

# National Arab American Journalists Association

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RAY HANANIA

*National Coordinator*

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Society of Professional Journalists  
National Board of Directors

Dear Board members:

I am writing to urge the board not to take any action to terminate the Helen Thomas Lifetime Achievement Award. The purpose of the award was to recognize journalists who dedicated their lives in the pursuit of the principles of professional journalism including accuracy, fairness and objectivity.

Helen Thomas has been an important role model for American Arabs who have and are pursuing journalism as a career choice. As you may know, there are so very few Americans of Arab heritage working in professional journalism. NAAJA maintains a census of American Arabs in Journalism and we have identified only about 300, with the majority employed in the ethnic media.

Being Arab in America is a challenge, far more so for Arabs than for any other ethnic group. The political realities of a Middle East conflict that has raged for more than a century weigh heavily on our community. While the majority of American Arabs seek a peaceful resolution of the conflict, it has been very contentious and has been the source of great anger, animosity and worse.

During her career as a journalist, Helen Thomas offered a special insight in to the issues that have made the Middle East conflict so radioactive for many in this country. As the Dean of the White House Press Corp, Helen Thomas often would ask the question that many in the media either did not think worthy or felt was too politically sensitive to address. It is a simple question but it has raised the volume in the already heated Arab-Israeli debate. That question is, "Why is the United States insisting that inspections be made of Iran's nuclear program, which seeks to build a nuclear bomb, and yet not insisting that Israel's more than 250 nuclear weapons be inspected?"

It is politically incorrect. It may not be of importance to mainstream Americans, but it is important to American Arabs who believe there is a hypocrisy in American foreign policy and a failure on the part of the mainstream media to address these issues.

Tragically, I and other American Arabs in professional journalism believe that the mainstream media is afraid to ask these and other questions that deal with our coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict, a conflict that is so intrinsic to the day-to-day

lives of all Americans. The Middle East dominates our news coverage, but it appears skewered and biased against the views of American Arabs. Americans do not understand basic concepts about the Middle East and mainstream journalism coverage has been broad-stroked and often filled with stereotypes.

I have never heard of a major mainstream journalist removed from his job for writing critically about and against Arabs.

Yet, many months ago, Helen Thomas was approached by a blogger – a Rabbi who has a controversial past, depicting in a YouTube video racist stereotypes of Mexican Americans. The Rabbi asked Helen Thomas about her views on Israel.

Here is the dialogue that took place.

**Nesenoff:** Any comments on Israel? We're asking everybody today, any comments on Israel?

**Thomas:** Tell them to get the hell out of Palestine.

**Nesenoff:** Oooh. Any better comments on Israel?

**Thomas:** Remember, these people are occupied and it's their land. It's not German, it's not Poland ...

**Nesenoff:** So where should they go, what should they do?

**Thomas:** They go home.

**Nesenoff:** Where's the home?

**Thomas:** Poland, Germany and America and everywhere else.

**Nesenoff:** So you're saying the Jews go back to Poland and Germany?

**Thomas:** And America and everywhere else. Why push people out of there who have lived there for centuries? See?

I want to point out that in the exchange the issue presented to Helen Thomas was Israel, a foreign country. She wasn't asked about "Jews."

Yet, in almost every news media report of the incident, it was reported that Helen Thomas said that "Jews" should "get the Hell out of Palestine."

She was denounced as anti-Semitic.

I am astounded how someone can argue that her response to a topic she did not initiate, can be described as anti-Semitism.

Was her reference to "Germany" and "Poland" insensitive? Surely, if in fact the issue of the Holocaust had been addressed.

But regardless of the intent of the Rabbi, Helen Thomas' response was specific to the questions she was asked.

The video did not immediately surface until many weeks later when an activist, and not a journalist, turned it in to an issue. The writer twisted the words, replaced the word "Israel" with the word "Jews."

It became a story. And Helen Thomas was immediately fired by the Hearst Newspapers – the media insists she resigned, she insists that they was fired without anyone at the newspaper asking her to explain her remarks. The fact was

On Dec. 11, 2010, I was honored to be one of many speakers addressing a diversity workshop organized by ArabDetroit.com, one of the country's leading American Arab online news web sites. ArabDetroit.com, for full disclosure, and its publisher are members of the National Arab American Journalists Association.

More than 300 people attended the event. I addressed the issue of media bias. I challenged the failure of UNITY: Journalists of Color to include American Arabs as partners in the organization. I challenged the SPJ's unilateral decision earlier this year to close the Arab Journalism Sector on the grounds that the blog and the site were being used for address political issues.

At the very end of the full day of workshops, with less than 100 people present, Helen Thomas, who is 91 years old and a frail 80 pounds and who can barely walk on her own without some assistance, spoke about what happened to her.

She spoke about the need for American Arabs to become more involved in journalism. She spoke about the failure of American Arabs to be as active of those who oppose their community agenda. She referred to them in one sentence as "Zionists." Again, she never used the word "Jews."

Here is her precise sentence in that context as she spoke to the attendees. I videotaped the speech and it is on my Morning Talk Radio Web Site at [www.RadioChicagoland.com](http://www.RadioChicagoland.com). Before you judge her, please listen to her words and read what she said.

*"There are so many who want to denigrate us and we are put in a position to defend ourselves. That is horrible."*

*(She then criticized American foreign policy and the war in Iraq.)*

*"The whole question of money involved in politics. We are owned by propagandists against the Arabs. There is no question about that. Congress, the White House, Hollywood and Wall Street are owned by the Zionists. No question in my opinion. They put their money where their mouth is. It counts. For us to be called the militants, so forth, we are being pushed in to the wrong direction in every way. I hate the fact the Arabs who have given so much to this country are so maligned."*

Zionism is a political movement in this country and in other countries. You can say you disagree with her remarks. You can say you passionately and strongly disagree with her remarks. You can criticize her. But to act so rash as to accept the broadly and unfairly applied label that she is "anti-Semitic" is morally wrong.

Journalism is about accuracy. It is about fairness. It is about allowing a healthy and vibrant debate to ensue on every topic that consumes our society. This is no different than any other debate. But, it is far from anti-Semitic. It is far from hate speech. Others may wish to twist her intentions, but the fact is this, despite her

strong words of challenge to American foreign policy at press conferences, her belief that the Arabs are treated unfairly or that Israel's government policies are wrong, she has never in her entire career uttered anything that could close to being viewed as anti-Semitic.

It may be disliked by the Zionist Organization of America. It may be disliked by strong proponents of Israel inside and outside of the mainstream American media.

But to call her anti-Semitic is outrageous and wrong. It violates our fiduciary responsibilities in the trust of professional journalism.

To enter into this debate not by evaluating, debating or dissecting the controversy but by reacting, would be a shameful act by the Board of the SPJ.

The Helen Thomas Lifetime Achievement Award is an award that reflects 50 years of outstanding professional journalism.

To allow two events at the end of that career to so damage that entire lifetime achievement would be an injustice.

I would urge you to not terminate the award and to continue to offer it to those who will continue to view the receipt of that award as a great honor.

One day the Middle East conflict will be over and Arabs and Jews will, hopefully, become the friends they once were.

But in the meantime, professional journalists whose primary responsibility is to report the news and offer insight, not judgment, should in fact refrain from engaging in the debate as newsmakers and not risk compromising their sacred role as news observers and reporters.

Thank you

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ray Hanania', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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