

Wake-up call for Kamala Harris from Muslim, Arab Americans

A pro-Palestinian demonstrator tears down posters of Vice President Kamala Harris as the Democratic National Convention takes place in Chicago on August 21, 2024.
● JOSHUA LOTT/THE WASHINGTON POST

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OPINION

The fracture between Muslims and Arab Americans and the Democratic Party has reached a breaking point. If recent surveys are any indication, most will not be voting for Kamala Harris, suggesting a stark shift just years after they had become a key Democratic Party constituency during the Trump years. In a survey of Muslim voters, 29.4 percent say they plan to back Harris, leaving her virtually tied with Green Party candidate Jill Stein, while a survey of primarily religious and college-educated Muslim voters put Harris's support at 14 percent. Meanwhile, 42 percent of Arab Americans intend to vote for the Democratic nominee. These figures are a far cry from the large majorities that voted for Joe Biden in 2020. Something has changed. In my conversations with Arabs and Muslims across the country, the mood has become dark and despairing. They see how the Democratic Party has ignored the preferences of its own members, 77 percent of whom believe the United States should not send weapons to Israel.

Leading Democrats acknowledge the devastation inflicted on Gaza but in the same breath appear unwilling to do anything about it. In a recent interview, former House speaker Nancy Pelosi did the rhetorical equivalent of shrugging her shoulders, saying "death is sad" and suggesting that Arab Americans should be grateful that Democrats "flocked to their protection" after Donald Trump proposed his Muslim travel ban. Initially, it seemed Harris could distance herself from Biden's uncritical embrace of Israel's assault on Gaza. At a campaign event early in the war, Biden had acknowledged Israel's bombing was "indiscriminate" yet chillingly also said, "We're not going to do a damn thing other than protect Israel." As vice president, Harris has struck a different tone, speaking out on several occasions about inhumane conditions in Gaza. But a series of missteps squandered the goodwill she might have had. The problems started during the Democratic National Convention in August. Democrats adopted a big tent approach, featuring a roster of Republican speakers on the main stage. But the tent was only so large. The Uncommitted movement had lobbied for a Palestinian American or a doctor who had volunteered in Gaza to address the convention. The final push was to have Georgia state Rep. Ruwa Romman speak. Her prepared remarks were fairly innocuous, expressing enthusiastic support for Harris while highlighting the need for a cease-fire and freeing Israeli captives

and Palestinian prisoners. Romman's snub showed how sensitive the Harris campaign is to even mild expressions of support for the human rights of Palestinians. During Harris's good vibes moment, it was easy to imagine the Middle East receding into the background. But then on October 1, Israel launched its invasion of Lebanon, which has killed more than 2,700 and forced over one-fifth of residents to flee their homes. Democrats are now in the awkward position of explaining why a war that they hoped would be over has expanded, waged by a close ally that receives billions of dollars of American military aid. The complicity of Biden and Harris in two wars that have deliberately targeted civilians and civilian infrastructure has become hard to deny. Despite public notes of concern, senior administration officials green-lit the invasion of Lebanon. The United States' continued support comes as Israel blocks humanitarian access, with the amount of aid coming into Gaza in September "the lowest of any month during the last year," according to the administration's own assessments. All of this has made it impossible for Muslim and Arab voters to proceed as though this is just another election. I feel it too. The United States speaks out and takes action when mass atrocities are committed against civilians in other conflicts. But not, it seems, in the Middle East. For decades, the United States has funded and armed Arab dictators that deny the most basic rights to their people. An undercurrent of disdain toward the people of the region has been a mainstay of Democratic and Republican administrations alike, even the ones that were supposed to be better. Barack Obama was known to privately joke, "All



I need in the Middle East is a few smart autocrats" while wondering aloud why people in the Middle East couldn't just "be like the Scandinavians". The devastation of Gaza has confirmed for many Arabs and Muslims what they may have only previously suspected: They are not viewed as equal or equally deserving of dignity. Arab and Muslim lives are expendable. As writer Lina Mounzer put it: "Ask any Arab what the most painful realization of the last year has been and it is this: that we have discovered the extent of our dehumanization to such a degree that it's impossible to function in the world in the same way." It is true that Harris has expressed sympathy for Palestinians in a way that Biden has not. Yet with few exceptions, she has avoided addressing Arab Americans directly. She finally did so recently in Michigan but indicated no change in approach. She acknowledged the suffering of Palestinians but made no mention of who had caused it. It was as though a sad natural disaster had befallen them, when, in fact, it was American weaponry that had made their suffering possible. In Detroit, when asked specifically about the anger of Arab American voters over Gaza's destruction, Harris defaulted to old talking points, saying, "The first, most tragic story is October 7" as though Palestin-

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ian suffering must always be caveated and minimized. I hope Kamala Harris wins. But she's not making it easy for Arab and Muslim leaders who would otherwise more forcefully advocate on her behalf. Through her neglect, she has allowed Trump to make inroads. Led by Tiffany Trump's father-in-law Massad Boulos, who is Lebanese, the Trump campaign says it has held over 100 meetings with Arab Americans. Arab and Muslim Americans could tip the election. Political scientist Youssef Chouhoud projects that if 40 percent of these voters abstain or vote third party, the net loss for Harris could be 44,000 votes in Michigan, 28,000 in Pennsylvania, and 12,000 in Georgia. But it goes well beyond Arabs or Muslims, extending to young progressives who support Palestinian rights at much higher levels than their counterparts. And presumably, those who are angry about American complicity in Israel's war talk to their friends and colleagues, further weakening enthusiasm for a campaign that needs all the help it can get. That's not a good place to be days from an election. But until Election Day, it's never too late. The Harris campaign needs a wake-up call.

Republican presidential nominee former president Donald Trump (R) looks on as local Muslim leaders endorse him during a campaign rally at the Suburban Collection Showplace in Novi, Michigan, on October 26, 2024.
● ALEX BRANDON/AP

People protest in support of Gaza during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in August 2024.
● EPA

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