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The Distinction between Anti-Semitism & Anti-Zionism in the Eyes of American Muslim Preachers

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The boundaries between antisemitic and anti-Zionist stances have increasingly blurred over the last decade, also in connection to the developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One of these examples is reflected in organizations such as the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions), which aims to gain support for the Palestinian cause by fortifying the opposition against Israel and is considered as a new form of antisemitism.¹

In this article, I explore the discourse of prominent American Muslim preachers on YouTube between 2013 to 2021, and the growing distinction between anti-Zionism and antisemitism. Despite their overt opposition to Israel and Zionism, these

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¹ Kenneth S. Stern, "[Anti-Zionism, Antisemitism, and the Fallacy of Bright Lines](#)," *INSS*, 14 June 2021. Last accessed 15 June 2022.

preachers see in manifestations of hatred and hostility towards Jews a red line they refuse to cross.

Sheikh Hamza Yusuf,² founder of the California-based Zaytuna College,³ and a leading Muslim figure in America, has condemned the Israeli military “aggression,” but, simultaneously, he also believes that the Muslim community needs to undergo a “transformation” in its attitudes towards the Jews.

Sheikh Yusuf reminds that there are Jews that disagree with Israeli policies, condemning “the blanket statements that all Jews are evil,” a position which is even contrary to the teachings of the Qur’an. Also, in a rather bold statement, Sheikh Yusuf condemns radical Muslim preachers, who are often documented by MEMRI (Middle East Media Research Institute), in their inflammatory rhetoric inciting to kill Jews, also emphasizing that such statements symbolize a harsh insensitivity to a people who went through the Holocaust.⁴

A broader and more in-depth stance toward the topic is reflected in the views of Sheikh Dr. Yasir Qadhi,⁵ from the “Islamic Seminary of America”⁶ and “Epic Masjid”⁷ in Texas. Despite Sheikh Qadhi’s apparent opposition to Israel, he clearly distinguishes between Zionists and Jews.

First, he believes in cooperation with the Jewish community in America, trying to establish bridges between Muslims and Jews, for mutual support also against Islamophobia and antisemitism. A common battle he supported was the fight against the attempt to ban the ritual animal slaughter.⁸

² [@sh_hamzayusuf](#), *Twitter*, Last accessed 13 June, 2022.

³ For the official site of Zaytuna College, see: <https://zaytuna.edu>. Last accessed 13 June 2022.

⁴ Hamza Yusuf, “[Learn the Difference Between Jews & Zionists](#),” *YouTube*, 4 April 2016, Last accessed 13 June 2022.

⁵ [@YasirQadhi](#), *Twitter*, Last accessed 13 June 2022.

⁶ For more information, see: <https://www.islamicseminary.us>. Last accessed 13 June 2022.

⁷ For more information, see: <https://epicmasjid.org>. Last accessed 13 June 2022.

⁸ Yasir Qadhi, “[Is Kosher Meat Halal? A Comparison of the Halakhic and Shar’i Requirements for Animal Slaughter](#),” *MuslimMatters*, 22 June 2012. Last accessed 14 June 2022.



Screenshot taken from the video “[Khutbah: Practical Steps To Help Palestine / Shaykh Dr. Yasir Qadhi](#)” by Yasir Qadhi, YouTube, 15 May 2021.

During one of the IDF operations in Gaza, Qadhi referred to hostile generalizations toward Jews and emphasized that such stigmas are anti-Islamic and harmful to the Muslim community in the long run. In his view, the anti-Israeli attitude due to the “unrestrained” assaults in Gaza must not lead to anti-Jewish attitudes.

Sheikh Qadhi also expressed optimism about a future Muslim-Jewish partnership and positively mentioned the “J Street” initiative, which, unlike the more pro-Israeli AIPAC, is much more mindful of the rights of the Palestinians. He also positively addressed “Neturei Karta,” the ultra-Orthodox Jewish group that strongly rejects Zionism.⁹

Nonetheless, Sheikh Qadhi’s anti-Zionism is clear, and it strongly emerged last year during the 2021 military confrontation between Israel and Hamas, when he called every Muslim in America to support BDS and hosted in his mosque in Texas the former Israeli Miko Peled,¹⁰ a known BDS activist.¹¹

⁹ Yasir Qadhi, “[Difference Between Anti-Zionism and Anti-Semitism?](#)” *YouTube*, 29 June 2017. Last accessed 13 June 2022.

¹⁰ [@mikopeled](#), *Twitter*. Last accessed 14 June 2022.

¹¹ Yasir Qadhi, “[Practical Steps To Help Palestine](#),” *YouTube*, 14 May 2021. Last accessed 17 June 2022.

Similar distinctions can also be observed in Imam Omar Suleiman, the founder of the Texas-based “Yaqeen Institute.”¹² Imam Suleiman, who is of Palestinian descent, apparently holds harsher anti-Zionist views, and is a known critic of Israel.¹³ For example, in an Islamic convention that took place in Singapore in 2016, Imam Suleiman praised the BDS for effectively bringing about changes among the public.¹⁴

However, Suleiman is also one of the prominent voices in favor of interfaith dialogue with Jews (as well as Christians) and has participated in 2018, in a panel in Dallas with Rabbi David Stern and Pastor Christian Girata, which went viral on YouTube and reached close to 12 million views.¹⁵

Imam Suleiman also calls on American Muslims not to rule out cooperation with pro-Israel Republicans because of their stances on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In his view, there is a vital need to cooperate with anyone who can promote essential interests of the Muslim community in America, such as the crucial battle against Islamophobia.¹⁶

In addition to the prevalent distinctive stances within the mainstream clerics in America, these opinions can be found among more conservative Muslim preachers. One such figure is Sheikh Khalid Yasin, a well-known African-American preacher who promotes *da'wa*,¹⁷ and is considered by some as a conservative with an affinity to radicalism.

Because of his activities, Yasin was accused of adversely affecting the Muslim youth in Australia, calling for incitement to terrorism and encouraging conspiracy

¹² For more information, see: <https://yaqeeninstitute.org>. Last accessed 14 June 2022.

¹³ See for example: Omar Suleiman, [#SanctionIsrael](#), [@National March for Palestine](#), *YouTube*, 1 June 2021. Last accessed 14 June 2022.

¹⁴ Omar Suleiman, Nouman Ali-Khan & Abdul Nasir Jangda, [“Debate & Talk Show,”](#) *YouTube*, 16 May 2016. Last accessed 14 June 2022.

¹⁵ Omar Suleiman, David Stern & Christian Girata, [“Islam, Judaism, and Christianity - A Conversation,”](#) *YouTube*, 30 January 2018. Last accessed 14 June 2022.

¹⁶ Omar Suleiman & Suhaib Webb, [“Voting and Political Participation: Halal or Haram?”](#) *YouTube*, 20 August 2012. Last accessed 14 June 2022.

¹⁷ *Da'wa* is a call for spreading Islam. See: Elad Ben David, [“Marketing Da'wa in America Through Social Media”](#), *Bee Hive - Middle East Social Media*, Vol. 8, No. 6, September, 2020.

theories against the West.¹⁸ He also encouraged polygamy among Muslims¹⁹ and even supported violence against women, as a form of “control and education”.²⁰

However, in one of his speeches at a *da‘wa* conference in Oslo in 2014, Yasin drew a red line: despite the clear opposition to Israel, it is forbidden for Muslims to bear any negative emotions towards Jews.²¹



Screenshot from the video “[Was Muhammad \(pbuh\) a Jew slaughterer due to the killing of 6-700 Jews? - Q&A - Sh. Khalid Yasin](#)” by Islam Net, YouTube, 3 July 2013.

There is no doubt that anti-Zionism is often a tool for expressing blatantly antisemitic views, but it is vital to acknowledge the gray area where the two phenomena remain distinct. The preachers mentioned in this article support the Palestinian cause, but at the same time, they do not show anti-Jewish sentiment and emphasize the distinction between Jews and Zionists. This indicates that American Muslim YouTube preachers oppose pure antisemitism as expressed in extreme Islamic groups or radical far-right movements.

¹⁸ Sarah Ferguson, “[Khalid Yasin: The new voice of Islam?](#)” 9 October 2005. Last accessed 14 June 2022.

¹⁹ Khalid Yasin, “[Polygamy \(Multiple wives\) in Islam](#),” *YouTube*, 5 December 2011. Last accessed 14 June 2022.

²⁰ Khalid Yasin, “[Beating Muslim Wife](#),” *YouTube*, 6 March 2013. Last accessed 14 June, 2022.

²¹ Khalid Yasin, “[Was Muhammad \(pbuh\) a Jew slaughterer due to the killing of 6-700 Jews?](#)” *YouTube*, 3 July 2013. Last accessed 14 June 2022.

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