

**ORAL TESTIMONY for Hearing before the Canadian House of Commons Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage**

**“Unintended Consequences: M103 Harms all Canadians, especially Muslims”**

**By Dr. M. ZUHDI JASSER**

**PRESIDENT, AMERICAN ISLAMIC FORUM FOR DEMOCRACY**

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**Introduction**

Thank you Chairperson Fry and members of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage for holding this very important hearing on studying whether and how to fulfill the recommendations of M-103. I am Dr. M. Zuhdi Jasser, President and founder of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy (AIFD) based in Phoenix, Arizona. I am here today not only at the request of your staff, but I am taking the time to be with you because I could not feel more strongly that our current national, and moreover, joint Western direction in addressing the complexities of Muslim related issues from combating Islamist inspired terrorism to domestic tranquility is deeply flawed and profoundly dangerous. For Canadians, many of the questions with which you are wrestling, we as your American neighbors and allies to the south are also wrestling with as we all have since 9-11 and now especially since the rampant increase of Islamist inspired acts of terror against our homelands with the advent of ISIS and continued growth of global jihadism.

As a devout American Muslim who loves my faith, and loves my nation, I must tell you that any emphasis on "Islamophobia" is profoundly flawed and will continue our nations down the slippery slope of actually catering to Islamist separatism. I am here to tell you that by simply even using that term and referring to it as "Islamophobia" and getting the government into the business of monitoring any form of speech will end up paradoxically heightening societal divisions. We must not coddle Muslim communities which will only further separate Muslims out. Trying to suppress what can be painful speech about Islam at society's fringes will actually paradoxically feed an unintended consequence of fomenting non-Muslim fears of Islam. Citizens who cannot have their real fears heard and their speech exercised will be stifled from the public sector and push underground resentment that will only foment.

Yes, all racism should be addressed by our free societies and prevented in all its forms, but it actually hurts Muslims for a government based in universal rights of all to pay special attention to protecting "Islam" from harsh critique versus protecting all human beings of faith or no faith from actual bigotry. The "special" treatment of Muslims will actually backfire and cause our communities to be culturally derided,

hated, and feared more because our faith is not held to the same free-for-all as any other faith.

### **Brief Background on American Islamic Forum for Democracy (AIFD) and The Muslim Reform Movement (MRM)**

Our American Islamic Forum for Democracy (AIFD) was founded in 2003 in the wake of the horrific attacks of September 11. For us, it is a very personal mission to leave our American Muslim children a legacy that their faith is based in the unalienable right to liberty and to teach them that the principles that founded America do not contradict their faith but strengthen it. AIFD's founding principle is that we as Muslims are able to best practice our faith in a society like the United States that guarantees the rights of every individual under God but blind to any one faith with no governmental intermediary stepping between the individual and the creator to interpret the will of God. Because of this, our mission is explicitly to advocate for the principles of the Constitution of the United States of America, liberty and freedom through the separation of mosque and state. We believe that this mission from within the "House of Islam" is the only way to inoculate Muslim youth and young adults against radicalization. The "Liberty narrative" is the only effective counter to the "Islamist narrative."

AIFD is the most prominent American Muslim organization directly confronting and attempting to reform against the ideas of political Islam. We believe Muslims can openly counter the common belief that the Muslim faith is inextricably rooted to the concept of the Islamic state (Islamism). AIFD's mission is derived from a love for America and a love of our faith of Islam. The theocratic "Islamic" regimes of the Middle East and many Muslim majority nations use their interpretations of Islam and 'shar'ia' (Islamic jurisprudence) as a way to control Muslim populations. We believe, as did America's founding fathers, that the purest practice of faith is one in which the faithful have complete freedom to accept or reject any of the tenants or laws of the faith no different than we enjoy as Americans in this Constitutional republic. We constantly ask that Americans not just observe what is happening inside the House of Islam but that they take the sides of the reformers, dissidents, and secularists against the theocratic Islamists.

AIFD was founded on the premise that the root cause of Islamist terrorism is the ideology of political Islam and a belief in the preference for and supremacy of an Islamic state. Terrorism is but a means to that end. Most Islamist terror is driven by the desire of Islamists to drive the influence of the west (the ideas of liberty) out of the Muslim consciousness and Muslim majority societies. With almost a quarter of the world's population Muslim, American or Canadian security will never come without an understanding and winning out of the ideas of liberty by Muslims and an understanding of the harm of political Islam by non-Muslims. This will not happen if tough public discussion on Islam is muted by fears of "offending Muslim, read Islamist, sensibilities".

We work to engage Muslim youth and empower them with the independence to question the ideas of imams, clerics, and so many "tribal" leaders of Muslim

communities unwilling to work toward reform and modernity. We empower Muslim youth to have the confidence to take personal intellectual ownership of their own interpretation of Islam, the Qur'an, Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), and shariah (Islamic jurisprudence) and separate mosque and state. We work to advocate for the ideas of gender equality, genuine religious pluralism, and an unwavering preference of the secular state and a secular law over the Islamic state among other central ideas in modernity.

Our mission is on the front lines of what is probably the most essential and yet contentious debate of the 21st century. So it should be easy to understand why many Muslims may agree with our mission to separate mosque and state and marginalize political Islam, yet want to remain private and out of the public eye as supporters.

AIFD most recently convened and helped launch the Muslim Reform Movement (MRM) in December 2015 in Washington D.C. The Muslim Reform Movement is a coalition of over 15 Western Muslim Leaders (from the U.S., Canada, and Europe) whose goal is to actively fight radical Islam from inside by confronting the idea of Islamism at its roots. The MRM has written a Declaration for Muslim Reform, a living document which was presented to all Islamic organizations, leaders and mosques across the U.S. in 2016 (Appendix 1), with hopes of using its principles as a firewall to clearly separate radical Islamists from Muslims who believe in universal human rights.

Not one iota of this work is possible in an environment where government agencies and the western public writ large are unwilling to understand and engage Muslim groups domestically and abroad on their diverse interpretations of core terms, ideas, and movements. The attempts and policies of the Obama and Trudeau administrations and their advisors to obstruct the use of terms which are central to the precursor characteristics of radicalized Muslims is willfully blind, negligent, and leaves us bare against the threat of radical Islamism. It renders our greatest allies within the Muslim community- genuine reformers-entirely impotent and marginalized.

I hope and pray that my testimony today will open your eyes to how central the engagement of honest terminology is in demarcating who are our genuine allies from those who are or are working with our enemies abroad and the insurgents within.

### **Overview of M103 mandates**

M103 asks your government, now via your committee, to assess the following:

- 1- "Address and quell the increasing climate of hate and fear": I believe it'll actually make it worse preventing the tough conversations we need to have publicly and instead allowing them to boil underneath the surface.
- 2- Specifically condemns "Islamophobia and all forms of systemic racism and religious discrimination and take note of House of Commons e-petition e-411 and the issues raised" which are all related to Islam, Muslims, and so-called

Islamophobia: I believe that this inordinate focus on Islam and even Muslims will actually backfire and not have the effect upon your citizenry and culture that the author of M103 feels it will. It will only empower the tribal leaders, the Islamists in our midst. Racism and discrimination in all its forms should be fought and focusing on one community under the name of their faith (Islamophobia) rather than about the bigotry against those individuals (Muslims) will actually exacerbate the situation.

3- Asks your committee to "undertake a study on how the government could (i) develop a whole-of-government approach to reducing or eliminating systemic racism and religious discrimination including Islamophobia, in Canada, while ensuring a community-centered focus with a holistic response through evidence-based policy-making": While the government should certainly be in the business of protecting individual citizens from acts of violence and protecting their rights of free speech and religious freedom, they should not be in the business of studying negative or positive sentiments about a particular faith.

4- Asks you to "collect data to contextualize hate crime reports and to conduct needs assessments for impacted communities": Again, this seems harmless enough. But the focus should not simply and solely be on Muslims when in fact preventing racism and discrimination should be something that addresses all vulnerable minorities or groups. In Europe, areas for example seeing spikes in bigotry against Muslims are also seeing spikes in anti-Semitism and other forms of xenophobia.

Let me elaborate on these positions in the following areas to which I would like to call your attention.

### **'Muslim' issues should not be partisan wedge issues**

First, I must emphasize, that having difficulties, as I and so many Canadian Muslims do with any of the above mandates imposed upon your committee by M103 does not in any way mean that individuals like myself, especially as a Muslim, would ever turn a blind eye towards hate crimes or discrimination against Muslims or any vulnerable minority for that matter. But we, Muslims, should not want special treatment beyond that afforded any other faith community. You should address anti-Semitism, and any form of xenophobia with the same vigor with no special treatment for Canadian Muslims.

Moreover, the best mechanism for your government to address any bigotry, that may exist against Muslims, is certainly not through the language and mandate of this proposal originated from MP Iqra Khalid. This resolution and the commentary on the original e-petition (E-411) actually smack of the language seen in Islamic Republics and their sharia-based (Islamist jurisprudence) restrictions on free speech rather than what we should expect from the freest nations on the planet which protect the rights of every individual equally with no protections of any religions or their ideas- only protections for individual citizens.

There is nothing partisan that should either support or deny the premise of M103. For both liberals and conservatives, the protection of women's rights, minority rights, and the rights of non-Muslims to criticize Islam in the struggle for modernity should bring you to reject the term 'Islamophobia' and any protections against it. There is absolutely no partisan or one-sided basis for rejecting jihad, Islamism, Salafism, and any other idea from within the Islamist mindset. M103 protects all these ideas from critique and dissection under the rubric of Islamophobia. If you are going to study anything, it may be wise for you to study why otherwise liberal anti-Islamist Muslims (more natural ideological allies of Liberals) are finding more support among Conservatives for our reformist ideas while fundamentalist theocratic Muslims are finding home among Liberals? Tahir Gora recently looked at this question for Clarion Project. The answer may lie in the exploitation of Muslim rights at the altar of group identity politics.

### **Increase in hate crimes?**

According to one study the number of hate crimes versus Muslim Canadians doubled over a three-year period from 45 in 2012 to 99 in 2014. This was reported in 2016. I will not support nor deny here the reproducibility and validity of this data. But even if we accept these large shifts in relatively small numbers, this ignores so many variables. This is still in a setting where Jewish Canadians are still the most likely to be attacked of any vulnerable minority faith group. The total number of hate crimes in Canada went from 1414 in '12 to 1295 in '14. Thus, if you look at the totality and the proportion of numbers of 99 reports against Muslims versus 1300 hate crimes in total, it seems disproportional and biased to simply address bigotry towards Muslims. And this is not to mention that if and when you do address bigotry towards Muslims, please just address that-bigotry towards Muslims-- and not a contrived Islamist concept of "Islamophobia".

Muslims should be treated equally like any other group and not be coddled or protected more than any other group at the first sign of any concerns with a different threshold for study than any other minority faith group or vulnerable community. Doing so will in fact backfire and cause an increase in hostility and forces of separatism.

### **Do not use the term Islamophobia**

You should understand that the term 'Islamophobia' was created by Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) nations in the 90's in order to stifle criticism of Islam by Western nations and free market open media. It is a deceptive concept Islamist regimes employed for centuries as there are countless number of Muslims and non-Muslims (millions) in jails across Muslim majority nations for the crimes of blasphemy and apostasy linked to "criticism of Islam". Any criticism of their government and legal systems are labeled Islamophobia in order mask systemic domestic repression under the guise of protecting 'sacred Islam'. Muslim reformers like myself are attacked and derided even in our own mosques and Islamic institutions here in the West under the rubric of protection of the community from "Islamophobia" since they equate criticism of theocratic Islamism and Islamist groups with "Islamophobia".

This is an inevitable result when a government gives ideas (like Islam) rights. The identification of bigotry under the label of a 'phobia' against a faith rather than bigotry against a particular group of people is Orwellian and in the end will harm Muslims and our rights. Ideas do not have rights. Islam is an idea. It does not have rights. Muslims are human beings that have rights and should be protected like any other free Canadian citizen.

Thus, your use of the term 'Islamophobia' and study thereof will actually have the effect of stifling your greatest most liberal allies within the Muslim community including the leaders of our Muslim Reform Movement. The ideas of our Muslim Reform Movement declaration have been derided as Islamophobic by many of the Islamist allies of the authors of M103. It is unfathomable to me that in the freest nations on the planet including Canada and the United States and Europe that we are being marginalized by our own communities through the platforms gained by resolutions like M103 which stifle our critique of Islamism under the rubric of 'Islamophobia'.

You were asked to study systemic racism and religious discrimination. Islam is not a race. Just like you should address anti-Semitism but not Judeo-phobia our nations should address bigotry and hate against Muslims but not Islamophobia. You are also stifling the maturation of Muslims in dealing with the most difficult issues in our faith. "Tough love" for Canadian Muslims requires that you provide and protect the public space for the discussion of any ideas related to faith no matter how unpalatable while protecting individual rights, but it is not your role to protect ideas like Islam.

For example, the recent rejection in Quebec of the so-called freedom to where a face veil 'niqab' was described as Islamophobia, when in fact the reality is that there is nothing more pro-Muslim than protecting the individual rights of women to be identified and autonomous, and not be facelessly oppressed. The central aspect of the protection of individual rights is the ability to identify people by face. The oppression of women should not be dismissed under the guise of religious freedom. The claim that there is a slippery slope for government to prohibit niqab (face covering) and then go on to other religious clothing is absurd. There is no slippery slope from the niqab or face-veil to then having the government get involved in any other clothing such as the hijab or the burqa. No. The government should not be involved in personal dress; however even our Supreme Court in the U.S. has deemed it illegal for demonstrations to occur with facemasks.

M103 opens the door to connecting any and all issues even remotely involving Muslims to the so-called Islamophobia. This should be stopped from the get-go.

### **Harm of M103**

There are many harms and unintended consequences that would naturally follow as a result of implementing M103.

1- The enabling and enshrinement of the term Islamophobia with the empowerment

of all the Islamists domestically and abroad including their regimes who use that term to shut down dissent.

2- The empowerment of Islamists over Muslim reformers who are silenced by being called 'Islamophobes'.

3- The infantilization of Muslims by disproportionately protecting them more than any other vulnerable community in Canada. This is especially true since "Islamophobia" includes the perception that Muslims are particularly sensitive about critique of our faith, Islam.

4- It will backfire and end up separating Muslims out more and feeding to both extremes in today's Canadian society. Thus it will actually not only fail but make things worse than what it was intended to do at its stated inception.

5- It will feed into a false and deceptive partisan narrative on Muslim citizenship instead of both sides of the aisle agreeing to lift up common values shared by all Canadian heritage which are rejected by Islamists.

6- M103 treats Muslims as a monolith and in fact we are an ideologically diverse community for which many reject the platforms created by the Islamist establishment on our behalf. If many or most Muslims believe there is no need for this, you will cause more harm. No one appointed MP Khalid or any Islamist agitators our spokespersons.

7- The security apparatus will be harmed after being hamstrung even further in addressing the root cause of violent Islamism-non-violent Islamism. Petitions like e-411 which apparently led to M103 claim that radicals are an "infinitesimally small number" and "these violent individuals do not reflect in any way the values of the teachings of the religion of Islam. In fact they misrepresent the religion." While most Muslims reject the violence, many remain in deep denial that the non-violent supremacist Islamist precursors lead directly to terrorism and need reform. You cannot divorce the connection between the cultural ostracization of Muslim reformers against Islamism and the blindness created by bromides and anesthetics like M103. Your security apparatus' approach to violent extremism (CVE) and not (CVI-Countering Violent Islamism) comes from a fear of naming Islamism due to this major obstacle of the contrived "Islamophobia".

8- Instead of entrenching further the obstacles to study Islamism, you should contrarily actually free up the public discourse on Islam and stop infantilizing Muslims. You should allow us the freedom to have major public debates about how non-violent Islamism is the precursor to violent Islamism. The conditions called for in M-103 are a major obstacle to that entire process.

9- Governments should never be in the business of protecting the image of a faith. This is what the Saudis try to always do regarding their radical version of Islam which is the root cancer -Wahhabism--, and it thus should not be the role of the

Canadian government to protect the image of Islam. That is a slippery slope which will cause many of the problems noted above.

10- In fact, the avoidance of a discourse on Islam does not leave the government neutral. It effectively hands the argument to the predominant current power structure of the domestic and global Muslim faith community-the suffocating influence of 'petro-Islam', the Wahhabi version of Islam in Saudi Arabia and the Islamist movement of the Muslim Brotherhood based out of Egypt and Qatar or the Deobandis of Pakistan. Make no mistake this whole debate of this hearing is not only about the plight of Canadian Muslims, but it is also about appeasement of a host of foreign Islamist regimes (Islamic republics) who our government is afraid to critically engage on their supremacist shar'ia states and even protects from debates and critique in our own homelands.

11- Denial of the role of various forms of Islamic theology in radicalizing Muslims and creating the domestic and global threat of Islamism, will only fuel bigotry in our cultures rather than quell it.

12- Pew polling demonstrates that American feelings about Muslims, for example, are "cooler" than any other faith group scoring a 40 out of 100. In fact, I would ask you to see that there is actually nothing that would do more to melt away that anti-Muslim bigotry to the extent that it exists than for Americans to see Muslims step away from denial and actually engaging and confronting the Jihad with their own jihad for liberty and against theocracy. We should be calling for a jihad against jihad rather than shielding Muslims and Americans from the tough love that they need.

13- Please make sure that you understand that the advice you receive from ideological Islamists is compromised by their fealty to clerics, and the tribal construct of Islamic states for Muslim majority nations.

14- In the United States, and in the West, Muslim reformers are constantly confronted with advocates like MP Iqra Khalid who provide an apologetic for Islamists and their ideology of Islamism promoting similar restrictions on freedom of speech seen in many Islamic Republics from Pakistan to Iran and Saudi Arabia to name a few. We must understand that for what it is.

15- M103 empowers the OIC lobby. The OIC is the proverbial elephant in the room. The constant refrain from the Obama and Trudeau administrations is that the West should not "declare war against 1.6 billion Muslims and their governments" is related to global intimidation by the OIC sadly while ignoring the plight of Muslim and non-Muslim dissidents in their nations who lead the fight against Islamist movements.

### **Conclusion:**

I recommend the following in lieu of M103. We must treat our Muslim communities with a tough love and give the following recommendations:

1. Address any bigotry and racism equally across faith and racial communities without a disproportionate focus on Muslims.
2. Do not use the term Islamophobia.
3. The best way to melt away any bigotry that exists against Muslims is for Muslims to abandon the denial, victimization and grievance narratives and instead lead an ideological revolution against Islamism. When our anti-jihad work is seen to predominate our bandwidth, then bigotry will wither on the vine. See our Muslim Reform Movement. (Appendix A).
4. 'Whole of government' should immediately move from a center of gravity on "Countering Violent Islamism" (CVE) to one centered on "Countering Violent Islamism" (CVI).
5. The Canadian government and public discourse (academia, NGO's, and media) must include a broad spectrum of ideologically diverse voices in the Muslim community. Just as you have done in the testimony to this committee. It is time to end the un-democratic ban on any theological terms and with that also end the marginalization of reform minded Muslims most notably the bipartisan group of Muslim leaders of the Muslim Reform Movement. This will melt away bigotry far more quickly than making people fear any discussion about Islam, Islamism, and Muslims.
6. It is time to stop engaging Muslim Brotherhood legacy groups in government and media and recognize their misogynist, anti-Semitic, homophobic, and anti-American ideological underpinnings. We must recognize that they are not the only voice for Western Muslims. We must make women's issue and freedom of conscience a litmus test. These groups, when pressed, will fail.
7. It is time to stop giving credence to the concerns of OIC dictatorships about our word choices and counter-radicalization strategies. Our real allies abroad are the free thinkers in their prisons not in their palaces.
8. In fact, Canadian Muslims, like all in the West, have a moral obligation to utilize the freedoms we have here to counter all the ideas which are the precursor ideas to militant Islamism through public reform that create these massive Islamist political movements.

Respectfully submitted,

M. Zuhdi Jasser,  
President, American Islamic Forum for Democracy  
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