

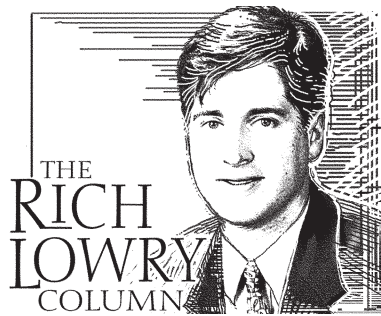
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THE RICH LOWRY COLUMN

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By Rich Lowry



Zohran Mamdani's bogus explanation for opposing Israel

It's a shame, really. New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani is such a strong supporter of pluralism that he has to single out the state of Israel for unique opprobrium. Asked by Jonathan Karl of ABC News in an interview for "This Week" whether he supports Israel's status as a Jewish state, Mamdani said he doesn't — he'd only support Israel "as a state with equal rights."

"I believe that any state that privileges one religion over another is one that I can't tell you I support," he continued, "whether it be Israel or Saudi Arabia or anywhere else."

Mamdani makes it sound as though Israel is a theocracy, and so he has to withhold his support until such time as it meets his exacting standards for state neutrality in religious matters and freedom of conscience.

The same is true, sadly, of Saudi Arabia. When was the last time, though, that you heard Mamdani or his movement, the Democratic Socialists of America, inveighing with great moral passion against Saudi Arabia?

This Mamdani line of argument is built on a falsehood about Israel and is transparently an exercise in bad faith and double standards.

Israel doesn't have an official religion — repeat, it has no state religion. Instead, it is the homeland for Jews. Its Basic Law says that Israel is "the nation-state of the Jewish people, in which it realizes its natural, cultural, religious and historical right to self-determination." In other words, Israel is for the Jews in much the same way, say, that Poland is for the Poles or Japan for the Japanese.

That these countries have distinct national identities defined by the peoples who live in them doesn't mean they aren't free societies. The Israeli Declaration of Independence says the Jewish state "will ensure complete equality of social and political rights

to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture."

And, indeed, there is freedom of religion in Israel. Christian, Muslim, Druze and Baha'i communities maintain their own religious institutions and are free to worship as they please. The wrinkle is that — in an inheritance from the Ottoman Empire — Israel recognizes various religions and gives their courts authority over matters such as marriage and divorce.

To liken any of this to Saudi Arabia is perverse. The desert kingdom is an absolute monarchy with no political rights and a state-enforced official religion; the Quran is its constitution.

If Mamdani were sincere in saying he cannot support any state that privileges one religion over another, he'd have to set himself against most Muslim countries in the world, which make Islam their official religion and often discriminate against religious minorities. He'd have to look askance at Nordic countries, where there are established churches. He'd hate England for the official status of the Anglican Church, and utterly disdain Greece for its special recognition of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Mamdani, by the way, recently skipped New York City's Israel Day parade but attended the Pakistan Day parade, despite the fact that Islam is Pakistan's state religion and religious minorities face legal and informal discrimination in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

More consequentially, if the mayor took his pluralism seriously, he would oppose a Palestinian state on grounds that Palestinian society needs to further evolve to embrace Western norms — lest we risk creating a new Islamic state that represses its people and rests on a foundation of Islamic law.

Of course, Mamdani will never do this. His purported universalism is a pretext, a way to dress up his irrational animus toward Israel.

Mamdani told Jonathan Karl that his view on Israel "comes back to a fundamental belief that we should all be considered equal." Such is the mayor's commitment to equality that he singles out one people and one state for particular obloquy and asks us to believe that pluralism demands that the Jews cannot have a homeland.

Rich Lowry is editor of the National Review.

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