

Why young Muslims are using a messaging app to pray for Bernie Sanders

by [Aysha Khan](#) in the [November 20, 2019](#) issue



Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., center, speaks during the Democratic presidential primary debate, Tuesday, Oct. 15, 2019, in Westerville, Ohio. Sanders is flanked by Sen. Kamala Harris, D-Calif., left, and former Vice President Joe Biden. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

It's no secret that many Muslims are [fans](#) of Sen. Bernie Sanders, so much so that some affectionately call the 78-year-old Democratic presidential candidate "Uncle Bernie."

So when the news broke that Sanders had suffered a heart attack in October, Hamzah Raza kidded on his Instagram account about setting up a group to read the Qur'an for the senator.

"You know, like if your real uncle ended up in the hospital, you would recite the Qur'an on his behalf and pray for his health and recovery," said Raza, a 23-year-old Islamic studies student at Harvard Divinity School.

Immediately, he said, he began receiving messages from his Instagram followers: Was the group real? Could they be added to it? Oh, and could their friends join, too? Could they also read this prayer for Sanders, or that prayer?

The day after Sanders's heart procedure, Raza set up the Quran Khatm for Bernie, a WhatsApp group where 40 young Muslims tracked the group's team effort to complete the recitation of the entire Qur'an and pray for Sanders's health and guidance.

"The idea is that when we're saying these prayers, it makes us more receptive to God's blessings," Raza said. "So inshallah (God willing), with this completion of the Qur'an, we will receive some more blessings that will make our prayers for Bernie more powerful."

Most participants read a few *juz*, the 30 equal-sized sections that the Qur'an has been divided into, on the Vermont senator's behalf. Others read the Hizb al-Bahr prayer for protection and the Dalail al-Khayrat collection of prayers for the Prophet Muhammad.

The group mainly comprises US Muslims in their teens and twenties, but there's also an international presence: a friend of Raza's from the Gaza Strip offered to read 100 *salawat* for Sanders.

When asked by some group members whether it was permissible to read the Qur'an and perform these prayers on behalf of a non-Muslim, Raza ran the idea past a sheikh, who gave them a green light.

"He told me it's fine, because [the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him] also prayed for non-Muslims' health," Raza said. "But he also explained that usually when we pray for non-Muslims, we should also pray for their *hidayah*"—the Arabic word used to refer to divine guidance.

Though this year's American Muslim Poll [found](#) that young Muslims' rate of voting is significantly lower than that of their non-Muslim peers—only 63 percent of Muslim young adults reported being registered to vote, compared with 85 percent of all young adults—US Muslims have shown a willingness to show up for Sanders.

With hashtags like #Muslims4Bernie and #InshallahBernie and events like the Bay Area's [Iftars with Bernie](#)—as well as Sanders's 2016 sweep of Michigan, where the

campaign courted Muslim voters through Arabic-language ads in the city that has America's largest Muslim population—US Muslims have rallied together for the candidate.

"Muslims are not a monolith with who they're voting for, but I would say Bernie Sanders is the single most popular candidate in the primaries among American Muslims," Raza said. "His vision for America is just very different from what we've seen in the White House before. It's one where Muslims are very much included and very much a part of society. He shows not only in his rhetoric, like some other Democrats do, but in real ways."

For Muslim voters—76 percent of whom vote for Democrats, per the American Muslim Poll—Sanders has managed to set himself apart from the beginning.

"If someone ranked all of the presidential candidates by their friendliness to the Muslim American community, Bernie would be miles ahead of everyone else," 21-year-old Zainab Kahloon, who participated in the WhatsApp group, said. "One thing I appreciate about the Sanders campaign is that they're one of the only ones that have actively reached out to the Muslim American community. In both of his campaigns, Sanders visited mosques and prominent Muslim gatherings and hired Muslim Americans for important positions in his campaign."

Sanders hired the first-ever Muslim campaign manager for a major presidential campaign and has continued to work with staunchly pro-Palestine activist Linda Sarsour—whom he brought on as a campaign surrogate during his 2016 bid for the presidency, and who speaks at major Muslim gatherings around the US on the candidate's behalf—despite the [controversies](#) swirling around her.

But more importantly, members of the group said, Sanders has been a consistent advocate for issues that are close to many Muslims' hearts.

Besides his support for universal health care and a living wage, Raza said, Sanders has emerged as the strongest candidate when it comes to speaking about human rights in Kashmir, Palestine, Yemen, and other central humanitarian concerns for Muslims around the world. He criticized the Iraq War from the outset and has lambasted the Trump administration's controversial ban on travel from several Muslim-majority countries.

Still, Raza said he felt that Sanders “could be stronger when it comes to foreign policy.”

A poll last year by the Brookings Institution [found](#) that 56 percent of Democrats are in favor of imposing sanctions if Israeli settlements in the West Bank continue to expand. But Sanders has not gone so far.

“At least not yet,” Raza said. —Religion News Service