

CNN FAILED: American Muslims Respond to CNN's "25 Influential American Muslims" List

Editor's Note: With rare public support and a united front, we countered CNN's one-size-fits-all version of Islam. We are proud to see our statement resonate with the American Muslim community. The areas where it has created controversy is a very good steppingstone and moving ahead in unifying Islam as a religion accommodating of everyone and not a rigid religion excluding everyone, ie. an "American Caliphate" – a phrase used to show well-meaning media how devastating their limited representation is to American Muslims. We stand against monopolies in religion, where critical thinking is only considered legitimate if it critiques those who "we don't like."

On May 2, 2018, CNN published its "[25 Influential American Muslims](#)" list. After claiming that no one speaks for Muslim Americans, the list pushes forward 25 names derived from a year-long series of conversations with a mere hundred American Muslims – the amount of people you could expect in a manufactured focus group.

A demonstration of media-backed social engineering, CNN's top 25 list adds a thick coat of primer over the seismic movements and rapid growth taking place within the American Muslim community. As American Muslims, we have worked tirelessly to build a unique agora, a digital and real time coming together of innovative Muslim thinkers and critical Islamic theory. The top 25 Muslim influencers list was an opportunity for CNN to

tap into the coursing vein of American Muslim dialogue as we create a pivotal chapter in Islamic history. Instead, CNN presented a lobbying of Sunni hegemony and sanitized some of the deeply troubling associations and behavior practices of several people presented as influencers.

CNN's emphasis on influence is also problematic. In 1938, even Adolf Hitler was named "Man of the Year" by Time Magazine. The almost cultish fanfare and systematic signaling of tokenized Muslim voices only influences American Muslims by radically uniting us against a forced normative identity.



We reject the manipulation of intersectionality as a means to advocate for Sunni Muslim conservatism or orthodoxy. We see the bedrock crisis of American Muslim identity when these neat spheres of influence overlap. Sheikh Hamza Yusuf faced intense backlash for his comments on Black Lives Matters and the politicization of Islam. There was no opportunity cultivated to have a powerful conversation on racism; radically honest dialogue has curdled under the insistence that Muslim faith and identity is a monolith.

Rarely if ever do the American Muslim religious orthodoxy share openly on their stances across defining topics including FGM, polygamy, child marriage, dis/honor killings, physical and psychological violence against women, segregation of women, homophobia, sect-based supremacism, and the extremist rhetoric of hate imams. Theologically, imams are not designated community activists and organizers, but the activists on CNN's top 25 list do have the ability to talk about social issues. With few exception, they do not.

A top 25 American Muslim influencer list should look beyond

surface-level narratives that rise simply because they are the most well-funded and media-supported. It should look to who is most impactful and of benefit to the construct of an American Muslim identity. Without personal bias, a *list on American Muslim influencers should include:

- **Amina Wadud**, Ph.D in Arabic and Islamic Studies
- **Imam Daayiee Abdullah**, Director of Mecca Institute
- **Azizah Al Hibri**, Islamic scholar
- **Dr. Kashif Chaudhry**, Activist
- **Omid Safi**, Professor of Islamic Studies, University of Northern Carolina at Chapel Hill
- **Kecia Ali**, Professor, Department of Religion, Boston University
- **Jaha Dukureh**, anti-FGM campaigner
- **Aman Ali**, Comedian
- **Ani Zonneveld**, Muslims for Progressive Values
- **Sheikh Hisham Kabbani**, Sufi Sheikh
- **Amanda Quraishi**, Activist
- **Sheikh Hossein Nasr**, Islamic Philosopher, Professor Emeritus of Islamic Studies at George Washington University
- **Professor Hamid Mavani**, Claremont College
- **Qasim Rashid**, Author and Speaker
- **Kaamila Mohamed**, Somali American Poet

While CNN's list includes some heavy-hitting voices among American Muslims, it is dangerously void of any controversy or diversity of opinion that reflects the rich tapestry of American Muslim. We urge media outlets to be more well-researched in the anti-American attitudes adopted by figures they choose to applaud with time-slots, interviews and laurels of credibility. It is highly irresponsible to conflate commendable voices within the CNN top 25 list with voices that routinely strangle Muslims with one hand while raising fist to air in demonstrations against the same marginalization and supremacism they complain of when crying "Islamophobia."

Outright anti-Islam sentiment and [veiled bigotry](#) are real concerns, but often those the American media sees as champions against these practices are the same people who exert the same oppression within their own faith group.

The media (along with [philanthropic organizations](#) and political influencers) must understand that emboldening and supporting American Muslims means understanding there are many sides to Islam. Our voices are not the minority nor are we a fringe. Since Islam does not have – and should not have – centralized power, maintaining balance in how American Muslim are portrayed is pinnacle to ensuring integrity and respect for our faith. Anything else is culpability in establishing an American caliphate.

Signed,

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American Muslim Reformer

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** The suggested list of influencers is comprised, without bias, of American Muslims who carry significant influence, even when or if we don't personally agree with their argument style or behavior. The compilation highlighting diversity and*

candidates for future consideration is a small part of the many other voices who do not receive media attention.