LEADERSHIP OR PANDERING
GRADING OUR ELECTED OFFICIALS
ATTACKS ON ARAB AMERICAN AND
AMERICAN MUSLIM PUBLIC SERVANTS

ARAB AMERICAN INSTITUTE
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One of the ways we are fighting intolerance is by holding public officials accountable for the words they use. AAI’s “Leadership or Pandering” series examines the statements made by policymakers and candidates as they address divisive issues that provide clear opportunities to stand against bigotry. Though not comprehensive, and while no official can be judged fairly by any single action or statement, we hope it will provide a useful look at the debate and its participants.

This edition of “Leadership or Pandering” takes a look at the unfounded attacks on American Muslim public servants by Representative Michele Bachmann (R-MN) and four of her colleagues on the Hill, Representatives Trent Franks (R-AZ), Louie Gohmert (R-TX), Tom Rooney (R-FL), and Lynn Westmoreland (R-GA). Bachmann released letters they had collectively sent to the Inspectors General of the Departments of State, Justice, Defense, and Homeland Security, and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, calling on them to investigate whether “influence operations conducted by individuals and organizations associated with the Muslim Brotherhood” have “had an impact on the federal government’s national security policies.” The letters warned of “determined efforts by the Muslim Brotherhood to penetrate and subvert the American government as part of its ‘civilizational jihad,’” and asked the Inspectors General to identify the Muslims who were influencing U.S. policy. They also named names, using dubious “six degrees of separation” logic to accuse American Muslim public servants like Huma Abedin, Deputy Chief of Staff to Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, as Muslim Brotherhood infiltrators.

The sole source cited for these charges was the Center for Security Policy, a group that has become notorious for its anti-Muslim conspiracy theories and baseless smear attacks on American Muslims and anyone who stands for tolerance. The head of the center, Frank Gaffney, served as one of Bachmann’s advisers during her run for the presidency.

Bachmann’s witch-hunt is an issue that presents a clear opportunity for public officials to demonstrate either leadership or pandering. Many elected officials and policymakers have weighed in, some in defense of Bachmann’s campaign of bigotry and others making impassioned arguments for tolerance and religious liberty in the wake of these attacks. Still more have tried to find a middle ground, either with a measured response or by limiting their criticism to the specific attacks. We hope this guide provides an effective means for you to judge the statements by your own elected officials and hold them accountable for their responses to religious intolerance.

The statements graded below are listed in chronological order and separated into three categories: statements from the House of Representatives, statements from the Senate, and statements from other prominent figures such as candidates for office, advisors, and government officials. This list will be continually updated as more of our leaders react to the attacks on American Muslim public servants.

Rating Scale:

👍👍 Criticized the bigotry and attacks on religious liberty underlying Bachmann’s allegations
👍 Defended the chief target of the attacks, Deputy Chief of Staff to the Secretary of State Huma Abedin, but did not condemn the broader campaign against American Muslim public servants
👎👎 Defended Bachmann’s witch-hunt and/or its Islamophobic underpinnings
**Representative Keith Ellison (D-MI)**

Representative Ellison was the first member of Congress to take Representative Bachmann to task for her letters, calling out her use of Frank Gaffney as a sole source and demanding evidence for her allegations.

“Mr. Gaffney’s views have been widely discredited, including by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and conservative organizations. The FBI said his research made ‘unsubstantiated assertions’ and relied on ‘outdated information.’ After the ACU [American Conservative Union] board conducted a full investigation of Mr. Gaffney’s accusations against Grover Norquist and Suhail Khan, the board found Mr. Gaffney’s accusations ‘reprehensible,’ ‘baseless’ and ‘false and unfounded.’ The ACU even barred Mr. Gaffney’s participation from CPAC in 2011.

Despite Mr. Gaffney’s record of unsubstantiated allegations, you appear to have based your letters to the Inspectors General on his views.

I request that you provide my office a full accounting of the sources you used to make the serious allegations against the individuals and organizations in your letters. If there is not credible, substantial evidence for your allegations, I sincerely hope that you will publically clear their names.”

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**House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA)**

Representative Nancy Pelosi reacted to Senator McCain’s criticism of Bachmann with two tweets about specific allegations and the broader issue at stake.

“I applaud @SenJohnMcCain for his powerful rejection of baseless accusations against Huma Abedin + other Muslims.”

“I wish this discourse no longer existed in our country, but we have more educating to do with respect to what America is about.”

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**House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH)**

When asked whether he shares the concerns expressed in Representative Bachmann’s letters, Speaker Boehner called the allegations “dangerous,” but stopped short of criticizing Bachmann directly.

BOEHRER: “I haven’t seen the letter, but — I don’t know Huma, but from everything I do know of her, she has a sterling character. And I think accusations like this being thrown around are pretty dangerous.”

Q: “Would you consider taking her off the Intelligence Committee? Congresswoman Bachmann?”

BOEHNER: “I don’t know that that’s related at all.”

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2 [https://twitter.com/NancyPelosi/status/225768942789095426](https://twitter.com/NancyPelosi/status/225768942789095426) (July 18, 2012)
3 [https://twitter.com/NancyPelosi/status/22576904786409472](https://twitter.com/NancyPelosi/status/22576904786409472) (July 18, 2012)
Representative Betty McCollum (D-MN)

“The baseless and slanderous accusations by Minnesota Congresswoman Michele Bachmann – attacking honorable Muslim-Americans in government service working on behalf of the American people, including my dear friend and colleague Congressman Keith Ellison – are malicious and bigoted. This transparent tactic of manufacturing unsubstantiated claims to draw media attention goes beyond incivility by an elected representative; it extends into the realm of abnormal behavior.”

Chairman of the House Intelligence Committee Mike Rodgers (R-MI)

In an interview with USA Today, Representative Rodgers withdrew his previous support for Michele Bachmann’s witch-hunt and distanced himself from her letters.

“That kind of assertion certainly doesn’t comport with the Intelligence Committee, and I can say that on the record. I have no information in my committee that would indicate that Huma is anything other than an American patriot…This was not an activity that was sanctioned as any Intelligence Committee matter.”

Representative Jim Sensenbrenner (R-WI)

When he was asked by a constituent in a town hall meeting to show support for Michele Bachmann’s attacks on American Muslim public servants, Representative Sensenbrenner stood up to the Islamophobic remarks of his constituent and joined the ranks of his fellow Republicans in decrying the witch-hunt. Rep Sensenbrenner’s response stands out in that he not only condemned the specific unfounded allegations against Huma Abedin, but also gave an impassioned argument for religious pluralism and tolerance.

SENSENBRENNER: “Let me say that I do know Huma Abedin and I think that the comments that were made about her in that letter, whether or not they were taken out of context, were the wrong thing to do… I think the Constitution, in saying that there shall never be a religious test for any office of trust and profit under the United States, meant that people should not be judged on the basis of their religious beliefs or lack of religious beliefs. That was Thomas Jefferson that put that in the Constitution — I think he was right.”

CONSTITUENT: “I think that there’s a political ideology that’s a concern in Islam that is concerning and that should be looked at and we should know that this person is not a threat…”

SENSENBRENNER: “The First Amendment prohibits the government from making a distinction between what is “good religion” and what is “bad religion.” That’s none of the government’s business. Religion is a personal issue to every one of the people who lives in the United States, whether you practice a faith, how you practice a faith, whether you don’t practice a faith, whether you say you’re a member of a faith but don’t practice it, it’s none of the government’s business. And this is the whole issue of religious freedom. And that has been one of the most cherished freedoms that this country has had since its beginning.”

**Ranking Member Representative Dutch Ruppersberger (D-MD)**

“We have a small committee, we work hard together, it’s a very bipartisan committee and we deal with national threats. This does not help our committee at all.”

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**Representative Adam Schiff (D-CA)**

“The unfounded allegations made by some members of the Intelligence Committee against Huma Abedin are deeply disturbing — and damaging to the committee’s work and its reputation. The authors discredit themselves and are deserving of no further comment.”

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**Representative Jim Langevin (D-RI)**

“Given our access to sensitive information, I also believe members of the Intelligence Committee have a special responsibility to exercise caution in making statements about national security concerns. The only reasonable action for the authors of these letters to take would be to withdraw their requests.”

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**House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-VA)**

House Majority Leader Eric Cantor gave an extended interview to Buzzfeed on July 19, in which he urged his party and the nation to stand against intolerance on a range of issues, including the role of Muslims in the government. He made it clear, however, that he was not speaking specifically about Michele Bachmann’s allegations. Charlie Rose, in an interview with Representative Cantor, asked him specifically about Bachmann’s letters, noting that they did not square with the sentiments he expressed to Buzzfeed. Rather than stand against the kind of intolerance he decried in his Buzzfeed interview, he chose to defend Bachmann.

ROSE: “Do you think Congresswoman Bachmann was out of line? I mean, it does not square with this?”

CANTOR: “Well, again, I think that if you read some of the reports that have covered the story, I think that her concern was about the security of the country. So that’s about all I know.”

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Senator John McCain (R-AZ)

Senator McCain was the first member of the Republican party to criticize fellow Republican Michele Bachmann. He gave a strong repudiation of the specific allegations on the Senate floor, but defended Frank Gaffney, whose Center for Security Policy is the source of the scurrilous allegations.

“To say that the accusations made in both documents are not substantiated by the evidence they offer is to be overly polite and diplomatic about it. It is far better, and more accurate, to talk straight: These allegations about Huma Abedin, and the report from which they are drawn, are nothing less than an unwarranted and unfounded attack on an honorable citizen, a dedicated American, and a loyal public servant.”

“I would like to point out that I have worked with the Center for Security Policy, and the head of it is a friend of mine.”

Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL)

Senator Rubio spoke out against Bachmann’s attacks on NPR’s Diane Rehm show. Rubio was asked by a caller if he would join Republican Senator John McCain’s strong condemnation of the anti-Muslim witch-hunt on the Senate floor on July 19.

RUBIO: “Everyone I talk to who has dealt with her says she is a professional and hardworking and patriotic American who loves her country and in the service of her country is serving it… I can tell you that I don’t share the feelings that are in that letter, and in fact, I’m very very careful and cautious about ever making accusations like that about anyone.”

Senator Scott Brown (R-MA)

Senator Brown condemned Representative Bachmann by name in a strongly-worded tweet.

“Representative Bachmann’s accusations about Sec. Clinton aide Huma Abedin are out-of-line. This kind of rhetoric has no place in our public discourse.”

Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC)

The South Carolina Senator defended the chief target, Huma Abedin.

“People who say these things are really doing her a disservice because they don’t know what they’re talking about, and I don’t know what their motivations are, but clearly it says more about them than it does her.”

12 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGf9AgilJYs&feature=player_embedded (July 18, 2012)
13 http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=6nCq4gE-7ZM (July 19, 2012)
14 https://twitter.com/ScottBrownMA/status/225728969763352577 (July 18, 2012)
Ed Rollins

One of the harshest rebukes came not from any of Representative Bachmann’s colleagues on the Hill, but from her former campaign manager, Ed Rollins, who guided her to victory in the Iowa caucuses. Rollins called her charges “extreme and dishonest,” and expressed personal shock at Bachmann’s distortions.

Rollins went so far as to say: “Having worked for Congressman Bachmann’s campaign for president, I am fully aware that she sometimes has difficulty with her facts, but this is downright vicious and reaches the late Senator Joe McCarthy level.”

He ended his op-ed with an exclamation of “shame on you, Michele!” as well as a demand that she apologize to Ms. Abedin and every American Muslim public servant she slandered by extension.16

DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano

Secretary Napolitano stood up to one of the letter’s signatories, Representative Louis Gohmert (R-TX), in an exchange about one of her American Muslim employees who was singled out by the witch-hunt.

NAPOLITANO: “I found out that the statements that have been made in that regard are false. They are misleading and objectionable, and I think they’re wrong.”

GOHMERT: “You need to know that you have people who are lying in your department. ... Are you saying ... it is a lie that Mohammed Elbiary downloaded material from a classified website using the secret security clearance you gave him? Are you saying that is a lie?”

NAPOLITANO: “I’m saying that is inaccurate. That is incorrect. ... I’m saying that he as far as I know he did not download classified documents.”

GOHMERT: “It did not bother you that he accessed some information?”

NAPOLITANO: “He accessed some information. What bothers me, quite frankly, are the allegations that are made against anyone that happens to be Muslim.”17

Former Ambassador to the UN and Romney Policy Advisor John Bolton

“What I think these members of Congress have done is simply raise the question, to a variety of Inspectors General in key agencies, ‘are your departments following their own security clearance guidelines, are they adhering to the standards that presumably everybody who seeks a security clearance should have to go through, are they making special exemptions?’ What is wrong with raising the question? Why is even asking whether we are living up to our standards, a legitimate area of congressional oversight, why has that generated this criticism? I’m just mystified by it.”18

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16 http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2012/07/18/bachmann-former-campaign-chief-shame-on-michele/ (July 18, 2012)
18 http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/romney-adviser-john-bolton-defends-michele-bachmann-witch-hunt (July 24, 2012)
Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich

Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich came to Michele Bachmann’s defense during an event at Politico on July 24, insisting that she and the four Congresspeople behind the attacks on American Muslim public servants had asked legitimate questions. Gingrich attributed the criticism of Bachmann from senior members of the Republican party to “an elite culture of political correctness.”

JIM VANDEHEI (POLITICO): “So you think the Muslim Brotherhood has infiltrated the American government?”

GINGRICH: “I think it’s worth knowing and I think it tells you something about the level of hysteria attacking these five members of Congress….I would ask the question, what is it they’re afraid of learning?”

Jim Graves, Bachmann’s challenger in election for MN-6

“It’s definitely a witch-hunt. It’s really terrible. It’s really disgusting. It’s horrible. I mean, quite frankly, America’s better than that. We shouldn’t be talking like this. We should be doing things constructively. They’re baseless allegations. They’re inflammatory. They’re divisive. They’re all the things that we don’t want in America.”

Former FBI Director William Webster

Former FBI Director William Webster, in an interview with Newsmax, argued that Michele Bachmann’s allegations against American Muslim public servants are “morally wrong” and undermine the war on terror.

“This is unfair, counterproductive, and it’s probably, in some respects, illegal or tortuous to be saying those things,” Webster says. “But more importantly, it gets in the way of our being able to prevent terrorist acts from happening.”

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton

Speaking at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Secretary Clinton was asked a question about the attacks on her top aide, Huma Abedin. She took the opportunity to not only defend her aide, but to tie it to the larger issue of protecting religious liberty and diversity. Secretary Clinton also praised the leadership of Republicans who spoke out against the attacks and called for more, similar leadership on issues of religious liberty and tolerance.

“Leadership is incredibly important. Leaders have to be active in stepping in and sending messages about protecting the diversity within their countries. And frankly, I don’t see enough of that, and I want to see more of it. I want to see more of it, and we did see some of that in our own country. We saw Republicans stepping up and standing up against the kind of assaults that really have no place in our politics.”

19 http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=zsHI_HKqArY (July 24, 2012)
20 http://www.salon.com/2012/07/21/bachmann_challenger_jim_graves_speaks_on_witch_hunt/ (July 21, 2012)