

Statement by MAS Philadelphia and Leaders Academy

**123 E Luzerne Street,
Philadelphia, PA. 19124
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Our Sorrow

Over the last decade our members have poured their soul and resources to create a harmonious, peaceful and engaged community. We are very sad that within minutes all of this work was tarnished and we realize the mistake is ours to own.

As leaders of MAS Philadelphia and Leaders Academy, we would like to reiterate that we are deeply saddened to have hurt our partners in the Jewish community and beyond. We remain committed to working with our partners to pave a positive future for our community and increase our work with people from all walks of life.

We realize that we have caused harm to our Muslim community as well – numerous mosques had to endure hate calls, death threats and protests. Here in our community, our children were called names in our neighborhoods and we have received hate calls and endured two protests by an uncivil crowd shouting hateful messages in front of our Center.

For the past week, we focused on the safety of our community as the event came on the heels of the holy month of Ramadan that sees the busiest foot-traffic in our mosque around the year. Second, we have worked with civic partners and put in place ongoing programs to address our blind-spots.

Our Center and the Leaders Academy

MAS Philadelphia was established in 2003. Our center is commonly known among the community as Al-Hidaya mosque/masjid. The Leadership Academy is an independent and separate organization governed by its own board. It is a hybrid learning community program that helps students follow the PA Cyber curriculum in compliance with PA-DOE requirements and also excel in language and religious studies. The Academy is run by volunteer aides administered by the Leadership Academy Board and teachers. We are proud that more than 90% of its graduates go on to attend college.

The Umma Day

The event held on April 17, 2019 was the 6th Annual Umma Day organized by community members and our volunteer aides. This program aimed to celebrate the diversity of our community in a festive fashion. We had 18 countries represented on this day where children sang songs from different cultures and wore customary dresses. The goal is to celebrate the diversity in the Muslim community and to inculcate in the children an appreciation for this diversity.

The event lasted for about 2 hours. The songs on the videos that became controversial were selected by one of our volunteer aides, who wanted to include a song from Palestine as we have a large Palestinian community in our Center. The song that was selected was a popular one on YouTube and the children merely danced along as the song played on the computer. The children did not understand this song as their command of Arabic is not advanced and neither did some of our aides. Other aides who know Arabic mention that in that hectic and festive day, they did not give a close ear to the song's lyrics. The speech by the two older girls was likewise a selection that primarily sought to highlight the children's capacity to read and project Arabic rhetoric; however, they have not yet mastered enough grammar to comprehend the words.

The volunteer feels terrible that she made a mistake and has decided that in light of the sensitive nature of her mistake she cannot continue to serve the Leaders Academy community any longer. Our interaction with our children is constructed on the Islamic values of mercy and justice.

Antisemitism or other forms of bigotry are foreign concepts to us and we are especially saddened that our beautiful children and community continue to face these accusations.

Ongoing Steps

In a staff meeting on Monday May 6, 2019, we assessed the situation and our mistake with the selection of the two performances. We agreed that although it was an unintended mistake, it was a grave mistake and we needed to put in place processes that would never allow this to repeat. We are defining new standard operating procedures that will streamline selection and approval processes.

Second, we have enlisted CAIR-Philadelphia to help us with a number of trainings. CAIR-Philadelphia's Executive Director Jacob Bender conducted a training on Judaism and Antisemitism for our entire staff, including the aides and administrative personnel. It was a productive training and the Question and Answer session really helped us view the incident with the eyes of the public as well as the specific experiences of the Jewish American community. We are hoping to develop further relationships and host programs with leading institutions such as POWER, Interfaith Philadelphia and the Dialogue Institute to excel in leading in a diverse community.

Third, we are in the process of setting up an advisory council which can review our processes, recommend changes and monitor our steps in the right direction. We are committed to be transparent in this process and restore the confidence of our community and our partners. The Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations has been particularly helpful in this regard.

Fourth, we stepped up security measures in our center. In the wake of New Zealand attacks, we made the decision to hire additional security during Ramadan. Since last week we initiated additional security steps in light of the hateful protestors and calls we received.

We are grateful to all civic actors who voiced their willingness to help us navigate this difficult episode. Our community is genuinely invested in building greater alliances across the board. We are dedicated to turn this incident to a learning moment and deepening relationship with our broader community.

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Best,

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