

Opinion

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Who Is Allowed to Mourn 9/11 and Its Aftermath?

Meher Ahmad

An editor in the Opinion section.

THIS year's Sept. 11 commemoration at ground zero featured a familiar scene. Politicians, both retired and currently in office, gathered between the sunken pools built on the former footprints where the north and south towers of the World Trade Center once stood. The event is designed to be devoid of politics: The only people who speak are the loved ones of the victims as they read the names of people who died in the attacks one by one. The politicians in attendance aren't there to speak, but to bear witness.

But the ceremony this year became the subject of political scrutiny. Cameras captured Zohran Mamdani, the mayor of New York, making his way to Rudy Giuliani, who held the same post the day the towers were struck. The handshake should have been ordinary — two men who have occupied a role few others have greeting each other at a memorial event. But days before, Mr. Giuliani went on a TV tirade against Mr. Mamdani, demanding that he stay away from the commemoration. "All the Muslims" Mr. Mamdani supports, Mr. Giuliani said, "are murderers." At Friday's ceremony, the former mayor says, he told the current mayor, "I pray for you," and Mr. Mamdani responded, "Thank you."

The scrutiny of Mr. Mamdani's every move in the days leading up to the 25th anniversary was born out of a controversy that began brewing weeks before. Mr. Giuliani's tirade was part of a larger smear campaign that deemed the sitting mayor of New York City somehow unfit to attend the ceremony commemorating the darkest day in the city's history. It's a story that hinges on the notion that Mr. Mamdani, who was 9 years old the day the twin towers were struck, has beliefs that are more in line with those of the Sept. 11 hijackers than with those of the millions of New Yorkers he serves and governs.

Part of the tragedy of senseless violence at the scale witnessed on Sept. 11 is that assigning blame becomes an ambiguous task. How can such violence be avenged? The enemy has shifted in these 25 years: Osama bin Laden, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, Saddam Hussein. Even when those men had been vanquished in one way or another, it seems as if the fault can reconstitute and land at the feet of a different Muslim, through the smoke and mirrors of insinuation. A national suspicion toward Muslims



tend the Sept. 11 ceremony, built his legal career fighting the state apparatus created to surveil and target Muslim communities after the attacks. Several prominent positions in City Hall are staffed by Muslims whose careers were directly or indirectly tied to the work of rectifying the injustices that Muslims in America faced after the attacks; Faiza Ali, the commissioner of immigrant affairs, helped lead a successful campaign to get Muslim holidays recognized by the New York City public school system.

Growing up and coming to political prominence in an environment where one wrong word or suggestion could relegate a Muslim to the category of terrorist sympathizer, Mr. Mamdani seemed particularly adept at navigating the controversy leading up to the ceremony. When asked by the press, he refused to engage in the calls for him to stay away from the ceremony. Instead, he stuck to a single message: that the primary focus of the anniversary of Sept. 11 should be the families of the victims who died that day.

But even that is not enough. The cameras that followed Mr. Mamdani closely at the anniversary on Friday captured him greeting Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the pair briefly smiling as they spoke before returning to the somber event. The New York Post headline: "AOC Spotted Laughing Next to Mamdani at 9/11 Ceremony — as Victims' Families Weep During the Reading of Names." (The article went on to make it clear they were in fact greeting each other — and noted that Mr. Mamdani had stayed for the entire ceremony.)

There's a difficult lesson here for Muslim Americans considering life in the public eye. A certain type of criticism of prominent Muslims does not seem to fade as we move further in time from the attacks of Sept. 11. And while Islamophobia may not always be the most prominent line of attack, it's always there, available as a tool to keep us in our place.

THE POLITICAL FANTASIES born out of Sept. 11 sometimes make it difficult to remember the visceral realities of the attacks. Two thousand, nine hundred and ninety-seven lives ended. Roughly 1.5 million tons of debris stretched across three disaster sites. The World Trade Center Health Program has counted health conditions in over 150,000 survivors and first responders. After the Mamdani administration recently made public a cache of documents that show

— one cultivated by both state policy and culture that feels comfortable depicting our religion as insidious — has made it easy for a lot of Americans to squint at a Muslim man and see one of the bad guys.

Perhaps that's how Mr. Mamdani found himself at the center of a firestorm we should easily be able to identify as fueled by bigotry, and how the very people who claimed to want to keep this year's Sept. 11 anniversary an apolitical event of remembrance managed to do the exact opposite. The logic of why Mr. Mamdani shouldn't have attended belies the undercurrent of beliefs that have become acceptable to voice in mainstream America: that Muslims can't really be Americans and that our religion is irreconcilable with American values. Twenty-five years after a group of Islamist hijackers killed thousands, that belief echoes through American discourse.

THERE'S ALSO SMOKE and mirrors at the root of this controversy. Calls for Mr. Mamdani to step away from the ceremony began with a Change.org petition created by Giovanni Galante, who lost his wife in the attacks on the World Trade Center. The petition cited concerns over Mr. Mamdani's "public positions, associations and responses to rhetoric that many perceive as hostile" to American values. The New York Post quickly picked it up, declaring, "Thousands of 9/11 families demand Mamdani be banned from 25th-Anniversary."

According to reporting by the journalist Judd Legum, Mr. Galante had not verified how many family members of those who died that day had signed it, let alone verified any of the signatures at all. It's unclear exactly how many families of the victims actually signed Mr. Galante's petition. (It went on to amass over 100,000 signatories.) But the lack of clarity on the number of families who signed it didn't matter by then: The narrative that many Sept. 11 families found Mr. Mamdani unfit to attend the ceremony had already taken hold.

Mr. Giuliani was joined in his rejection of Mr. Mamdani's presence by Vickie Paladino, a City Council member; George Pataki, a former governor of New York; and Bruce Blakeman, the Republican candidate running against Gov. Kathy Hochul. Mr. Galante and a group of Sept. 11 families gathered on the steps of City Hall days before the ceremony to demand that the mayor not attend. A group of retired Port Authority officers reportedly took the opportunity to get their jabs in, too.

Their logic varied. Some said his association with the political podcaster Hasan Piker was enough to disqualify him from attending. That Mr. Mamdani's father's writings on Islamophobia and terrorism make Mr. Mamdani himself un-American. That the attendance of his chief city counsel, Ramzi Kassem, a decorated civil rights lawyer who served in the Biden administration — as well as defended Guantánamo inmates as part of his legal work — at an executive order signing ceremony meant that Mr. Mamdani was spotlighting "someone whose work intersects with the very ideology that took their loved ones," as one retired New York Police Department detective put it.

One could address each of these allegations individually; in each, kernels of truth are used to conjure Islamophobic specters.

Opposition to Mamdani's visit to ground zero was fueled by the belief that Muslims can't be Americans.

But another way to interpret what Mr. Mamdani's detractors accuse him of — espousing terrorism, hatred and violence toward Americans — is that the simple fact of being Muslim is all it takes to be accused of these things. In the imagining of the Giulianis and Patakis of the world, there's nothing a man like Mr. Mamdani could say or do to prove his Americanness.

THE SUSPICION OF Muslims in America didn't begin with Sept. 11, but in the years since, it has metastasized beyond the knee-jerk spike of hate crimes the community experienced in the immediate aftermath of the terrorists' attack. A recent Pew poll found that 43 percent of respondents said Muslims were less patriotic than other Americans.

The poll also found that views on Islam are more negative, and more partisan, than in 2002.

It's unthinkable to imagine President Trump visiting a mosque six days after an attack at that scale, as President George W. Bush did just six days after Sept. 11, to quell a wave of anti-Muslim rhetorical and physical attacks. If Americans knew somewhat or little about Islam on Sept. 10, 2001, 25 years on, that void has been filled with an incalculable volume of media that has baked mistrust of Muslims into the American psyche.

In so many ways, coming of age in that climate has shaped the generation of Muslims now reaching the upper echelons of power. Mr. Kassem, who became a focal point of the campaign to deem Mr. Mamdani unfit to at-

licity in the vicinity of ground zero, the number of people known to have been sickened or to have died as a result of exposure is very likely to grow. There's grief in recognizing the long tail of devastation caused by that day.

Then there are the realities of the wars that came after, and the grief of the communities affected by them. Quantifying the toll of the so-called War on Terror is difficult, but the Costs of War project at Brown University puts the direct civilian toll at more than 432,000 people across five countries. Indirectly, the project estimates that between 3.6 million and 3.8 million people have died in post-9/11 war zones. That's to say nothing of the physical and environmental damage.

How can we begin to grasp that scale of devastation? For many — most — Americans, the fact of the violence wrought in the name of the people who died on Sept. 11 is often conceptual, subject to the swirling unrealities of our times.

In the aftermath of the United States' disastrous exit from its nearly 20-year occupation of Afghanistan, the American military left behind tons of waste: abandoned offices, military barracks full of gear, everything from night vision goggles to paper shredders and pots and pans. The footprint of the occupation was massive, so the abrupt exit from American bases and outposts meant heaps of American items were left behind. The Afghan artist Aziz Hazara worked with scrap dealers and intermediaries in Kabul to collect containers full of this detritus from Bagram Air Base and ship it to New York City. The installation made from this material, which opens on Saturday at SculptureCenter, is aptly titled "Coming Home."

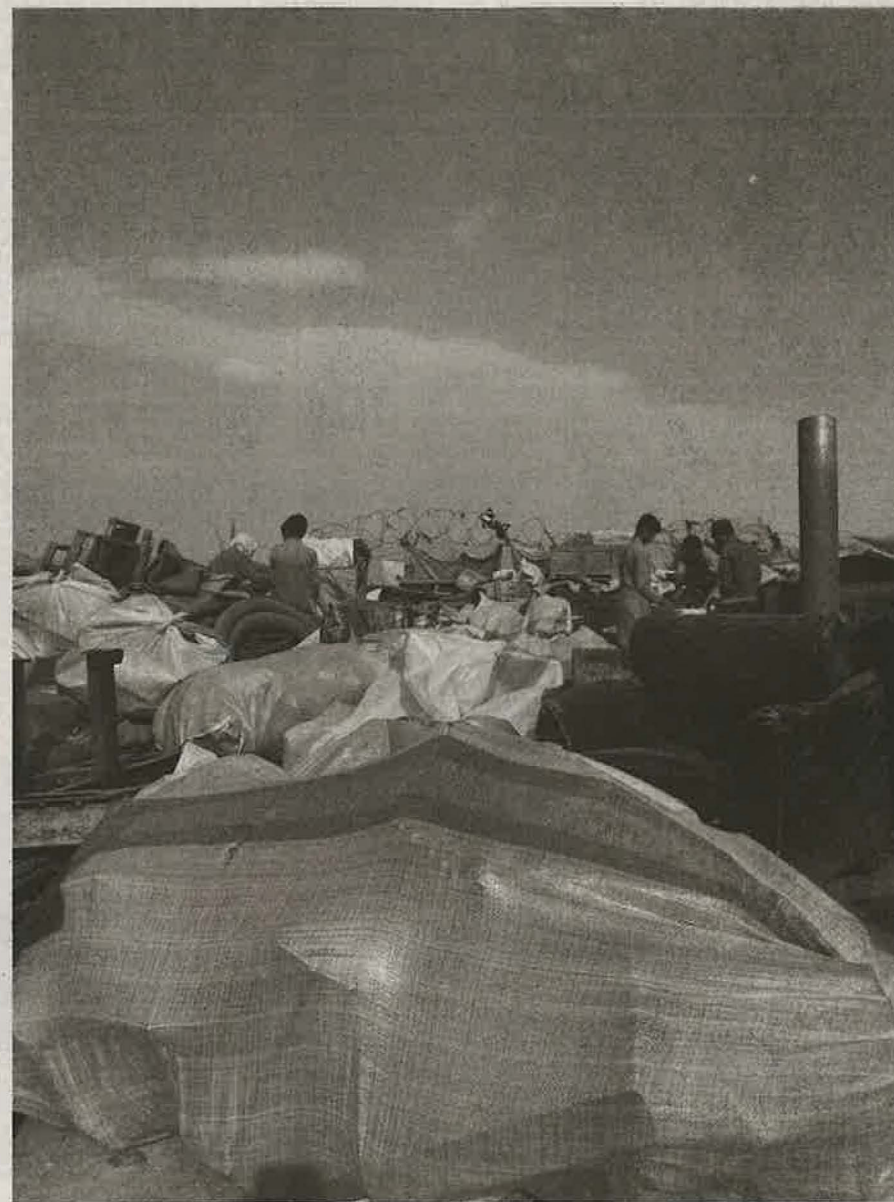
I visited the installation as the political scandal around Mr. Mamdani was brewing thanks to an invitation from a friend who curated the exhibition. Arranged in an otherwise austere space in Queens, the objects Mr. Hazara has collected feel both absurd and mundane. A cheap French press. Military-grade knee pads. Body bags. A gaudy umbrella holder. Each made me imagine how it might have been used before it was discarded. Which armed services member got rid of an ankle brace before abruptly leaving behind America's longest military occupation? What kind of documents were threaded through a hand-held paper shredder left behind at Bagram?

The objects are arranged in piles as you might see at a flea market, or, more relevant to Mr. Hazara's project, as you might see at the black markets that have cropped up in the countries the United States has invaded since Sept. 11. The trash (and that is what it is: American trash) is presented without much fuss or explanation. It just is.

I found walking through the remains of the War on Terror, after spending that morning in the head-spinning political theater of the Mamdani Sept. 11 controversy, oddly grounding. The objects are proof of the calamity that faced our communities, of wars that are forever tethered to the events of Sept. 11. Even those of us who have experienced the violence and suspicion that came after the attacks firsthand can begin to lose grasp of the reality of it.

But it exists, and the fact of its existence cannot be erased with sleights of hand.

POOL PHOTO BY ADAM GRAY



AZIZ HAZARA, "BAGRAM PICK UP, 2021," FROM "COMING HOME," 2021-26; PHOTOGRAPH BY ZAKER MANDEGAR