

# ISSUE BRIEF **04.13.21**

## Islamist Reactions to the Biden Presidency in the Middle East

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For Islamists, the Trump administration embodied the worst of American policy toward Islam, Muslims, and Muslim-majority countries. The Muslim ban, express support for Israeli policies in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the embrace of Islamophobic discourse leave little doubt that Muslims in general and Islamists in particular were discontented with the Trump presidency.

How have Islamists—as the relentless self-proclaimed defenders of Islam and Muslims—reacted to the Biden presidency? Do Islamists' ideological leanings dictate their response to Biden in the form of a warm welcome, or do their tangible and political interests shape their reactions?

Statements by Islamist organizations or their leadership reveal that Islamists around the Middle East filter Biden's electoral victory through their organizational self-interests.

This type of response fits the mold of Islamists. Despite efforts to collectivize and homogenize them (which makes it easier to understand them), Islamists are variegated. While religion forms the backbone of their political identity, it is far from being the lone pillar of their identities. They form their political ideology in response to ongoing socio-political and religious conditions. Hence, even when religion constitutes a central element of Islamist identity, it shows variation in how Islam lives in the imagination of the Islamist actors throughout the region.

### ISLAMIST GROUPS' MESSAGING ON BIDEN

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has been among the most enthusiastic about the Biden administration. Ibrahim Munir, the deputy supreme guide of the Brotherhood, welcomed the change in U.S. leadership and called on the United States to “return to the values of democracy and respect the will of nations.”<sup>1</sup>

The Brotherhood's interest in Biden is firmly rooted in the group's desire to see a change in the Egyptian political landscape. In particular, the Brotherhood hopes for the Biden administration to gain greater awareness of the ongoing repressive environment in Egypt and to pressure Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to change his policy toward the Brotherhood and release Brotherhood prisoners. Munir, for example, stated that “it is time that the new American administration review their policies toward supporting and backing dictatorships, and the actions that these tyrannical regimes commit around the world including crimes and violations against the rights of the people.”

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rhetoric used during the pre-Arab Spring period, the Brotherhood uses “the people and their free will” as the yardstick to evaluate U.S. policy toward Egypt, where establishing a strong relationship with “the ruling institutions of despotism” amounts to being “on the wrong side of history.”<sup>2</sup>

That the Brotherhood faced terrorist designation or bans in some Arab and European countries<sup>3</sup> and that similar efforts took place in the U.S. Congress in recent years<sup>4</sup> deeply concerned the Brotherhood leadership. In this sense, avoiding a similar fate in the United States constitutes the Brotherhood’s most important expectation from the Biden administration.<sup>5</sup> In fact, some supporters of the current Egyptian government falsely claim that U.S. President Biden supports the Brotherhood and will facilitate its resurgence in Egypt.<sup>6</sup>

In Yemen, Ansar Allah, more commonly known as the Houthis, welcomed the Biden presidency. The war with Saudi Arabia constitutes the principal lens through which the Houthis assess U.S. policy toward Yemen. The former president of the Revolutionary Council, Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, recognized the Democratic policy “to stop the aggression on Yemen” as vital to the group’s interests and expressed pleasure at Biden’s electoral victory. The group views Democrats’ “friendship” with the Houthis and the “deep” bond between the two as keys to ending the Saudi-led military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen.<sup>7</sup>

One Islamist group underscored Biden’s commitment to his Christian faith as the chief reason for welcoming his administration. Given its status as a primarily religious organization—composed of *ulama* (or Islamic scholars)—that lends support to an Islamist vision of society and state, the International Union of Muslim Scholars chose to focus on religion rather than politics to extend its support for Biden. The Union’s secretary-general, Ali al-Qaradaghi, praised Biden’s “religious trait” and set him as an example to leaders of Muslim-majority countries: “In America, President Biden begins his presidential term with a church mass and swears on the Bible. The ceremony is interspersed with priestly words and prayers. I saw the

attendees with their heads bowed when hearing the priest’s sermon with much respect and humility.”<sup>8</sup>

One of the Islamist groups who was most hurt by the Trump administration and its policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the Palestinian Hamas. The group viewed the Trump administration’s actions toward Israel and Palestine, such as recognizing Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, moving the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, and negotiating the “deal of the century,” as fundamental threats to the Palestinian cause. Hamas’ public statement on Biden’s inauguration expressed a call for Biden “to rectify the historic trajectory of U.S. policy biased against our Palestinian people, bring security and stability to the region, and end all decisions aimed at liquidating the Palestinian cause.”<sup>9</sup> Senior Hamas official Ismail Haniyeh criticized the Trump administration policy toward Palestinians and claimed that while Trump “sought to obliterate Palestine’s cause,” Jerusalem and Palestinians “will not go.”<sup>10</sup>

In Lebanon, Hezbollah is more focused on Trump’s election loss than what a Biden administration might promise. Hezbollah was hurt by the maximum pressure campaign of the Trump administration toward Iran and its regional allies. American sanctions against Gebran Bassil—the son-in-law of the Lebanese president and a powerful Maronite politician—on charges of ties to Hezbollah, drew Hezbollah’s ire. Describing the Trump administration as being “among the worst” administrations in U.S. history, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah cautioned against Biden. With Israel as his main focus, Nasrallah expects no shift in American policy, which he characterized as pro-Israel.<sup>11</sup> The pro-Hezbollah Lebanese newspaper Al-Akhbar made a similar point by stating that President Biden “appears bent on building on the legacy of his predecessor’s aggressive policies.”<sup>12</sup>

Tunisia’s Ennahda is an Islamist group that expressed early recognition of and unequivocal support for the Biden administration. Ennahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi highlighted the significance of Biden’s victory for democracy worldwide

by stating, “The success of the Democrats is a positive message for democracy in the world.”<sup>13</sup> For Tunisia, in particular, the country’s young democracy still needs support for consolidation. For Ghannouchi, continued U.S. support as “a state policy, not a partisan policy” would be better for Tunisia and the region.<sup>14</sup>

In a break with most other Islamist groups, Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) was notably displeased with the Biden victory. Turkish President and the leader of the ruling AKP, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, developed a strong personal relationship with former U.S. President Trump. This personal relationship between the two leaders, transactional in nature, allowed Erdogan to promote Turkish foreign policy objectives around the region without strong opposition from the United States, including in Iraq, Libya, and the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>15</sup> The change in American leadership implies greater checks on Erdogan’s ability to conduct foreign policy as he sees fit. Likewise, the Biden administration signals greater emphasis on human rights and democracy in its foreign policymaking; as the state of Turkish democracy continues to deteriorate, the state of human rights will become an increasingly important component of bilateral relations. Turkish President Erdogan was considerably late in congratulating Biden on his election victory on November 10, 2020 in comparison to other partners of the United States in the region and beyond.<sup>16</sup> The spokesperson for Erdogan, Omer Celik, justified the delay with the existence of “objections” to the election results and stated that Turkey will congratulate the winner once “the final results” come in.<sup>17</sup>

The Iranian government’s position on the American presidential elections stood in sharp contrast to that of Turkey’s. The Trump administration not only withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, but also implemented a maximum pressure policy that imposed broad sanctions aimed at crippling the Iranian economy. Hence, Iranian response to the elections focused on Trump’s

loss rather than Biden’s victory. Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, called the presidential elections a “spectacle” and evidence of “the ugly face of liberal democracy” in the United States. Khamenei framed the election as a clear indication of “the definite political, civil, and moral decline” of the American political system.<sup>18</sup>

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani criticized Trump’s policy toward Iran by stating, “The U.S. presidential election results show that a country constantly wielding threats, sanctions, and sticks and taking a bullying tone with other nations must be pursuing a misled foreign policy.” In light of this, Rouhani encouraged the Biden administration to heed the “message” of the election and “translate this determination for change into their foreign policies and their ties with other countries and states.”<sup>19</sup> Iran’s Foreign Minister Javad Zarif tweeted on November 8, 2020 that “Trump’s gone in 70 days” and cautioned regional countries against “betting on outsiders to provide security.”<sup>20</sup>

## IMPLICATIONS

The variation in Islamist actors’ responses to the Biden presidency reflects their fundamental differences as political actors operating under vastly different sociopolitical circumstances. The common thread in the Islamist responses reviewed above is their political nature. Their reactions were crafted to further their political—not religious—objectives. In each case, the Islamist group in question assessed an impending Biden presidency through the prism of its tangible interests. In cases where the Islamist group is in power, they identified with national interests and reacted to Biden’s electoral victory by prioritizing the nation’s political preferences—whether these are defined in line with their Islamist vision or not. Where Islamist groups are not in power, their response to the Biden presidency reflected the group’s political priorities.

What does this tell us about Islamism as a religious ideology? It shows the supremacy of politics over religion in Islamist

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politics, similar to other instances, such as the Islamist response to the recent Arab normalization agreements with Israel.<sup>21</sup> Despite the extensive religious rhetoric employed by Islamists in the political arena, organizational decision-making is typically motivated by political interests. Consider, for example, the relationship between the AKP-led Turkish government and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. While the primary motivation for the close relationship between the two is framed in religious ideological terms, the AKP government viewed the military coup in Egypt undertaken by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in 2013 as a challenge to its Islamist vision for the region. The AKP hosted the Brotherhood in Istanbul and has supported their political activism since 2013. In recent weeks, however, the Turkish government has limited the extent of the freedom enjoyed by the Brotherhood. Footage of Ibrahim Munir, the acting general guide of the Brotherhood, confirming that the Turkish government asked the Brotherhood to temper its criticism of the Egyptian government, aired on Brotherhood TV channels out of Turkey.<sup>22</sup> Just as the original support for the Brotherhood served the AKP government's political interests in its conflict with Sisi in Egypt, this recent shift in the AKP government's support for the Brotherhood tracks the impending improvement in the Egyptian-Turkish relations.

Engagement with religious political actors such as Islamists, therefore, should prioritize political dynamics at the expense of religious ones. While religious discourse and Islamists' purported intransigent commitment to religion tend to overshadow everything else about them, it is important to recognize that these are political actors first and foremost. They are motivated by political incentives, and their primary commitment, as such, is to gain and maintain political power and influence. In this regard, religious rhetoric has its limits in understanding Islamist actors in the Middle East. Religious discourse must be contextualized within the broader political environment to make sense of its significance and political relevance.

## ENDNOTES

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Cite as:

**Yildirim, A.Kadir. 2021. *Islamist Reactions to the Biden Presidency in the Middle East*. Issue brief no. 04.13.21. Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, Texas.**

<https://doi.org/10.25613/BFRF-3315>