

MSA West Action Manual

Organizing on your campus around the recent tragic attacks on September 11th, 2001

In the name of Allah, the most Beneficent, the most Merciful

The recent tragic events that rocked this nation on September 11th, 2001 have sent us all into shock and sorrow. We all mourn for the innocent blood that was shed that day, and no group can ever condone the civilian lives that were taken away from us on September 11th, 2001. Yet as Muslims living in the U.S., we have already seen the racist backlash come down on our communities as a result of misplaced anger being directed against Muslims and Arabs. Hate crimes against all people of color have shot up dramatically, and with the drums of war being beaten by all vested parties, the hate against the Muslim community does not show signs of letting up. It is on this note that MSA West sends out a call to all Muslim students urging for increased community action and campus organizing in order to ensure the safety of Muslim students on campus as well as to ensure that the Muslim perspective is not lost in all the discussion and dialogues that surround us at every turn.

As you will see from the following action manual, the recent tragic events have forced the nature of Muslim activism on campus to change. Much greater emphasis is now placed on making the MSA a safe space for all Muslims to feel comfortable and welcome, and in which Muslims must begin to help each other foster a greater political, social, historical and most importantly spiritual consciousness through more dialogues, discussion, and halaqas held in the community. Also, a much greater emphasis must now be placed on coalition building on the campus and working very intensively with other progressive communities in order to share the common struggles that bind progressive-minded students together.

This action manual is drafted with the hopes of serving as a tool for each MSA to use as a reference for their organizing around the recent tragic events. The action items listed are suggestions for those MSA's looking for guidance as to where to input their organizing capabilities. Some of the items may be common sense, and some your MSA may have enacted already. We, at MSA West, urge you all to share this manual with your respective campus communities on campus in order to help ensure that the Muslim student voice serves as a moral beacon of truth in these times of sorrow, anger and confusion.

Ensuring the Safety of your Muslim Community on Campus

It is at times like these that the Muslim community must come together more than ever in order to ensure the safety of each and every Muslim on campus. The safety of Muslim students comes first and foremost as this should be the top priority of any Muslim organizing that is done on campus. The following are ways to ensure that your MSA

fosters the safest environment possible. As you will notice, the theme here is strength (and safety) in numbers:

- a. Set up a central location on campus where Muslims can meet up and escort each other to their cars, classes, etc. For most campuses, the MSA office is the most obvious location. At smaller campuses in which the MSA's do not have offices, the student commons area is also a good location. Ensure that this area is well lit, in an area with high foot traffic, and has easy access to a telephone. If possible, use this area to set up car services for Muslims walking back to their apartments in the evening in which a Muslim would volunteer their car to take Muslims home in the evening.
- b. Track all reports of harassment, derogatory statements, hate crimes, or racial profiling that happen on your campus against the Muslim community. Take each report seriously and verify them to ensure their full accuracy. We ask that you forward all incidents to muslimsafety@yahoo.com (please include the school where you are from). These e-mails will be used by MSA West to keep track of the environment on various campuses towards Muslim students, and any serious incidents will then be forwarded to CAIR for follow-up.
- c. Give out the cell phone numbers of some trusted brothers and sisters that Muslims can call at any time if they ever feel threatened or need to get in touch with someone. These are to be used as emergency contact numbers when in need of an escort or if someone just needs someone to talk to ASAP. Basically, this lets other students know that there is someone there for them at all times.
- d. For those campuses where a lot of Muslims live in apartments around campus, set up a common brothers' and a common sisters' apartment. This should serve as an open and safe environment where nearby Muslims can feel free to go to anytime they feel unsafe being alone or are simply in need of company. However, for obvious safety reasons, be sure NEVER to admit strangers into these apartments, no matter how safe it may seem.
- e. Set up a buddy system between different Muslims on campus. Have Muslims call their buddy periodically to check-up on each other and ensure that both are safe and haven't come under any harassment recently. This also ensures that people have someone to talk to if they are feeling overly anxious or distressed.
- f. Look into buying pepper spray/mace. Especially for the sisters. These serve as adequate means to buy some time if one is ever in a potentially dangerous environment.

- g. Set up meetings with other trusted campus organizations with whom your community has close ties. Students of color organizations such as MEChA, African/Black Student Unions, etc. as well as multi-ethnic student centers are often the most understanding and reliable organizations on campus. Discuss how hate crimes affect all minority communities, and encourage other organizations to educate their constituents about the safety concerns that all minority communities have in such a xenophobically charged environment. The relationship building of MSA's at some campuses has even reached a level where other communities have volunteered their members to escort Muslims around campus, as well to provide security during events such as Jumu'ah.
- h. Organize self-defense classes that are available for both brothers and sisters. Ask around to see if anyone in the community is qualified to teach self-defense, if there are supportive individuals who would be willing to offer free self-defense classes, or if you would like, pool some money together and hire someone to teach them to folks in the community. Try to ensure that everyone in the community takes these classes together as it will help to build brother/sisterhood within the community, and will help Muslims feel safer when they around other Muslims.
- i. Set up meetings with local campus police and campus administration for the purpose of ensuring the safety of the Muslim community on campus. Be sure to emphasize the role that the administration has in fostering a safe and healthy environment for students to feel safe and learn. However, it is important to note that your main source of safety should come from your own community, with police and administration playing a supporting role in ensuring the safety of your community. Possible items to request include:

 - i. Rooms for prayer and Jumu'ah.
 - ii. Local police hotlines to call in case of emergency.
 - iii. Procedures for reporting hate crimes.
 - iv. Ensuring there is no racial profiling occurring on campus.
 - v. Having the Chancellor issue a statement asking for students to remain calm and respectful towards Muslims/Arabs.
 - vi. Procedures for reporting various anti-Muslim/Arab comments made by faculty during class.

Organizing Relief Efforts as Well as Vigils and Other Acts of Remembrance

After steps have been taken to ensure the safety of your Muslim community, the next step is to organize relief efforts and vigils. Not only does this aid with the much needed relief for the victims and their families, but it also shows the campus that Muslims also share the grief of everyone else in mourning the tragic loss of life, and that they also would like to help with the relief work being done. The following are ways that your MSA can organize immediate relief efforts as well as solidarity activities:

- a. Set up an MSA food and clothing drive. Collect clothes and food from various students on campus, as well as from local masjid/community centers and donate them to the Red Cross or other relief organizations working around the recent attacks.
- b. Set up blood drives in conjunction with local clinics/hospitals/health centers. Although many organizations are flooded with folks lining up to donate blood, this is still an extremely important cause that would require the attention of Muslims regardless of the recent tragedies. Also, this is a symbolic act of good faith that the Muslim community stands in solidarity with others in providing any help necessary for the victims of this tragedy.
- c. If your campus has not already done so, organize a candlelight vigil on campus. Ensure that this is done in conjunction with as many other groups on campus as possible, including the student government. This is relatively simple to set up. It can be set up by booking a public speaking place on campus, booking speaker systems, and then getting as many other organizations to co-sponsor as possible.
- d. Organize a memorial evening program on campus, if your campus has not done so already. The purpose of these programs is to unite the campus in grieving and remembrance of the tragedy, as well as to show that the Muslim community feels the same pain as the rest of the nation. Be sure to get as many organizations to co-sponsor as possible. Making it an inter-faith memorial is a very good way to build ties across various communities. Also, topics to be sure to touch on include preventing the loss of more innocent civilian lives by a knee-jerk call to war as well as uniting against the increased hatred and racism against the Muslim/Arab community.
- e. Set up a table on campus to collect donations to aid with the relief efforts. For those MSA's that regularly have tables out on campus, simply putting a jar on the table to collect money is a very simple task that can be done to help out. Other ways to raise funds include bake sales, car washes, etc.

Educating the Campus about the Islamic Perspective on the Recent Attacks

Once you have ensured the safety of your community, and have gone through the initial phase of relief efforts, and programs of remembrance, there comes the time to educate the campus about Islam and its stance on “terrorism.” It is important that this is not done too soon so as to allow emotions on campus to calm down enough that people will be able to approach the topic with an open mind, rather than with a close-minded emotionally charged mentality. As tragic as these times have been, this is very much an excellent opportunity for da’wah as more and more people begin to realize how truly ignorant they are about Islam, Muslims, and the Muslim world. Around the nation, many curious individuals wanting to learn more about Islam and Muslims have begun to visit local masajid. Possible ways to educate your campus include:

- a. Organize a forum/lecture differentiating between the traditional teachings of Islam and what is often reported in the media as being “Islam.” Possible titles include: “Islam: A Religion of Peace and Justice” or for a more catchy (and provocative) title, one can go with “What’s the Difference Between a Muslim and a Terrorist?” Be sure to co-organize this with the more progressive and supportive organizations on campus so as to ensure that you will be outreaching to an open-minded crowd. Touch on the fact that Islam does not permit the killings of innocent civilians, and that the acts of a few individuals do not represent a whole religion or group of people.
- b. Meet with progressive minded organizations and present to them the opportunity to do a teach-in at one of their general body meetings about the Islamic perspective on the recent events. Depending on how comfortable you feel with the respective organization, you can touch on the role of U.S. foreign policy in causing such a horrible tragedy, the need to think critically about going to war with a devastated country such as Afghanistan, the fact that a high majority of the Americans that will be drafted to fight in the war will be primarily poor people of color, and how to combat the global rise of hate crimes against all minority communities. These are opportunities to really connect our struggles with the struggles of other communities in a more intimate discussion-oriented environment. A note to mention is that very often it is the students of color that can more easily understand how the U.S. was not simply attacked because we it is a “free nation” but that the unjust acts of this government played a major role in the cause of the attacks.
- c. Set up a media watch committee in your MSA dealing with this issue in particular. Assign some individuals to ensure that Muslims are writing opinion pieces/letters to the editor to your local newspapers, as well as to ensure that there are no racist pieces being put out in the local media that misrepresents Islam and the Muslim community. A good first step is to arrange a meeting with the school newspaper editor(s) and let them know of some of the common misconceptions of the media, and other concerns that you may have as a community in how information is reported in the media.

- d. Put out ads (if your budget allows) in the local newspaper indicating that Islam does not promote such indiscriminate killings, and that Muslims in America grieve along with the rest of the nation about the recent tragedies. Also, urge others not to target Muslim/Arabs that they may see as the causes for these horrible acts.

Working Towards a More Peaceful Alternative to a Full-Scale War

With each passing speech by George W. Bush, it becomes clearer that the U.S. is fully prepared to begin a sustained war using ground troops against Afghanistan, and possibly the whole Middle East. Yet as the cries for war continue, there has been a very positive response by anti-war activists around the world pleading for a peaceful solution. Around the world from South Korea to Berlin to Harvard, the cries against a continued U.S. led war have been generating steam as people are starting to see that the cycle of violence will not solve anything. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, "An Eye for an Eye leaves the Whole World Blind." Traditionally, student organizing has played a vital role in being a critical voice against the U.S. in times of unjust war. Thus, once your MSA has assessed that the mood on campus is not too emotionally charged, and that your community has done the work required to build up enough support and credibility throughout campus to be able to take a stand against the war, you can begin to look into fostering an anti-war movement on your campus. MSA West emphasizes that taking a stance like this at such an emotional time is a process that requires a great deal of work and strategic thinking. These are the steps that MSA West recommends in speaking out against another unjust war, and should be undertaken in order of appearance:

(**IMPORTANT NOTICE: A realistic assessment of the work your MSA has done so far on this issue is absolutely critical at this point. It is highly recommended that this next step be undertaken only once your MSA has already gone through the process of fostering a safe environment on campus, once you have built close relationships with other progressive organizations on campus, once you have met with campus administration concerning safety issues, and once you feel that the general campus atmosphere is calm and open-minded enough so as to not make these discussions a potentially dangerous situation for Muslims on campus.)

- a. Meet with the leadership from other supportive communities, as well as supportive faculty, and discuss the real danger of another war, especially one with such an already war-torn country like Afghanistan. Share ideas on how this war will effect our respective communities, what the motivations are behind such a war in light of the recent economic recession, how the presence of the U.S. military in various third world countries bears a striking resemblance to old European colonialism, and what steps can be done to educate an angry public about the need for restraint. Be sure to touch on the fact that Bush has been saying that this will be a long and sustained operation, with the operation name "Infinite Justice" implying that U.S. presence in the Middle East will be anything but short and sweet. Also touch on the danger of the U.S. line that one can either stand with

the U.S. or with terrorism, implying that any critical thought about American policy at times like these is both un-American and an act of terrorism in itself.

- b. Once you have met with various organizations and feel that there are enough people on campus who are generally on the same “anti-war” page as your MSA, you should begin to hold various public discussions, forums, and lectures. Once again, it is vital that these programs are held in conjunction with a number of other organizations on campus, and with speakers that represent a broad number of communities. In these lectures, touch on the same topics that were brought up in your discussions, but in a more public (and thus more controlled) format. Also, be sure to have your own security at these programs in case the environment begins to get more heated than anticipated and security is needed to control the situation.
- c. Write opinion articles calling for restraint and a peaceful solution in response to the attacks on the World Trade Center. The tone here should be critical of U.S. policy, but not to the point where an average reader would be completely alienated by such criticism. Emphasize that a violent reaction would only continue the pattern of violence and serve to increase the level of animosity that so many in the world (especially the developing world) hold towards the U.S. government. If possible, encourage non-Muslim/non-Arab writers to contribute to this subject to make it a more universal appeal stretching across a variety of communities and backgrounds.
- d. If and when you feel that you have formed very close ties with supportive organizations, and that you represent more than simply a fringe section of the campus, it is advisable to organize an anti-war rally on campus or in the local community. Be sure that your security is very good here, and that you are going to be able to pull out a large number of people from campus to the rally. The point of the rally is to show that there is a sizeable contingency on campus that is outspoken against the impending war. A war that the media has made to appear so popular amongst all Americans. The more diversity in terms of ethnic, religious, and political backgrounds at this rally, the better. If the rally is held on campus, be sure to meet with your campus advisors and administration to let them know that a rally like this is being planned, as the possibility for a clash of thoughts is very real at a rally like this. Ensure that the media is notified well in advance and that you have designated press spokespeople that have been trained with what to say to the media. Also, have someone with a camera available to document any unsafe instances of possible police brutality, antagonistic actions by overly emotional individuals, and to simply document the rally for future uses.
- e. The next step on campus is the formation of a “peace coalition” on campus that is student initiated and united for a peaceful resolution by the U.S. that does not involve the killing of any more innocent civilians around the world. Some MSA’s may feel that this step should come before the forums, rallies, etc., and it is ultimately up to the judgment of each particular community as to when this

coalition should be formed. In starting a formal coalition, it is vital to first outline the principals that unite the particular coalition, the level of investment that each organization/community is willing to undertake in the coalition, and the goals that the coalition is seeking to fulfill. As this coalition is united around peace, peaceful means of organizing should be emphasized.

This is the end of the MSA West Action Manual for organizing around the recent tragedies, as well as the impending war that will most likely follow as a result. It is important to re-emphasize that these are all suggestions, and that some may not apply to your campus. This is by no means the extent of what can be done around this issue, but merely a guide to get started on the issue. Those with more ideas are highly encouraged to share them with other MSA's. You can do this by sending any new ideas to msawest_action@egroups.com

For more information on MSA West, this Action Manual, or if you are having any kinds of problems at your local MSA, please contact us at msawest_officers@egroups.com, visiting our website at www.msawest.org, by calling one of our chapters, the MSA at UCLA at (310) 206-8763.

May Allah discern truth from falsehood, may Allah grant strength to the believers, may Allah alleviate the suffering of all the poor and downtrodden around the world, may Allah fill our hearts with compassion and mercy, and may Allah spread *His* justice throughout this Earth.

Ameen.

Jazaakum Allahu Khayr
Was-Salaamu `Alaykum
Your sisters and brothers at MSA West

MSA West is a progressive coalition of MSA's across the West Coast committed to empowering the Muslim Student voice through grassroots activism and community building.

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