

# Statement in Solidarity with Urooj and an Urgent Call for Building a Stronger Movement Defense Infrastructure for Protestors



By Muslims for Just Futures and Urooj Rahman's  
Solidarity Committee

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## Introduction

On November 18, 2022, the defense attorney for our friend, Urooj Rahman, stood in a Brooklyn federal courtroom and stated, “I’d like to begin today by acknowledging the tremendous support for Urooj here in the courtroom and also in the overflow courtroom.” Urooj did not stand in the court alone. In addition to her attorneys, Urooj’s friends, families, and community members, who had traveled for hours, packed the court as a form of collective defense. Two years after her presence at a Black Lives Matter protest, Urooj Rahman was sentenced to 15 months in federal prison with two years of supervised release and a joint restitution obligation in the amount of \$30,137. The judge gave this punitive sentence under the pretext of “general deterrence.” As Urooj begins her confinement in a federal prison in the next few days, MJF and her supporters are releasing this statement to name the injustice that occurred against Urooj and ways the broader public can support Urooj and her family during her confinement.

In addition, MJF is releasing this statement to name our concerns with the gaps in providing adequate community and legal defense to protestors. Through our experience witnessing the lack of adequate support Urooj received, we want to underscore the importance of building an infrastructure of community and legal defense for protestors who will continue to be targeted by the state, especially Black, Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern and South Asian (BAMEMSA) protestors, survivors, and women. It’s irresponsible for movements to push community members and organizers to take to the streets and resist when we aren’t prepared to offer the adequate community or legal defense infrastructure when the state hunts them or labels protestors as criminals and terrorists, in the process using the state criminalization infrastructure to justify any level of state repression against protestors. Our statement offers broader recommendations for our communities, organizations working in our field, and movement lawyers. These recommendations are included at the end of the statement.

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## *Urooj's Sentencing and Explicit Islamophobia in the Courtroom*

Throughout Urooj's sentencing hearing, many of us witnessed the judge make explicit Islamophobic statements, including misogynist comments rooted in gendered Islamophobia. Throughout this entire case, **Urooj has been scapegoated and misrepresented by the prosecution, by the press, by her co-defendant's defense counsel, and targeted as a broader political project to shut down dissent and protest. This violence is rooted in gendered Islamophobia.** For vandalizing an abandoned and previously destroyed police vehicle, the prosecution's charges included a "terrorism enhancement," a discretionary charge most often used against people of color. Originally facing up to 45 years of incarceration, Urooj accepted a plea deal, and relinquished her ability to appeal the court's proceedings, a waiver that often comes with prosecutorial deals that enact lopsided power dynamics in favor of the government.

Urooj's attorneys made arguments permitted by the legal system—that those protesting the murder of George Floyd and all that it represented of police violence were overcome with "anger and despair." Urooj's attorney could discuss her work as an eviction defense attorney, her representation of refugees, and her role as primary caretaker of her mother, but they could not argue for her freedom, her innocence, or point towards the absurdity of what was playing out—a woman, a Muslim, an organizer, an immigrant, excessively penalized for the alleged crime of property damage. Her attorney asked the judge to look at Urooj's life as a whole, not by "the worst mistake of her life."

Judge Brian M. Cogan, looking down from his bench, did not initially respond to these comments, but instead remarked on Urooj's arrest photo, "she doesn't seem angry to me. She seems, like, happy to me." Casting aside an explanation of trauma, gendered violence, and state violence, Judge Cogan used the t-shirt Urooj was wearing to depict Urooj as a criminal.

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The shirt that Urooj wore that night, which said, “the struggle continues,” is a sentiment all organizers for justice hold in their heart. Urooj’s political commitments against police and racial violence were a mark against her. Both the judge and prosecutor focused on the Minneapolis uprising, depicted property damage as “bombing,” attack on “rule of law,” and that “it’s the United States of America, where we just don’t do things that way,” as if an insurrection wasn’t carried out on January 6th on Capitol Hill. He went on to state, before the Muslim defendant, “we’re not in the West Bank.”

Context is critical and applying a differential standard to protestors while allowing law enforcement and state institutions to move with impunity is unjust. Urooj was one of the many protestors arrested during a summer of police violence enacted against communities in New York, but not a single police officer faced similar consequences for the tear gassing, kettling, and mass assault of protestors during 2020. Despite considering her justified anger at a legal and police system’s violence, the court issued a sentence of 15 months and two years of probation to achieve “general deterrence.” Judge Cogan meted out this sentence while stating that there are, “other people who are on the margins of protests who can slip into the same kind of mentality that you did, and I have to speak to those people.” The court issued this sentence as a warning for any who seek to disrupt the status quo, particularly women, particularly people of color, particularly those who are closest to the inequities of society.

Urooj, speaking for herself at the hearing, shared “[w]hen I connect back with God, I realize love is really my animating force, not anger or pain.” Throughout the two-year prosecution, letters of support for Urooj were authored by members of her union, her alma mater, human rights organizations, her profession, and her religious community. It has been an effort of love to support Urooj throughout this period. **In moving forward as Urooj begins her unjust confinement in a federal prison, here are some ways community members can support Urooj directly.**

1. **Sign this jot form ([bit.ly/URjotform](https://bit.ly/URjotform)) if you would like to remain engaged in supporting Urooj during her confinement;**
2. **If you are an abolitionist or prisoner support group located in Philadelphia, please get in touch with us at [community@muslimsforjustfutures.org](mailto:community@muslimsforjustfutures.org); and,**
3. **Please share this statement to ensure we are building a narrative that doesn’t further dehumanize Urooj and other protestors.**

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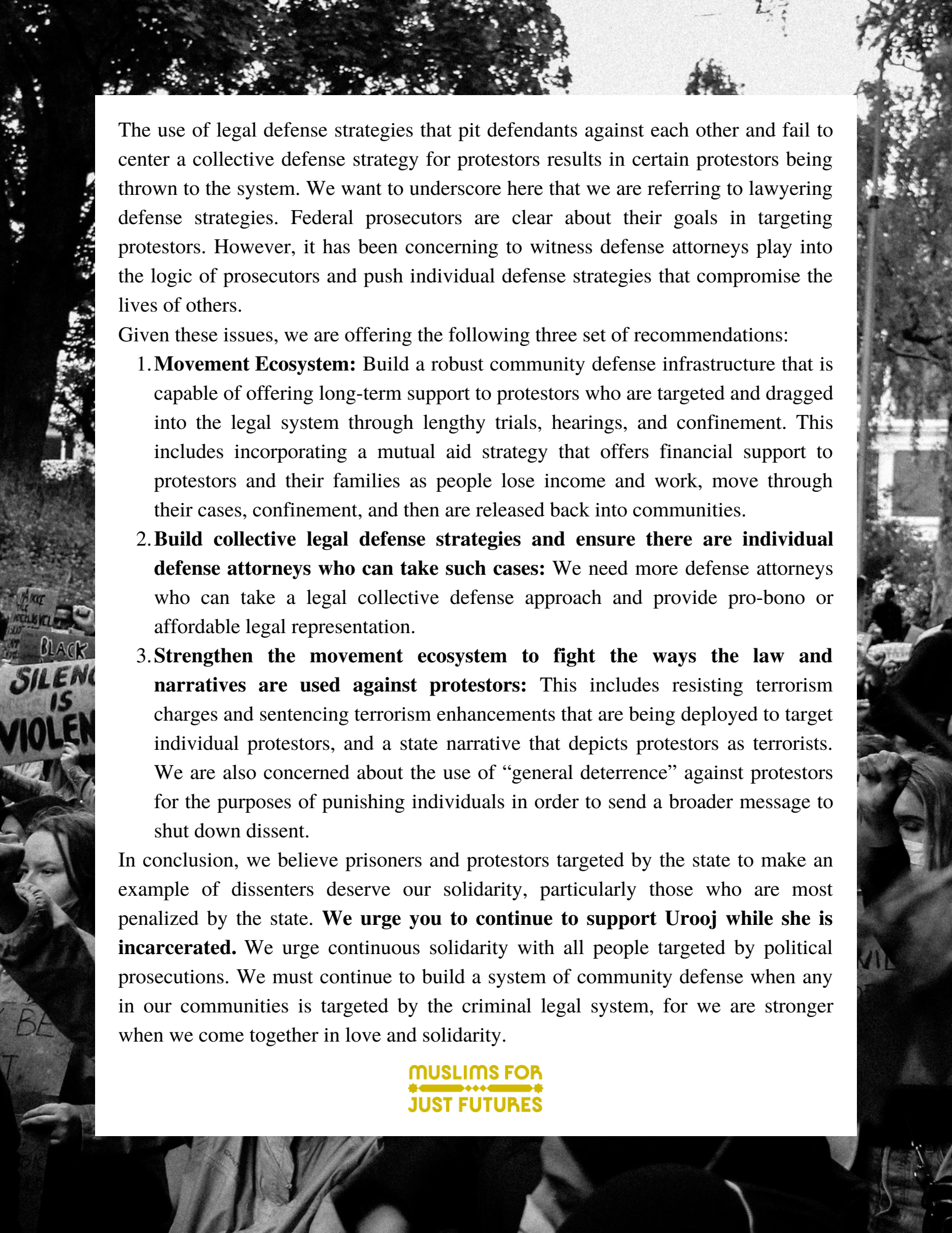


## *Broader Recommendations for Building a Movement Infrastructure to Defend Protestors*

As a group of organizers that have supported Urooj during this entire ordeal and are witnessing the attacks on protestors from Atlanta resisting Cop City to other movements, we have witnessed concerning gaps in our broader movement ecosystem in building adequate defense infrastructure for movement protestors, especially Muslim protestors and those who end up in the dragnet of being labeled terrorists and have terrorism charges and sentencing enhancements thrown at them. We are concerned that the state will continue to use the apparatus of terrorism laws and sentencing enhancements to criminalize movements and justify state violence towards protestors.

Often during uprising moments, numerous movement organizations encourage communities to show up in the streets, attend protests, and rise up for justice. However, far less attention is given to the defense infrastructure required to sustain defense of protestors who are thrown into a violent system that drags out punishment and trials over years destroying the lives of individuals, their relationships, and families. While many of our organizations in movements are well-intentioned, as a field that is stretched beyond capacity, the level of sustained defense and support that is required is dropped and protestors either have to organize their own defense or smaller grassroots collectives have to hold the actual work of supporting individuals and their families. The lack of capacity results in missteps, mistakes, and oversight that truly compromises putting up the best self-defense for individual protestors.

Further, we are concerned with the lack of collective legal defense strategies for protestors. While there is an abundance of lawyers and their advocacy efforts are appreciated, the lack of movement lawyers who can apply collective defense strategies in the legal system and take these cases on is a serious gap in our movement ecosystem.



The use of legal defense strategies that pit defendants against each other and fail to center a collective defense strategy for protestors results in certain protestors being thrown to the system. We want to underscore here that we are referring to lawyering defense strategies. Federal prosecutors are clear about their goals in targeting protestors. However, it has been concerning to witness defense attorneys play into the logic of prosecutors and push individual defense strategies that compromise the lives of others.

Given these issues, we are offering the following three set of recommendations:

- 1. Movement Ecosystem:** Build a robust community defense infrastructure that is capable of offering long-term support to protestors who are targeted and dragged into the legal system through lengthy trials, hearings, and confinement. This includes incorporating a mutual aid strategy that offers financial support to protestors and their families as people lose income and work, move through their cases, confinement, and then are released back into communities.
- 2. Build collective legal defense strategies and ensure there are individual defense attorneys who can take such cases:** We need more defense attorneys who can take a legal collective defense approach and provide pro-bono or affordable legal representation.
- 3. Strengthen the movement ecosystem to fight the ways the law and narratives are used against protestors:** This includes resisting terrorism charges and sentencing terrorism enhancements that are being deployed to target individual protestors, and a state narrative that depicts protestors as terrorists. We are also concerned about the use of “general deterrence” against protestors for the purposes of punishing individuals in order to send a broader message to shut down dissent.

In conclusion, we believe prisoners and protestors targeted by the state to make an example of dissenters deserve our solidarity, particularly those who are most penalized by the state. **We urge you to continue to support Urooj while she is incarcerated.** We urge continuous solidarity with all people targeted by political prosecutions. We must continue to build a system of community defense when any in our communities is targeted by the criminal legal system, for we are stronger when we come together in love and solidarity.

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