

Muslim Leaders in the United States Since October 7: From Criticism of Zionism to Intensified Anti-Israel Messaging

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The events of October 7 intensified the campaign of delegitimization against Israel in the West in general, and in the United States in particular, reflected in increasingly anti-Zionist rhetoric and discourse among Muslim communities and leaders. This article examines prominent Muslim leaders in the United States who, over the past decade, have emerged as influential shapers of public opinion and analyzes how the events of October 7 not only deepened their hostility toward Israel but also reframed their messages within direct political contexts in both the Israeli and American arenas, departing from the anti-Israel discourse that prevailed before October 7. This trend reinforces anti-Zionist Muslim activism in the United States, intensifies the delegitimization campaign against Israel, and harms its public image. It is therefore recommended to invest in public and interfaith diplomacy, cultivate ties with moderate Muslim voices, expand alliances with additional ethnic groups in the United States, and support the Jewish community as the ongoing delegitimization campaign intensifies.

Islam is currently the third-largest religion in the United States, after Christianity and Judaism. However, the exact number of Muslims is uncertain. The Muslim community makes up about 1.1%–1.4% of the total population, with estimates ranging from [4.5 million](#) to over 6 million—and it could potentially surpass the number of American Jews in the future. Although Islam has existed in America for centuries, its strengthening began mainly in the second half of the twentieth century—with the emergence of the Nation of Islam, which influenced many African Americans, alongside waves of Muslim immigration following President Lyndon Johnson’s immigration reforms in the 1960s. From then through the 1990s, major Muslim organizations were established, including the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), the Muslim Students Association (MSA), the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), and the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR). Some of these organizations were [influenced by thinkers associated with the Muslim Brotherhood movement](#) and contributed to establishing Islam in North America. The American Muslim community is considered the most diverse in the world, comprising primarily African Americans, immigrants from Muslim-majority countries, converts from Christianity, and members of the Latino community.

The September 11 Attacks as a Catalyst for Muslim Influence in the United States

Muslim visibility in the West in general and in the United States in particular took a dramatic turn following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, which brought Islam and Muslim communities more prominently into the public sphere and symbolized the beginning of a “new era” in relations between Islam and the West. Although the attacks undermined the

status of Muslims in the United States, they also led to proactive organization and increased civic, social, and political engagement within the community. Muslim leaders and organizations condemned terrorism, sought to present Islam as a positive and peace-seeking religion, strengthened ties among various Muslim streams, and initiated dialogue with Jewish and Christian communities—all in an effort to deepen their integration into American society as natural allies rather than as a security threat.

The rise of new media at this time contributed to the trend of Islamic consolidation in the United States, which helped expand the influence of American imams who became prominent leaders and online influencers. They began to stand out on social media platforms, especially through *da'wa* (the dissemination of Islam), which included “public diplomacy” efforts to counter the negative image associated with Islam, guidance for Muslims in the West toward a “modern and Western” form of Islam, and outreach to non-Muslims. Although they belong to different Islamic streams (including Salafis, Sufis, Deobandis, and the Muslim Brotherhood), they shared a mainstream orientation: rejection of extremism and terrorism alongside efforts to strengthen the Islamic spirit and integrate it within a Western democratic environment.

Yasir Qadhi and Omar Suleiman as Muslim Influencers in the American Sphere

Two central figures who stand out within the landscape of Islamic influence in the United States are Sheikh Yasir Qadhi and Imam Omar Suleiman, both representing broad audiences within the Muslim community, mainly in Texas—where they reside—as well as in other key arenas such as California and Washington, DC. Their stature rests not only on their experience as veteran imams with extensive public involvement but also on their intellectual leadership and their significant impact on Muslim communities in the West through their prominent social media presence.

Qadhi, for example, has [1.3 million followers on Facebook](#) and [over 700,000 subscribers on YouTube](#), with hundreds of millions of views. Suleiman, with an even more viral presence, [has nearly three million followers on Facebook](#) and [over two million YouTube subscribers](#), also with hundreds of millions of views. Both are regarded—especially Qadhi—as eloquent representatives of the Wasati (middle way) strand within American Islam, which seeks to balance theological conservatism with civic integration. They embody a form of “soft Islamism”: integrating into American society while strengthening and spreading Islam, and rejecting [terrorism](#) and [religious extremism](#), including the [establishment of a sharia state](#). Qadhi and Suleiman have long expressed anti-Zionist views, but their growing hostility toward Israel has intensified their negative image, particularly among American conservatives.

Qadhi, a second-generation Pakistani-American born in Texas, currently serves as chairman of the [Fiqh Council of North America](#), the highest Islamic jurisprudence authority in the United States, responsible for interpreting sharia for the Muslim community. He is also dean of the [Islamic Seminary of America](#), a recognized Islamic-academic institution offering advanced degrees. In his youth, Qadhi spent a decade at the Islamic University of Madinah in Saudi Arabia and was affiliated with the Salafi movement. After the September 11 attacks, he returned to the United States and completed a PhD in Islamic theology at Yale University. Over time, he distanced himself from Salafism and adopted a more modern approach tailored to life as a Muslim minority in the West, establishing himself as an international Muslim leader.

However, he remains [firmly anti-Zionist and is a declared supporter of the BDS \(boycott, divestment, sanctions\) movement](#) against Israel.

Suleiman, a second-generation Palestinian-American born in Texas, is a founding member of the [Yaqeen Institute](#), a prominent semi-academic Islamic research institute focused primarily on issues concerning Muslims in the West. He earned his PhD from the International Islamic University in Malaysia and is considered one of the most influential young imams and is [particularly visible in his advocacy for the Palestinian cause](#).

As second-generation Muslims born in the United States, both Qadhi and Suleiman are deeply engaged in the American public sphere, striving to reconcile their Muslim identity with active civic participation. Qadhi, for example, [supported Ilhan Omar's congressional campaign](#) and [expressed admiration for Zohran Mamdani's rise in New York politics](#), while Suleiman has [had public interactions with Bernie Sanders](#)—all figures associated with the progressive camp, although both imams emphasize that they are not formally aligned with any political party. Both have faced sharp criticism from opposing poles: from right-wing American circles and from progressive and radical Islamist factions, who alternately label them “extremists” or “too liberal.” [Qadhi, in particular, has even received death threats from ISIS in the past](#).

In relation to their ties with the Jewish community, both Qadhi and Suleiman tended toward dialogue and interfaith engagement, mainly with Orthodox and Reform Jewish circles. Qadhi, for example, [called for cooperation on shared religious-legal issues](#), while Suleiman appeared on [interfaith panels](#) and [demonstrated together with Rabbi David Stern](#) of the Temple Emanuel congregation in Texas against President Trump's executive order that banned entry to citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries. However, since October 7, questions have arisen regarding the continuation of these relations and dialogues, which have become increasingly complex.

For several decades, long before October 7, the Muslim struggle against Zionism and the outspoken support for the Palestinians have stood at the center of the Muslim public discourse in the West in general, and in the United States in particular. This trend intensified after the collapse of the Oslo Accords and the Second Intifada. Despite their geographical distance from the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, Qadhi's and Suleiman's support for the Palestinians stems from their sense of loyalty to the challenges facing the global Muslim *umma* and from the deep religious connection to the Holy Land, especially the al-Aqsa Mosque. In this sense, they seek to maintain a dual allegiance—to the needs of their local American Muslim communities on the one hand and to the global Muslim nation on the other, as reflected in the Palestinian issue. Whereas before October 7 their opposition to Zionism was expressed mainly through general criticism of Israel, the war has since deepened their involvement in the conflict and expanded their discourse into explicitly political dimensions.

The Messaging of Qadhi and Suleiman Before and After October 7

One of the prominent phenomena observed after October 7 among a considerable number of Muslim community leaders in America was their disregard for, or minimization of, the Hamas massacre while focusing their condemnations solely on Israel. For example, after October 7, Qadhi [refused to condemn Hamas's attack](#) and was content with a general statement that Islam opposes the killing of innocent people. In his messages to the Muslim community, he

[called on American Muslims to use their political power](#) as citizens of the world's strongest nation to exert pressure on elected officials to take a stand against Israel and to boycott companies supporting Israel—all while emphasizing Israel's economic and military "dependence" on Washington and the role of the United States as its "lifeline."

Qadhi also [harshly criticized Israel's former defense minister, Yoav Gallant](#), accusing him of "Islamophobia" and of promoting "genocidal rhetoric" after Gallant referred to Palestinians collectively as "human animals" following October 7. Emphasizing the positive demographic trends of Islam's growth in the West, and particularly in the United States, Qadhi sought to mobilize the Muslim community for a cognitive and political campaign against Israel and Zionism. Some of his statements [focused on shaping the US public narrative through media engagement and building coalitions with religious and social groups](#), including non-Zionist Jews and the ultra-Orthodox group Neturei Karta, in support of the Palestinian cause.

Qadhi's positions represent a clear shift from his pre-October 7 stance: in 2017, for instance, [he condemned terrorist attacks carried out in Israel](#), but since the war in Gaza, he has refused to do so. Moreover, his national messages to American Muslims have taken a new direction. In the post-September 11 era, [his messages emphasized strengthening the American national identity of Muslims](#), particularly among immigrants, to enhance their integration and civic participation. After October 7, however, his messaging has escalated, [promoting Muslim activism](#) toward goals with an overtly political tone.

A more direct and prominent stance toward Israeli and American political figures can be seen in Suleiman's messages, as his Palestinian background has made him more active in the pro-Palestinian struggle. Unlike his pre-October 7 rhetoric, which was characterized by universal themes such as "justice for Palestinians" and "equal rights," the war in Gaza brought a marked change in his approach, reflected in fierce and direct attacks on senior Israeli officials. For instance, Suleiman [shared an edited video of Minister Bezalel Smotrich](#) in which he highlighted the massive destruction Israel had caused in Gaza and Smotrich's stated desire to reduce humanitarian aid to the Strip—framing it as evidence of Israel's alleged "genocide."

Suleiman also included sharp criticism of Republican members of Congress. For example, [after Congressman Randy Fine met with Smotrich, Suleiman shared their photo](#), telling his millions of followers that "their members of Congress are best friends with sanctioned terrorists like Smotrich, the same guy who said 'There is no such thing as a Palestinian people.'" In another attack against Republican lawmakers, he [posted a photo of House Speaker Mike Johnson](#) speaking at Ariel University alongside an Israeli flag, presenting Johnson as someone "drenched in the flags of a nation committing genocide."

It is evident that Suleiman's positions have shifted since October 7. Although he has always condemned Israel's treatment of Palestinians, [he had previously opposed calls of American Muslims to boycott cooperation with pro-Israel Republican lawmakers](#), arguing that collaboration with anyone who could advance key interests of the American Muslim community was essential. This change reflects the ongoing tension among Muslim leaders in America between focusing on domestic community interests and advocating for Muslims abroad, especially Palestinians.

Another notable precedent set by Qadhi and Suleiman [was their signing of a petition calling on Muslim-majority countries to take practical steps to halt the “genocide in Gaza.”](#) This petition, which included eighty-five American Muslim clerics, leaders, and heads of institutions, emphasized the following goals: severing ties with Israel, imposing economic boycotts, opening border crossings for aid, and initiating joint political action, while stating that diplomatic condemnations alone were no longer sufficient.

The Rise of Zohran Mamdani as a Reflection of the Growing Muslim Influence in the United States

The political rise of Zohran Mamdani, the candidate for mayor of New York City, reflects the deep processes that have shaped the Muslim community since September 11. His ascent symbolizes the combination of increased Muslim visibility with active civic and social engagement in the public sphere. This process—through which Muslim identity became a vehicle for struggles for social justice and against racism and discrimination—prepared the ground for Mamdani’s rise and, more than anything else, represents a transition from a cautious and apolitical Muslim generation to a new generation seeking to influence American policy. The war in Gaza has reinforced these trends, giving pro-Palestinian messages a broad socio-political dimension that resonates in New York, especially among immigrant, progressive, and Muslim audiences, [with Muslims making up about 10% of the city’s population](#). Mamdani’s anti-Zionist and socialist positions echo those of other Muslim politicians such as Congresswomen Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib, as well as prominent non-parliamentary figures like [Linda Sarsour](#) in New York. Mamdani’s anticipated electoral victory would mark an advanced stage in the consolidation and political engagement of the Muslim community in the United States, strengthening its integration in both local and federal arenas.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Since October 7, Muslim leaders in the United States have adopted increasingly hardline positions against Israel, exemplified by prominent figures such as Yasir Qadhi and Omar Suleiman. Although these imams, like politicians such as Mamdani, repeatedly stress that their harsh criticism is directed [“against Zionism and not against Jews,”](#) their escalating hostility toward Israel, which is spreading from social media into streets and campuses, has reached a critical point. On one hand, Qadhi and Suleiman explicitly reject any form of violence in the US public sphere, and Suleiman himself has [condemned attacks on Jews, such as the 2022 incident at the Beth Israel synagogue in Texas](#). On the other hand, their sharp anti-Israel rhetoric carries the risk of fueling antisemitism, particularly among young Muslims with polarized worldviews who already harbor deep anger over the situation in Gaza.

Regardless, this reality intensifies the delegitimization campaign against Israel and has parallel effects across several fronts. In the United States, political and activist pressure from the Muslim and progressive lobbies continues to grow, joining other dynamics that undermine traditional bipartisan support for Israel. For American Jews, this trend [increases the risk of antisemitism](#), erodes interfaith alliances, and deepens the sense of isolation and alienation within the Jewish community—while exacerbating internal divisions between supporters and critics of Israel. For Israel itself, it threatens to further damage its image and standing in both the American and international arenas.

In light of this, it is recommended that Israel invest in public diplomacy that distinguishes between legitimate political criticism and accusations of “genocide,” while working to establish communication channels with moderate Muslim voices such as the Muhammad Mosque in Washington, DC—[which condemned Hamas and maintains dialogue with Israelis](#)—and progressive Muslim organizations like the American Islamic Forum for Democracy, founded by [Dr. Zuhdi Jasser](#), an outspoken supporter of Israel. Such initiatives could help curb the spread of the dominant anti-Zionist narrative. At the same time, senior Israeli officials should exercise greater caution in their public statements to avoid exacerbating the soaring delegitimization campaign in the era of social media.

It is also important to continue monitoring the messages of prominent Muslim leaders in America, such as Qadhi and Suleiman, and to evaluate them in light of changing moods and developments in the United States. It can be expected that the end of the war in Gaza and subsequent efforts toward regional recovery could moderate their direct rhetoric toward Israeli and American officials. However, the potential expansion of the Abraham Accords is unlikely to alter their opposition to Israel, [given their explicit condemnation of those agreements in 2020](#).

Additionally, it is recommended that Israeli institutions support the American Jewish community, which currently finds itself caught between a rock and a hard place. This support should focus on strengthening community security, empowering Jewish youth to confront challenges on campuses and online, and expanding alliances with other religious and ethnic communities—such as major churches, as well as Latino and African American groups—to prevent social and political isolation. While opportunities for dialogue with leading figures like Qadhi and Suleiman may now be limited to non-Zionist Jewish circles due to their heightened hostility toward Zionism since October 7, broadening and reinforcing dialogue between the wider Jewish community and moderate Muslim actors could help soften polarized discourse and create a positive long-term impact.

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