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January 26, 2015

## **CAIR Open Letter to 2016 Republican Presidential Candidates: Engage Muslim Voters, Reject Islamophobia**

Dear aspiring Republican 2016 presidential candidates:

It is a noble public service and personal sacrifice to campaign for president of the United States. On behalf of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the nation's largest Muslim civil liberties organization, we provide sincere advice on how to avoid the past mistakes other Republican candidates have made when making remarks about and engaging with the American Muslim community.

The 2012 Republican presidential primaries were marked by a series of anti-Muslim statements made by nearly all candidates. For example, Herman Cain and Newt Gingrich both said that Muslims would be required to take loyalty tests or oaths to serve in their administrations, with Cain saying that he would not require similar oaths from Mormons or Catholics "because there is a greater dangerous part of the Muslim faith than there is in these other religions."

Not only are loyalty oaths based on a person's religion un-American, it is a violation of Article VI of the U.S. Constitution, which clearly states that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States."

Islamophobic fear mongering during the 2012 campaign did not translate into a nomination for GOP presidential hopefuls Michele Bachmann, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, Tim Pawlenty, Rick Perry, and Rick Santorum. Instead, the eventual Republican presidential nominee, Mitt Romney, was able to distinguish himself from other GOP primary contenders by reaffirming that "people of all faiths are welcome in this country."

Promoting Islamophobia and false anti-Muslim conspiracies to prove conservative bona fides and attract support from the GOP base in a presidential bid is a failing strategy. As noted in the 2013 Republican National Committee's post-2012 election autopsy report, *Growth & Opportunity Project*, "If our Party is not welcoming and inclusive, young people and increasingly other voters will continue to tune us out."

American Muslims are one of the most racially and ethnically diverse religious groups in the United States, with African-Americans, Arab-Americans, and South Asians each making up roughly a third of the community. Muslims have deep ties to and are actively involved in their respective communities. If Republican candidates want minority voter support, they will have to approach the Muslim community with the same respect shown to any other community.

The Republican Party's "fight to reclaim America" in 2016 should not include disparaging remarks that question the loyalties of American Muslims or stigmatize Muslims as a group. Making anti-Muslim remarks will not get a campaign the "good" attention it needs to make a run for president. Such remarks do not go unnoticed by watchdogs and turn away independent or undecided voters.

Take for example Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, a potential GOP presidential candidate, who was recently criticized for calling some neighborhoods in European cities Muslim-controlled "no-go zones." Delivering a foreign policy speech delivered in London, Jindal said, "In the West, non-assimilationist Muslims establish enclaves and carry out as much of Sharia law as they can without regard for the laws of the democratic countries which provided them a new home."

While Fox News apologized for and retracted one of its guest's false claims that there are Muslim "no-go zones" in Europe, Jindal's insistence that such places do in fact exist has been widely reported by his home state's liberal and conservative leaning newspapers as a bungled play for the conservative base.

Sweeping Republican victories in the midterm election were partly driven by the higher turnout of older, white voters. Younger and minority voters traditionally show up in far greater numbers during presidential elections. A Republican path to the White House in 2016 and beyond will be paved by making greater efforts to appeal to America's minority communities, including the American Muslim community.

As advised by the *Growth & Opportunity Project* report, Republican candidates in 2014 made far greater attempts to court Latino voters or at least avoid being antagonistic about the issue of immigration. This strategy paid off in a number of key races in Texas, Georgia, and Kansas where nearly half of Latino voters supported Republican candidates for governor. This was quite an accomplishment considering Latinos had voted two-to-one for Democratic candidates in the previous mid-term elections.

Republican candidates should invest similar resources in courting Muslim voters as they do other minority communities. The American Muslim community is well positioned to impact election results in key swing states such as Ohio, Virginia and Florida.

It is well-known that the majority of the American Muslim vote went to President George W. Bush in the close 2000 election. However, by the 2012 general election, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney only received a single digit percentage of the Muslim vote. This significant drop in Muslim support for the Republican Party can be attributed to unwillingness from Republican candidates to engage with Muslim communities, increased adoption of Islamophobic rhetoric and support for discriminatory legislation that targets foreign law, a dog whistle to the conservative base for "sharia law."

A poll of registered American Muslim voters conducted by CAIR before the 2014 midterm election found a modest positive shift in Muslim voter support for Republican candidates, reflecting the GOP's national gains. Close to 20 or more percent (23 percent for Rick Scott in Florida) of Muslims elected Republican candidates for governor in the midterm elections. Republican gains in the Muslim community were attributed to winning over traditionally independent or undecided voters.

While Republicans have overwhelmingly been responsible for pushing anti-Islam prejudice during past elections, four separate incidents in 2014-15 showed that the GOP will, at times, act against Islamophobia. In January, the RNC Executive Committee voted to censure Michigan GOP National Committeeman Dave Agema for his repeated incendiary comments about Muslims and Islam. Continued Republican actions against Islamophobic remarks and acts inside and outside of the party can easily swing Muslim voters with a history of Republican Party support back toward the GOP.

Further Republican gains in the Muslim community are possible if a sincere effort is made. Again, CAIR advises that by not giving a platform to Islamophobia, holding accountable those candidates that do use their campaigns to foster anti-Muslim sentiment and making a concerted effort to engage Muslim voters, your campaign and the Republican Party will be closer to its presidential aspirations.