

Islamophobic Groups Attacking Humanitarian, Peacebuilding Groups and Human Rights Defenders

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In recent years, two U.S. organizations have conducted smear campaigns against charities and human rights groups that appear intended to shut down or limit humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding and human rights advocacy by or on behalf of Muslim communities. They target groups working in places with large Muslim populations, including Palestine and south Asia. Their work has been used to fuel “lawfare” attacks in the U.S. and abroad by groups such as the Zionist Advocacy Center.

Middle East Forum (MEF)

The Middle East Forum (MEF), founded in 1990 by Daniel Pipes, is described as a conservative think tank. It purportedly “promotes American interests in the Middle East and protects Western values from Middle Eastern threats.”¹ It became a nonprofit organization in 1994. It publishes the *Middle East Quarterly* and the *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* and runs several projects, including Campus Watch, Islamist Watch, among others.²

The Bridge Initiative at Georgetown University has conducted a thorough analysis of MEF.³ It says:

“The Middle East Forum is a right-wing anti-Islam think tank that spreads misinformation, creates ‘watchlists’ targeting academics, and advocates hawkish foreign policy. MEF provides funding to numerous anti-Muslim organizations and has provided legal services to a number of anti-Muslim activists including Geert Wilders and Tommy Robinson.”

In 2017, a British court ordered Sam Westrop, now director of MEF’s Islamist Watch project, to pay £140,000 in libel damages after finding that he falsely alleged that Mohammed Ali Harrath, CEO and founder of the Islam Channel, was guilty of terrorism.⁴ Since then, MEF has attempted to disrupt funding to a large Muslim charity in the UK, in the form of a U.S. congressional budget amendment, and attacked a U.S.-based Muslim charity by feeding disinformation that drove introduction of a House Resolution and a letter to the U.S. State Department demanding an investigation of the charity.

A 2011 study by the Center for American Progress (CAP) stated that Pipes has “parlayed his prestigious academic credentials to great effect,” but has “become increasingly out of touch with the realities of the

¹ Middle East Forum website, www.meforum.org

² MacFarquhar, Neil (March 14, 2007). “Scrutiny Increases for a Group Advocating for Muslims in U.S.” – via www.nytimes.com/2007/03/14/washington/14cair.html; <https://www.meforum.org/campus-watch/>; <https://www.meforum.org/islamist-watch/>

³ Bridge Initiative (Georgetown University), *Factsheet: Middle East Forum*, August 14, 2018, <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-middle-east-forum/>

⁴ Judgment Between Mohamed Ali Harrath, Claimant (1) Stand For Peace Limited (2) Samuel Westrop, Defendant, Case No: HQ15D04437, March 3, 2017, [https://www.carter-ruck.com/images/uploads/documents/Harrath-v-\(1\)Stand_for_Peace-\(2\)Westrop-Judgment.pdf](https://www.carter-ruck.com/images/uploads/documents/Harrath-v-(1)Stand_for_Peace-(2)Westrop-Judgment.pdf)

Muslim world at home and abroad, making more extreme and unfounded observations about Islam in the United States.”⁵

One MEF target, academic Juan Cole of the University of Michigan, described his experience:

“First they harass you and try to have you spied on. Then they threaten, bully and try to intimidate you. And if that fails and you show some spine, then they simply lie about you. (In this case the lies are produced by quoting half a passage, or denuding it of its context, or adopting a tone of pained indignation when quoting a perfectly obvious observation).”⁶

Investigative Project on Terrorism (IPT)

IPT was founded by Steve Emerson in 1995 and it became a nonprofit organization in 2006. The group and Emerson have come under fire for making false claims about Muslims and Emerson’s “history of peddling questionable facts.”⁷ His claims regarding British Muslims in Birmingham, England and “no-go zones” were heavily criticized, leading to a censure of Fox News by Ofcom (the UK’s communications regulator), which said the remarks were “materially misleading and had the potential to cause harm and offence to viewers.”⁸

The CAP report cites another example:

“In 1997, Emerson presented the Associated Press with a purported FBI dossier showing ties between Muslim American organizations and radical Islamist groups. The AP reporters concluded the dossier was created by Emerson and ‘[Emerson] had edited out all phrases, taken out anything that made it look like his.’ Another AP reporter stated, ‘[Emerson] could never back up what he said. We couldn’t believe that document was from the FBI files.’ ”⁹

In addition, IPT’s status as a nonprofit organization has been criticized as a lucrative platform for Emerson.¹⁰ Charity Navigator posts an advisory for the organization, noting that its 2010 IRS filings show that 100 percent of the group’s income was directed to IPT’s CEO and founder’s for-profit management company, while more recent filings show income going to “management,” a practice that Charity Navigator describes as “atypical.”¹¹ The site further notes that it has reached out to IPT for further clarification “but have not received an adequate explanation.”¹² A 2015 version of the CAP report asserts similar findings, stating that “IPT employs unsubstantiated threats that portray Muslims as dangerous to accrue funding often transferred to Emerson’s for-profit entity, SAE Productions.”¹³

⁵ Center for American Progress (CAP), *Fear, Inc.: The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America* (2011)

www.americanprogress.org/issues/religion/reports/2011/08/26/10165/fear-inc/ at 41-43

⁶ Columbian College of Arts & Sciences, George Washington University, Juan Cole: *His Response to Criticism from Jonathan Chait Harris and the Middle East Forum*, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/8991>

⁷ CAP report, at 50.

⁸ The Guardian, *Ofcom criticizes Fox News for calling Birmingham no-go zone for non-Muslims*, 21 Sept. 2015, www.theguardian.com/media/2015/sep/21/ofcom-criticises-fox-news-for-calling-birmingham-no-go-zone-for-non-muslims; BBC News, *Fox apology for Birmingham ‘Muslim-only city claim’*, 18 January 2015, www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-birmingham-30870062

⁹ CAP report, at 49-50 fn 142 and 143

¹⁰ The Tennessean, *Anti-Muslim crusaders make millions spreading fear*, 24 Oct. 2010, via archive.ph, <https://archive.ph/20150315213855/http://archive.tennessean.com/article/20101024/NEWS01/10240374/Anti-Muslim-crusaders-make-millions-spreading-fear>

¹¹ Charity Navigator website, <https://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=search.summary&orgid=13249>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ CAP, *Fear, Inc. 2.0 The Islamophobia Network’s Efforts to Manufacture Hate in America* (2015), <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/FearInc-report2.11.pdf> at 57