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# Inside the command center of the fight against Islamophobia

by Daniel Rivero (<http://fusion.net/author/daniel-rivero/>) | December (<http://fusion.net/2015/12/>) 8 (<http://fusion.net/2015/12/08/>), 2015 (<http://fusion.net/2015/>) 3:29 p.m.

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Barely a few sentences were passed between us when Ibrahim Hooper cut me off to tend to other business. "Hold on, I have another call," he said.

About twenty seconds later he was back with me, but he couldn't quite remember who I was. The previous day, we had twice spoken by phone and exchanged emails. A formal interview was arranged, and I would be speaking with him at length. The story: What it's like to work in in the communications office at the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the nation's largest Muslim civil-rights organization. If anywhere, the office is the command center in the fight against Islamophobia in the U.S., I figured. Hooper, being the national communications director, would be the ideal person to talk with.

But between the time I spoke to him the previous day and when I called him back, something monumental happened. It was revealed that Syed Farook and Tashfeen Malik (<http://fusion.net/story/241175/syed-farook-tashfeen-malik-san-bernadino-suspects/>), the married suspects responsible for the mass shooting of a public health facility in San Bernardino, Ca. (<http://fusion.net/story/240855/mass-shooting-san-bernardino/>), which left 14 dead, were Muslim. "Muslim Killers," read the front page of *the New York Post* ([http://twitchy.com/2015/12/03/ny-post-gets-trashed-for-changing-front-page-to-muslim-killers-photos/?utm\\_source=autotweet&utm\\_medium=twitter&utm\\_campaign=twitter](http://twitchy.com/2015/12/03/ny-post-gets-trashed-for-changing-front-page-to-muslim-killers-photos/?utm_source=autotweet&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=twitter)). An anti-Muslim backlash was anticipated, and the group had been scrambling to control the message, setting up press conferences and communicating with countless media outlets.

## From 9/11 to now this is the most toxic atmosphere I've seen.

- Ibrahim Hooper, director of communications, CAIR

"From 9/11 to now this is the most toxic atmosphere I've seen," Hooper said of the aftermath of the shooting, when we could finally talk at length the following day. "We're at a rather sharp moment in America where we have to decide if we're going to vilify Islam and Muslims on a daily basis, or if we're going to have to work together for the common good."

Again, just three minutes into our conversation, another call came in. It was CNN.

"There's a controversy brewing," Hooper told me when he came back.

News outlets had been let into the home of the shooters, and camera crews were fixing shots on all the personal items they could find. Family photos, underwear drawers, the baby's crib. At one point, the lens of an MSNBC camera trained itself on the expired driver's license of Rafia Sultana Farook, the mother of Farook, one of the shooters. It contained her address and other personal information.



"They would never do this with the abortion clinic shooter, or the Newtown shooter, or any of the 355 mass shootings (*Editor's note: That number has since gone up*) around the country. They would never do this," said Hooper, leaning on me through the phone line for support.

"But somehow it's okay with Muslims," he said.

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Hooper does not have an easy job.

Every morning, he wakes up hours before going into the office, filtering through an extensive keyword news search, looking for recent anti-Muslim incidents around the country. Rarely is there a shortage. On the day we first spoke, his organization was figuring how to respond to a bullet-riddled Qu'ran that was found (<http://mashable.com/2015/12/02/quran-bullets-hate-crime/#kIGtOHY8taqj>) outside an Islamic store in Anaheim, Ca., about 48 miles from where the shooting in San Bernardino would happen hours later. Earlier in the week there was the story of a Muslim taxi driver who was shot in the back (<http://fusion.net/story/239267/muslim-taxi-driver-shot-pittsburgh-thanksgiving/>) on Thanksgiving Day after the suspect allegedly probed him about his religion. A group of white supremacists were planning an anti-Islam rally (<http://www.wfaa.com/story/news/local/dallas-county/2015/11/30/white-supremacist-group-plans-rally-irving-mosque/76594924/>) in front of a Texas mosque.

When he finally arrives in the office, he told me, the staff holds a briefing he likened to a news assignment meeting you would find in a television newsroom. "That will determine the direction of the day," he said. "We'll start working with the chapters, editing, suggesting communications content," and coordinating with the legal team on language.



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*A bullet-ridden Qu'ran found in front of an Islamic store in  
Anaheim, Ca.*

CAIR

It's an integral part of the daily routine routine for the organization that was founded in 1994, and boasts thousands of American Muslim members, who make up its funding structure, raising millions of dollars annually throughout its network. The group says it does not receive funds from overseas, with the exception of a one time payment of \$500,000 meant for a library it received from Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, a Saudi Arabian national and one of the world's wealthiest men. Independent groups that monitor CAIR's influence and activity have questioned (<http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/misc/292.pdf>) that claim, suggesting there's more foreign money than the group reveals.

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Across the nation, the civil rights group has 28 different chapters in 20 different states. As we were talking, Hussam Ayloush, the executive director of the Los Angeles chapter, was getting ready to lead Friday prayers at a mosque that was once attended by San Bernardino shooters Farook and Malik.

“That’s part of our strength, that we’re able to be on the ground in all of these communities,” Hooper said.

That same strength is used as a way by anti-Muslim individuals and organizations to question the group’s motives and credibility. Hours after the San Bernardino shooting, the organization held a press conference with Farook’s brother-in-law, prompting some to question (<https://twitter.com/FergusFSU/status/672472023172554752>) how it had such quick access to the family, presumably even before authorities.



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“It started as a missing person situation,” explained Hooper. Farook’s family contacted the group after he and his wife were missing and initial reports about the shooting were emerging. “That was the first contact, they didn’t know where they were.”

It was hardly CAIR’s first brush with controversy. In 2007, federal prosecutors listed the group as an unindicted co-conspirator (<http://www.investigativeproject.org/2340/federal-judge-agrees-cair-tied-to-hamas#>) in a plot to fund Hamas, the militant Palestinian organization, which the U.S. considers a terrorist group. Though not charged, the mention of CAIR subjected the group to “annoyance, ridicule, scorn, and a loss of reputation in the community,” as well as “violent threats,” acknowledged a federal appeals court judge. He declined to strike the group’s name from all trial documents, even as he sealed the 246 individual and organizations mentioned in the original list.

“The public may make its own judgment from evidence presented at trial,” the judge wrote.



# You don't do what I do without seeing your face with devil horns on it across the internet.

- Ibrahim Hooper, director of communications, CAIR

In another incident, over 12,000 pages of internal documents were stolen from the group, some of which were published in a conspiratorial book titled *Muslim Mafia: Inside the Secret Underworld that's Conspiring to Islamize America*, by an author who once called (http://tpmmuckraker.talkingpointsmemo.com/2009/10/man\_behind\_intern\_spy\_wars\_muslim\_mafia\_author\_david\_gaubatz.php) President Obama "our Muslim leader" and who claimed to have personally found weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in 2003—a claim directly at odds with several branches of the federal government, which insist there were none to be found.

A theory espoused in the book was that CAIR had implanted an intern on Capitol Hill for spying on the behalf of Muslim leaders. Several congressional Republicans called for an investigation into the supposed plot (http://talkingpointsmemo.com/muckraker/gop-reps-file-request-with-sergeant-at-arms-for-muslim-intern-spy-investigation), but nothing ever came of it.

"You don't do what I do without seeing your face with devil horns (https://fusiondotnet.files.wordpress.com/2015/12/6abe6-6a00e54fb9aa7d883301774344c779970d-580wi.jpg?quality=80&strip=all) on it across the internet," said Hooper, who often appears as the spokesman for the group.

While the country was reeling with the terror attacks in San Bernardino, Hussam Ayloush, the group's Los Angeles executive director, who was thrust into the limelight after the attack, made controversial comments to CNN. "Let's not forget that some of our own foreign policy, as Americans, as the west, have fueled that extremism," he said. "Terrorism is a global problem, not a Muslim problem. And the solution has to be global. Everyone has a role in it."

The comments set right wing media ablaze, with the Fox News headline (http://www.foxnews.com/us/2015/12/04/muslim-leader-from-cair-tells-cnn-america-bears-some-blame-for-terror-attacks/) reading: "Muslim leader from CAIR tells CNN America bears some blame for terror attacks."

"Today it's this, tomorrow they'll pick something else apart," said Hooper. "In some people's eyes, we can do no good."

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The emails between Hooper and me don't stop. Republican presidential hopeful Rick Santorum said Islam is "not protected (http://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/elections/presidential/caucus/2015/12/04/santorum-islam-not-constitutionally-protected-iowa-caucus-san-bernardino-terrorism-shooting/76802568/)" by the Constitution in the same way as Christianity. A Nevada lawmaker said she wants to fly to Paris and shoot Syrian refugees (http://lasvegassun.com/news/2015/dec/07/michele-fiore-says-she-wants-to-shoot-syrian-refug/) herself. The president of Liberty University, a Christian school, urged his students to carry weapons to "end those Muslims (http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/president-liberty-univ-urges-students-carry-weapons-article-1.2456262)" before they can carry out a San Bernardino-esque attack.

"We had expected a rise in Islamophobia during the presidential election cycle, but we never thought it would get to this level," said Hooper.

"2010 was the last really bad cycle, with the whole Ground Zero mosque," said Corey Saylor, the group's director of the department of monitoring and combating Islamophobia. "This one has a more violent tone to it."

As part of his job, Saylor gathers incoming reports from the chapters across the country and the national office, studying the patterns and infrastructure of Islamophobia, so much as it exists. The last one (http://www.cair.com/islamophobia/legislating-fear-2013-report.html), issued in 2013, found the "inner core" of the U.S.-based Islamophobia network was made up of at least 37 groups, drawing \$119,662,719 in total revenue between 2008 and 2011.

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- Ibrahim Hooper, director of communication, CAIR

A forthcoming report featuring data compiled since then is tentatively slated to be published in January 2016. "In general, Tennessee and Florida are competing to be the most anti-Muslim states in the country," he said of the findings of the upcoming report.

Yet it's far from a regional problem. By last count, Saylor figured there were 30 attorneys spread out across the nation, all involved in different aspects of litigation or in trying to resolve discrimination claims outside the courts. "They provide services to our clients start to finish," he said.

The work that the attorneys do—winning some cases, losing others (or getting cases they've brought dismissed (

Last Sunday, the group called on President Obama to decry the latest wave of Islamophobia in an Oval Office speech he gave on the fight against terrorism, and welcomed his statements when he did just that.



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*Anti-Muslim graffiti defaces a Michigan mosque in 2007.*

Getty Images

"Hopefully it will have the same impact we saw after George W. Bush made the same kind of speech back in 2001," Saylor told me. Just a few hours after we spoke, Republican presidential hopeful Donald Trump called for a ban of Muslims entering the country (<http://fusion.net/story/242416/donald-trump-muslim-ban/>), which would apply to "everyone." The political backlash from both sides of the aisle, and surprisingly from both the White House and Congress, was swift and unified. Former Vice President Dick Cheney, a notorious hawk, even commented (<http://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/12/07/verbatim-dick-cheney-criticizes-donald-trumps-muslim-policy/>) that the notion "goes against everything we stand for and believe in."

Within moments, Hooper sent out a statement condemning the plan as Islamophobic and scheduling a press conference in Washington.

"People often say, 'how do you take doing this kind of work on a daily basis for decades? Doesn't it depress you?' And actually I think it's quite the opposite," he told me over the phone from his Washington office. "It allows me to at least have some impact on what's going on in the society other than just sitting on the couch, shouting at the TV."

Then, there was a pause. "Hold on, I'm getting another call," he said. "CNN again," he returned. "So where were we?"

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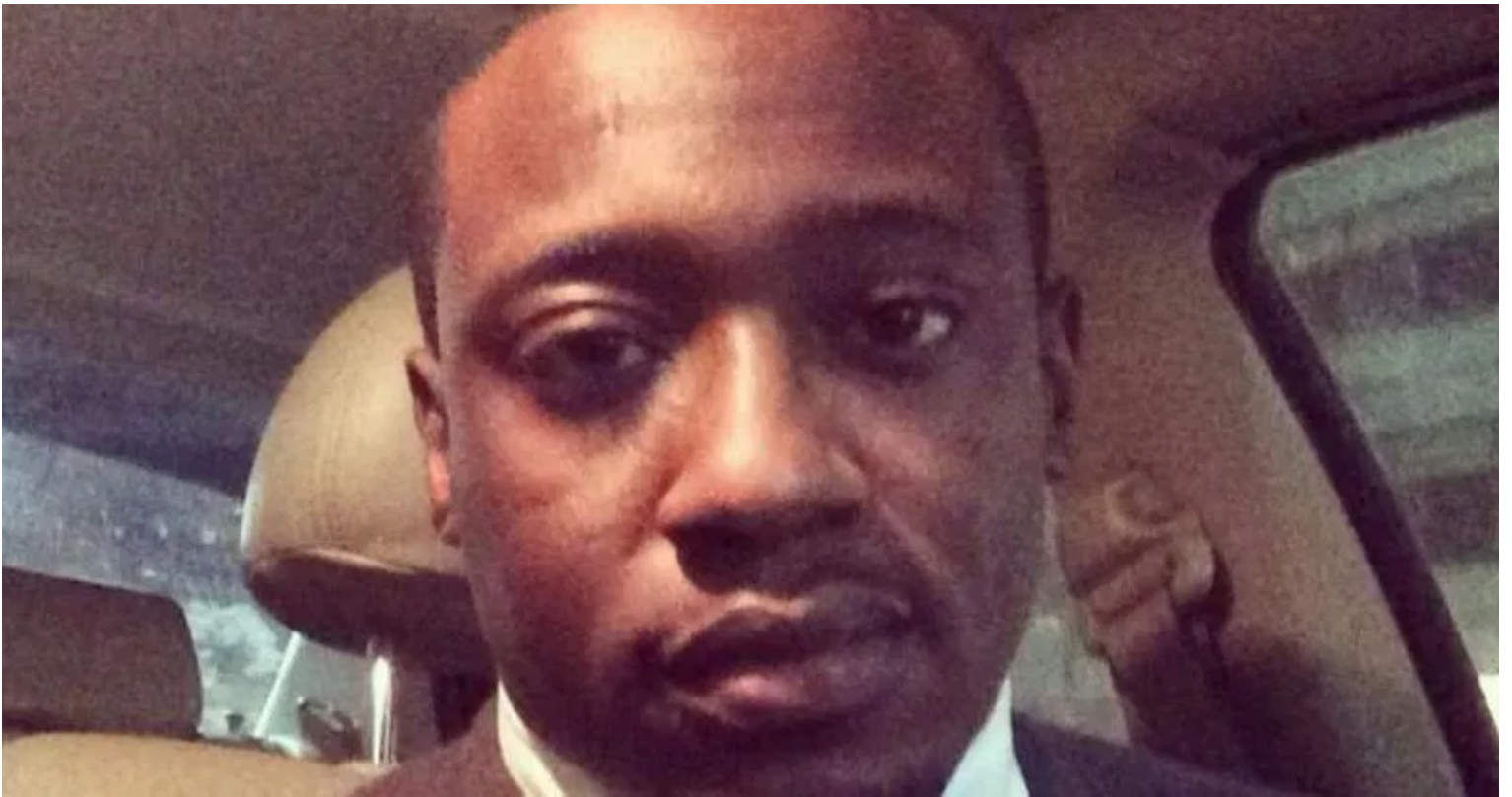
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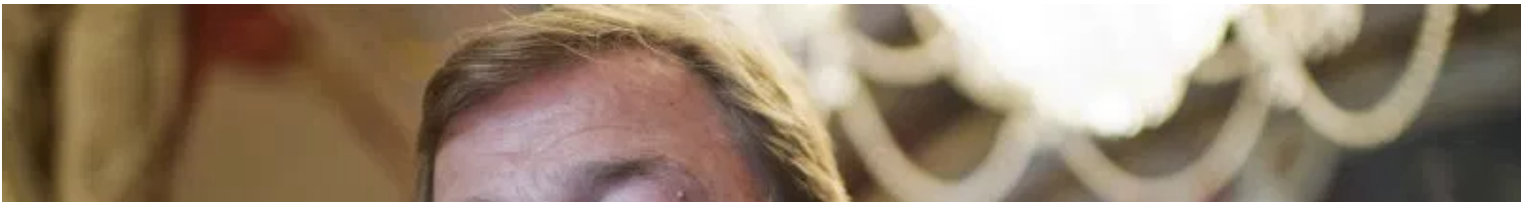




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