

April 26, 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:

"The believers, in their love, mutual kindness, and close ties, are like one body; when any part complains, the whole body responds to it with wakefulness and fever." (Muslim)

Our own words seem inadequate to describe our disappointment with your decision to honor *My Name is Khan*, but the prophetic tradition is clear: if one segment of the community is hurt then the entire community should respond to that pain with deep empathy and respect. Put simply, the degrading portrayal of African Americans in this film is as painful as it is offensive. We appreciate that you have acknowledged the film's "crude, outdated and painful stereotypes of African Americans," but this acknowledgement falls far short of being effective - you still find the film praiseworthy. Furthermore, we explicitly raised objections about the film's Good Muslim/Bad Muslim motif, but your letter was strangely silent on this matter. We do not believe this is a secondary, or minor issue but another critical reason why this film should not receive the MPAC Foundation Media Award. We are pleased by the recent decision by FOX Studios to remove the scenes that feature demeaning representations of African Americans from the film. It is noteworthy that MPAC recommended these edits to a Director's Cut of the film, however this should have taken place before the film was honored by MPAC, which would have been a satisfactory sign of progress. In the end, the MPAC Foundation's Media Award for "Voices of Courage & Conscience" is being given to the full-length film, not a *potentially* edited future release.

The intended message of the movie may have been as you stated, to promote "mutual acceptance and understanding across racial and religious differences," but ultimately your decision seems to be based on the argument that the "positive" portrayal of a lone Muslim in this movie makes the many disturbing portrayals of African Americans and the larger Muslim community negligible. This, we maintain, is unacceptable logic. This logic is offensive to African Americans generally, and African American Muslims specifically, and is an offense that is only deepened by the idea that fellow Muslims would respond with an air of indifference. The benefit gained by one part of our community should never be used to conceal the harm to another part. Moreover, the experience of Islam in America is inextricably tied to the histories and contemporary realities of black Americans, thus there is no harm to black America that is not harmful to American Muslims of all backgrounds. We believe the diverse Muslim communities in the United

States must continually work towards seeing ourselves as interdependent parts of a single community, rather than distinct and singular groups with interests that can be used to pit us against one another. Such narrow politics can only serve the interests of those who seek to disenfranchise and isolate American Muslim communities. These efforts to marginalize American Muslims often take up the Good Muslim/Bad Muslim paradigm set up in the film in which "jihadism" is an epidemic plaguing the Muslim community that can only be eradicated by a partnership between Good Muslims, void of any political dissent, and coercive government intervention. Thus, rather than challenge the status quo, this film merely recycles it, and honoring this work comes dangerously close to establishing a new troubling status quo - one where we as a Muslim community are so starved for any semblance of "positive" portrayals that we become blind to other ills staring us in the face. Surely this is not MPAC's intention.

We were also particularly disturbed by the reference to Debbie Allen in your letter. The invocation of her disavowal of anger replicated a common technique in which resistance to racist practices, particularly when made by African Americans, is dismissed as "overly sensitive" or "angry." To deliberately misconstrue our direct and incisive critique as irrational anger and marshal Ms. Allen, an African American, in an attempt to sidestep a question of anti-black racism is condescending. While discussing race and racism in this country is never easy it is a challenge we must confront, rather than deflect, so that our community develops a critical understanding of racism as both systemic and individual practices.

Your letter maintains that the film is being honored because it meets the overall standards MPAC sets for media achievement. These standards must be revised and elevated. Although this may initially shorten the roster of eligible films, this should not deter your organization from creating a set of standards that embody the values for which MPAC aspires to be known. A more powerful strategy would be to support the creation of media that offers rich, diverse, and humanist portrayals of the multifaceted and unique parts of our community. For example, MPAC could fund a small grant competition for artists and media makers committed to producing dynamic and empowering images of Muslims. This would be a big step in ensuring that the voices MPAC honors in the future will truly be ones of courage and conscience.

As a group, we initiated this campaign because we too feel the call to be voices of courage and conscience - to remain silent would have been just the opposite. The implication that we have been less than open and frank in our approach is simply untrue. We have been forthcoming and transparent at every step of this engagement. American Muslims are in desperate need of a public square where debates are open and honest and our leadership is held publicly accountable. Furthermore, we believe that leaders should be engaged directly, which is precisely how we engaged MPAC, as opposed to disengaged critique such as, for example, an open letter in a major news outlet. In the spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood, we would like to have an honest, in person discussion with MPAC in order to ensure that as individuals and community members our larger goals for Muslim communities in the US are not hindered or stifled in the long run.

We write this letter as a collective of diverse Muslim Americans, from immigrant, African American and Latina/o backgrounds, as converts and individuals raised in Muslim families; all of whom are deeply hurt by the disempowering depictions of our communities in *My Name is Khan*. While we are deeply saddened by MPAC's decision, we too believe that moving forward will require open and frank engagement around racism and prejudice in the media and within our communities. We are committed to such an endeavor and believe this letter begins that process. Please accept our open and frank comments in the spirit of love.

FiamanAllah y Pa'lante,

My Name is Not Khan Collective