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Reflections of a movement, not the nation

Zohran Mamdani's rise in the New York City mayoral race has sparked rare anti-Muslim rhetoric in mainstream politics

The election of Donald Trump as the 47th US president has unleashed some of the most extreme forms of anti-immigrant rhetoric. The fact that these sentiments weren't expressed as openly before doesn't mean that they didn't exist. The MAGA movement has simply provided a public platform for aversion to 'the other' to be vocalised more graphically and the ostracisation of Arabs, Latinos and Muslims to become embedded in the official discourse.

The ongoing immigration crackdowns at home and the Trump administration's investment in Israel's violent campaign in the Gaza Strip had already mainstreamed the villainisation of people of colour, rarely seen at this pace since the 9/11 attacks. But a specific event has helped project the expressions of prejudice to a new level: the New York City mayoral race.

Prejudice as policy

The Democratic frontrunner in the race is the 33-year-old State Assemblyman Zohran Mamdani. If elected in November, he will be the first ever Muslim mayor of New York City, a megapolis of 8.5 million people hosting a population of about 768 000 Muslims. Mamdani's rise to popularity has unsettled the federal administration to the extent that even a conversation on denaturalising and deporting him was entertained by the White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt.

Vice President JD Vance has also found fault with Mamdani for not being grateful enough for the opportunities of America and 'the incredible bounty of this country', lamenting that while he has had 'a very good life' as an immigrant, he has constantly criticised the United States for its problems.
As the administration threatens the media, batters the universities and

expands its battalion of online influencers to disseminate its messaging, it is becoming more common for Americans to find different manifestations of extremism on their social media timelines, TV screens and in their communities.

In a viral September 4 post on X, far-right influencer Laura Loomer shared a photo of a woman and her child in a bathroom at what she said was the Salt Lake City airport. The photo shows the hijab-wearing woman in front of the bathroom mirror with her small kid seated on the vanity. Loomer's post reads, 'Airport bathrooms are now foot washing basins for Muslim invaders.'

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Then, in a series of nearly-identical X posts in September, Loomer wrote, 'Ban all Muslims from serving in the US Congress.' Before her ascendancy as a government advisor, Loomer's messaging was even more violent. In 2017, in reaction to a report about the deaths of over 2 000 Muslim refugees crossing the Mediterranean, she tweeted, 'Good. Here's to 2 000 more.'

The toxicity doesn't stop here. Florida Congressman Randy Fine routinely shoehorns the words 'Muslim terrorists' in his social media posts, including once taunting Congresswoman Ilhan Omar in reaction to her critique of the visit by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Capitol Hill. 'I'm sure it is difficult to see us welcome the killer of so many of your fellow Muslim terrorists', Fine wrote. He doubled down on that message after other congresspeople asked him to apologise to Omar.

At a press conference in Beirut on 26 August, the US ambassador to Turkey told Lebanese journalists to 'act civilised' rather than being 'animalistic', suggesting that the journalists talking over each other was a sign of the region's broader problems. Tom Barrack, a grandson of Lebanese immigrants, later apologised for his comments, and yet his words couldn't be more illustrative of the ideology of the administration he represents.

Tradition of tolerance

In an increasingly polarised climate, it would be easy to deduce that demonising Muslims is the official government policy being enacted in subtle, invisible forms. The continued blackmailing of media, colleges and other stewards of public awareness has made it unappealing for them to consider furnishing spaces for a conversation about the spiralling crisis

of Islamophobia as it rears its head, not from fringe news outlets or quarters, but government-affiliated forums.

Still, the clarity of historical precedent and the predictability of political storms enable us to see this authoritarian trajectory as what it really is. Although unusual, it's not an anomaly, and it doesn't capture the full picture of American politics.

The hypothetical clash of civilisations between the West and Islam has hardly ever been settled, at least in the minds of those who sway the public discourse. This mental image has influenced the decision-making of politicians across generations. But there have always been leaders who have sought to challenge these rigidities and venture into innovative thinking.

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One notable example is former President Dwight Eisenhower, who, on 28 June 1957, at the opening of the Islamic Center of Washington D.C., said America would fight 'with her whole strength' for the American Muslims to have their place of worship and follow their conscience in that space, adding that 'civilization owes to the Islamic world some of its most important tools and achievements.'

The US government's military entanglements with Muslim-majority nations include tragic wars that continue to this day. But despite trillions of dollars and countless lives lost in these adventures, anti-American sentiments haven't engulfed these nations, and American society has remained hospitable to thousands of immigrants from these countries.

The comparatively widespread resistance to the integration of Muslims in Europe has not recreated itself in the United States with the same severity, and a public debate is gestating about the spike of Islamophobic sentiments along the lines of the reckoning that followed the murder of George Floyd.

Numbers also point to a socio-political climate that distinguishes the United States from other Western societies, encapsulating its culture of tolerance that, despite being weakened, has not been compromised in the middle of the cultural wars waged by the MAGA movement.

According to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Hate Crime Report, the frequency of Islamophobic hate crimes and violent incidents remains low in America relative to other participating

countries. In the year 2023, when the most comprehensive disaggregated data were released, a total of 143 anti-Muslim hate crimes were documented in the United States.

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In the same year, Germany recorded 1 464 Islamophobic hate crimes, while the tally stood at a staggering 3 866 crimes across the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland. In the Netherlands, with a population almost 18 times smaller than that of the US, Islamophobic hate crimes were nearly twice as numerous.

Indeed, Muslim identity remains a disadvantage in access to political participation, public safety and media representation. Any reference to a Muslim politician running for office draws suspicion, inviting smear campaigns orchestrated by well-heeled pressure groups. Since 1789, only five politicians identifying as Muslim have served in Congress, making up one of the smallest religious groups in the legislature.

Notwithstanding these disparities that aren't asymptomatic of multicultural societies, the fact that Zohran Mamdani is seen as the most likely politician to win the New York City mayoral race is one indication of the tradition of acceptance in the United States — one that even the Republican voters don't seem to be rejecting outright. In fact, favourable views of immigration in America are at a record high, as evidenced by the latest Gallup data.

Hostility toward those who look different from us is a human trait. Academic studies show that children as young as 7-9 develop the potential to internalise racial bias. Still, amid the waves of intolerance being peddled by irresponsible leaders, the real threshold of tolerance in American politics can most probably be found in the words of Dwight Eisenhower — not Donald Trump.



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