

June 7, 2021

Via Electronic Mail

Susan Swecker, Chairwoman  
Andrew Whitley, Executive Director  
Democratic Party of Virginia  
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Bill Fanshawe, Senior Vice President  
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RE: Unaddressed Anti-Muslim Bigotry at Your Virginia Lieutenant Governor Debate

Dear Chairwoman Swecker, Mr. Whitley, Mr. Lucas, and Mr. Fanshawe,

We're writing to you as Muslim elected officials from the Commonwealth of Virginia, the District of Columbia and the State of Maryland to share our deep dismay at the anti-Muslim question asked of Delegate Rasoul during the Democratic Party's debate for Lieutenant Governor on Tuesday, May 25 and your subsequent refusals to adequately address your responsibility to serve all of your constituents and viewers, including Muslims.

The question asked during the debate—and highlighted by local, national and international media—injected a bigoted, anti-Muslim trope and conspiracy theory into the heart of what should have been a fair debate on the issues facing Virginians.

As an official moderator for the debate, Mr. Lucas raised a concern about Del. Rasoul's support from Muslims who live outside of Virginia and who are excited at the prospect of electing a Muslim to any statewide office for only the second time in American history:

*"There's nothing wrong with that. But that was the case. Talk a little bit about your fundraising efforts. And can you assure Virginians if you're elected, you'll represent all of them, regardless of faith or beliefs?"*

This question, which we understand may have approved by others at WJLA and/or the Democratic Party of Virginia, [is rooted in the "civilization jihad" and Muslim "infiltration"](#) conspiracy theories fomented by hate group leader Frank Gaffney. According to the report [Running on Hate](#), this common and despicable trope claims that there is a conspiracy amongst Muslims and their allies "to take over the government and replace the Constitution with Sharia

law.” That same report also noted that this trope is a common political smear deployed across the country and in the Commonwealth of Virginia. On pages 11 and 39, the report notes that anti-Muslim bigotry was a factor in *every statewide race in Virginia in 2017 and 2018*. In those years, candidates for governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, senator and Congress either trumpeted the endorsements of anti-Muslim hate groups or invoked Muslims as inherently foreign, violent threats who are infiltrating Virginia.

What makes this question even more nefarious than any of these examples is that it was not delivered by a partisan candidate for office, *but by the moderator of the official debate hosted by the official party and one of the largest news stations in the region.*

We appreciate that WJLA has issued an [apology for the “impact of these words.”](#) but their decision to put this solely at the feet of “our anchor, Dave Lucas,” doesn’t absolve the company of its responsibility as the official host of the debate to vet and approve these questions. Our understanding is that Mr. Lucas did not create this question entirely on his own and that it was approved by others. This apology doesn’t address how WJLA will correct the inherent biases in the company’s newsroom and management to ensure that Muslim community members, institutions and candidates in the DMV won’t be subjected to similar discrimination in coverage and debate moderation.

Furthermore, Mr. Lucas’ outright refusal to even acknowledge these concerns is deeply concerning. Instead of simply responding to a reasonable call to apologize from Muslim Advocates, a major civil rights group representing our community, [Mr. Lucas has blocked the organization on Twitter.](#)

We also appreciate that the Chairwoman of the Virginia Democratic Party has also personally apologized. However, we have not yet heard a whiff of concern, contrition or explanation from the Democratic Party of Virginia, which also hosted and is responsible.

Delegate Rasoul has dutifully served his constituents for eight years and we all have been duly elected by constituents of many faiths, races and backgrounds. We are shocked that your institutions would treat him with this level of disrespect and that you would hold such contempt for the region’s Muslim community.

We urge the Democratic Party of Virginia and WJLA to:

- Clarify exactly how this anti-Muslim question was introduced to the debate, how these questions were vetted and to confirm all parties who were aware of the question before it was asked.
- Apologize unequivocally to the Muslim communities impacted by WJLA and the Democratic Party of Virginia.
- Have your staff and leadership meet with us, alongside other Muslim community leaders, to an educational session on the history and use of anti-Muslim tropes to suppress American Muslim civic engagement.

- Attend a listening session with diverse communities of Muslims in Virginia and DMV to ensure that your work is fully informed about the lives of American Muslims in our region.
- Commit to a transparent fair vetting of all future debate questions to ensure this bigotry does not impact future Muslim candidates for office the way it has adversely impact Delegate Rasoul.

We look forward to hearing from you. Please direct any correspondence regarding these requests to Scott Simpson, Public Advocacy Director for Muslim Advocates at [scott@muslimadvocates.org](mailto:scott@muslimadvocates.org).

Sincerely,

### **Virginia**

**Ibraheem Samirah**, House Delegate (86th District)

**Buta Biberaj**, Loudoun County Commonwealth's Attorney

**Abrar Omeish**, Fairfax County School Board Member (At-Large)

**Mo Seifeldein**, Alexandria City Councilman

**Naila Alam**, Herndon Town Council Member

### **Maryland**

**Raaheela Ahmed**, Prince George's County Board of Education Member (District 5)

**Sabina Taj**, former Howard County Board of Education Member (At-Large)

### **District of Columbia**

**Amir Irani**, Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner (ANC 1C01, Chair of ANC 1C)

**Rehana Mohammed**, Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner (ANC 2F07, Chair of Public Space & Transportation Committee)

**Sauleh Siddiqui**, Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner (ANC 3C05)