



AMERICAN MUSLIMS FOR PALESTINE

**EMPOWERMENT** through  
**EDUCATION** and **ACTION**

# Creeping Normalcy a.k.a. Faithwashing

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How Israel co-opts advocacy for Palestinian rights through 'interfaith cooperation'



## **CREEPING NORMALCY**

Creeping Normalcy is the process where a negative is adjusted so slowly and in such small increments that it eventually becomes 'normal' or accepted without any ill effects. In other words, it "... refers to slow trends that aren't easily detectable year by year, but accumulate over decades into extremely serious problems. Perception is altered because the gradual [change] is constantly adjusted as being "normal" ..."

The idea of creeping normalcy is not a new one. At times, it has been used to describe an ancient Chinese torture treatment that imposed death upon prisoners one small cut at a time. This practice, which endured until the early 20th century, was often called "death by a thousand small cuts." Today, these terms usually are applied to business, an economic downturn, or even the environmental movement, vis a vis 'global warming.'

The mythical boiling frog fable, which is often used in business motivational meetings, describes this phenomenon with more color and flair. The myth says that a frog dropped into boiling water will immediately jump out. But a frog who is put into a pot of cool water, whose temperature is increased slowly and in increments, will remain until it boils to death.<sup>2</sup> Creeping normalcy is also used to refer to the slow moral decline of a society.

The American Muslims for Palestine (AMP) uses this term to refer to a specific strategy employed by Israel and the American Zionist organizations, which support it to normalize the occupation of Palestine. This handout will attempt to briefly identify and describe the major organizations responsible for implementing this strategy in the United States, as well as exposing their tactics. The purpose of this short document is to prompt discussion among our Muslim leadership and organizations in attempts to identify areas where Creeping Normalcy may be impacting our work as well as to create a comprehensive strategy for dealing with this phenomenon.

Israel admits it has an image problem and has created a new cabinet position to deal with this. Israel also works closely with Zionist organizations in the United States to help craft and implement tactics to 'neutralize' the pro-Palestine narrative taking shape in public discourse.

In the fall of 2011, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met behind closed doors with the elite leadership of the Jewish Federations of North America to speak about the Israel Action Network and Israel Advocacy Initiative, for instance. These strategies will be discussed below.

### **Ministry of Information and Diaspora Affairs**

Israel had a public relations disaster on its hands after its three-week assault on Gaza in 2008-'09 that killed more than 1,400 Palestinians. The world woke up and took notice. Though this was a terrible tragedy that amounted to crimes against humanity, the global social justice movement exploded in response and there were international cries to hold Israel accountable. Then came the killing of nine innocent activists aboard the Mavi Marmara by Israeli commandos in international waters in May 2010. Global outcry focused on holding Israel accountable for these crimes. Israel had a public relations disaster on its hands.

In response, Israel created a new cabinet position to combat the movement, especially in the United States. This new cabinet position is called the Ministry of Information and Diaspora Affairs and it is charged with coming up with ways to confront and silence any voice critical of Israel in the US and elsewhere. The

Ministry of Foreign Affairs also has said that it is working through “front groups” so the propaganda about Israel can be disseminated without the “**fingerprints of the government**” being found on it.<sup>3</sup>

## Reut Report

The Reut Institute is an Israeli think tank that informs the government on policy issues. In 2010, it released a huge report about the pro-Palestine movement and the growing boycott, divestment and sanctions movement. The report initially called “attacks” and “sabotage” on the movement. The Reut Institute removed that language after global outcry that it sounded like the report was calling potential criminal activity. The report talks about the various ways Israel can combat the movement and one way is by engaging those not active in the cause to divide communities to create a ‘political firewall’ around those of us who do advocate for international law and human rights.

“According to the Reut paper, the aim is to drive a wedge between bona fide critics of specific Israeli policies and promoters of delegitimacy, thereby winning over the nonpartisan political center and creating a “political firewall around Israel,””<sup>4</sup> according to an article in the Jewish Telegraph Agency.

## Zionist organizations

### The David Project

The David Project was formed about 10 years ago to combat Palestine solidarity work on America’s college campuses. Until recently, the David Project followed a policy of aggressively attacking anyone forwarding the Palestinian narrative. Their adherents would demonstrate outside pro- Palestine events, shout, yell and otherwise disrupt public speaking, smear solidarity activists with the labels of anti-Semite and worse.

Several years ago, it attacked Palestinian professor Joseph Massad for his views in a film called “Columbia Unbecoming,” which asserted Massad was biased against Jewish students and steered them to classes other than his. An independent university committee found no basis for the allegations of the film.

The David Project is also involved in harmful Islamophobia and several years was one of the key instigators behind a campaign to stop the construction of the Roxbury Mosque by the Islamic Society of Boston. Court documents showed The David Project collaborated with Zionist Islamophobe Steven Emerson as well as the State of Israel.<sup>5</sup>

Today, however, The David Project has changed its tune. Instead of protesting pro-Palestine events, which actually brings media attention to the issue, The David Project has written a new strategy paper that encourages Israel’s supporters to forward a narrative of peace and co-existence, instead. After all, once you ‘build bridges’ with your neighbor, he or she is less likely to speak out about something that makes you angry or uncomfortable.<sup>6</sup>

“It can start as grabbing a cup of coffee with leaders representing other student groups and ultimately lead to joint programs. Support for anti-Israel causes then becomes unthinkable.” ~ David Bernstein, director, The David Project<sup>7</sup>

This quote sums up perfectly how Creeping Normalcy works.

There are Zionist organizations that are instrumental in forwarding Creeping Normalcy as part of their strategic effort to help Israel maintain its occupation of the Palestinian people. They are the Jewish Federations of North America, the Jewish Council on Public Affairs and their Jewish Community Resource Councils, the David Project and the Hillel Foundation. These work together on carrying out strategic plans to 'neutralize' the Muslim community as well as other groups to stifle any discourse about Palestine.

### **Jewish Federations of North America**

The JFNA is an umbrella organization for about 157 federations throughout the country. The JFNA was instrumental in supporting the creation of Israel and helping it to grow and prosper throughout the years.

It brings in about \$3 billion per year from all its federations. This money is used in large part for charity work. In 2010, the JFNA committed \$6 million to the Israel Action Network, a project designed to shut down Palestine solidarity work on college campuses.<sup>8</sup>

“While other groups, including the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the Zionist Organization of America and J Street, focus primarily on influencing the political arena, and others, such as the Israel Project and CAMERA (the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America), key in on the media, **the new network will aim to influence civic leaders.** “Israel’s government has been advocating for this, especially over the past six months or eight months,’ Silverman said.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Jewish Council for Public Affairs**

The Jewish Council for Public Affairs and its nationwide network of the Jewish Community Resource Councils work to garner and strengthen support for the state of Israel. It works closely with the Jewish Federations of North America and is the vehicle through which the Israel Advocacy Initiative and the Israel Action Network are implemented.<sup>10</sup>

### **Hillel Foundation**

According to Hillel’s website ([www.hillel.org](http://www.hillel.org)), the “Foundation for Jewish Campus Life is the largest Jewish campus organization in the world. The organization serves students at more than 550 colleges and communities throughout North America and globally, including 30 communities in the former Soviet Union, nine in Israel, and five in South America. Since its origin in 1923, Hillel has played a critical role in ensuring the future of our Jewish community by creating a welcoming environment for Jewish students on campus and by fostering students’ ability to incorporate Jewish tradition into their lives. Hillel helps students expand Jewish knowledge, hone leadership skills, bolster ties to Israel, and volunteer in social justice work.”

## **Some major Hillel initiatives include:**

**Israel on Campus Coalition (ICC)** - The ICC is a partnership of the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation and Hillel in cooperation with a network of over 30 organizations committed to promoting Israel education and advocacy on college campuses. Members of ICC include the following Zionist organizations: American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC); American- Israeli Cooperative Enterprise (AICE); American Jewish Committee (AJC); The American Jewish Congress; Anti-Defamation League (ADL); The David Project; Fuel For Truth; Hillel – The Foundation for Campus Life; The Jewish Federations of North America; and Jewish National Fund (JNF).

**Taglit-Birthright Israel** - Supported by the Israeli government, Jewish Federations and philanthropists, this partnership offers thousands of Jewish college students a free, first-time trip to Israel with their peers. More than 35,200 Jewish college students have experienced a first visit through Hillel since 2000.

**Campus Israel Fellows** – This initiative, in partnership with the Jewish Agency for Israel, places young Israelis on campuses to serve as peer educators and foster support for Israel. This year, Israel Fellows at 19 Hillels can reach about 80,000 Jewish students.

## **Strategic plans that implement Creeping Normalcy**

### **Israel Advocacy Initiative. A description from its website:**

The IAI builds grassroots support for Israel. Launched jointly by the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA), the IAI works with more than 150 communities to enhance the capacity of Jewish Community Relations Councils and Federations to meet **local Israel advocacy challenges within a nationally coordinated and strategic framework.**<sup>11</sup>

IAI helps more than 150 communities, large and small, from coast-to-coast, build a strong U.S.-Israel relationship through: **Interfaith and Intergroup Partnerships ...**<sup>12</sup>

### **Israel Action Network. A description from its website:**

The Israel Action Network (IAN) is a strategic initiative of the Jewish Federations of North America, in partnership with the Jewish Council for Public Affairs to counter the assault on Israel's legitimacy. ... The IAN was created to educate, organize and mobilize the organized North American

Jewish community to develop strategic approaches to countering these assaults and develop innovative efforts to change the conversation about Israel and achieving peace and security for two states for two peoples. Our work is grounded in building strong relationships with people of faith, human rights advocates, political and civic leaders, and friends and neighbors in our communities.<sup>13</sup>

This paper is just a very brief introduction into Creeping Normalcy and organizations that promote actual systematic strategies. For a more in-depth look at Zionist organizations, who they are, how they are organized, how they operate and how to push-back against their tactics, contact American Muslims for Palestine at [info@ampalestine.org](mailto:info@ampalestine.org) or at 708.598.4267.

## Appendix I

### **An Interfaith Trojan Horse: Faithwashing Apartheid and Occupation**

JULY 1, 2014

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*Interfaith work has the potential to create and sustain profound relationships across religions. But what happens when interfaith work becomes a trojan horse?*

*In this piece I explore the Muslim Leadership Initiative, a program which sends American Muslims leaders to Israel to study Judaism and Zionism and is funded by the Shalom Hartman Institute, a Zionist and anti-BDS organization. I've broken down the narrative into five parts – the actual critique and deconstruction of the institute and program are towards the later part of the article.*

#### **The Background**

Last week, Rabia Chaudry – a National Security fellow at the [Truman National Security Project and New America Foundation](#) - published a piece on TIME magazine's website, entitled "[What an American Muslim Learned From Zionists](#)". In the article, Rabia reveals that two cohorts of young American Muslim leaders - their identities kept hidden because of the "risk" – over the past year have gone to Israel as part of an 'interfaith' program, called the Muslim Leadership Initiative (MLI), organized by Duke Muslim Chaplain [Imam Abdullah Antepji](#) and Trinity College Assistant Professor of Religion [Homayra Ziad](#); it was funded by the Jerusalem-based [Shalom Hartman Institute](#) (SHI).

Chaudry's piece was a follow up to a [June 4th article written on her Patheos blog](#), which discussed the difficulty she, personally, faced in making the decision to accept the invitation. This was not, however, the first time Chaudry had discussed the trip. On November 17th, 2013, Chaudry [gave a talk on her first of two trips to Israel](#), through the Shalom Hartman Institute, at Silver Spring's Muslim Community Center. In the talk, she also mentioned that the participants reached out other Muslim American leaders and even shayukh - who encouraged the trip. Up until last week's TIME article, however, the institute behind the program had been left unnamed and other participants in the program have yet to be revealed (save those who have voiced their participation vis a vis social media).

The TIME article reduces the occupation to the displacement of "dialogue" and "both sides" (unsure if Chaudry means Palestinians and Israelis or Muslims and Jews) being unwilling to speak outside "their own bubbles". Muslims, it essentially argues, misunderstand Zionism and thus misunderstand Jews and Israel. Therefore, to have healthy and holistic interfaith dialogue back in the United States, American Muslims must understand what Zionism means to Jews and what Israel means to Jews. At the midway point of her piece, Chaudry even explains how it was only after she finally met Palestinians, during her trip, that she understood that the "fear many Israeli Jews have [of ending the occupation] is not a figment of [their] imagination" as "the pressure cooker cannot hold indefinitely."

Chaudry followed up her article – which elicited, albeit relatively isolated, an uproar of condemnation from many Palestinian Americans on Twitter as well as voices of support from other groups elsewhere on social media – with another, responding to criticisms about the Shalom Hartman Institute’s program and the participation of Muslim American ‘leaders.’ This blog post was, too, filled with deeply problematic and logically unsound arguments (see: ‘don’t single Israel out’, equivocating ‘jihad’ and Zionism; claiming not to speak for Palestinians while, actually, doing that with both words and actions).

Additionally, it even mentioned that it was key to enable Muslim leaders “to use the language of Zionism to remind Jews of the ethical and moral callings of their faith.” Because Muslims have a responsibility to make Judaism inseparable from Zionism and tell believing and non-believing Jews what’s theologically up?

Criticisms of the articles themselves aside, the majority of the social media criticism was directed towards the existence of the program itself; the fact that Muslim American leaders would consider breaking, in effect, BDS (Boycott, Divest, Sanction) by being sponsored, supported and funded by a Zionist institution seemed to knock the wind out of many. The inclusion of participants such as Wajahat Ali and Haroon Moghul – two well-respected and prolific Muslim names in US media – as opposed to the usual fringe- esque names we may be used to, set off a scurry of alarms and a tide of confusion.

## What’s going on?

### Speaking to the Man Behind the Curtain

To those who know him Imam Abdullah Antepli, the visionary behind the Muslim Leadership Initiative, is a “beautiful man” with a passion for interfaith dialogue. In February of this past year, his interfaith efforts at Duke were featured in a Haaretz article chronicling the growing challenges of interfaith dialogue on US campuses with the growth of student-led BDS movements. I had the opportunity to speak with Imam Antepli last Thursday; like many others who had caught wind of the program and trip, I was livid, saddened and at a loss for words to see what I and so many others felt was a normalization of Zionism and Israel within our community through some of our most well regarded public leaders.

In our conversation, Imam Antepli stressed that the purpose of the program was to educate Muslim American leaders – those at the forefront of being in touch with young Muslims especially – about Judaism so as to better approach the question of Zionism and Israel that is otherwise made into the elephant in any and all interfaith dialogue between Jews and Muslims. This was, he said, just a pilot run of the program; he, along with the participants and the Hartman Institute were unsure of what exactly to expect from one another and from the experience. Nevertheless, Imam Antepli trusted the Shalom Hartman Institute, which he had visited for three years straight prior as a participant at the institute’s multifaith, interdisciplinary International Theological Conference (ITC). The program consisted of curriculum by the Hartman institute, of which the majority was originally created for American Rabbis.

The institute, founded by American Progressive Orthodox Rabbi Dr. David Hartman, is dedicated to being “a center of transformative thinking and teaching that addresses the major challenges” faced by the world’s Jewry. Following a progressive Orthodox Judaism, the institute also promotes Jewish pluralism, both for religious and secular



Jews, and multi-faith conversation (e.g. ITC). In particular, it is also interested in looking at the relationship that diaspora Jews have with Israel.

Because of Imam Antepi's own experience with the institute and belief in its principles and the sort of space it has cultivated for itself within the American Jewish community as well, he felt that the institute would be best suited to house the program. The line, for him, would be groups like the ADL and AIPAC.

He admitted, however, that there were shortcomings – most glaringly (and a central criticism waged against the program) the absence of Palestinian and Arab-Americans from the cohorts. Imam Antepi explained that in the original cohorts, there were a few Arab-Americans poised to go on the trip, but due to logistics and unforeseen events they had to leave, leading the cohorts consisting primarily of South Asians, a few Turks and one Black American. When I asked him the selection process for the MLI participants, he emphasized repeatedly that his goal was to have the proportional representations of members of the American Muslim community present in the program. Thus, because there are more South Asian Muslims than Arab American Muslims there would be more South Asian Muslims present in the program. Additionally, he continued, it was of dire importance to him that the participants be half men and half women – this was something he was completely unwilling, he said, to compromise on. In addition to these representations, Imam Antepi stated that he wished that there had been a more pluralistic Muslim representation, as all those who went on the trip were representatives of the Sunni community.

The Imam also explained how he had plans for a JLI – Jewish Leadership Initiative – which would bring Israeli Jewish leaders to the United States to speak with American Muslims and learn about Islam. This would be, of course, a plan for the distant future as opposed to anything in the next near while.

When I pushed about the crossing of the BDS line by this program, the answers seemed to be less than satisfactory. Imam Antepi did not deny the deplorable conditions of the Palestinian people or the 'disgusting' nature of segregated Israeli society; he minced no words in condemning the occupation and treatment of Palestinians as well as the Israeli attitudes towards both. Yet on BDS, he provided anecdotes of how during his conversations with Palestinians while they agreed with the importance and strength of BDS they also believed in the importance of Muslims, from around the world, coming to see for themselves the occupation.

## **Faithwashing Apartheid and Occupation**

It is hard to ignore the obvious; it is hard to ignore that despite whatever good intentions and explanations there were and will be, a group of Muslim American leaders – many in the very public eye and with a great deal of social authority – went to Jerusalem through a program, albeit organized by an Imam, funded and supported by an institution that is unabashedly Zionist. That a group of Muslim American leaders traveled to Israel to learn about what 'Zionism means to Jews' to better understand Jewish connection to Israel and thus bridges, interfaith, dialogue and other such nouns.

And yet nothing about this is, unfortunately, surprising.

One of the most common tactics of Zionist lobby groups and organizations has been sanitizing the occupation and apartheid and displacing the actual cause and reason for the conflict. Zionist groups have courted Black college students and Latino

leaders (with pushback), for instance, in an attempt to, as independent journalist Rania Khalek describes it, “neutralize the brown electorate.” She explains how in an attempt to thwart identification or solidarity Latino, Asian and Black Americans may have with the Palestinian struggle there is a necessity to, quoting former US Ambassador to the European Union Stuart Eizenstat, show how the conflict “..“is not a civil rights issue. It’s rather a very different conflict in which violence is being used and Israel’s right to be a state is questioned.”

This is, in its essence, what *washing* the occupation and apartheid clean actually is: to sanitize the narrative in which the oppressor becomes the oppressed or, at the very least, a *relatable oppressor*.

And this where what I will refer to as ‘Faithwashing’ comes in. Faithwashing is about changing the cause of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (or, rather, Israeli occupation and ethnic cleansing of Palestine) from a mid-20th century Euro-American settler-colonialist project (that brought anti-semitism to the Muslim world) to a non-existent centuries long enmity between Jews and Muslims.

Using religion to whitewash Israeli crimes and dilute the occupation is nothing new. It’s relatively well known that Christian (Evangelical and others) often travel to Israel to visit holy sites as well as pledge support for the state of Israel – although not really in the interest of the world’s Jewry. What’s not as well known is that these trips are often, albeit not always, funded by Zionist groups interested in propping up support for Zionism and Israeli policies.

Now it seems that the attention has been turned towards mainstream Muslim American leaders who are anti-Islamophobia activists and well regarded within their communities. In the case of MLI – it seems as though good intentions have been turned into an opportunity for a liberal Zionist educational institution – Shalom Hartman Institute – to further its anti-BDS agenda.

The decision by these community members and leaders to go to Israel vis a vis a Zionist, anti-BDS institution is incredibly shameful and dangerous. Good intentions matter, but actions make the real difference. The bottom line becomes that this program should not have happened and should not continue as it undercuts the plight of Palestinians and normalizes Zionism – a racist ideology and institution that is antithetical to our own Islamic traditions of social justice – within our communities.

### **BDS matters. Ignoring BDS is Ignoring Palestinians.**

In 2005, Palestinian civil society released a statement making a call for the international community to commit to the Boycotting, Divesting and Sanctioning of Israel (similar to the one issued against Apartheid South Africa) until it complied with international law.

Part of supporting BDS, beyond divestment from corporations and groups that directly exploit the occupation and Palestinians, is not enabling the very institutions that both directly and indirectly support the occupation, the status quo; that support Zionism, a secular ideology that co-opted religious narratives for nationalist aims, propagated by European colonial officers who supported the export of the so-called ‘Jewish problem’. When an individual, who claims to be committed to the Palestinian Cause™, makes the decision to be associated with and use the support of a Zionist organization – however good the cause – they are, without any grey, breaking the BDS line and are normalizing Zionism. And there should be no mistake about what Zionism is and what it isn’t.

## **The Shalom Hartman Institute is actively dedicated to and engaged in anti-BDS campaigns.**

It is hard to imagine that not a single participant in the MLI checked out the Shalom Hartman Institute's website before accepting the invitation to the program. It only takes a few minutes to discover some alarming facts and associations – facts and associations that point to an institute that is actively engaged in fighting BDS on campuses and faithwashing the existing and emerging narratives on Israel.\*

In 2010, SHI launched the "Engaging Israel Project" or, IEngage - a project which has partnered with AIPAC. The goal of the project "is to respond to growing feelings of disenchantment and disinterest toward Israel among an ever-increasing number of Jews worldwide by creating a new narrative regarding the significance of Israel for Jewish life." It does this by "addressing core questions pertaining to the necessity and significance of the Jewish national enterprise; how a Jewish state should exercise power; why a Jew who lives outside of Israel should care about Israel; and what the State of Israel can offer the world."

In other, less euphemistic words: IEngage is about saving Zionism and ensuring Israel's support, as a Jewish state, both at home and abroad.

One of IEngage's faculty is McGill Professor of History, Gil Troy who has been at the forefront of fighting BDS. In 2009, he and Dr. Mitchell Bard presented a position paper at the Working Group on Delegitimization at the Global Forum against Anti-Semitism (seriously, click that link and read it). Tasked with the responsibility to "respond" to the challenges that would arise from the growing BDS movement, they emphasized that the fight against BDS was an "educational one" and outlined a three- pronged vision for fighting BDS:

1. *Israel Being a Cause to Celebrate*
2. *Humanize Israel*
3. *Driving a Wedge between Soft Critics and Hard Delegitimizers*

The Hartman website even features an article highlighting Troy's efforts to fight BDS on campus, in which he said to have said "the Shalom Hartman Institute iEngage Project has been working for four years to shift the negative and doctrinaire conversation about Israel toward one that is constructive, thoughtful, and educational." SHI president Rabbi Donniel Hartman is also quoted in the article in emphasizing how the campaign against BDS must be a campaign of ideas. Elsewhere on the website, Rabbi Hartman also discusses how BDS is "repulsive" and that it must be, once again, defeated through ideas, education and, essentially, reclaiming Zionism amongst the world Jewry.

A key program of the IEngage project is the CLI: Christian Leadership Initiative, which preceded the MuslimLeadership Initiative. The program, however, was not initiated by SHI but, rather, AJC – the Global Jewish Advocacy group that is also unabashedly and openly committed to fighting BDS. In May of this past year, the AJC discussed on its website that in an attempt to thwart any American Christian movement awayfrom supporting Israel it had established the CLI in a partnership with SHI.

CLI is a mirror program of the MLI – beyond just sharing a name. In fact, the description of the MLI program (co-directed by Yossi Klein HaLevi, who is a former follower of Meir Kahane and member of the JDL) on the SHI website makes it abundantly clear that the purpose of the program is not to teach Muslim leaders about

Judaism (at least solely) but to educate them on Zionism and the centrality of Israel to the world's Jewry.

The curriculum for the Muslim leaders was, in fact, entitled “Encountering Israel: Independence, *Peoplehood*, and *Power*.”

Until Saturday, SHI's 2013 Annual Report included the MLI under the IEngage project. When I brought this concern up with Imam Abdullah Antepli, he said that the MLI was not a part of the IEngage project and that he would, immediately, speak with SHI staff to have it removed. And within less than twenty-four hours, it was. Thank goodness for this screen shot.

## MUSLIM LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

The goal of the Muslim Leadership Initiative (MLI), launched in summer 2013, is to empower an elite group of emerging religious and intellectual leaders – including **האגודה ליהודים ומוסלמים בארצות הברית** – in the American Muslim community in reassessing its preconceived views of Judaism and Israel.

This program is unprecedented. Unlike typical interfaith initiatives, MLI is not a dialogue. Rather, the program invites Muslims to experience how Jews understand Israel and themselves. We believe that helping emerging North American Muslim leaders to develop a deeper understanding of Judaism, the Jewish people, and Israel has the power to change attitudes in the North American Muslim community and in Muslim-Jewish discourse in communities and on campuses across North America.

MLI brings together emerging North American Muslim leaders for a 13-month program comprising two 12-day seminars held in Jerusalem at the start and end of the program, two mid-year retreats in North America, and year-long distance learning. The curriculum, entitled *Encountering Israel: Independence, Peoplehood, and Power*, addresses a lack of understanding among Muslims about the way Jews see themselves – not only as a religion but as a people and a nation connected to a particular land. The curriculum deals with peoplehood, basic Judaism, Zionism, Jewish pluralism, and the challenges of Jewish sovereignty and power.

MLI began with a cohort of 16 North American Muslim leaders. Our experience with MLI so far has proven that there is indeed a great thirst in parts of the Muslim community for a greater understanding of Judaism and the relationship of Jews to Israel. **האגודה ליהודים ומוסלמים בארצות הברית** within their communities in fostering a conversation that will improve Muslim-Jewish relations in North America and view the program as necessary for this. Participants have been deeply affected by the program; MLI has been “life changing,” they report.

As a result of our relationships with Muslim chaplains on college campuses, Hartman scholars have been invited to address Muslim students. Our Muslim partners are keen to bring Hartman scholars to speak in local mosques and Muslim community centers.



*I think the breakthrough for me was coming here [to Israel, to the Hartman Institute] as somebody who always has been very careful to fence herself as an anti-Zionist but not an anti-Semitic, and now not quite sure if I'm an anti-Zionist anymore. I'm not saying I'm a Zionist, I'm saying I don't know what I am anymore.*  
– MLI Participant, Cohort 1

While Imam Antepli was adamant that MLI had nothing to do with the IEngage project, it is incredibly telling that it is modeled after AJC's Christian Leadership Initiative and that SHI included it under its IEngage project section in its 2013 annual report.

Is this a matter of thirteen months of miscommunication?

The program description in the annual report also reiterates – contrary to the claims of those who participated – that the interfaith initiative “is not a dialogue” but rather to help “Muslims to experience how Jews understand Israel and themselves. “And, perhaps most tellingly, also claims that it aims to “change attitudes in the North American Muslim community and in Muslim-Jewish discourse in communities and on **campuses across North America.**”

Emphasis added.

The Shalom Hartman Institute's interests lie not in fostering better Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations for the sake of interfaith, but rather in fostering relationships with key leaders within these communities – specifically in the United States – who have access to the youth in their communities and can help normalize Zionism, legitimize Israel and thus delegitimize BDS.

### **The Need to Reject The Zionist Narrative**

There are more questions than answers.

One of the first things that struck me about the program, after I learned that it was associated and funded by the Shalom Hartman Institute, was that there actually isn't any reason for Muslim American leaders to travel to Israel to study Judaism for the sake of interfaith. Was there really a dearth of resources in the United States? Or are Rabbinical studies only possible in Israel? Just as Qur'anic studies would only be possible in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen, Egypt, India, Jordan? Morocco has one of the most vibrant Jewish communities in the world; why not go there, where interfaith between Muslims and Jews isn't obstructed by apartheid walls and laws? Not only would it not cross the BDS line but it would also shift the focus from Ashkenazi-centric Jewish narratives to Sephardic.

Does it make sense for American Muslim leaders to work with an institution where, by the participants own admittance, the instructors claimed they had never interacted with Muslims despite living in a country where the majority within a decade or so will be Muslim? Does it make sense to speak of bringing Israeli Jewish leaders to the US to learn about Islam when their neighbours are, in fact, Muslim?

And are we now accepting, after years of rejecting, the equivalence of Judaism and Zionism? Are we actually sidelining anti-Zionist Jewish voices that reject the modern state of Israel as an integral part of Judaism, of their Jewishness (secular or religious)? Where do we get the authority to do that?

Palestine is central to the hearts of Muslims all around the world, but that does not mean we try to re-write the narrative of the occupation on our own terms. There is a real need for interfaith understanding and work between Jews and Muslims and if Israel is a part of that work, then so be it. But we must not, in the process, allow ourselves, our communities and our leaders to be on the wrong sides of history and justice by normalizing and accepting what was and remains unjust.

Right now is a critical moment for our communities to have an actual conversation – not a shouting match. There are concerted efforts to drive wedges between members of communities that may and do stand up against Zionism and the oppression of Palestinians. I earnestly hope we do not allow those efforts to succeed and I encourage others to write responses and engage on this topic. Let's keep the conversation going.

*\*An important note: the Chair of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America is Angelica Berrie, who is the president of the Russell Berrie Foundation. In a 2011 report for ThinkProgress entitled Fear Inc., MLI participant Wajahat Ali revealed a network of organizations creating and feeding the Islamophobia industry in the United States. Amongst the foundations mentioned, the Russell Berrie Foundation was, too, included. According to the report, the foundation “contributed \$3,109,016 between 2001 and 2009 to organizations engaging in anti-Muslim work”. Some of the anti-Muslim groups who received funding included “Counterterrorism & Security Education and Research Foundation, receiving \$2,736,000; the Investigative Project on Terrorism (\$100,000); and the Middle East Forum (\$273,016.22).”*

## Creeping Normalcy footnotes

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