April 14, 2009

Salam Al-Marayati
Executive Director
Muslim Public Affairs Council
3010 Wilshire Blvd. #217
Los Angeles, CA 90010

As Salaamu Alaykum.

Dear Br. Salam Al-Marayati, MPAC Staff, and MPAC Board of Directors:

As Muslims and Americans we are the inheritors of an honorable legacy of social justice grounded in the commitment to protect and preserve the dignity of all human beings. This is a legacy embodied, first and foremost, by our beloved Prophet Muhammad (saws) and has also been championed by countless women and men, from icons like Malcolm X to everyday people. It is in this spirit that we seek to address your announcement to honor Karan Johar's film, *My Name is Khan,* with one of the distinguished 2010 MPAC Foundation Media Awards.

We were alarmed by the distinction MPAC is bestowing upon this movie and its director on two accounts:

Anti-black racism: As you know, the film features a series of black American characters that Khan encounters in a fictional all-black town in rural Georgia. While there, Khan mourns the loss of his son and later returns to the town where he becomes a local and national hero. The fundamental problem with this plot twist is that the townspeople are not black characters but *caricatures* of African Americans. Entering Georgia, the viewers see a town reminiscent of 19th century post-Antebellum reconstruction. The two main characters in this town, a mother and son combination of "Mamma Jenny" and "Funny Haired Joel," call upon the infamous stereotypes of Aunt Jemima and Buckwheat. Such presentations of servile, boisterous, and helpless black womanhood and unkempt 'pickaninny' buffoonery are not simply insensitive, but call upon a history of genocide, slavery, and Jim and Jane Crow racism. Such appalling imagery is much older that this movie and is premised on white supremacist ideas that seek to deny African descended people the dignities of their humanity—an experience of dehumanization shared by many communities of color at home and abroad. These ideas, just as the policies and practices they engender, are violent, immoral, and undoubtedly un-Islamic. To fail to recognize these images as vile, hurtful, and racist is as damaging as depicting Muslim Americans as terrorists. Furthermore, African Americans compose the largest racial/ethnic segment of the Muslim American community. To honor a film that portrays African-Americans in such a debased manner further reinforces the unfortunate divide that exists between many African American and first and second generation immigrant Muslim communities.

Good Muslim/Bad Muslim Paradigm: Throughout the film Khan is shown as a deeply spiritual and observant Muslim, yet his religious observances are always conducted in

isolation. The first time filmgoers see Khan in the company of other Muslims, Khan visits a Southern California masjid where he encounters Dr. Faisal Rehman. Rehman, we are led to believe, is trying to rally a group of young Muslim men into a "jihadi" plot. The Good Muslim that Khan is, he verbally intervenes to contradict the Bad Muslim's (Rehman) jihadist logic. Yet, rather than further engage the situation in order to gain a more informed understanding of Rehman and the local community, Khan places a call to the FBI; the FBI, who, as even as this movie depicts, has been historically unable to make a distinction between *actual* threats to our national security, the average lunatic, and democratic dissent. Is then, the message the film seeks to send out to audiences around the world that Muslims are only good, loving, and righteous when they are *not* in fellowship with other Muslims? Are Muslim places of worship by *default* hotbeds of "jihadist" rhetoric? Is a Good Muslim unengaged in community life, but when necessary is an FBI informant? A Good Muslim in this construction engages in personal prayer and service, but cannot engage in political critique or dissent.

As American Muslims we are intimately aware of the dearth of positive representations of Islam and Muslims in popular culture. However, our desire to see more positive reflections of ourselves should not prompt us to set our bar so low that we would find acceptable, let alone praiseworthy, media that is otherwise racist, sexist, or discriminatory in other ways simply because the Muslim character is not a villain. Importantly, these subplots are not tangential but central to the film's narrative, thereby making it impossible to cast aside the film's racism and Manichean depiction of American Muslims. As a result, MPAC's decision to honor this film appears as an endorsement of anti-black racism and the Good Muslim/Bad Muslim paradigm. This seems to be in direct contrast to the explicit goal of the MPAC Foundation Media Awards, which is to honor "*artists, actors, activists and executives who use art and media to create enriching and humanizing portrayals of Islam and Muslims, promote diversity and social justice issues, and inspire action.*"

In light of these objections we request that MPAC reverse its decision to honor this film. This would be difficult yet nonetheless a courageous choice. A less ideal proposal is to create an opportunity at the Awards Dinner for these issues to be addressed or in a public post-award show conversation between the film's director, MPAC's executive director and two of the signatories of this letter, namely Su'ad Abdul Khabeer and Dr. Arshad I. Ali. This conversation would be open to the dinner attendees as well as recorded and posted on MPACs website.

We request that MPAC publicly engage our concerns, not only because of the gravity of the film's violence to African Americans and American Muslims of all ethnicities, but also because MPAC offers itself to the American Muslim community as our representative to government, media, and policy institutions. In such a capacity it is critical that the organization is held publicly accountable to the very community it seeks to represent.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

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