Zohran Mamdani's mayoral candidacy stirs Jews in New York – and beyond
Questions circulate about what the rise of an anti-Zionist mayor in the most Jewish U.S. city means
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NEW YORK — In the most Jewish city in America, debates over antisemitism have exploded in the final days of the mayoral race as New Yorkers appear close to electing a 34-year-old Muslim who does not believe Israel should exist as a Jewish state.

Interest in the election has reached beyond New York City's five boroughs and into Jewish and Muslim communities around the country in ways that reflect shifting views on Israel and a changing Democratic Party that could have national political implications.

Zohran Mamdani's surprise win in the Democratic mayoral primary in June not only established him as the front-runner in the Nov. 4 election, it also accelerated tensions over those shifting views.

New York is home to the largest Jewish population outside of Israel and is also one of the country's most concentrated collections of Democrats — albeit among the more progressive slices. A growing segment within both of those groups, led by younger voters, view Israel more negatively over its prosecution of the war in Gaza that was prompted by the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attacks.

As happens often, the fears and hopes of Jews and Muslims are bound up together. New York City is also home to the country's largest Muslim population.

Mamdani is campaigning on promises to make the city more affordable by offering free bus routes, universal child care, rent-control freezes and a pilot program of city-run grocery stores, while seeking tax increases on wealthier residents.

But it is his stance on Israel — including its right to any kind of Jewish identity — and his positions on Palestinian rights that have proved the most emotional issues of the race. And in the closing days of the New York mayor's race, sharp debates over antisemitism and Islamophobia, present from the moment of Mamdani's upset primary win, have reached a crescendo.

More than 1,000 rabbis, cantors and rabbinical students from around the country signed a petition this week to oppose "rising anti-Zionism and its political normalization," including from candidates. Mamdani was the only politician mentioned.

"When public figures like New York mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani refuse to condemn violent slogans, deny Israel's legitimacy, and accuse the Jewish state of genocide, they, in the words of New York Board of Rabbis president Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, 'Delegitimize the Jewish

community and encourage and exacerbate hostility toward Judaism and Jews,'" the petition said.

The petition referred to Mamdani not immediately condemning the phrase "globalize the intifada," though he has recently said he would discourage its use. He has long called Israel's actions in Gaza a genocide and has said Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should be arrested.

The petition was organized by the Jewish Majority, a D.C.-based advocacy group that has framed itself as a corrective to anti-Zionist Jewish groups, among others. Its executive director, Jonathan Schulman, said the letter was the idea of rabbis across the country who are worried. They view Mamdani as the most prominent example but are also concerned about Democratic candidates in Massachusetts, Minnesota, Washington state and elsewhere, whose criticism of Israel has grown beyond specific criticisms of the current government, he said.

"This is something starting to make Jewish people very, very nervous," he said. "Throughout the country, Jews have a wide range of opinions on any action the state does. Many, many Zionist Jews are highly critical of Israel, just like there are American patriots critical of our government. That doesn't mean our government shouldn't exist."

At the same time, Mamdani has been embraced by Jewish progressives dedicated to the cause of Palestinian rights. Mamdani declined to be interviewed for this piece.

"Zohran's success is a demonstration of the fact that the Democratic voting base is supportive of Palestinian rights and wants to end U.S. complicity in Israeli apartheid and genocide," said Beth Miller, political director of the anti-Zionist group Jewish Voice for Peace Action, which has endorsed Mamdani. "What politicians long thought was a third rail of politics is in fact something voters want to see."

Miller noted that U.S. Jews have diverse, complex views about the state of Israel and about its Jewish character.

According to a Pew Research survey last year, about 7 in 10 U.S. Jews align with Democrats. A Washington Post poll of U.S. Jews released last month shows many sharply disapprove of Israel's conduct of the war in Gaza and a shrinking percentage of young Jews feel connected to Israel, even as a majority of Jews think its existence is "vital" to the future of the Jewish people.

"Zohran's role is not to lead that conversation, that's not what he's trying to do. He has his own values about the dignity of all people. That should be the starting point of this conversation," Miller said.

But even as Mamdani stirs debates about Israel and Jews, he has faced relentless attacks on his own identity and faith.

This past week, during the second and last debate of the campaign, both Democratic former governor Andrew M. Cuomo, who is running as an independent, and Curtis Sliwa, the Republican candidate, attacked Mamdani for his stance on Israel. Cuomo's campaign went a

step further during the debate, releasing a racist AI-generated video showing criminals backing Mamdani.

The two-minute video began with a depiction of Mamdani running through Manhattan and eating rice with his hands.

It then showed various criminals, including a Black shoplifter wearing a kaffiyeh, voicing support for Mamdani's policies. The video concluded with Mamdani releasing the criminals from prison, and a shot of New York City in flames.

The clip was deleted from Cuomo's official social media account soon afterward, but it was re-uploaded by a reporter and viewed more than a million times. The campaign said it was inadvertently posted by a junior staffer and was neither finished nor approved.

Cuomo also appeared on a radio show whose host suggested Mamdani would side with the 9/11 terrorists as mayor if another such attack occurred. Cuomo did not challenge the host and instead ran through disasters that he said Mamdani would be ill-equipped to handle. Mamdani responded on social media, describing the comments as "Just disgusting."

"I thought that if I behaved well enough, bit my tongue enough in the face of racist, baseless attacks, all while returning back to my central message, it would allow me to be more than just my faith," Mamdani said in an address Friday outside a mosque. "I was wrong. No amount of redirection is ever enough."

Cuomo met Friday with leaders in the Orthodox Jewish community, aligning himself with conservative Jews.

Mamdani's candidacy has reverberated among Jews beyond New York City.

Joel Rubin, who ran Jewish outreach for Bernie Sanders' presidential run and is a strategist for Democratic candidates, said Mamdani is a "huge deal" among U.S. Jews, in part because competition has been heating up between Democrats and Republicans in recent years for Jewish votes. The GOP has been more aggressively pursuing Jews, he said.

"Trump's moves on Gaza and antisemitism have improved Republican recruitment and — Democrats will hate me for saying this — but Mamdani gives them an opportunity to really flip some of those voters," Rubin said.

Jennifer Wolff, who left New York City in 2021 for Connecticut but still maintains a deep interest in the city's politics, is Jewish and a registered Democrat but said in an interview that she doesn't "even know what party I'm affiliated with anymore." She helped organize regular marches in her town for the Israeli hostages. She said that what Mamdani represents to her is "a microcosm of what's going on in the rest of the world, and once New York turns in this direction, it is indicative of how frightening it is to be a Jew right now."

She said the amount of vitriol directed at Jews after Hamas's attack on Israel was astonishing to her, and she has been urging friends in New York — on social media and in conversations — to

vote for Cuomo, even though she blames him for her father's death by covid-19 in a nursing home.

"Not that I think he's a great guy," she said, "but because I don't know what would happen to Jews if Mamdani were elected."

Jerry Karp and Stephanie Gold recently attended a Mamdani rally in upper Manhattan and have been supporting him from the early stages of his campaign. They live on the Upper West Side and "fully support his stance on the war in Gaza," said Karp, who, like his wife, is Jewish.

"His stance that everyone deserves to have a life with dignity really resonates," Gold added, "both for Israelis and Palestinians.

U.S. Jews have wide-ranging opinions on what actions they see as antisemitic, according to the September Post poll. Just 15 percent said "criticizing Israel for any reason" is antisemitic, and 22 percent said the same of criticizing Israel "for its actions in Gaza."

But the numbers flipped on the question of whether it's bigoted to say Israel doesn't have a right to exist "as a Jewish state" — which is Mamdani's position. About 76 percent of U.S. Jews said Israel's existence is vital for the long-term future of the Jewish people and that saying it doesn't have a right to exist as a Jewish state is antisemitic; 14 percent said it's not antisemitic; and 10 percent had no opinion. The numbers on that question didn't vary much between Jews of different political parties.

In a March poll by the Pew Research Center, 53 percent of U.S. adults expressed an unfavorable opinion of Israel, up from 42 percent in March 2022, before the conflict began. Democrats had a worse view of Israel than Republicans, with 69 percent of Democrats expressing an unfavorable opinion, compared with 37 percent of Republicans.

Mamdani has been meeting with Jewish leaders throughout his campaign, has promised to address rising antisemitism in New York, and has moderated several prior positions as he has continued his campaign, including saying he would discourage the phrase "globalize the intifada," which some Jews have criticized as an invitation to violence.

He told a recent gathering at a Brooklyn synagogue that Israel, as well as countries with official religions such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, should uphold equal rights.

Progressives are still hashing out what lessons should be taken from Mamdani's rise.

Rubin said they are at risk of overplaying their hand.

"I believe a chunk of progressive Jews will support Mamdani, but that's not going to grow unless — and this is the X factor — he governs to the center," Rubin said. "It all depends on how he chooses to govern."

Miller said progressives' "most important lessons" is that "voters want to see consistency. For a very long time there was an idea you could have progressive values but exclude Palestinians from those values … I think that's less and less common."

Polls on the race show differing results for Jewish support in the mayoral race. A Fox News poll conducted in October showed 42 percent of Jewish voters favor Cuomo, while nearly as many back Mamdani at 38 percent and 13 percent support Sliwa. An October Quinnipiac poll showed that 60 percent of Jewish likely voters support Cuomo, with about half that supporting Mamdani and only 8 percent for Sliwa. But the constant is that Jews are less supportive than voters overall of Mamdami and relatively supportive of Cuomo.

Rabbi Rachel Timoner of Congregation Beth Elohim synagogue in Brooklyn, where Mamdani spoke in early October, said that while she is not endorsing anyone in the race, she has seen Mamdani "listen really deeply to Jewish leaders and seek out conversation, wanting to hear what our concerns are and wanting to be responsive to them." She has seen him move his positions to accommodate those concerns. "So I think that he has come to understand that while also retaining his commitment to the Palestinian causes for freedom."

Timoner sees disagreements in the community between Jews who "see greater danger around the question of Jewish safety, and some who see greater danger around not following Jewish values," but both groups, she said, are trying to do what they believe is right.

She encourages people to choose both values and safety, "because the Jewish people will not be whole or free until the Palestinian people are free. We are intertwined with one another."

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