



Shaun King campaigns for Senator Bernie Sanders in 2019.

ON THE FRINGE

The Hamas Whisperer?

Black Lives Matter activist Shaun King was accused of fraud. Now he's pivoted to pro-Palestine firebrand—and self-proclaimed hostage negotiator

BY ERNEST OWENS

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Of all the unlikely characters to make waves during the Hamas-Israel crisis—Senator John Fetterman, Harvard president Claudine Gay, billionaire businessman Bill

Ackman—none is more curious than Shaun King, a 44-year-old Black Lives Matter activist with a history of dubious claims and an even more dubious money trail.

There he was almost immediately after Hamas's attack, blasting Israeli "apartheid" and "war crimes" to his millions of followers on Instagram, X, and YouTube followers. There he was in late October, claiming to have helped free a pair of Israeli hostages. And there he was in mid-December, in Doha of all places, speaking on a panel about human rights during wartime at the Qatar National Convention Centre.

Last week, there was King—an ordained Christian minister—making news after he and his wife converted to Islam in an Irving, Texas, Islamic center, a move he said was inspired by "the past six months of suffering and pain and trauma that we've seen in Gaza."

Despite lacking a formal job or a clear connection to either Israel or Gaza, King managed to position himself at the center of America's anti-Israel protest movement thanks to his relentless and often carnage-filled social-media posts. He also regularly shared propaganda content from Hamas itself. Claims that Hamas was treating Israeli hostages well got him banned from Instagram in late December.

"I'm grateful, I'm safe, and I've been through much harder times," King said on a friend's account. "But I refuse to betray my values and principles by staying silent about this genocide and the war crimes in Gaza and the West Bank." Without missing a beat, he announced that he would be pursuing legal action.

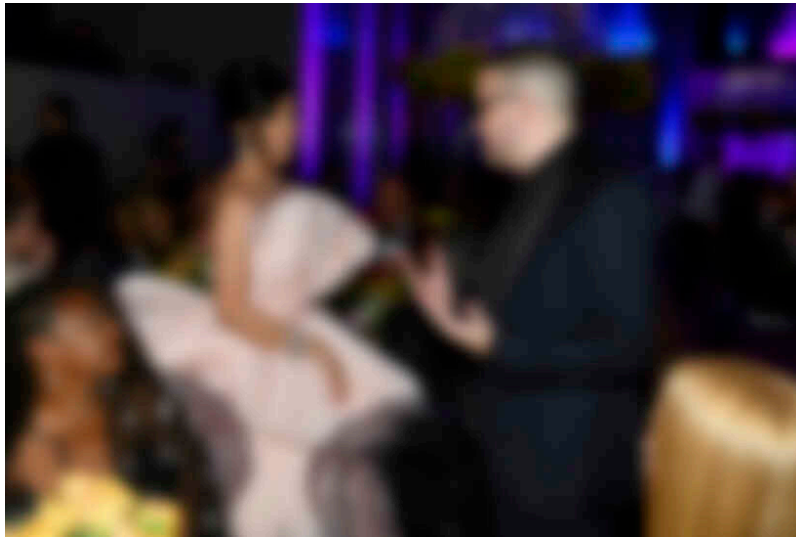
King's public ascent can be traced back to the death of Eric Garner, the 43-year-old Black man killed by Staten Island police officers in 2014 and whose dying words—"I can't breathe"—helped kick-start the nascent Black Lives Matter movement.

King, a Morehouse College graduate born to a white mother, had dabbled in public-school teaching, virtual preaching, and low-profile advocacy work in Atlanta. But he discovered a hidden talent for crowdfunding on social media, ostensibly to help Black families impacted by police brutality and racial injustice.

He began raising money for the family of Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old killed by a Cleveland police officer in 2014. The following year, he set up a bail fund for Bree

Newsome, an activist who went viral after scaling a pole at the South Carolina Statehouse to remove the Confederate flag. Soon he had millions of social-media followers and endorsements from the likes of Bernie Sanders, media personality Cenk Uygur, billionaire businessman Robert Smith, and actresses Sigourney Weaver and Susan Sarandon.

In 2019, Rihanna honored King, whose work she described as “groundbreaking,” at her fifth annual Diamond Ball, at Cipriani Wall Street. King was even named one of *Time* magazine’s 25 most influential people on the Internet in 2018.



Cardi B and honoree Shaun King attend Rihanna's fifth annual Diamond Ball, in New York City, 2019.

Baby-faced and fair-skinned, with a pencil mustache and the requisite black-rimmed glasses, King was at once forceful and crowd-pleasing, especially to white donors. He reliably championed *au fait* causes such as economic justice and anti-racism that provided followers maximum virtue signaling with minimal effort.

Then, in February 2019, a group of nearly 200 activists, community organizers, and community voices signed an open letter, which was published on Medium, demanding accountability from King following ongoing accusations of organizational mismanagement, financial impropriety, and cyberbullying within his various social-justice networks.

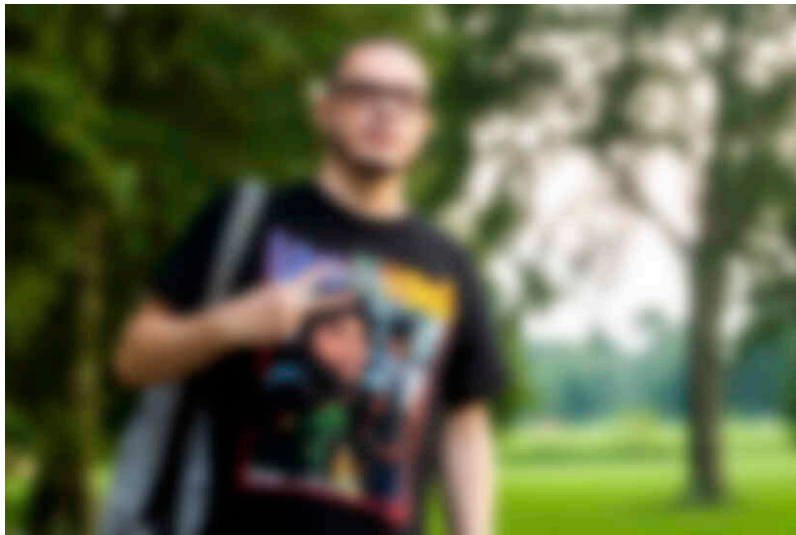
“For far too long Shaun has used his power to not only center himself but as both weapon and shield against the community he claims to protect,” it read. “Instead of

using his sizable platform to be a beacon of light, Shaun has become a bully in the pulpit, casting a long shadow on our collective justice efforts, using his one enormous microphone to drown out the voices of the many.”

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The prominent B.L.M. activist DeRay Mckesson also turned to Medium a few months later to castigate King’s fundraising tactics. King’s “lapse in integrity within the activism community [is] so glaring that to be silent is to be complicit,” Mckesson wrote.

King denied any impropriety—“failure is not a fraud,” he likes to say—but the allegations continued to mount. In 2020, reports of tension and financial mismanagement among the team behind King’s failed news outlet North Star brought further scrutiny. In addition, a pair of political endeavors King helped launch—Real Justice PAC and the Grassroots Law Project (G.L.P.)—accomplished little while spending huge sums.



King attends the August BreonnaCon Bre-B-Q, in 2020, following the shooting of Breonna Taylor, who was killed in a botched raid by police in Louisville, Kentucky.

The Daily Beast reported in 2022 that much of the \$6.7 million he raised in the wake of George Floyd's death went to King and his crew of "consultants." The \$40,000 he spent on a guard dog didn't help matters—nor did the five-bedroom, 3,000-square-foot lakeside home in New Jersey purchased by his wife for nearly \$850,000.

King's Real Justice PAC was repeatedly fined by city governments, such as Philadelphia's, for ethics violations in 2019 and 2021. Also in 2021, Samira Rice, Tamir Rice's mother, publicly rebuked King for profiting off her son's death after G.L.P. raised \$125,000 in Tamir's name without her consent or benefit. "I don't understand how you sleep at night.... Along with the united states, you robbed me for the death of my son," Rice wrote in an Instagram post. "As a white man acting black you are a imposter that can not to be trusted."

Murmurs that King was actually not Black were nothing new. Back in 2015, reports on the conservative news site Breitbart and then in the Daily Beast reported that both his parents, not just his mother, were white. King insisted that although the father listed on his birth certificate was white, his mother confirmed that his actual biological father is a light-skinned black man. There was no racial smoking gun, he said. The charges were simply "fodder to discredit me and the greater movement for justice in America."

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Yet nearly a decade on, King's race remains as murky as his finances. Over the years, he has embarked on a range of GoFundMe-style campaigns to raise money for everything from relocation expenses for his wife and five kids to medical care for an ongoing nerve condition. There was also an ill-fated fashion line launched in August 2021. King continued to seek donations from his followers, and leading social-justice activists backed away.

And then came Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel. Suddenly, King was seen as a legitimate activist fighting for a global cause. His prominence—and social-media following—hit new heights. But so did his ambition and the inevitable need to place himself at the center of the news cycle.

When Hamas released the American hostages Judith and Natalie Raanan, last October, King claimed to have “worked frantically behind the scenes to help make [their release] possible.” The Raanans had been “supporters of mine and protested police violence in America alongside us,” he said. King also claimed they were allies of the Palestinian cause.

Uri Raanan, Natalie's father, quickly insisted his family is “not affiliated with Mr. King,” though he did note that the Raanans had “reached out to many people far and wide to bring Natalie and Judith to safety.” Later it emerged that Natalie's brother, Ben, had been in contact with King but had acted without his family's knowledge or consent. The Raanans released a statement saying, “We want to make clear that he is lying! Our family does not and did not have anything to do with him, neither directly nor indirectly. Not to him and not to anything he claims to represent.”

Exactly how this independent agitator—working with the Qatari government, he claims—could have accomplished this diplomatic feat remains, like nearly everything to do with King, unclear. And if there were any truth to his version of events, it would seemingly make him guilty of violating long-standing U.S. policy against negotiating with terrorists.

“You've asked me virtually no questions about my actual activism and have instead written several patently false accusations that have nothing to [do] with my work,”

King responded when sent a detailed list of questions. When asked to elaborate on which accusations he was referring to, he did not reply.

“There was a time when he did good work, calling attention to racial violence with a clarity and efficiency no one else could,” T. Anansi Wilson, an associate law professor at Mitchell Hamline School of Law in Minnesota and director of its Center for the Study of Black Life and the Law, said recently of King. “But ... he has gone astray and perhaps, the fame, money or other things have infected his moral compass or clarity.”

Ernest Owens is a political writer at large at Philadelphia magazine and the author of [The Case for Cancel Culture: How This Democratic Tool Works to Liberate Us All](#)

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