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How a Duke Imam Became a Lightning Rod in the Campus Israel Wars

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Rina Castelnuovo For The Chronicle Review

Imam Abdullah Antepli

In the summer of 2011, the Center for American Progress published the results of a landmark investigation into the rise of American Islamophobia. The liberal think tank's report, called "Fear, Inc.," documented how seven foundations had directed more than \$40 million to a small network of "misinformation experts" whose message of "hate and fear" reached millions of Americans. The

study became a touchstone for Muslim leaders defending their faith in the public sphere.

Abdullah T. Antepli reacted differently to the report than many of his colleagues. The imam, then the Muslim chaplain at Duke University and associate director of the Duke Islamic Studies Center, tried to understand these people who worked so hard to cast suspicion on Islam. He found that the zeal came from two communities: evangelical Christians and pro-Israel Jews. And the correct

response, he felt, was self-criticism. If Muslims' presence was perceived as a threat, that meant Muslims had failed to tell their own story. They should disarm the hostility by engaging with its sources.

The impulse was typical of Antepi. Since moving to the United States in 2003, the Turkish-born imam had established himself as a prominent interfaith leader and a pioneer of campus Muslim life. He had become only the second full-time Muslim chaplain at an American university. The first Muslim since 9/11 to deliver the opening prayer of the U.S. Congress. An adviser to the U.S. State Department on religious diplomacy. It was a journey made more remarkable because of where it began. Raised in an anti-Semitic home, in a country whose government and media fanned rage against Israel, Antepi grew up consumed with hatred for Jews.

By 2012, the self-described "recovering anti-Semite" felt that he had found the ideal partners in his long quest to create dialogue between Muslims and Jews. That winter, the imam attended a theology conference hosted by the Jerusalem-based Shalom Hartman Institute, a Jewish research and educational center. Impressed with the institute, Antepi approached its president with a proposal: Would the Zionist center open its doors to a group of Muslim leaders from the United States?

Antepi knew the idea would be controversial. But his effort, which came to be called the Muslim Leadership Initiative, or MLI, has provoked a fury beyond his imagination. Since 2013, 54 cultural, religious, and intellectual Muslim leaders have traveled to Hartman to study the psychological makeup of modern Jews: their faith, their relationship to Israel, their self-conception as a people. Antepi hopes MLI will help reconcile a U.S. Jewish-Muslim relationship poisoned by Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. But so far one of its most visible effects is Muslim division. Its harshest critics: pro-Palestinian activists who see the imam's Zionist partnership as an affront to their own movement to isolate Israel through boycotts, divestment, and sanctions, or "BDS."

In July, some of these activists began to circulate a petition against Antepli's program. More than 1,000 people quickly signed the document, which demanded an end to his "betrayal" of the Palestinians.

Antepli felt a different betrayal. Among the petition's promoters and lead signatories was the director of his own center, Omid Safi. A Muslim leader who, for years, had been one of his closest friends.

Not long ago, Antepli sat down to tell that story in his office at Duke. The 42-year-old imam is a squat man with big brown eyes, a short black beard, and a hearty laugh. He personifies the "American as apple pie" Islamic identity that he wants to ensconce in this country. He is a strictly observant Sunni Muslim who lives a rich devotional life. But he could pass for a businessman: dark slacks, striped shirt, a bamboo-green Lexus SUV parked outside. Instead of giving his 11-year-old son an Arabic first name, Yakub, he and his wife chose the English version, Jacob.

When Duke hired Antepli as its first Muslim chaplain in 2008 — the university has since promoted him to a grander position, "chief representative of Muslim affairs" — Princeton and Yale had also been courting him. But Duke held a special appeal because of the expansive brief Antepli would have there. He wouldn't just lead prayers. He'd also teach courses on Islam to future Christian leaders in the Divinity School, work in the Islamic Studies Center, and establish a Hillel-like organization called the Center for Muslim Life. Another attraction: the chance to interact with professors down the road at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a hub of influential Islamic-studies scholars, including, at that time, Omid Safi.

Antepli had known Safi by reputation for years. Born in Jacksonville, Fla., Safi had spent much of his childhood in his family's native Iran, only to return to the United States in the mid-1980s. His early scholarship focused on medieval Islamic

history and politics. But Safi pivoted to contemporary issues after 9/11, becoming, in Antepi's words, "one of the most important and helpful public voices defending Islam, fighting Islamophobia." A prolific author, blogger, and media commentator, Safi promoted a progressive reading of Islam based on social justice, gender equality, and pluralism. Antepi admired Safi's books and shared his aspirations for the future of their religion. "It was love at first sight," he says.

In 2014, Antepi advocated hiring Safi to lead the Duke Islamic Studies Center. Demand for Islamic expertise had soared across academe in the wake of 9/11, and Safi's hire was the latest in a series of ambitious steps Duke had taken to expand Islam-related research and student services. But recent years have also been a time of controversy and violence for Muslims in the region — a charged atmosphere that, until lately, Safi and Antepi worked together to defuse.

In January of 2015, Duke announced plans to begin a weekly Muslim call to prayer, or *adhan*, from the 210-foot bell tower of its neo-Gothic chapel. It was a gesture of pluralism for a Methodist-rooted institution whose West Campus is laid out in the shape of a cross. But the plan sparked outrage online. Franklin Graham, an evangelical leader and the son of Billy Graham, urged alumni and donors to boycott Duke. Writing to millions of supporters on Facebook, he excoriated the university for planning the *adhan* at a time when "Christianity is being excluded from the public square and followers of Islam are raping, butchering, and beheading Christians, Jews and anyone who doesn't submit to their Sharia Islamic law." The university called off the bell-tower *adhan* after receiving what it described as a "serious and credible" security threat.

The specter of violence against Muslims soon became reality. One month after the *adhan* controversy, three young Muslims were shot and killed at their Chapel Hill home. Authorities charged a middle-aged white man with their murder. To relatives of the victims, all of whom had connections to local universities, the killer's motive was clear: hatred of Muslims. But police said a parking dispute

appeared to have prompted the shootings. Frustration about the tragedy went global under the hashtag "#muslimlivesmatter." The situation, Antepi says, threatened to become a "Muslim Ferguson."

It didn't. Antepi had worked hard to build connections with local faith leaders, public officials, and law-enforcement agencies. In the 72 hours that followed the Chapel Hill killings, those relationships paid off. Antepi brought authorities together with the victims' families and Muslim leaders. He joined a press conference in which officials said they would pursue all leads and the imam proclaimed his "full trust" in local law enforcement. Safi, too, was a ubiquitous media presence, eulogizing the victims and calling for action against Islamophobia. Both Safi and Antepi comforted a weeping crowd of thousands at a Chapel Hill vigil.

"It was a beautiful, healing moment," Antepi says. "The community came together. This tragedy revealed the best of us."

Antepi and Safi were maintaining public harmony, but controversy over the imam's Jerusalem program had already erupted. The trouble began on June 24, 2014. That's when one participant in the Muslim Leadership Initiative, Rabia Chaudry, drew wide attention to the program in a *Time* article titled "What a Muslim American Learned From Zionists." Two weeks later, Israel began a military offensive against Hamas in Gaza. For the MLI participants, Antepi says, "Hell broke loose."

Prior to that moment, Antepi and his colleagues had been quietly building an unusual experiment. Unusual, first, because of the people involved. As Antepi saw it, one of the stumbling blocks between Muslims and Jews was



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Abdullah Antepi (left) at the Shalom Hartman Institute, in Jerusalem, with Yossi Klein Halevi, a senior fellow there.

their tendency to support each other's renegades. Jews might look to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, known for her attacks on Islamic culture. Muslims might seek out Norman Finkelstein, who has criticized Israel for exploiting the Holocaust. Antepi was attempting something different. The imam tapped his network to recruit mainstream, pro-Palestine American Muslims: journalists, university chaplains, scholars, politicians, activists, and business

people. And he put them in conversation with a mainstream Zionist institution. Hartman's mission is to help Judaism thrive. It does that through a think tank concerned with questions of identity and values as well as through a range of programs that train religious leaders and bring Jewish ideas into secular Israeli institutions like high schools and the armed forces.

The nature of the MLI conversation was also atypical. It wasn't the usual interfaith exchange where Jews and Muslims chatted about halal chicken and avoided the elephant in the room. It was a one-way educational program whose classes were meant to expose Muslim leaders to the inner challenges of Judaism. How do Jews understand peoplehood — the idea that Jews exist as a people independent of their religion? How do they understand Israel as a Jewish democratic state? How do they struggle with building a society in which Judaism can divide people more than it unites them? How do they understand power? Beyond these classes at Hartman, MLI participants also spent part of their trip meeting with Palestinians.

Antepli had watched the Israeli-Palestinian conflict polarize American Jews and Muslims. Just as worrisome to him as Jews' support for Islamophobia was the casual anti-Semitism running out of control in many Muslim circles. Antepli considered that lethal for a marginalized, largely immigrant community trying to integrate into the United States. The imam hoped MLI could nurture a different relationship. By traveling to Israel, studying the Jewish story, and risking their reputations along the way, its participants would create a reciprocal process. Some American Jews would reconsider their take on Islam. New doors would open for Muslims.

But once the Gaza war broke out, social-media feeds began to fill up with images of slaughter. The conflict would last 51 days and kill 1,462 Palestinian civilians, a third of them children, according to a United Nations inquiry. At a moment of such carnage, many were mystified by Chaudry's *Time* article, which, while critical of Israel, also discussed how the Hartman program had helped her better understand Zionism and empathize with Jews' fear of Palestinians.

A single critique framed much of the MLI debate. Responding to Chaudry in *The Islamic Monthly*, a columnist named Sana Saeed described Antepli's program as the latest in a series of efforts to sanitize Israel's system of occupation and "apartheid." It "undercuts the plight of Palestinians," she wrote, "and normalizes Zionism — a racist ideology and institution." Saeed also highlighted Hartman's ties to the Russell Berrie Foundation, which provides significant financial support to the institute. The 2011 "Fear, Inc." report had identified Russell Berrie as a leading funder of Islamophobia.

As critics saw it, Antepli's recruits were stooges in Hartman's campaign to co-opt Muslims and counter the anti-Israel BDS movement. And they were going to Israel just when BDS was gaining traction, particularly among academic groups like the American Studies Association. One American-studies professor at Yale University, Zareena Grewal, published an essay arguing that Antepli's program

posed a "unique challenge" to BDS: "a rejection by the very U.S. constituency that would seem the most natural advocates of the Palestinian cause." She likened its members to "scabs" brought in to break a labor strike.

On Facebook and Twitter, critics began to expose and shame the MLI participants. They were Zionist whores. Sellouts. Infidels. For Haroon Moghul, the effect was "a lot of emotional pain." Moghul is a Columbia University Ph.D. student whose work straddles academe, journalism, and the world of New York and Washington think tanks. His goal is to push U.S. policy away from aggression toward the Middle East and the Muslim world. He had joined Antepi's program in part out of frustration that people assumed his Pakistani and Muslim background prevented him from intelligently discussing America's relationship to Israel. In his view, the BDS approach seemed ill conceived at a moment when most Americans held positive views of Israel and Muslims were the only demographic group openly discussed as a threat. "If we can't talk to people who strongly disagree with us, who are also minorities, we basically are saying that we will not be talking to anyone," he says.

After Moghul's participation was publicized, activists organized boycotts to block him from speaking on campuses, costing him significant income. A proffered university fellowship, which would have supported his dissertation work, suddenly disappeared.

It was worse for Antepi, who began to receive anonymous phone and email messages threatening to kill him. One day that summer, local police and FBI officials showed up to inspect the security of his home. The visit frightened Jacob, who saw his dad as a defender of Islam. Why would Muslims want to harm him? Stroking Jacob's hair, Antepi reassured his son that their lives were not in danger.

Safi tried to make peace. He publicly sympathized with the imam's opponents



Jon Gardiner, Duke Photography

Omid Safi, director of the Duke Islamic Studies Center

while reaffirming faith in his "dear brother" Antepi. But Antepi wasn't looking for peace. As he saw it, the vitriol had exposed his community's pathologies. It had shown he was right about the need for new approaches to activism. It was now time to expand MLI.

On college campuses, the responses to Antepi's program tend to follow a pattern. Opposition comes largely from professors and students. Support comes from interfaith offices, religious chaplaincies, and university administrations. At Yale, for example, Grewal's anti-MLI essay revealed that the university's Muslim chaplain, Omer Bajwa, had joined the program, and the essay quoted the criticism of a Muslim student disillusioned by that participation. More than a dozen campus chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine have signed on to a boycott campaign that seeks to deny public platforms to MLI participants. But nowhere has the conflict been more poisonous, or more public, than at Duke.

Safi had publicly stuck up for his friend. Their private conversations were turning into something much different. Starting in the summer of 2014, Safi says, he and others spent months trying to persuade Antepi to change course. Their message: Pause the program. Get Hartman to remove its "Islamophobic funding." Clarify whether MLI was about interfaith exchanges or "brainwashing Muslims about Zionism."

None of those appeals worked, Safi says. With Antepi preparing to bring more MLI recruits to Jerusalem in July of 2015, the program's critics escalated their campaign by drafting a public letter. Antepi got word of the coming petition

about a month before the document was published. The imam confronted Safi. "Don't do it," Antepi recalls telling him. "It will be impossible to work with you."

In Safi's telling, he and Antepi agreed on most things. But one core issue divided them: how to behave at a time of political injustice. Seek political influence? Or align yourself with the weak?

On July 1, Safi made his answer clear in a Facebook post urging his thousands of followers to sign the petition against Antepi's program. "I have spent the better part of the last year privately asking my friend Abdullah T. Antepi to pause or cancel the MLI program because it has failed to deliver the lofty goals he aspired to, and because it is bringing serious and real pain for the Palestinian community and its allies," he wrote. "That private approach has not worked. Therefore, I have agreed to sign on to a public letter, voicing my own critique of the MLI program, and asking the participants for the next cohort to sit down and seriously grapple further with the consequence of taking part in this program."

The public letter excoriated MLI for bypassing Palestinians and failing to account for their suffering. It asked readers to consider an analogy. "Imagine an MLI-type program that was designed to address racial tensions and understanding of police violence in the United States," it said. "MLI is akin to going to Ferguson, but not meeting with Michael Brown's family, and instead devoting oneself to 'engaging' the supporters of Officer Darren Wilson."

The sense of frustration was palpable among the petition's Palestinian signatories. One was Kamal Abu-Shamsieh, the only Palestinian-American to participate in MLI. Abu-Shamsieh had publicly abandoned the program in May, citing a litany of complaints: Hartman's president, Rabbi Donniel Hartman, had supported Israel's Gaza campaign ("a just war" that needed to be fought, as he had described it in an op-ed). The program's leaders had refused to restructure

MLI into a nonprofit that would be financially independent of Hartman. The promise that MLI would spark Muslim-Jewish partnerships had been "exaggerated."

Another signatory was Hatem Bazian, who teaches at the University of California at Berkeley and in 2009 co-founded Zaytuna, the first accredited Muslim liberal-arts college in the United States. "If you want Muslim Americans to assimilate into American society and integrate, please don't use Palestine as the steppingstone," he says. "If you want to open up doors of access and influence ... please don't use Palestine and MLI as the key."

Antepli felt ambushed by Safi's petition. A director campaigning against the associate director of his center? It was a stab in the back. "Promoting it in such a way, and knowingly going ahead with it in the form of a petition, knowing that I'm receiving death threats and this will put me and my family in such a difficult situation. ... There is nothing brotherly or friendly about what and how he did it," he says. "That's what hurts."

The imam expresses amazement at the petition's Ferguson analogy. It reveals less about MLI, he says, and more about how the authors of the petition see the world — how unaware they are about the way their rhetoric sounds to regular Americans. If you feel any affinity for Israel, the petition equates you to a "racist killer murderer cop," Antepli says. "How can a university professor say something like this?"

After the petition appeared, Antepli resigned from the Duke Islamic Studies Center. He moved his office to a different campus building. His personal and professional relationship with Safi was finished.

But the conflict's ripple effects went further. The controversy provoked resignations from the Duke Islamic Studies Center's board. And it raised questions about whether Safi had taken his activism too far.

That's how Eric M. Meyers felt. To Meyers, a biblical scholar who used to run Duke's Center for Jewish Studies, Safi's petition was "unprecedented" and "inappropriate in the most extreme way." The document earned Safi the "disdain" and "disappointment" of many colleagues, Meyers says, and helped to strain relations between Jewish and Muslim groups on campus. Meyers and others have urged Safi to soften his anti-Israel language, to no avail.

"It's tough to have a civil conversation about the Arab-Israel debate on campus," adds the emeritus professor. "The Jewish kids now, with this growing support for BDS, feel intimidated."

But Bruce Lawrence, a mentor of Safi's who previously led the Duke Islamic Studies Center, says Safi's position on MLI is "high on principle and absent any personal animus." He signed the anti-MLI petition with enthusiasm. Most of the center's external advisory board also sided with Safi, he says.

Safi rejects the "easy narrative" that pits him against Anteppli, "Position A" versus "Position B." He argues that "Muslim-community-wide, it's 99 percent of people who find this particular program morally repugnant. And a small but somewhat influential circle of people that have deep political ambitions — and they're committed to it. And so the 'A' versus 'B' format actually skews how incredibly marginal it is."

The MLI participants "love to portray themselves as the primary victims in this conflict," he says. "They love to talk about how many harassing emails they have gotten, and in some cases perhaps threatening phone calls, being disinvited from

panels. My point of view is the primary victims in this situation are those Palestinian dead children."

Antepli, an imam obsessed with community, may come out of this fight marginalized by his own people. He sees that as a real risk.

He also sees something else: MLI is beginning to work. Muslims, he notes, seriously debated the program in October at their largest U.S. gathering, the Islamic Society of North America's convention. Jews, meanwhile, are giving MLI a warm welcome, publishing glowing articles about the effort and inviting its participants to speak at synagogues.

But MLI will only be successful if its outreach inspires a similar Jewish commitment, Antepli says. He dreams of an analogue to the program: Israeli, American, and European Jewish leaders coming to study Islam at a Muslim institution. At one point, he hoped the Duke Islamic Studies Center would be that host. It won't. But he's still looking.

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