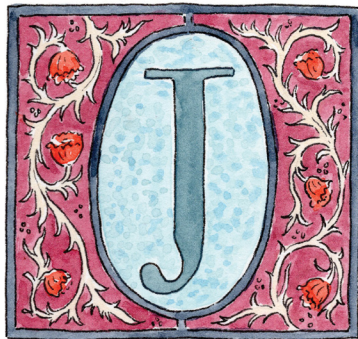


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Islam in America

What will the future hold?



JUST DAYS before his historic victory in New York City’s 2025 mayoral election, Zohran Mamdani gave remarks outside the Islamic Cultural Center of The Bronx. He claimed that his aunt had stopped taking the subway after the September 11 attacks because she “did not feel safe in her hijab,” and he spoke of the “fear and humiliation” that she and other Muslim New Yorkers had been forced to endure in the years since. Soon afterward, critics observed that Mamdani’s only living aunt at the time resided in Tanzania and was not known to wear a hijab. Mamdani later clarified that he was referring to a distant, deceased cousin of his father’s, a woman named Zehra, whom he referred to as an “aunt” in accordance with cultural tradition.

Having grown up as a Muslim in Brooklyn, I can say that Mamdani’s bleak sense of Muslim life in that era of New York City does

not ring true to me. What I remember most vividly from the aftermath of 9/11 were the displays of solidarity among New Yorkers and the many pronouncements from public officials decrying anti-Muslim hatred. Though civil libertarians objected to NYPD surveillance of Muslim houses of worship and other organizations in the years that followed, these measures by and large struck me as defensible, not least because they were grounded in a desire to understand Muslim communities and to protect them along with the rest of the city.

Nevertheless, Mamdani's belief that modern America is rife with Islamophobia is ascendant among younger American Muslims. In conversations with Bangladeshi Americans a generation younger than myself, I've been surprised by how estranged from America many of them feel, and how natural and even ennobling that estrangement seems to them. One survey from the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley found that 60 percent of Muslim respondents believe that Islamophobia in the United States is a very big problem, and that concern about Islamophobia was most acute among younger, female, and U.S.-born Muslims—the very Muslims most thoroughly incorporated into the American mainstream.

Notably, while Mamdani and other young American Muslims see Islamophobia as a pervasive threat, it does not appear to have stymied the rapid growth of the American Muslim population, which now stands at somewhere between 4 and 4.5 million, or close to triple its size in 2000. Though some of this growth can be attributed to the relative youth and fertility of America's Muslim minority, its chief driver has been legal immigration. If current trends hold, Muslims are poised to surpass Jews as the nation's second-largest religious group by 2040.

The question for policymakers is not whether American Muslims are a growing political force—that much is beyond dis-

pute, as evidenced by the rise of Mamdani, Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, Abdul El-Sayed, and other stalwarts of the Democratic Left. It's whether American institutions are thinking clearly about what that growth portends. The answer turns on two ideological tendencies within the American Muslim population that are distinct in their character, different in their dangers, and yet mutually reinforcing.



The first is Islamism, a transnational revolutionary ideology that seeks to capture state power in order to impose Islamic law and that rejects any separation between religious authority and political life. Islamism commands the allegiance of a distinct minority of American Muslims, but its most dangerous manifestation—jihadism, or the turn to violence in pursuit of Islamist objectives—is an urgent threat. The second is Third Worldism, a fusion of anti-Zionism, anti-Westernism, and anti-capitalism that places the sacralized victimhood of Palestinian Arabs at the center of a larger struggle against American imperialism. Unlike Islamism, Third Worldism is not primarily a religion-based ideology. Its most committed adherents, such as Mamdani himself, tend to lead largely secular lives. But, in important respects, it presents the more consequential long-term ideological challenge. Where jihadism targets American civilians as part of a larger struggle to overthrow “apostate” regimes in the Muslim world, Third Worldism endeavors to transform the nation’s ideological-intellectual milieu, shaping how Americans—well beyond the Muslim minority—understand their country and its place in the world.

Islamism’s violent potential was underscored in March this year when Ayman Mohamad Ghazali, a 41-year-old naturalized U.S. cit-

izen from Lebanon, rammed his truck into the entrance of Temple Israel in West Bloomfield, Michigan, where 140 children were attending the synagogue's early-childhood center. He drove down a hallway with a rifle before his vehicle burst into flames. Ghazali had reportedly lost several family members to an Israeli airstrike in Lebanon — two of whom have been identified by the IDF as members of Hezbollah. Rather than seek revenge by making his way to Lebanon to fight Israel, he chose to slaughter Jewish children in suburban Michigan.

Ghazali was not an aberration. That same month, Mohamed Bailor Jalloh, of Sierra Leone, and Ndiaga Diagne, of Senegal, carried out similar deadly lone-actor jihadist attacks in Virginia and Texas, respectively. The previous summer, Mohamed Soliman, an Egyptian national, firebombed a hostage-solidarity rally in Colorado, killing one. Each was an immigrant; each imagined he was acting in solidarity with Muslims abroad. They are part of a broader pattern of jihadist violence in America stretching back decades — a pattern that includes not only immigrants who brought their grievances with them but also native-born and long-resident Americans who acquired them here.

Lone-actor attacks are by definition difficult to anticipate and interdict. Hardening potential targets — securing buildings, increasing physical barriers, posting armed guards — can mitigate the damage, and it has undoubtedly saved many lives. But it cannot address the upstream failure that allowed these men into the country in the first place.

Why, for example, did the United States grant a spousal visa and then citizenship to Ghazali, a man so intimately connected to a designated foreign terrorist organization? There is a meaningful difference between the “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” that Donald Trump called for in December 2015 and the targeted, constitutional vetting reforms that these cases

make plainly necessary. Rather than putting the onus on consular officials to definitively prove that a Lebanese national is not aligned with Hezbollah, federal law ought to shift the burden of proof to petitioners, requiring them to demonstrate that the individuals they are sponsoring are willing to live in accordance with American norms. Federal law already criminalizes fraud on sponsorship forms, but punishment after the fact is no substitute for rigorous screening before the visa is granted. Thoughtful vetting of newcomers from societies rife with extremism and religious intolerance is not an act of bigotry. It is common sense. It is also, despite the objections of the civil-libertarian Left, an act of protection for the millions of American Muslims who want nothing to do with the violence committed in the name of their faith.

Vetting reforms, however carefully designed, address only one failure mode. They cannot screen for the radicalization that happens after arrival—in prisons, in online communities, and in the darker corners of American Muslim life. That problem is harder to see and address, because it is inseparable from the changing character of American assimilation itself.



The conventional wisdom holds that American Muslims are a success story—and by many measures, they are. According to a 2025 survey from the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU), 36 percent of Muslim Americans hold a bachelor's degree or higher, roughly comparable to the Protestant share and above that of white Evangelicals and Catholics. Nearly a quarter report household incomes above \$100,000, broadly in line with those of other religious communities, and well above the incomes of white Evangelicals. Relative to their counterparts in the United Kingdom or France,

American Muslims are more tolerant toward other religious faiths, more likely to identify with the country they live in, and less likely to live in Muslim-majority enclaves, even after adjusting for income, education, age, and sex. One long-standing hypothesis is that while European societies tend to have more rigid ethnic identities, America's more inclusive national identity, its history as an immigrant-rich society, and its openness to religious observance have made it much easier for Muslims, including observant Muslims, to feel at home.

Feeling at home, however, is not the same as feeling content. Political scientists Justin Gest and Richard Nielsen have observed that American Muslims are less trusting of societal and government institutions than their European counterparts are, a gap they attribute to the greater integration of American Muslims. The more you see a society as your own, the more entitled you feel to voice frank opinions about its supposed deficiencies — a phenomenon that has been dubbed “the integration paradox.”

Efforts to understand Muslim assimilation are further complicated by religious attrition. A significant and growing share of Americans raised Muslim have quietly stopped identifying with the faith altogether. As analysts at the Cato Institute have argued, surveys of American Muslims tend to exclude ex-Muslims, so the data we have systematically overstate the share of the broader Muslim-origin population that retains a Muslim identity. What remains in the surveys, then, is a population skewed toward those who do retain that identity, whether as a matter of sincere religious practice or, increasingly, as a matter of political commitment. For a subset of younger American Muslims, the faith has become less a set of devotional practices than an emblem of resistance to Westernness and whiteness.

Together, the integration paradox and religious attrition explain something that might otherwise seem puzzling: why the most committed and articulate voices of Muslim anti-Americanism in the United States are

not marginalized, dispossessed, under-assimilated newcomers. Rather, they are privileged, cosmopolitan, first- and second-generation insiders who lead largely secular lives. Consider Mamdani and Hasan Piker, two hyper-assimilated American Muslims who have risen to prominence on the strength of their anti-Zionism, one through electoral politics, the other through a mass cultural platform that has made him one of the most followed political voices in the country.

Having successfully navigated the institutions of American meritocracy, many young American Muslims have rejected the quiet gratitude that one associates with immigrants and their children of earlier eras. Instead, they have undergone what the political scientist Robert Leiken has called “anti-West westernization” or “adversarial assimilation”: a process by which incorporation into American institutions produces not attachment to patriotic narratives of American freedom, individualism, and benevolence but hostility toward them. This phenomenon is especially common, I suspect, among younger South Asians broadly—a highly educated, upwardly mobile group increasingly over-represented in the uppermost echelons of the American Left. Regarding South Asian Muslims specifically, the ISPU’s 2025 American Muslim Poll offers suggestive evidence: While 59 percent of Asian Muslims identified the war in Gaza as their top policy priority in the 2024 presidential election, the same was true of only 32 percent of white and 12 percent of black Muslims.

It is in this restless, estranged population—secular in practice, Muslim in political identity—that Third Worldism finds its most fertile ground.



Third Worldism is not a recent invention. Its intellectual roots run through the Algerian War of Independence, when Jean-Paul Sartre

and Frantz Fanon moralized revolutionary violence as a cleansing, liberatory force, and through Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which recast Western knowledge itself as a colonial enterprise. Institutionalized in American universities over the following decades, these ideas hardened into what Hudson Institute scholar Zineb Riboua calls a "political theology": a worldview that treats any movement arrayed against Western power as inherently righteous. By October 7, 2023, it had migrated from the fringes of academia into mainstream political life. The slogans that appeared within hours of the Hamas attacks were not spontaneous expressions of outrage but the product of a conceptual system built over decades, now fluently spoken by a generation of American politicians and activists.

Third Worldism's most visible manifestation is not terrorism but what my colleague Tal Fortgang calls civil terrorism: mass unlawful behavior designed to coerce people into adopting unpopular political positions, typically by going just far enough to break the law while stopping short of bodily harm. Think of the college students who took over campus quads and libraries while raging against "Zionists"; nonprofits that vowed to keep blocking roads until Americans stopped supporting Israel; or vandalism that lionizes terrorist groups. None of these actions are constitutionally protected protests. They are harassment, intimidation, and antisocial behavior—a deliberate strategy to maximize disruption at minimal personal risk. That protesters so often hide their faces and evade accountability is itself the confession: Theirs is a politics of coercion, not conscience.

The secular character of Third Worldism also explains phenomena that might otherwise seem incoherent. Consider the seeming contradiction of "Queers for Palestine." Presumably, the activists behind this movement oppose the criminalization of homosexuality, a core tenet of Islamism. Their choice of ally, therefore, makes

sense only if they understand Islam primarily as a political identity rather than a religious one and if their chief motivation is hostility to American power and its perceived proxies. Third Worldism's capacity to recruit across racial, religious, and ethnic lines is precisely what makes it a more expansive and durable ideological challenge than Islamism. It is also what makes it so dangerous as a permission structure for Islamist violence. By celebrating "anti-imperialist" resistance movements as inherently righteous and insisting that the real violence is always structural, always Western, and always Zionist, Third Worldism provides the moral vocabulary according to which attacks like Ghazali's become, for some, not atrocities but acts of liberation.

The policy responses available are imperfect but not negligible. First, states should vigorously enforce existing laws against civil terrorism and raise penalties for antisocial behavior that exploits the gray zone between criminality and prosecution, as Utah's legislature recently did. The logic is familiar from "broken windows" policing: Tolerating minor disorder signals that major disorder will be tolerated, too. Civil terrorists count on prosecutors looking the other way. Vigorous prosecution would prove them wrong. Second, the federal government should investigate the networks organizing acts of civil terrorism for criminal conspiracy, nonprofit law violations, and material support for terrorism. You can't criminalize Third Worldist ideas, but you can dismantle the infrastructure that translates them into organized campaigns of harassment and intimidation.

The deeper challenge is the ideas themselves. Foreign funding of American educational institutions warrants disclosure requirements and perhaps even outright prohibition. But that only addresses the problem on the margins. Our universities are already saturated with anti-Western orthodoxies that require no foreign subsidy. The more fundamental reform is structural: increasing the accountability of

universities to their trustees and, through them, to the public. The goal is not ideological coercion but the restoration of a minimal civic commitment: respect for the society that makes free inquiry and religious liberty possible in the first place.

Third Worldism, left unchecked, won't remain on the radical fringe. Consider the first months of Zohran Mamdani's mayoralty. In March 2026, two men inspired by ISIS attempted to detonate shrapnel-filled improvised explosive devices outside Gracie Mansion. Mamdani forcefully condemned the anti-Islam rally that preceded the attack—but even after describing the bombing attempt as “a heinous act of terrorism,” he declined to name or condemn the jihadist ideology that inspired it. The following month, he vetoed a city council bill establishing protest buffer zones around schools, citing concerns about the rights of pro-Palestinian demonstrators. Somehow, Third Worldists always insist on maximum vigilance about Islamophobia while offering little more than equivocation about jihadism.



Third Worldism is a serious challenge, but it is not without precedent. Consider the trajectory of an earlier immigrant population that gave rise to its own generation of radicals: Jews.

Third Worldism is proving as seductive to today's second-generation American Muslim radicals as socialism, Communism, and anarchism were to the second-generation Jewish radicals of the 1920s and 1930s. The parallel is closer than it might appear. Like today's Third Worldists, the Jewish radicals of that era were largely secular. Their radicalism was a substitute identity rather than an extension of religious practice, a way of channeling communal energy into political commitment. The Rosenbergs, convicted of treason by a Jewish judge and executed in

1951, are the tragic extreme and long tail of that tendency. Like Third Worldism, the Jewish radical movements of the early- and mid-20th century were not marginal phenomena; they shaped American intellectual and political life in ways that took decades to work through.

What eventually brought the children and grandchildren of Jewish radicals back was not suppression but confidence: America's mid-century commitment to its own liberalism, the demonstrable reality of its promise of equality under the law. For Jews, the arc from adversarial to patriotic assimilation was neither automatic nor guaranteed. It required America to live up to its own ideals. But it happened. Is a similar arc available to the second-generation American Muslims now in the grip of Third Worldism? And do American institutions have the conviction to make the case?

Needless to say, I am not a disinterested observer of these questions. I am the son of Muslim immigrants whose lives were profoundly damaged by Islamist violence in their country of origin and who felt immense gratitude to this country for the opportunity to build a life. The Islam of my youth was a syncretic tradition deeply rooted in Sufism; it respected Hindu practices and valued tolerance above all else. It is my decidedly imperfect religious upbringing that has made me hostile to political Islam, which I've long understood as an effort to subsume local identities and practices into a sterile, homogenizing neo-imperial project, one more concerned with subjugating religious minorities and other dissenters than with achieving spiritual transcendence. That formation has left me alert, not indifferent, to what Islamism and Third Worldism are doing to the humane, tolerant traditions that I and many other American Muslims actually come from.

And I am far from alone in this regard. The millions of American Muslims who celebrate, identify with, and depend on the freedom and pluralism that Islamism violently rejects have as much at

stake in this argument as anyone. So, too, do the lapsed American Muslims who have quietly abandoned their religious inheritance altogether, sometimes out of outrage and shame over the horrors committed in the name of Islam.

We cannot ban noxious ideologies, nor should we try. What we can do is defend the tradition that makes pluralism possible: the tradition George Washington invoked in 1790 when he promised the Hebrew Congregation of Newport that this would be a nation in which “every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.” That promise was made to Jews. It applies equally to Muslims. It is worth defending. *

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