

Muslim, Arab American voters part ways with Biden

By Fiona André
Reporter

PERSPECTIVE

Before she was elected to Georgia's House of Representatives two years ago, Ruwa Romman, the first Palestinian American to hold any office in Georgia, campaigned for Joe Biden in 2020 in Atlanta's northeast suburbs, which she now represents.

Today, Romman, who is also the first Muslim woman to win a seat in Georgia's statehouse, said her neighbors with family in Gaza are scared, scrambling to get their loved ones out of the territory and feeling betrayed by Biden's embrace of Israel in the war against Hamas.

"This isn't like a group of people that didn't get a policy they wanted or throwing a temper tantrum. This is a situation where people feel like, 'Hey, you are directly contributing to my loss, my very personal loss,'" said Romman.

Many of her constituents, like Muslim voters across the country, have already announced they won't support the president in 2024, with some joining in active campaigning against his re-election, known as the Abandon Biden movement. These voters, who, for the most part, voted for Biden in 2020, have pledged to make him a "one-term president".



Muslim community leaders from several swing states pledge to withdraw support for US President Joe Biden at a conference in Dearborn, Michigan, on December 2, 2023, citing the president's refusal to call for a cease-fire in Gaza. AP

Soon after the war began, Biden's popularity among Muslim and Arab American voters fell, from 59% in 2020 to 17% in October 2023. As more than 30,000 Palestinians have been killed since October, more have joined the movement, antagonized by President Biden's refusal to advocate for a cease-fire.

They are backed by a growing number of Americans who think the president should have a more balanced approach to the conflict. According to an Arab American Institute poll, 57% of Americans think the "US should act as a fair and impartial broker between Israelis and Palestinians."

But the Abandon Biden movement goes beyond airing opinions. In early December, Muslim leaders in eight states, including the crucial swing states of Georgia, Michigan, Arizona, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, began demanding that Biden push Israel to agree to a cease-fire, threatening to boycott him in the next election if he didn't. More recently they have

vowed that nothing will convince them to support the president and expanded the campaign to all 50 states.

"We would have considered not abandoning Biden maybe 10,000 Palestinians ago, but right now, it is too late," said Khalid Turani, a Palestinian American member of the movement from Michigan, during a press conference.

The movement's leaders point out that they are not calling on voters to support Donald Trump but hope they will support a third-party candidate or abstain. Hassan Abdel Salam, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Minnesota and the movement's president, said further that if Trump were elected, the group would support a Democratic majority in Congress to fight his agenda.

The Abandon Biden leaders are trying to foster partnerships with "Black, Hispanic, and young progressive allies" who were part of the coalition that elected Biden in 2020 and who, according to recent

polls, are losing faith in the president over his Israel policy.

Salam said the Abandon Biden movement has restored a sense of pride to Muslim American voters who feel the Biden White House has shown them no respect. While he doubts that either the administration or the campaign views the Abandon Biden movement as a credible threat, he takes it as a sign of their being disconnected from their voters.

"It's so strange; it has something to do with the echo chamber," he said about the disconnect.

In her district, Romman has tried to engage voters on the issue of Gaza, conversations she said she hoped are happening elsewhere in the Democratic Party, particularly at the national level. "I'm hoping that that changes in the future, as more and more people reach out to their elected officials in the new year," she said.

It's not clear how much Muslim Americans can impact the outcome of the 2024 presidential race. Youssef Chouhoud, an assis-

tant professor of political science at Christopher Newport University, has compiled data from various sources — the 2020 US Census and US Religious Census, as well as the Arab American Institute — to quantify the effect of mass abstention or third-party votes from Muslim, Middle Eastern, and North African voters.

He argued that although the Muslim and Arab Americans' share of the total US population is relatively small — 3.5 million, according to the 2020 Census — their voting power is amplified by the Electoral College.

"Under that system, swing states are really what it comes down to. And it turns out that Muslims and Middle Eastern and North Africans have an outside influence in a number of swing states," said Chouhoud.

According to his findings, if even half of Muslim and Arab American voters in Arizona and Georgia alone fail to vote for Biden, it would be enough to swing those states to his opponent in November.

But for Chouhoud, the drop in support for Biden among these communities can't be attributed solely to the Israel-Hamas war. Before it became a salient issue in the campaign, voters from these communities had already distanced themselves from the Democratic Party over disagreements on cultural issues, such as debates over inclusive school curriculums.

Soon after October 7, 2023, the Muslim American advocacy group Emgage began to track Muslim Americans' intentions in the next election. In a survey released in November, only 5.2% of Muslim Americans said they would vote for Biden in 2024.

But counting Muslim votes alone may not capture the risk Biden has taken in backing Israel so strongly. He may also lose volunteers from the community who, like Romman, helped deliver voters in his 2020 campaign.

The full article first appeared in Religion News Service.

Netanyahu is turning against Biden



By Thomas L. Friedman
New York Times columnist

OPINION

It looks as if President Biden will be running in two races this year: one in America against Donald Trump and one in Israel against Benjamin Netanyahu. Maybe Trump could name Netanyahu his running mate and we could save a lot of time. Biden's support for the Israeli leader is costing him his own progressive base, while Netanyahu is now turning on Biden in ways that could win Trump fresh support from right-wing American Jews. Trump-Netanyahu 2024 — that has a certain ring to it, not to mention an air of truth. Why do I say this? Because at a televised news conference on Thursday, Netanyahu made clear something he had only hinted at in recent weeks. Despite the disastrous Hamas attack on October 7 happening on his watch, he is going to frame his campaign to stay in power with this argument: The Americans and the Arabs want to force a Palestinian state down Israel's throat, and I am the only Israeli leader strong enough to resist them. So, vote for me, even if I messed up on October 7 and the Gaza war is not going all that great. Only I can protect us from Biden's plans for Gaza to become part of a Palestinian state, along with the West Bank, governed by a transformed Palestinian Authority.

I know what you're asking: You mean Netanyahu would actually run for re-election by positioning himself against the American president who flew over to Israel right after October 7, where he put a protective arm around Bibi and the whole Israeli body politic and basically gave Israel a green light to try to destroy Hamas in Gaza, even if it led to thousands of Palestinian civilians' being killed in the process? You mean to save his own political skin, Netanyahu would actually run on a platform that would guarantee Israel had no American, Palestinian, Arab, or European partners to help Israel govern or exit Gaza or get its hostages back?

Yes, I am seeing and saying both. Although Israel has been at war with Hamas for over 100 days and still has over 100 captives to recover, Netanyahu's No. 1 focus is Netanyahu.

He's searching for the most emotive political message to get him

just enough votes from the far right to remain prime minister and stay out of prison, should he lose any of the three corruption cases against him.

Let me walk you through the sequence of events that transpired this week that led to this conclusion, as I was a close-up witness to part of them.

On Wednesday, I interviewed US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, first offstage for this column and then before a large audience at the Davos World Economic Forum. In the public session, I asked him to briefly explain something I had discussed in private with him: why it feels as if Israel is losing on three key fronts and why Israel could turn things around on those fronts if it had a legitimate, effective Palestinian partner.

The three fronts where Israel is losing:

First, Hamas seems to be winning the global narrative war on social media because of the thousands of

civilian casualties in Gaza caused by the Israeli bombing of Hamas fighters who had deliberately embedded themselves in tunnels and next to homes of Palestinian civilians.

Second, Netanyahu still has not defined a political outcome for Gaza, a plan for keeping the peace and overseeing governance and security, or a legitimate Palestinian partner to help make it all happen. Without that, Israel could be stuck in Gaza forever.

And third, Israel is being attacked from afar by pro-Iranian non-state actors, particularly the Houthis from Yemen and Hezbollah from Lebanon. And the only way for Israel to deter and counter their threats, particularly when it is still tied down fighting in Gaza, is with the help of global and regional allies.

The answer to all three challenges, I argued to Blinken at the public session, was for Israel to find and help build a credible, legitimate, effective Palestinian partner,

whether that is a reformed version of the current Palestinian Authority based in Ramallah — which has embraced the Oslo peace accord with Israel and worked with Israeli security forces — or some completely new institution named by the Palestine Liberation Organization, the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. If the PLO — with the help of the Americans, the Europeans, and the pro-American Arab states and the encouragement of Israel — is able to help stand up and sustain an effective Palestinian governing authority that has legitimacy in the eyes of Palestinians, this could answer all three of Israel's problems. It would seize the narrative by proving that Israel was not out for just revenge or conquest in Gaza. It would provide Israel with a political authority to govern Gaza for the long run that Israel could work with to ensure that a defeated Hamas could not come back.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (L) shakes hand with then-US president Donald Trump at a press conference in Washington. MICHAEL REYNOLDS/EPA

In response to this argument, Blinken said at our public discussion: "You now have something you didn't have before, and that is Arab countries and Muslim countries even beyond the region that are prepared to have a relationship with Israel in terms of its integration, its normalization, its security, that they were never prepared to have before and to do things, to give the necessary assurance, to make the necessary commitments and guarantees, so that Israel is not only integrated but it can feel secure."

But the only way to achieve that alliance-in-waiting, Blinken added, is by respecting the "absolute conviction by those countries — one that we share — that this has to include a pathway to a Palestinian state because you're not going to get the genuine integration you need, you're not going to get the genuine security you need, absent that. And of course, to that end as well, a stronger, reformed Pales-

tinian Authority that can more effectively deliver for its own people has to be part of the equation."

I totally understand why Biden, a true friend of Israel, insists on uttering them. Because every trend around Israel is only going to get worse — more non-state actors, more super-empowered angry men with drones, and more powerful Iran, and more TikTok haters warped by streaming videos of dead Palestinian babies in Gaza. Forging a legitimate, unified, effective Palestinian partner for a two-state deal with Israel that could defuse those threats may be impossible to achieve, but believing that abandoning any effort to do so is in the long-term interest of the Jewish state is a dangerous illusion. And that is exactly what Netanyahu is peddling for his own cynical purposes. Shame on him. Shame on his enablers.

The full article first appeared in the New York Times.