

Avril Haines
Director of National Intelligence
1500 Tysons McLean Dr.
McLean, VA 22102

July 10, 2024

Dear Director Haines

I write on behalf of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the nation's largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization, to express concern about the impact of the claim your office made yesterday regarding alleged attempts by Iranian actors who may be attempting to somehow stoke and support U.S. protests against the genocide in Gaza.

Foreign influence operations by any country, whether Iran, Israel or Russia, should concern the American people. At the same time, it is critically important for our government not to endanger the American people by making vague, reckless and dangerous claims that cast undue suspicion on the American people.

Like the Americans who protested against segregation, the Vietnam war and the illegal invasion of Iraq, the diverse group of Americans protesting against the Gaza genocide have done so organically and independently.

From overwhelmingly peaceful sit-ins on college campuses to massive, historic marches through Washington, DC to acts of peaceful civil disobedience in cities across America, hundreds of thousands of Americans have exercised their First Amendment right to protest our government's support for Benjamin Netanyahu's campaign of slaughter and starvation in Gaza, where at least 40,000 Palestinians—most of them women and children—have been killed.

Many of these protests have been organized, led and funded by Jewish Americans, Muslim Americans, Palestinian Americans, African Americans and many other Americans who oppose U.S. support for the Israeli government's genocide in Gaza because they have seen for themselves horrific images of Palestinian children blown into pieces, houses of worship destroyed, and grieving parents in bloodied hospital rooms.

As you note in your statement, "I want to be clear that I know Americans who participate in protests are, in good faith, expressing their views on the conflict in Gaza – this intelligence does not indicate otherwise."

Sadly, Americans engaging in anti-genocide protests have been met with a systematic campaign of hatred meant to smear and silence them, especially Palestinian and Muslim Americans.

In recent months, a massive wave of Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian racism has swept across our nation. In 2023, CAIR recorded over 8,000 complaints,¹ the highest number of incoming complaints we have received in our thirty-year history.

Recently in Texas, a woman screaming racial slurs attacked the children of a visibly Muslim woman at a public pool,² attempting to drown them. She now faces attempted murder charges. Earlier this month, a man known for harassing a Minnesota mosque drove his car into a CAIR staffer outside that house of worship,³ flipping our colleague over the hood of the car. Police have described the incident as a hate crime.

Protesters have been repeatedly targeted. Pro-Israel extremists launched a violent attack against UCLA students⁴ at their anti-genocide encampment, violent threats led USC to cancel the graduation speech of its Muslim valedictorian Asna Tabbasum,⁵ police officers have launched attacks against students at Emory University, the University of Texas at Austin and other schools, pro-Israel students allegedly connected to the IDF used the skunk spray chemical weapon on students protesting for Palestine,⁶ and a Palestinian Muslim protester in Austin was stabbed by a man screaming racial slurs, an incident police identified as a hate crime.⁷ We could go on.

In addition, pro-Israel extremists have attempted to smear protesters using conspiracy theories and hate speech. Anti-Defamation League CEO Jonathan Greenblatt has repeatedly made hateful remarks Jewish, Palestinian and Muslim Americans.⁸ Mr. Greenblatt also declared that Jewish Voice for Peace and Students for Justice in Palestine are literal “proxies” of the Iranian government, just like Hezbollah.⁹

Amid this backdrop of hate crimes, hate speech and conspiracy theories, the DNI announcement that over the past few weeks Iranians using social media have attempted to stoke protests or give donations in support of protests was vague, reckless and dangerous because of its lack of detail.

Your announcement read, in part, “In recent weeks, Iranian government actors have sought to opportunistically take advantage of ongoing protests regarding the war in Gaza, using a playbook we’ve seen other actors use over the years. We have observed actors tied to Iran’s government

¹ 2024 Civil Rights Report: Fatal: The Resurgence of Anti-Muslim Hate, Monitoring and Combating Islamophobia. <https://islamophobia.org/civil-rights-reports/2024-civil-rights-report-fatal-the-resurgence-of-anti-muslim-hate/>

² Texas Woman Accused of Trying to Drown Muslim Child In Racist Attack, “HuffPost.” June 22, 2024.

³ Minneapolis man charged with assault in hit-and-run at mosque, Fox 9 KMSP. May 24, 2024.

⁴ Pro-Israel counterprotesters attack pro-Palestinian camp at UCLA; violence continues for hours, Los Angeles Times. May 1, 2024.

⁵ USC says it is canceling its valedictorian speech because of safety concerns, NPR. April 16, 2024.

⁶ At Columbia, Student Protesters Say They Were Attacked with Chemical, The New York Times. Jan. 22, 2024.

⁷ Texas stabbing of Palestinian American meets hate crime standard, police say. The Washington Post. February 8, 2024. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2024/02/08/austin-stabbing-hate-crime-palestine/>

⁸ 60 Muslim, Arab, Palestinian & Allied Groups Condemn ADL and CEO Greenblatt For “Hateful, Dangerous” Anti-Palestinian Rhetoric. April 15, 2024. <https://www.cair.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/ADLNew.pdf>

⁹ Jonathan Greenblatt: “Iran has their military proxies like Hezbollah, and Iran has their campus proxies like these groups, like Students for Justice in Palestine, Jewish Voice for Peace.” Morning Joe. April 25, 2024. https://x.com/_waleedshahid/status/1783520372001825139

posing as activists online, seeking to encourage protests, and even providing financial support to protesters.”

This statement failed to share critical details that would substantiate the claim or clarify the extent of the Iranian influence campaign. How many Iranians have done this? Exactly when did they start attempting to do this? Which social media platforms have they used? How much financial support have they provided? How have they contributed this support?

In the absence of these and other important details, your announcement has given anti-Palestinian and anti-Muslim extremists leeway to exaggerate your claim, cast suspicion on future anti-genocide protests, and further endanger Americans who have already been beaten stabbed, rammed with cars, and subjected to other attacks while protesting over the past eight months.

This is not 1948 or 1968. Joseph McCarthy is dead. So is J. Edgar Hoover. Our government must not deliberately or accidentally resurrect their legacy by weaponizing its power to smear or silence the American people.

To address these concerns, we encourage you to share much more clarifying detail about the Iranian operation. If this operation did indeed begin a few weeks ago, your office should explicitly note that there is no evidence that the protests that have occurred across the country over the past eight months were funded or enabled by the Iranian government.

Finally, given your understandable concerns about foreign influence in our nation, it is critical for you to share information about the Israeli government's reported efforts to use fake social media users, bots and lobbyists to smear American citizens, manipulate members of Congress and manufacture support for their recent and past war crimes.^{10 11 12} Any foreign interference in American public discourse must be called out, not just influence by Iranians and Russians.

Thank you for your attention this urgent matter. We look forward to seeing your office share additional and clarifying information with the public before Americans protesting the genocide face a new wave of smears, threats and attacks.

¹⁰ *Israel Secretly Targets U.S. Lawmakers With Influence Campaign on Gaza War*, *The New York Times*. June 5, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/05/technology/israel-campaign-gaza-social-media.html>

¹¹ How Israel tried to use AI to covertly sway Americans about Gaza, NPR. July 9, 2024. <https://www.npr.org/2024/07/09/nx-s1-4994027/israel-us-online-influence-campaign-gaza#:~:text=Past%20Israeli%20online%20influence%20operations&text=The%20department%20hired%20people%20who,behalf%20of%20the%20Israeli%20government.>

¹² Israeli army admits to covert influence campaign in Gaza war, AP. March 22, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-social-media-fake-accounts-bots-bea114a2be8e0fcf73fcabc736047fd3>

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Edward Mitchell, III". The signature is written in a cursive style with a distinct "III" at the end.

Edward Ahmed Mitchell
National Deputy Director
Council on American-Islamic Relations
e-mitchell@cair.com