

The US Administration Against the Muslim Brotherhood and CAIR: From Declarations to Action?

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In recent months, the Trump administration has intensified its campaign against proponents of political Islam. This effort has been reflected in state-level proclamations by the governors of Texas and Florida, designating the Muslim Brotherhood and the Council on American–Islamic Relations (CAIR) as “foreign terrorist organizations,” as well as in a presidential order stating that branches of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon should be considered “terrorist organizations.” These moves have reignited discussion in the United States on this issue and should be understood as part of a broader response to domestic political and social developments, including an intensifying anti-Israeli discourse and the growing tendency to frame Muslim activity in security–ideological terms. While such measures may curb the anti-Zionist discourse and the activities of some Muslim organizations due to concerns over reputational damage, they may also reinforce a sense of collective threat within the Muslim community and strengthen the perception of Israel’s involvement in US politics, thereby exacerbating efforts to delegitimize Israel. Nevertheless, given the limited practical implications of these actions, it is still too early to assess their long-term effects.

The events of October 7 intensified the anti-Zionist discourse within American Muslim communities, particularly among clerics, young people, and students, and may be contributing to a significant shift in the political and public climate among Republicans toward Islamic organizations and their role in the US public sphere. Three recent decisions have reignited the volatile debate surrounding the Muslim Brotherhood in general, and its connections to the United States in particular: state-level proclamations by Governor Greg Abbott of [Texas](#) and Governor Ron DeSantis of [Florida](#), labeling the Muslim Brotherhood and [CAIR](#) as “foreign terrorist organizations,” and [the federal order](#) issued by President Trump defining branches of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan as terrorist organizations.

The governors’ proclamations and the presidential order are unprecedented. No previous US president or state governor has formally designated branches of the Muslim Brotherhood or CAIR as terrorist organizations. At the same time, it is too early to determine whether these decisions will directly affect the presence, influence, and legitimacy of networks associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, or whether they are primarily declarative measures driven by domestic political considerations—steps that will revive the contentious debate over the Muslim Brotherhood without being accompanied by significant policy or operational changes.

The Muslim Brotherhood in America: A Historical Overview

The Muslim Brotherhood is widely regarded as one of the most influential Islamic movements over the past century, largely due to its pragmatic mode of operation and its ability to adapt to different local contexts. Since the mid-20th century, the organization has expanded into

the West, which it perceived as a favorable arena for disseminating Islamist ideology. Within this framework, the Brotherhood sought to establish a hegemonic Islamic authority and shape representations of Islam in the Western public sphere.

One of the central criticisms of the Muslim Brotherhood's activity in the West is that while it presents itself as a representative of "moderate Islam," it gradually advances a political Islamist vision. This tension lies [at the heart of an ongoing debate](#) among scholars and policymakers, between those who view the Muslim Brotherhood as a legitimate actor for dialogue and limited cooperation, and those who argue that it employs [a strategy of dual messaging to advance a political Islamist agenda](#). Unlike its overt activity in the Middle East, in the West—and particularly in the United States—the Muslim Brotherhood has operated indirectly and without an official organizational presence. Over the years, however, a growing body of evidence has pointed to ideological, organizational, and financial ties between American Islamic institutions and the parent movement.

Connections between the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic institutions in the United States can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s, alongside waves of immigration and the expansion of *da'wa*, Islamic religious outreach. Students and activists who immigrated to America and were ideologically influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood played a central role in establishing key Islamic institutions, notably the [Muslim Students Association](#) (MSA), and later the [Islamic Society of North America](#) (ISNA). These institutions became influential in shaping Muslim education, *da'wa*, and identity in the United States.

Despite the growing entrenchment of the Muslim Brotherhood within Islamic organizations in the United States, the events of 9/11 constituted a major turning point, [primarily due to the tightening of enforcement measures against organizations suspected of financing terrorism](#). [The case of the Holy Land Foundation](#) (HLF)—which was shut down at the end of 2001 after it was determined to have assisted Hamas and whose leaders were later convicted of terrorism financing—exemplified this trend. As part of the legal proceedings, organizations such as CAIR and ISNA were cited as components of the Muslim Brotherhood's network in the United States.

This new reality compelled Muslim organizations to demonstrate greater transparency, public accountability, and conformity with American legal norms. The process accelerated the adoption of a "civic Islam" discourse, an emphasis on pluralism, and—at least publicly—a distancing from Islamist ideologies, [as part of a broader process of Americanization of the Muslim community](#). At the same time, these trends have also been criticized [as a strategy of *tamkin*](#), which means gradual civic integration aimed at accumulating legitimacy and influence, and therefore does not necessarily signal de-ideologization. Accordingly, it is difficult to determine the extent to which these organizations have truly abandoned concepts associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, as core ideological concepts and institutional networks—such as ISNA and the MSA—continue to influence discourse and *da'wa* activity.

Nevertheless, the revolutionary Islamist dimension—particularly the aspiration to establish an Islamic caliphate—now appears less relevant given the Muslims' demographic minority status and the legacy of 9/11. Therefore, it seems that the primary objective of these organizations is the consolidation of a legitimate civic Muslim presence within American society, with *da'wa* serving mainly as a cultural identity tool rather than a revolutionary goal of Islamization. At

the same time, increased political involvement—particularly by CAIR—is evident, including political campaign financing, support for the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, and the expansion of legal activism.

The Proclamations by the Governors of Texas and Florida

Since its establishment in 1994, CAIR has been regarded as one of the most prominent and influential Muslim organizations in the United States. Headquartered near Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, it is widely seen as a central civic organization advocating for the rights of American Muslims through legal assistance, lobbying, and efforts to improve the public image of Islam. At the same time, CAIR has also been viewed as having Islamist affinities, including direct or indirect ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, and as one of the most prominent proponents of pro-Palestinian positions among American Islamic organizations.

Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, CAIR’s executive director, Nihad Awad, a Palestinian American, [met with President George W. Bush at the White House](#)—an event that marked the organization’s recognition as a legitimate representative of the Muslim community at the national level. Nevertheless, questions regarding CAIR’s alleged links to the Muslim Brotherhood have persisted, based on considerable historical connections. Some of its founders, including Omar Ahmad and Nihad Awad, were previously active in the [Islamic Association for Palestine](#) (IAP), an organization considered close to Hamas and its ideas, as well as to circles influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood. Some of the founders’ names appeared in documents collected as evidence in [the HLF case](#)—but not as defendants or convicts—and no legal proof has been presented to date of a formal or institutional link between CAIR and the Muslim Brotherhood or Hamas.

The proclamations by the governors of Texas and Florida have classified both the Muslim Brotherhood and CAIR as international criminal organizations, claiming that they promote an Islamist ideology that threatens the democratic order. It appears that these proclamations rely more on ideological and historical connections between the entities than on recent criminal convictions. However, the severing of institutional ties between the FBI and CAIR since the HLF case seems to enable the governors to take administrative restriction and enforcement measures—primarily against CAIR—including terminating contracts and public funding, restricting activity and institutional presence, and increasing regulatory oversight, all of which can have a deterrent legal effect. It should be noted that this is a state-level classification only; it does not constitute an official federal designation of a terrorist organization. Accordingly, enforcement measures remain within the state’s authority and do not involve a formal criminal proceeding.

Reinforcing the “Israel First” Perception and Public Attitudes Toward the Governors’ Moves

Following the proclamations issued by Governors Abbott and DeSantis, [CAIR challenged the decisions in court](#). In Texas, [CAIR accused Abbott](#) of pursuing a move intended to violate basic civil rights and demonize the Muslim community for electoral gain, citing weaknesses in proving its involvement in terrorism and its alleged affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood. CAIR directed [similar criticism at DeSantis’s declaration](#), particularly regarding Israel’s alleged involvement. DeSantis was accused of promoting an “Israel First” policy rather than protecting

American citizens associated with CAIR and of coordinating with pro-Israeli actors to divert attention from events in Gaza.

Claims that Israel or pro-Israel actors are involved in the administration's actions have also been voiced by [prominent religious leaders in the United States](#), some implicitly and others openly. [Sheikh Yasir Qadhi](#), a Texas resident and [head of the Fiqh Council of North America](#)—which is also considered to have overlapping institutional ties to the Muslim Brotherhood—argued that Abbott's actions in a state home to more than 300,000 Muslims and major Islamic centers are perceived as a sign of renewed "institutionalized Islamophobia," employed as a means of diverting attention from Israel's "war crimes" in Gaza.

More direct remarks were made by the popular influencer [Nouman Ali-Khan](#), founder of the successful [Bayyinah Institute](#) for Quran and Arabic studies. He attributed the recent actions to [Israel's involvement](#), portraying it as an attempt to influence internal processes in the United States in order to rehabilitate its international standing—an alleged trend he described as a threat to the future of Muslims in America. According to Ali-Khan, the severe damage to Israel's public image and its declining standing in the United States have driven it to interfere in domestic issues and promote what he termed "Islamophobic" narratives, with the aim of shifting public attention away from Israel and toward the Muslim community, thereby restoring its standing with its most important ally, the United States.

The progressive wing of the Democratic Party also criticized the governors' actions. Representative Ilhan Omar, for example, referred to Abbott's remarks—labeling CAIR a "terrorist organization" and claiming that Muslims pose a "threat to freedom"—as a [troubling normalization of anti-Muslim discourse](#) in the political arena and even called for his removal. Similar statements were made by the Texas Democratic Party, [which condemned Abbott's proclamation as "racist and Islamophobic,"](#) argued that it violates the First Amendment, and called for its immediate repeal. Prominent figures in the Muslim community echoed these concerns, such as the lawyer Faisal Kutty, who is involved in defending civil rights. Kutty argued that [the governors' proclamations lack legal authority and are not driven by genuine security considerations](#); rather, they constitute symbolic political moves designed to portray Muslim organizations as an internal threat while undermining the civil rights of Muslims in the United States.

In contrast, Jewish organizations focused on combating antisemitism expressed support for the governors' actions against CAIR. [The Lawfare Project](#), a New York-based legal advocacy organization, for example, [unequivocally endorsed Abbott's decision](#), viewing it as a necessary step. According to the organization, CAIR has for years presented itself as a civil rights organization while, in practice, it promotes extremism, justifies terrorism, and harms Jewish communities, citing its historical ties to Hamas. From its perspective, Abbott's proclamation is seen as a moral and necessary measure to protect American society and a first step toward concrete action against CAIR.

Trump's Order Against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon

Alongside Abbott's and DeSantis's local campaigns against Muslim organizations in the United States, President Trump's order against the Muslim Brotherhood—which came into force in January 2026—operates on an external and entirely different plane. It focuses on specific

Middle Eastern countries—Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon—while key countries that support the Muslim Brotherhood, such as Qatar and Turkey, are not included in the order. Most importantly, it does not address Muslim Brotherhood activity in the United States itself.

The order states in part that Muslim Brotherhood branches in Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan were involved in or assisted violence and regional destabilization that harms American interests and citizens—especially after October 7. It claims that the Lebanese branch participated in rocket fire alongside Hamas and Hezbollah; that a Muslim Brotherhood leader in Egypt called for violence against the United States and its partners; and that the Jordanian branch provided sustained material support to Hamas’s military wing. After the order entered into force, the US State Department announced the designation of certain Muslim Brotherhood branches as terrorist organizations or as entities supporting terrorism, enabling sanctions and legal restrictions while emphasizing that this is not a decision against the movement as a whole.

The choice to limit the order to specific Middle Eastern states, at least for now, appears to reflect clear geopolitical considerations. Egypt and Jordan already define the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, so the US order aligns with their policies and further tightens the noose around the Brotherhood within their domestic arenas. In the Lebanese context, the interest in designating the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization [is based on its joint military training and operational coordination with Hamas and Hezbollah](#), as well as its deepening organizational identification with the Iranian-led “Axis of Resistance,” which provides assistance to designated terrorist organizations.

It seems that Trump’s order is intended to send a broad message against proponents of political Islam and to position him as a leader taking a hard line against the Muslim Brotherhood, while simultaneously preserving strategic relations with Qatar and Turkey—two key allies with a prominent Muslim Brotherhood presence. This pattern raises doubts about the centrality of security considerations in Trump’s policy, echoing [the executive order early in his first term in 2017 that restricted entry to the United States](#) from seven Muslim-majority countries. That order included weak Muslim states (with the exception of Iran) while excluding key players with significant international influence. Additionally, it should be noted that, similar to the West, Qatar and Turkey do not host official branches of the Muslim Brotherhood, complicating Trump’s ability to take similar steps against them, even if he wished to do so.

The Administration’s Steps Against the Muslim Brotherhood and CAIR: Why Now?

It can be assumed that the administration’s moves reflect both a continuation of and a counter-reaction to the growing political, social, and public dynamics in the US arena—especially after October 7—that have enabled a tougher policy toward Islamism and political Islam. Examples of these dynamics include [Florida Governor DeSantis’s attempt to dismantle Students for Justice in Palestine](#) (SJP) chapters on campuses a few weeks after Hamas’s attack (an effort that ultimately was not implemented); Texas Governor Abbott’s opposition to the EPIC City real estate project in north Texas led by Sheikh Yasir Qadhi to establish an organized Muslim residential community (currently on hold); turbulent pro-Palestinian campus protests, which led to federal action against leading universities; the strengthening of the Muslim lobby, highlighted by Zohran Mamdani’s mayoral victory in New York City; and unusual enforcement

measures, including the arrest and deportation of British Muslim journalist Sami Hamdi following his public statements against Israel. These developments have occurred alongside increasing antisemitism in the public sphere. Taken together, this overall context likely contributed to the Trump administration's recent steps, reinforcing a security-ideological framing of Islamic activity while promoting a political discourse—mainly advanced by conservative right-wing actors—in which advocacy for Palestinians is presented as a security threat.

Implications and Recommendations

At this stage, neither President Trump's order nor the proclamations by Governors Abbott and DeSantis appear to reflect a fundamental change in policy toward Muslim Brotherhood activity or toward CAIR. The presidential order did not address Qatar and Turkey, and the steps taken by the governors of Texas and Florida do not grant them authority to designate organizations as terrorist entities. However, the governors do have administrative leverage over CAIR, including the ability to cancel or freeze cooperation with state authorities, deny public funding, and tighten regulatory oversight—although such measures expose them to constitutional challenges.

Moreover, DeSantis's proclamation suggests that Abbott's move is not isolated but may signal the beginning of a broader trend among Republican-led "red states," with Texas and Florida widely viewed as leading the conservative camp. In any case, these moves appear aimed primarily at strengthening the Republican public narrative of "fighting terrorism and Islamism" amid heightened anti-Israeli discourse and the growing visibility of the Muslim lobby in the United States, particularly through pro-Palestinian activism following October 7, 2023.

Regarding Islamic activity in the United States, organizations such as ISNA and the MSA do not currently appear to face a direct threat. However, the reputational damage inflicted on CAIR may lead these organizations to act more cautiously and to reassess their steps in the near term—a reality that could also threaten other Muslim organizations and pro-Palestinian activism more broadly. Moreover, [the wider implication relates to US domestic issues: Measures driven more by political and reputational considerations than by well-founded security evidence](#) may reinforce populist policy trends while undermining civil rights, democratic norms, and freedom of expression in the United States.

In some respects, this reality could benefit Israel, as it may create a deterrent effect against the anti-Zionist radicalization observed within some Muslim organizations after October 7. Concern over additional measures by the administration could moderate their messaging and activities and shift their focus toward local issues rather than the Palestinian question.

At the same time, a stricter policy toward Islamic institutions could also generate a sense of siege and intensify radical discourse against Israel, particularly if Israel is perceived as encouraging or benefiting from these measures—especially in an era associated with the Netanyahu government and the Trump administration. This could push Muslim organizations to harden their positions in order to remain relevant among pro-Palestinian youth while simultaneously increasing their legal caution to avoid future restrictions. Moreover, these moves could also strengthen a collective sense of threat and bring different Muslim currents closer together, similar to the process seen after 9/11. However, unlike that period, the

Muslim community's greater strength and activism today could amplify efforts to delegitimize Israel, deepen Jewish–Muslim polarization, and further weaken the influence of the Jewish and pro-Israel lobby in the United States.

In conclusion, the administration's campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood and organizations such as CAIR aligns to some extent with Israel's interest in countering the rise of anti-Zionist discourse among Muslim organizations in the United States. However, broadening this campaign also places Israel [at the center of tension between "America First" and "Israel First" narratives](#). Because these measures are perceived as part of a Republican, conservative agenda, closely identified with pro-Israel interests rather than broad, consensual American interests, the claim that Israel benefits from or influences this policy could intensify. This perception could further deepen the politicization around Israel, intensify the political tensions toward it, and further erode its standing in American public opinion.

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