

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 7, 2023

The Honorable Amanda Bennett
Director
U.S. Agency for Global Media
330 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20237

Dear Director Bennett:

We write to express our grave concern about recent developments at Voice of America (VOA) related to its reporting on Hamas, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) that is funded, armed, and directed by Iran's terror-sponsoring regime. Dozens of countries have joined the United States in designating Hamas as a terrorist organization.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas terrorists invaded Israel and massacred over 1,400 people, including at least 36 Americans. President Biden and the Biden administration have repeatedly referred to the attack as a "terrorist" attack and to Hamas as "terrorists."

Nevertheless, VOA's taxpayer-funded leadership directed VOA staff not to refer to Hamas and its members as "terrorists" in reporting, except when quoting the statements of others. The instructions were conveyed by VOA associate editor for news standards Carol Guensburg. Meanwhile, Patsy Widakuswara, VOA's White House bureau chief, told VOA employees, in essence, that they should adopt Hamas's language and framework for describing the crisis, urging them to highlight how "the militant group's attack was done in retaliation for Israel's decades-long occupation."

This guidance was implemented, for example, in a recent video story about the massacre by Hamas at the Nova Music festival, in which a senior editor ordered the reporter, Linda Gradstein, to change an already-approved script by replacing Hamas "terrorist" with Hamas "militant." There were no other changes made to the script.

As members of the Senate committees with jurisdiction over the policies and funding of the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), we believe that VOA's editorial policy against the use of the term "terrorist" contradicts VOA's principle of providing "accurate, objective, and comprehensive" news. Indeed, we seriously question how VOA's editorial policy advances the interests of the American taxpayers who generously fund this news organization every year.

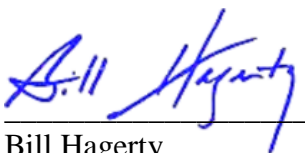
Perhaps most troubling, the statements by Guensburg and Widakuswara do not align with VOA's policy when describing other terrorist groups, suggesting an absurd and vacuous moral relativism

that is specifically generous to Hamas’s genocidal objectives. VOA already has established a history of using the term “terrorist” in reporting to describe U.S.-designated FTOs like the Islamic State and Al-Qaida. For example, VOA maintains the Extremist Watch Desk (EWD), launched in 2015, that was initially focused on the “Islamic State, Al-Qaida and other terror and extremist groups” and was “expanded to cover other designated terrorist and extremist groups around the world.”¹ VOA described the Islamic State as a terrorist group in a news article on April 14, 2023: “The United States has sought a presence in the region to monitor and address threats from terrorist groups such as Islamic State.”²

VOA has created an editorial double standard in which it appears to accept the description of the Islamic State, Al-Qaida, and other officially designated terrorists groups as terrorists, but not Iran-backed Hamas, which explicitly seeks to destroy Israel and kill Jews. VOA’s editorial double standard, therefore, contradicts its principles of providing “accurate, objective, and comprehensive” news to audiences around the world and “present[ing] responsible discussion and opinion” on matters related to U.S. foreign policy.

We, therefore, urge you to review this directive issued to VOA staff that contradicts the principles spelled out in VOA’s charter. In addition, we urge you to hold accountable VOA leadership who issued this guidance for editorial double standards when it comes to Iran-backed Hamas terrorists, including the immediate termination of Carol Guensburg and Patsy Widakuswara. Failing to do so only damages VOA’s credibility in the eyes of the Congress and American taxpayers. We look forward to your prompt response. It is crucial that VOA maintains the highest standards of journalism and a commitment to the truth, particularly when it pertains to matters of national security.

Sincerely,



Bill Hagerty
United States Senator



Ted Cruz
United States Senator



Lindsey O. Graham
United States Senator



Marco Rubio
United States Senator

¹ <https://www.insidevoa.com/p/6361.html>

² <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-cast-as-villain-during-meeting-of-afghan-neighbors/7051258.html>



Pete Ricketts
United States Senator



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