

Fatema Ahmad Receives July Patriot Award

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Fatema Ahmad, the recipient of DRAD's July 2018 Patriot Award, does advocacy work in Boston by engaging in community building and empowering residents to resist abusive policing practices. She is the Deputy Director of the [Muslim Justice League \(MJL\)](#), a Boston-based organization founded in 2014 to combat a series of events that jeopardized Muslim civil rights.

Ahmad is a former biomedical engineer who quit her job in order to pursue community organizing full time. Ahmad mentions how she experienced racism and oppression when she was younger and how it kept resurfacing at different points in her life. "I decided that maybe instead of thinking and talking about these things on the side, I can actually do them," she says. Ahmad worked with two organizations in North Carolina, the American Friends Service Committee under the Communities against Islamophobia project and Muslims for Social Justice. In North Carolina, Ahmad started advocating against [Countering Violent Extremism \(CVE\)](#) and was passionate about fighting it. Federal agencies announced in 2014 that they were launching a CVE program in Boston as part of a pilot project that also includes Minneapolis and Los Angeles. The program purports to prevent U.S. residents from joining "violent extremist groups" by asking different community groups to police their own members. This new anti-terrorism initiative however, [unfairly targets Muslims](#), causing misplaced fear, discrimination, and baseless reporting to law enforcement. Ahmad says the University of North Carolina was supposed to receive a [grant](#) from CVE, which she fought during her time in NC and through this work, she learned about MJL, which was leading a national call for people who opposed the initiative. Ahmad decided to move to Boston and join MJL because she wanted to raise awareness about unfair criminalization and surveillance in Muslim, Black and Latino communities. She also liked the sense of female empowerment that surrounded the organization. "MJL was founded by Muslim women and ran by Muslim women like myself, so it was a really good fit," she says, referring to the four Muslim female co-founders.

Ahmad's work involves community organizing and [barring](#) local, state, and federal police from targeting vulnerable people. She says that transmitting false stereotypes (for example, Muslims are inherently violent) is one of the most effective ways that abusive policing practices are undermined. She speaks about the federal programs that Boston police participate in, with the [main one](#) being CVE. Ahmad says that the Boston police department's involvement has garnered interest from other organizations, leading them to collaborate more. She states that a major issue communities are currently facing is increased police surveillance, citing how a local activist [saw police fly drones](#) over his neighborhood and called attention to it. "The problem is there's no real transparency," she says. "No one really knows how police are buying new technology." Ahmad reveals that the

most important event stemming from this topic is an ongoing [hearing](#) being held by the public safety committee on the Boston police department's questionable practices, which includes using surveillance software, information sharing and purchasing new technology. The City Council also expressed interest, agreeing that it shouldn't be easy for the police to buy drones. Ahmad says that the hearing was filled with people from the community who provided testimony against the Boston police department. Despite this, she admits that she was dissatisfied with coverage for the event. "The coverage was not very good, it didn't acknowledge that the community made the hearing happen," she says. "We want to uplift voices on this issue."

Ahmad says that she has worked with other nonprofit groups to combat CVE, with one of them being DRAD. She highlights the national and local work MJL and DRAD have undergone, including national coordination with other activists fighting CVE, hosting panel discussions at conferences, and doing advocacy work in DC and other locations. "Since I joined MJL, I have felt really supported by DRAD and really loved working closely with them in our [Resisting Surveillance series](#)," she says. Ahmad says she values her partnership with DRAD and looks forward to working with them again in the near future. "They are not only committed to defending civil rights of marginalized communities, but especially uplifting the voices and concerns from those communities."

Although the systematic targeting of marginalized communities is a problem, Ahmad believes it's only part of a larger issue. "Everything we're seeing, it all fits and works together to hurt everybody," she says. "The way it manifests, the root of the system that is white supremacist, patriarchal and racist, uses the same or similar tools to hurt the civil rights of everyone." Ahmad references the efforts to abolish Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) as an example. She says she's glad that people are questioning its existence and noticing the [horrific things](#) that they are doing, but states that not enough are taking it a step further. She reveals that ICE exists because of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which was created due to the islamophobic response to 9/11. She also notes that FEMA was put under DHS, the disaster relief program is still being questioned for its [lackluster response](#) to the hurricane aftermath in Puerto Rico. She argues that the core tenets of the system affect everybody, from Muslims to immigrants, because they are rooted in white supremacy. Ahmad says she wants to focus on the underlying causes instead of the expressions. "If we only look at the end result without analyzing how we really got here, we will continue getting these band aid solutions," she says. Ahmad praises organizations for hosting [rallies against family separations](#), but argues that the biggest thing protesters should be focused on is tackling rooted issues effectively. "People really need to dig deeper into what has been happening. It's really easy to be caught up in all the headlines everyday and be overwhelmed by everything we're seeing," she says. "We need to look at what the system looks like and what's really driving it." Ahmad states that once this is accomplished, people can achieve a broader understanding of where this is coming. She discusses how she gains insight from observing past activists and their resistance methods, not just the people she was taught in school. She says that she is inspired by previous leaders who were fighting the same battle and feels like she is connected to a longer history.

Ahmad admits that she does not feel overwhelmed with daily headlines because she knows what she's working on. "Hope comes from my community, which gets stronger everyday, even though we have these huge setbacks, I am connecting with people regularly," she says. "The work we do comes with building power in the community, seeing people connect and fight back in new and creative ways."