Mamdani, Netanyahu and the capitalist state

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24 July 2026

On the evening of Tuesday, July 21, New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani, the most prominent elected member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), released a video statement on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The first half of the video was an indictment of Netanyahu, who Mamdani states is "a war criminal, the architect of a horrific genocide against the Palestinian people." He recites the toll of more than 73,000 Palestinians killed (in fact, far higher); tens of thousands of children maimed, many undergoing amputations without anesthesia; maternity and neonatal hospitals deliberately targeted; food blocked at the border and starvation wielded as a weapon; hundreds of aid workers and journalists murdered.

Netanyahu is scheduled to attend a meeting of the UN in New York City in September, and Mamdani had earlier stated that Netanyahu would be arrested if he did so. In the video released on Tuesday, however, Mamdani conceded that "we do not have the independent legal authority to enforce this warrant." He concluded: "The federal government, however, does, and I call on them to join the ICC [International Criminal Court] and execute this warrant."

The denunciations and slanders came within hours. Mike Huckabee, Trump's ambassador to Israel, called Mamdani "an evil antisemite who deliberately lies about serious things like 'genocide' to stoke Jew hate" and added: "If anyone should be arrested, it's the Mayor of NY for incitement." Zionist organizations repeated the same line, with AIPAC declaring that the video is "based on a modern blood libel and outrageous lies."

The popular response was very different and of objective significance. Within a day, Mamdani's video had been viewed more than 13 million times. Mamdani won the mayoralty of the city with the largest Jewish population in the United States, many who voted for him, while denouncing Netanyahu as a war criminal. His statements about the genocide of Palestinians resonate with millions of young people who have participated in demonstrations against the genocide for nearly three years.

Mamdani's declaration that he will not arrest Netanyahu is, as a factual matter, a reversal. As a candidate, he pledged to arrest Netanyahu if he came to New York, and as recently as July 18 he said in an interview with the *New York Times* that he was in "active conversation" with the city's law department about enforcing the ICC warrant.

Many of those who took these pledges seriously have responded to the reversal with anger. The essential criticism of Mamdani's conduct, however, is not that he has failed to carry out a single pledge. Far more important is the light the episode sheds on the underlying bankruptcy of his entire political perspective.

Netanyahu, when he arrives in New York, will do so under the protection of the federal government—that is, of the most powerful sections of the American ruling class. In July of last year, when then Democratic Party nominee Mamdani had raised the issue of Netanyahu's arrest, Trump, standing beside Netanyahu at the White House, dismissed it with the contempt of a man who knows where power lies: "[Mamdani's] going to behave. He'll behave. He better behave."

On Monday, following Mamdani's interview with the *Times*, Trump posted that Netanyahu "will not be arrested, in any way, shape, or form, while in the United States of America." New York Governor Kathy Hochul, a Democrat, took the same position, stating that arresting Netanyahu is outside the NYPD's powers. Other leading Democrats, who have repeatedly voted to finance the Israeli genocide, either made similar statements or remained silent.

The Trump administration has, moreover, sanctioned

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the prosecutor and judges of the very court whose warrant Mamdani asks Washington to execute, and the State Department has vowed to dismantle the ICC altogether.

As for the instrument his pledge presupposed, the New York Police Department, Mamdani himself ensured, as one of his first acts as mayor-elect, that it would remain in the hands of Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch, heiress to the Tisch family's $10 billion Loews fortune and an open partisan of the Israeli state. In May, Tisch marched in the Israel Day parade alongside Israeli ministers. In September it will be Tisch's NYPD that guards Netanyahu's motorcade through Manhattan, on the orders of the mayor who declared him unwelcome.

That is, aside from the issues of jurisdiction involved in arresting Netanyahu, the individual Mamdani declares a war criminal enjoys the protection of the entire state apparatus, including his own government.

It is no different with Mamdani's pledges to defend the living standards of the working class. His promise of universal childcare has been scaled down to fit the budget of a city he cannot finance, because he cannot tax the wealthy without the permission of Albany, which will not grant it. His pledge to defend immigrants has not stopped ICE from carrying out operations in New York. He has kept the NYPD budget at $6.4 billion, while a $5.4 billion deficit prepares austerity against the workers who elected him. Each verbal proclamation has run up against the same reality. Power is in the hands of the ruling class, and the election of a "socialist" mayor has not altered that fact by one iota.

The entire perspective of the DSA is premised on a rejection of the basic principle of Marxism, that the state is not a neutral body but an instrument of class rule. The DSA promotes the fiction that the interests of the working class can be advanced within the framework of the capitalist state—and, in particular, through the Democratic Party—without the development of a movement of the working class against it.

Mamdani has drawn the practical conclusions. Since his election he has cultivated a working relationship with Trump, traveling to the White House twice to pledge collaboration. At every point where his electoral promises clashed with the interests of the ruling class, he has come down on the side of the latter. He endorsed Governor Hochul for reelection even as she issued emergency orders supplying scab labor against striking New York nurses, dispatched the NYPD to protect ICE agents from protesters, and granted permits and police protection to the pro-genocide Israel Day parade.

It is necessary to address another political issue. The focus on Netanyahu as an individual obscures what the genocide is. Netanyahu deserves to be prosecuted, but his crimes are the crimes of imperialism. Mamdani notes in his video that the bombs dropped on Gaza are made in America. But he does not indict the American state that financed and delivered them, and certainly not the Democratic Party, which under Biden organized and armed the genocide that Trump now continues.

Nor does the genocide stand alone. It is the spearhead of an eruption of imperialist violence on a world scale and of a war against the working class at home, waged through mass deportations, the destruction of democratic rights and the buildup of the apparatus of dictatorship.

The entire function of the DSA is to serve as a block for what is necessary: the political independence of the working class, organized on an international basis, to fight for the overthrow of the capitalist system that produces genocide and war as inevitably as it produces profit. The capitalist state, which exists to uphold the interests of the ruling class, must be replaced with a workers' state.

Netanyahu, and all those responsible for the genocide of the Palestinian people, can and will be brought to account for their crimes. But this will be done not through the courts of the imperialist powers or the appeals of their left-wing managers but through the independent political mobilization of the international working class against the capitalist system itself.

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