



Will Muslim Opposition to Biden’s Support for Israel Influence the 2024 Presidential Election?

By Dr. Elad Ben David

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel’s war in Gaza, which is being waged in response to the devastating Hamas attacks of October 7, has prompted a surge of anti-Zionist discourse among many Muslims in the West, including in the US. The American Muslim community has been politically active since 9/11. Muslim activists, clerics and Islamic organizations are among the most prominent Western voices condemning injustices against Muslims worldwide, and the Palestinian cause is often a priority. President Joe Biden’s support for Israel in the Gaza war has angered many in the American Muslim community, and they may wish to punish him for that support in the November election. **Will American Muslim opposition to Biden’s support for Israel have a political impact on the US election?**

The war in Gaza that erupted in response to the October 7 Hamas attacks has sparked harsh condemnation from many prominent Muslim voices in the United States. They have denounced Israel’s military offensives and accused the Israeli government of creating a genocide in Gaza. In addition to condemning Israel directly for its response to Hamas’s barbaric attack, many US Muslims have also criticized President Joe Biden for his support for Israel in its broad military operations in Gaza.

During the March on Washington for Gaza in January, American Muslim clerics explicitly criticized US foreign policy in the Middle East. Despite their geographical distance from the conflict, their support for the Palestinians is an inseparable part of their attachment to the global Muslim *ummah*. They believe the Holy Land is sacred to Islam, especially sites of worship like the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Sheikh Dr. Yasir Qadhi, an influential Muslim scholar from the Islamic Seminary of America, condemned Biden for his support for Israel and purported disregard for the widespread destruction and killing throughout Gaza. In harsher rhetoric, Imam Dr. Omar Suleiman, founder of the Yakeen Institute in Texas and a second-generation Palestinian immigrant, accused Biden of genocide, calling him “heartless” and a “hypocrite” for caring more about shipping lanes in Yemen than the lives of tens of thousands of Muslims in Gaza. Referring to the coming election in November, Suleiman needled Biden for wanting the votes of the Muslim community but rudely ignoring its calls for a cease-fire.

The sharp criticism of Biden by these American Muslim leaders reflects a drop in his support. An NBC News poll found that Biden is struggling among young voters: He trails former President Donald Trump 46%-42% among voters aged 18-34. These surveys strengthen the impression that the war in Gaza is affecting Biden's popularity, because in polls conducted before the war, in June and September of 2023, Biden led Trump among this voting cohort by a similar margin.

Other surveys show that Biden's status is declining rapidly among the Arab and Muslim public. The Arab American Institute found that only 17% of Arab Americans say they will vote for Biden in 2024, down from 59% who did so in 2020. American Muslims have even started an #AbandonBiden campaign, focusing on the sizable Muslim-American communities in swing states such as Michigan, Arizona, and Georgia.

In 2020, Biden won Michigan by 154,000 votes and took Arizona, a state with an Arab-American population of 60,000, by only 10,500 votes. In Georgia, a state with an Arab-American population of 57,000, Biden prevailed with a margin of only 11,800 voters. The Arab-American and Muslim vote is thus an important factor in US presidential politics, and their political influence is growing.

Consider, for example, the State of Michigan. There are at least 278,000 Arab-Americans in Michigan, and one of its cities, Dearborn, is believed to contain the largest number of Muslims and Arabs in the US. The Arab-American and Muslim community of Michigan was once considered a reliable voting constituency for Biden, but many of them are outraged by his support for Israel in the war in Gaza. Pro-Palestinian groups are chanting “Genocide Joe” and “How many kids have you killed today?” at rallies in Michigan. Dearborn mayor Abdullah Hammoud canceled a meeting with Biden's campaign manager, Julie Chavez-Rodriguez, in protest against Biden’s support for Israel. Michigan community leaders, hoping to send a clear message to Biden before November, are encouraging voters to select "uncommitted" in the Michigan primary elections to express their objection to the administration’s continuing support for Israel during the war.

Sami Hamdi, a British political analyst, conducted an in-depth analysis of poll results to assess Biden's chances in the presidential race. Hamdi concluded that if Biden loses even a tiny percentage of Muslim votes from key states such as Michigan, Pennsylvania, or Georgia, there is a high chance that he will lose the election. This means there is now a new reality in which “one percent of the population” (the American Muslim community) has “almost the power of 51 percent.” This is thus a golden opportunity for American Muslims to prove their political strength and punish Biden and the Democrats for their support for Israel.

With that said, Hamdi also noted widespread divisions among the ultra-heterogeneous Muslim-American community that can complicate its ability to unite into a solid political force. In this they differ from the American Jewish community, which is small in numbers but whose political influence derives from its ability to unite as a bloc. It could be, therefore, that Biden is not particularly worried about the political implications of the Muslims’ wrath - especially if the Republican candidate is former President Donald Trump.

Hamdi's strategic analysis addresses a fundamental question about the Muslim community’s diversity: How involved should it be in foreign policy issues (especially the Palestinian cause), and should it be more concerned about the community's internal challenges? It is not clear how many American Muslims would be able to set aside their own political divisions and sectarian bickering and unite as a political bloc. The current violence in Gaza is a watershed moment for

many American Muslims, but it is difficult to predict whether or not it will cause a significant number of them to abandon the Democrats.

Along with the backlash over the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, another issue that could prompt Muslims to reject Biden is the dispute over the LGBTQ community, which has been largely forgotten in the avalanche of current events. The rise of LGBTQ and other progressive trends in the social and political fabric of American life in recent years has caused fissures between the American Muslim community and the Democratic Party. For many conservative Muslims, support for these communities and trends is a red line in that it represents an explicit contradiction of basic Islamic values. Prominent Muslim voices have directly criticized the progressive wing of the Democratic Party for its support for the LGBTQ agenda.

These two factors could bolster the Republican candidate, who is likely to be Donald Trump. While flashy, pompous Trump is often perceived as an enemy of the Muslim community, he did not alienate all Muslim and Arab voters in 2020. In that election, while Biden received 64% of the Muslim vote, Trump took a significant 35%, possibly because of his economic policies and conservative image.

One explanation for this political phenomenon is that most racial groups did not find Trump's messages to be personally racist, offensive, or vulgar. Some even viewed them positively because they shared Trump's antipathy to the targeted minorities and agreed with his provocative statements. Anti-Black sentiment is common among many Arab, Hispanic, and Asian communities in America, and antisemitism is much more prevalent among Afro-Americans and Hispanics than it is among whites. Similarly, many Afro-Americans, Hispanic Christians, and Hindus are highly distrustful of Muslims.

Moreover, Afro-Americans are more supportive of limits on immigration than any other bloc of the Democratic coalition, and Hispanics tend to be more worried about illegal immigration than whites or Afro-Americans. Therefore, far from alienating minority constituencies, Trump's messages on immigration, law and order, and cultural conservatism were likely an essential part of his appeal to many voters of color even as they led many whites to distance themselves from him.

This could explain the diversity of the participants in the January 6 attack on the United States Capitol, which was conducted as part of an attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 election in Trump's favor. Despite the perception that most of the participants were conservative whites, the rioters included African-Americans, Hispanics, Arabs, and members of other groups.

Under current conditions, this combination of factors could give Trump an advantage over Biden among Muslim Americans, surprising though that might be. Nevertheless, despite a host of surveys and analyses, we must remember that the Muslim minority in the US is relatively small and compounded of multiple strands and ethnic-religious groups, a status that might hinder it from uniting as an influential bloc.

In my view, as long as the war in Gaza continues to result in death and destruction for Palestinians, it can serve as sufficient incentive to prompt many Muslims to vote against Biden, turning them into a political force in the US. But if the war in Gaza fades away and a cease-fire goes into effect in the near future, the intensity of feeling within the Muslim community might weaken to the point that they consider Biden the lesser of two evils.

Dr. Elad Ben David is an expert on Islam in the US and a research associate at the Forum of Regional Thinking. Ben David focuses on Da'wa (the call to Islam), especially among American Muslim clerics, and other contemporary topics related to the Muslim minority in the West.