



November 7, 2016

Richard Cohen
The Southern Poverty Law Center
400 Washington Avenue
Montgomery, AL 36104

Dear Richard Cohen,

It is deeply disappointing to see the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) betray its own noble mission of fighting bigotry and protecting the vulnerable by attacking moderate Muslim reformers like Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Maajid Nawaz. These two individuals have demonstrated enormous courage in speaking out for reform within Islam and in calling out those who preach violent extremism or have been responsible for the abuse and subjugation of women.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali is herself a victim of female genital mutilation who escaped a forced marriage and rose to global prominence as a member of the Dutch Parliament and as a gifted author and thinker. She has dedicated her life to ending female genital mutilation, forced marriage, and honor killings through the work of the AHA Foundation which she established. Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a free thinker and an atheist who has called for dramatic reforms within Islam, the faith community in which she was raised. She has faced threats of violence and death but remains undaunted in her commitment to fighting for the rights of women and girls around the world and in standing up for the essential human rights of all people. The Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice was proud to honor Ayaan Hirsi Ali along with Rebiya Kadeer and Irshad Manji with the Lantos Human Rights Prize in 2015 for their moral courage and leadership as women of Muslim heritage.

Maajid Nawaz is a British-Pakistani former Islamist who has become one of the most eloquent and effective campaigners against violent jihadist ideologies. He is the founder of Quilliam, a London based think-tank that counters extremism, promotes greater democracy within Islam, and seeks to empower moderate Muslim voices. Unlike Hirsi Ali, who proudly proclaims her atheism, Nawaz continues to identify as a Muslim and seeks to reform the faith that he practices. However, Nawaz has also faced death threats and violence in his efforts to champion freedom of expression and fundamental human rights.

It is bewildering and simply wrong for the SPLC to attack these two brave individuals merely because they have criticized aspects of Islam. The excerpts of these two individuals' records that the SPLC guide uses are taken out of context and belittle the nuanced positions of Hirsi Ali and Nawaz. Without open and intelligent criticism, reform and change are impossible. Furthermore, without support for those brave enough to criticize, even when it may put their own safety at risk, free speech itself is in jeopardy.

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The Southern Poverty Law Center has a long history of fighting on the right side of many human and civil rights battles. They have betrayed that history through their unjust and unwarranted attack on Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Maajid Nawaz. We call on the SPLC to correct this serious mistake by removing both of these courageous reformers from their list of anti-Muslim extremists.

Sincerely,



Katrina Lantos Swett
President, The Lantos Foundation

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