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## Why Zohran Mamdani believes he'll win over Jewish voters, as Israel critic surges to second behind Cuomo in NYC mayoral race

Mamdani, a Muslim, is beating Cuomo with young voters



New York City mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani on April 16. Photo by Angela Weiss/AFP via Getty Images

By [Jacob Kornbluh](#) April 28, 2025

Zohran Mamdani's stance on Israel may seem untenable for a mayoral candidate aspiring to run the city with largest Jewish population outside of Israel, yet he is emerging as the top contender against former governor Andrew Cuomo, the frontrunner in a crowded field of candidates despite being forced to resign over sexual harassment allegations he denied. Mamdani is standing firm on his leftist position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as he courts Jewish voters, who trend centrist on Israel but are seeking an alternative to Cuomo.

Mamdani, who is Muslim, says his forthright communications strategy will win over many Jewish Democrats in the same way it is [connecting](#) with younger voters, who say they would choose him over Cuomo in recent polls.

“It’s the unabashed nature of our policies: Whether you agree or disagree, you know exactly how I feel about something,” Mamdani said over a small bowl of chicken soup at Metro Diner, a childhood favorite on Manhattan’s Upper West Side.

Mamdani, 33, said he got that impression from an older Jewish voter who offered his support following a [candidate forum](#) at Congregation B’nai Jeshurun in January. “He whispered in my ear,” Mamdani recounted, “I disagree with you on one issue, and I’m pretty sure you know which one, but I like that you speak about it directly and I like your policies.”

Mamdani cited a recent [Siena Research survey](#) showing that the top four priorities for Jewish voters in the mayoral race are eldercare, paid family leave, affordable housing and combating discrimination.

The Siena poll, with a margin of error of plus or minus 3.7 percentage points, showed Mamdani in first place among voters aged 18-49, while Cuomo held a commanding lead among older voters.

That generational divide may also reflect differing views on the U.S. role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. During our 40-minute interview, the conversation was briefly interrupted by a Columbia student who spotted Mamdani through the window and stopped in to greet him. “We are all huge fans,” she said.

Compared to the other candidates in the race — Brad Lander and Scott Stringer, who are Jewish, and Cuomo — Mamdani is less connected to the broader Jewish community. And candidates who shared views similar to Mamdani’s were soundly defeated in races where [Jewish voters](#) and [pro-Israel spending](#) played a decisive role. With less than two months remaining until the June 24 primary, Mamdani has so far been spared pro-Israel attack money. Most of the candidates are directing their attacks at Cuomo.

Mamdani’s Israel posture has nonetheless been fodder for some of his opponents. Cuomo has repeatedly made Mamdani a target in his outreach to Jewish voters.

In a [speech at an Orthodox synagogue](#) earlier this month, Cuomo accused Mamdani of “[enabling the forces of antisemitism](#)” through his affiliation with the [New York City chapter](#) of the Democratic Socialists of America. The group was [widely condemned](#) for defending the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attacks on Israel at a demonstration in Times Square.

Mayoral candidate Whitney Tilson, an investor who is married to a Jewish woman, charged Mamdani with [stoking antisemitism](#) by [accusing Israel](#) of committing genocide in Gaza. In

2023, Jewish elected officials [accused Mamdani of antisemitism](#) after he [authored a bill](#) to penalize charities supporting Israeli settlements.

Mamdani accused his opponents of trying to mischaracterize his “support for universal human rights” and weaponize the real fear of antisemitism for their personal benefit.

He said he’s open to meeting with community leaders who are skeptical of him. “For far too long, we’ve refused to have any engagement with anyone that is seen as being disagreeable or disagreeing with them,” Mamdani said. “My commitment is that while I may disagree, I won’t be disagreeable in the course of that.”

### Who is Zohran Mamdani?



NYC mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani on March 24. Photo by Adam Gray/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Mamdani was born and raised in Kampala, Uganda, and moved to New York City with his family at age 7. His father, Mahmood Mamdani, a Columbia University professor who [has called for Israel to be dismantled](#) as an exclusive nation-state in order for an inclusive Jewish homeland to succeed, was among the thousands of Ugandans of Indian descent expelled and made refugees by then-ruler Idi Amin.

His mother is film director Mira Nair, who made the 2001 feature film *Monsoon Wedding* about an arranged marriage between a groom from the U.S. and a bride from Delhi, which [she said was modeled after](#) *Fiddler on the Roof*. In 2013, Nair [turned down](#) an invitation to be the guest of honor at the Haifa International Film Festival, posting on her Twitter page that she would not visit Israel until “apartheid is over.”

Mamdani’s political involvement began in 2017, when he volunteered for the unsuccessful campaign of [Khader El-Yateem](#), a Palestinian Lutheran minister who ran for City Council in Brooklyn.

In 2020, Mamdani [became](#) the first South Asian man and the third Muslim to serve in the New York State Assembly. He is one of nine Democrats in the state legislature affiliated with the city and Mid-Hudson Valley chapters of the DSA.

Danny Pearlstein, policy and communications director of Riders Alliance, a grassroots organization fighting for better transit, worked with Mamdani on his push for increased funding for bus and train services. In an interview, he called him a “powerhouse organizer” who communicates effectively about policy and quickly grasps new ways of using media to cut through the noise.

## Mamdani's views on Israel and the Gaza war



Zohran Mamdani at a mayoral candidate forum on Jan. 29. Courtesy of Zohran Mamdani for mayor

In our interview, Mamdani defended his stance on the Gaza war and his support for the [Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement](#) against Israel, which some in the pro-Israel community see as an assault on the legitimacy of the Jewish state's existence. Mamdani, who [told Politico](#) that he recognizes Israel as a sovereign state, maintained that his support for BDS is principled and guided by his belief in international law and "ending complicity with the violation of it."

"I think that that is something that many New Yorkers support," he said.

Mamdani has [said in the past](#) that he would order the police to arrest Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu if he visits the city, in compliance with an International Criminal Court warrant. The United States is not a party to the ICC, though, and the federal government would likely challenge the legitimacy of the arrest.

Mamdani initially demurred when asked in the interview if he would implement any form of Israel boycott as mayor, saying that his focus would be on bread-and-butter issues.

Pressed, he said he would end some Adams administration policies he regarded as illegal, but did not go into detail.

"If there are ways in which Mayor Eric Adams has supported the violation of international law, I would absolutely bring that to an end — because I think what New Yorkers deserve is a city in compliance, whether it's legal compliance with campaign finance or its compliance with international law," he said. "That is something I would do."

Mamdani condemned the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas as a "horrific war crime" and described the celebration of the killing of civilians by some of the [attendees at the NYC-DSA rally](#) as "not befitting of a movement supporting universal human rights."

Nonetheless, he also defended his [Oct. 13, 2023, conclusion](#) — six days into the war against Hamas in Gaza — that Israel was on "the brink" of committing genocide. Last year, the International Court of Justice said [in an interim ruling](#) that the Palestinians in Gaza were vulnerable to genocide, but has yet to rule on a claim initiated by South Africa that Israel is committing genocide.

“Genocide is not just a crime of action; it’s also a crime of intent,” Mamdani said. “And what led me to make that remark was a fear based on the statements we were seeing from a number of Israeli leaders that characterized Palestinians in language more befitting animals than people, and actions that had been taken to shut down civilian access to basic goods.”

Israel has said that comments characterized as calling for genocide were distorted or taken out of context, and has denied preventing civilians from getting food and other necessities, even as it has [blocked food and other aid](#) from entering the enclave for weeks.

Mamdani [attended](#) some of the pro-Palestinian protests across the city just after Oct. 7 and [participated in a hunger strike](#) outside the White House to call for a permanent ceasefire in November 2023. He has [defended the campus protests](#). Earlier this year, Mamdani [confronted](#) Trump’s border czar Tom Homan over the detention of [Mahmoud Khalil](#), a Columbia University graduate and a leader in the pro-Palestinian protests on campus.

Some of those protests were marred by [harassment of Jewish students](#) and the display of [antisemitic posters](#). A [poll released last year](#) showed that an overwhelming majority of New Yorkers believed the [campus protests](#) required authorities to intervene and crossed the line into antisemitism.

Asked whether he thought there was antisemitism at some of the rallies, Mamdani said that when evidence of antisemitism is presented, “it is absolutely incumbent upon me to condemn that.” He recently appeared in a [lengthy sit-down interview](#) with Hasan Piker, a Twitch streamer who has said “it doesn’t matter” if Hamas raped Israeli women on Oct. 7. Mamdani did not call out Piker. “Many New Yorkers have been rightfully horrified by a genocide that they’ve seen over more than 15 months,” Mamdani told him.

Before Oct. 7, Mamdani [came under fire](#) for introducing a bill that was titled “[Not on our dime!: Ending New York funding of Israeli settler violence act](#).” Some of his Democratic colleagues called it “purely antisemitic” because it targeted, in part, Jewish organizations and nonprofits assisting families of terror victims.

Mamdani revived his push for the bill last year, with the [backing of U.S Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#), to also target nonprofits “aiding and abetting” the resettling of Jewish communities in the Gaza Strip or providing “unauthorized” support for units of the Israeli army that have been accused of human rights violations.

In the interview, Mamdani attributed his swift rise to being truthful about his views. “Being honest about what you believe in allows for far more conversation than trying to pretend you are one thing to each person,” he said.

## What Jews are saying

David Greenfield, a former member of the City Council who is now the chief executive of Met Council, said he isn't impressed by Mamdani's charm offensive.

"Mamdani has been fanning the flames of antisemitism, and now he wants us to believe he's the firefighter," Greenfield said, pointing to Mamdani's positions on the war in Gaza, and [recent comments](#) Mamdani made linking the affordability crisis to U.S. military aid to Israel. "He can speak to as many Jews as he likes, but it won't change the fact that he's promoting antisemitic conspiracy theories," Greenfield said.

Mamdani clarified his affordability remarks, saying he doesn't believe the \$3.8 billion in annual funding for Israel is directly tied to a lack of funding for housing. "I think it's the contradictions that someone sees about priorities," he said.

The Jewish Vote, a progressive group that was formed in 2018 by leaders of Jews For Racial & Economic Justice, [endorsed](#) Mamdani and Lander in the ranked-choice contest.

The Riders Alliance's Pearlstein, who is Jewish, called the attacks on Mamdani "manufactured" in a way that is "pandering to people for whom antisemitism touches a nerve."

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