
POLITICS

Duncan Hunter Is Running the Most Anti-Muslim Campaign in the Country

The Republican congressman's reelection bid is a microcosm of the politics of fear in Trump's America.

MCKAY COPPINS NOV 5, 2018



MIKE BLAKE / REUTERS

SAN DIEGO, Calif.—Congressman Duncan Hunter had a problem.

The California Republican was supposed to coast to reelection this year. A square-jawed ex-Marine who inherited his father's House seat in 2008, Hunter had won each of his past five elections by a wide margin. His district, a collection of inland San Diego suburbs, was solid GOP territory, and few campaign watchers expected that to change anytime soon.

But then Hunter got indicted.

On August 22, federal prosecutors charged the lawmaker and his wife with stealing \$250,000 in campaign funds. In a [47-page indictment](#) littered with galling details, the Hunters were accused of using campaign cash to fund lavish family vacations; to pay for groceries, golf outings, and tequila shots; and even to fly a pet rabbit across the country. To cover their tracks, the indictment

alleged, the Hunters often claimed that their purchases were for charitable organizations like the Wounded Warrior Project.

[Read: [Duncan Hunter's indictment is a threat to the GOP House majority](#).]

The political backlash was swift and severe. Hunter was stripped of his committee assignments in the House. His fund-raising dried up, and Democratic money flooded into the district. When he tried to defend himself on Fox News, he exacerbated the crisis by appearing to pin the blame for the scandal on his wife.

Publicly disgraced, out of money, and facing both jail time and a suddenly surging challenger—what was an indicted congressman to do?

Eventually, Hunter seemed to arrive at his answer: Try to eke out a win by waging one of the most brazenly anti-Muslim smear campaigns in recent history.

In the final weeks of the election, Hunter has aired ominous ads warning that his Democratic opponent, Ammar Campa-Najjar, is “working to infiltrate Congress” with the support of the Muslim Brotherhood. He has circulated campaign literature claiming the Democrat is a “national security threat” who might reveal secret U.S. troop movements to enemies abroad if elected. While Hunter himself floats conspiracy theories from the stump about a wave of “radical Muslims” running for office in America, his campaign is working overtime to cast Campa-Najjar as a nefarious figure reared and raised by terrorists.

As multiple fact-checkers in the press have noted, these smears have no basis in reality. Campa-Najjar—a 29-year-old former Barack Obama aide who is half-Latino, half-Arab—is a devout Christian who received security clearance when he worked in the White House. His grandfather was involved in the massacre at the 1972 Munich Olympics, but he died 16 years before Campa-Najjar was born, and the candidate has repeatedly denounced him.* (Growing up, Campa-Najjar became estranged from his father, a former Palestinian Authority official, and was raised primarily by his Mexican American mother.)

But facts do not appear to be Hunter’s chief concern. The political strategy here is self-evident: Feed on anti-Muslim prejudice to scare enough conservative voters into pulling the lever for the incumbent—indictment be damned.

California’s Fiftieth District hasn’t drawn much attention from horse-race obsessives this year. There are other races with tighter polls, other House seats

more likely to flip. But what's unfolding here in the suburbs of San Diego represents an unnerving microcosm of this campaign season: white Republicans frightened by cynical conspiracy-mongers; religious minorities frightened by the fallout; a community poisoned by Trumpian politics—and a bitter question hovering over the whole ugly affair: *Will it ever get better?*

DUNCAN HUNTER IS NOT an easy man to find these days. He rarely holds campaign rallies, and doesn't attend town halls or debates. When I emailed his office asking for an interview, I was politely told my request would be added to the "list"—and then ignored when I tried to follow up.

Recent polls have shown that around half of the voters in Hunter's district are sticking with him. But finding surrogates to talk on Hunter's behalf proved as daunting as nailing down the candidate himself. Emails, phone calls, and Facebook messages to local conservative groups went unreturned. Not even Hunter's former GOP primary challenger had nice things to say: Shamus Sayed, a Muslim businessman and longtime Republican, told me he found the congressman's mudslinging "pathetic," and that he planned to vote for "anyone but Hunter."

To find an outspoken Hunter supporter, I turned to the land of the professionally outspoken: conservative talk radio. In a nondescript office building just outside La Jolla, I met Andrea Kaye, a drive-time host whose show is beamed out across San Diego County each night. A Louisiana transplant who bills herself on air as "dynamite in a dress," Kaye takes pride in having her finger on the SoCal conservative pulse. I found her in the KCBQ studio preparing for her show. She wore big, gold hoop earrings and sipped from a mug made to look like a stack of frosted donuts.

Kaye blamed a climate of militant political correctness for Hunter's lack of vocal boosters in the district. "It's the ultimate bullying," she complained. "You're not allowed to ask questions about [Campa-Najjar] or you're going to be called Islamophobic."

And that pesky indictment? The charges were troubling, she admitted. "But I always say, *Innocent until proven guilty*." She's been urging her listeners to reelect Hunter and then let the chips fall where they may once he's back in Washington.

[*Read: Democrats want to flip six seats in California.*]

Kaye told me Hunter had likely been helped by a recent controversy that provided an important local backdrop to the current congressional race. Earlier

this year, a group of parents sued the San Diego school district over an anti-bullying initiative aimed at creating “safe spaces” for Muslim students. Predictably, the lawsuit became a rallying point for right-wing culture warriors, who claimed the program—which included adding Muslim holidays to the calendar and teaching Islamic culture as part of the social-studies curriculum—was actually an effort to indoctrinate children with Islamist propaganda and make their schools “Sharia-compliant.”

While Kaye conceded that Hunter’s campaign probably went too far by labeling his opponent a “national security threat,” she insisted it was only natural for voters to demand serious scrutiny of Campa-Najjar’s background.

“There are multiple fronts of jihad,” she told me, her voice taking on a grave tone. “One is jihad through the sword, and the other is creeping Sharia.”

HUNTER IS NOT the only politician in America trying to win an election with Muslim-bashing. A recent [report](#) by Muslim Advocates, a civil-rights group based in Oakland, California, named 80 office seekers in federal, state, and local races across the country this year who have expressed anti-Muslim sentiments. (All but two are Republicans.)

The report’s author, Scott Simpson, told me Donald Trump—who made hostility to Muslims a centerpiece of his presidential campaign, going so far as to declare, “[I think Islam hates us](#)”—seems to have inspired a legion of copycat candidates in 2018. “There’s been this sort of wave of anti-Muslim candidates who are making the calculation that now is their time,” he said.

Simpson said some of these people are acting on bone-deep bigotry, while others are simply opportunists. But even if their stump screeds come off as “shrill and out of touch with reality,” he cautioned against ignoring them outright. “There’s a very coherent story that’s being told about Muslims ... that’s actually really sophisticated.” At the core of this story, he said, is the idea that Islam is not really a religion, but a violent political ideology whose adherents want to take over the government and replace the Constitution with Sharia law. Simpson told me that of all the candidates he has tracked this year, Hunter is the one who has “most fully digested the conspiracy theory, and is repeating it back.”

Simpson was quick to point out the silver lining in his report: Of the 80 candidates he wrote about, only 12 are safely projected to win their election. According to the organization’s polling data, the vast majority of voters—including many conservative Christians—are put off by politicians who attack Islam. “This isn’t a winning strategy,” he said.

And yet, whether they win or lose, these candidates can end up leaving a trail of collateral damage in their communities. The Muslims I interviewed in Hunter's district still remember how they felt the day candidate Trump called for a travel ban on their coreligionists. They remember the rabid cheers from his supporters, and the wall-to-wall coverage on TV, and the sinking dread they felt as he proceeded to climb in the polls.

"It was scary," said Ellen Molla, a Muslim mother of three who lives in Escondido. "It was kind of a shock that there were so many people that supported that. In everyday meetings, I would never have guessed that my neighbors next door had a problem with me." After Trump, though, she began to suspect they might.

Tasir El-Quolaq, a former U.S. federal agent who served in Iraq, has been registering Muslim voters in the San Diego area for years. But since Trump's election, he's noticed that some people at his local mosque are simply disengaging from politics. They feel like the process is rigged against them—and Hunter's recent smear tactics have only added to the exhaustion. "We are always on the defensive," El-Quolaq told me. "*Always.*"

[*Read: The proud corruption of Donald Trump*]

Meanwhile, the Islamophobia on display in the modern GOP has been especially frustrating to Muslims who are politically conservative. "When we first came here, most of us sort of favored the Republican Party," said Mohammed Kasabati, a retiree from Pakistan who moved to the U.S. decades ago. He noted that many Muslim voters hold socially conservative views, and belong to higher income brackets. In 2000, about 70 percent of them supported George W. Bush—and Kasabati still remembers the way that president defended the Muslim community in the wake of 9/11. Of course, Bush went on to lose Muslim support in the years that followed, with policies like the Patriot Act, which made it easier for the government to surveil Muslim Americans, and the war in Iraq. But Kasabati still thinks there could be a place in the GOP for people like him—if only Trump and his imitators would stop vilifying their faith.

"This is a country that was founded by people fleeing religious persecution," Kasabati said. Was it really too much to ask that the party of religious freedom extend them the same courtesy now?

ON A WARM NIGHT in October, about 80 students gathered in a softly lit auditorium at the University of San Diego to hear Ammar Campa-Najjar and other panelists offer advice for minorities entering politics.

After weeks of pitching himself nonstop to Trump voters in his deep-red district, Campa-Najjar had built up a collection of cringe-inducing encounters—and now he seemed eager to unload them. He talked about the man who refused to shake his hand and called him a terrorist, about the supporter who suggested he shave his beard so he wouldn't *look* so much like a terrorist. As he spoke, I wondered just how much time he'd been forced to spend on the campaign trail assuring voters that he didn't want to kill them.

[*Read: How American Muslims are trying to take back their government*]

These interactions had clearly made him hyperalert. Even here—at the kind of event where he could comfortably riff on “toxic masculinity,” and get away with saying things like, “Fellas, we need to be more woke”—he couldn't quite let his guard down. When another panelist said something about raising an “army” of allies, Campa-Najjar's ears perked up. “See,” he cracked, “that's something I could never say.”

After the event, we went outside and took seats at a table in the courtyard. Campa-Najjar looked every bit the well-coiffed congressional candidate—shiny hair, dark suit, flag pin—but he also exuded a kind of underdog exhaustion. I told him he looked tired. He told me he was.

The attacks of the past few weeks had left him indignant, but also darkly amused. He joked that if an Islamic terrorist ever actually encountered the two candidates together, he would likely take out the ex-Muslim apostate first. And for all the nonsense about Campa-Najjar being a potential “security threat,” he noted it was Hunter—the one under indictment—who couldn't obtain a security clearance.

On the whole, Campa-Najjar said he was surprised by how ham-fisted Hunter's strategy had been. “I thought there would be more finesse to it,” he told me.

Now, though, he was more confident than ever that victory was at hand. With Obama-esque audacity, he began ticking off all the reasons to be optimistic. The district was more diverse than many realized. “McCain Republicans” were repelled by the Muslim-bashing. While his own campaign was infused with idealism and “youth,” Hunter's was cloaked in the stench of “desperation.”

Very soon, he assured me, the good voters of the California Fiftieth would reject the ugly politics that had permeated their community this year and send him to Congress.

Perhaps detecting my skepticism, Campa-Najjar tried to conjure an alternative happy ending. “And if we fall short,” he tried, “we proved that we exceeded expectations and that—” but then he stopped himself. He couldn’t do it.

“I think we’re going to win.”

** A previous version of this article mischaracterized the events at the 1972 Munich Olympics. We regret the error.*

We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.
