

Democratic leaders join attack on Democratic congresswoman

Bogus charges of anti-Semitism fuel right-wing campaign against Ilhan Omar

Patrick Martin
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Democratic Representative Ilhan Omar issued a public apology Monday afternoon, backing away from her criticism of the inordinate influence of the Israel lobby over the US Congress. This political retreat—under immense pressure from the Democratic Party leadership—does not erase the truth of what she said. On the contrary, it verifies it.

The congresswoman from Minneapolis was elected last November as one of the first two Muslim-American women in the House of Representatives, along with Rashida Tlaib of Detroit. Representative Tlaib is also a target of a right-wing smear campaign claiming that the Palestinian-American is anti-Semitic because of her public criticism of Israeli crimes against the Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza.

Omar, a Somali-American immigrant whose family fled war-torn Somalia when she was a child, has been the target of right-wing and Zionist groups because of her support for the Boycott, Divestiture and Sanctions (BDS) movement, which advocates cutting off academic and business ties with the state of Israel to force a change in Israeli policy towards the Palestinians.

In a Twitter exchange over the weekend with Glenn Greenwald of the *Intercept*, in which Greenwald voiced his support for Omar against criticism from the top Republican in the House, Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, Omar tweeted that there were financial reasons for the support of Washington politicians for Israeli repression of the Palestinians. “It’s all about the Benjamins baby,” she wrote, using a slang term for \$100 bills, popularized in rap music. When a pro-Israel critic asked what she meant by this, Omar responded with a single word: “AIPAC.”

The America Israel Public Affairs Committee is the most powerful Zionist lobby in Washington, spending millions to promote US support for Israeli settlement activities on the West Bank and, more generally, whatever actions the Israeli government takes, both domestically and in foreign policy. The annual AIPAC conference is usually a huge affair, with thousands in attendance. It is frequently addressed by presidents, presidential candidates and congressional leaders of both parties, as well as top representatives of the US national security establishment. While AIPAC does not give money directly to candidates, its stamp of approval serves to direct an immense flood of cash from the super-rich to its favored candidates.

This exchange sent the equivalent of an electric shock through

the Washington political establishment, and particularly its Democratic Party wing. The congresswoman was immediately and publicly denounced for the worst possible crime: telling the truth!

On Monday morning, the House Democratic Party leadership issued a joint statement, declaring, “Anti-Semitism must be called out, confronted and condemned whenever it is encountered, without exception.” It went on to condemn Representative Omar by name and declare that her “use of anti-Semitic tropes and prejudicial accusations about Israel’s supporters is deeply offensive.”

The most significant and revealing sentence in the statement went as follows: “We are and will always be strong supporters of Israel in Congress because we understand that our support is based on shared values and strategic interests.”

What are the “values” shared by the Democrats with the state of Israel? Apartheid-style racism and colonial oppression of the Palestinian people? The gunning down of defenseless people engaged in passive resistance, the fate of hundreds at the border wall between Gaza and Israel last year? The elevation of one religion above all others, as laid out in the declaration, last year, that Israel is a state of the Jewish people?

Even more important are the shared “strategic interests,” the defense of the interests of American capitalism throughout the Middle East, its domination of the most important oil resources on the planet and the strategic locations required for control of that oil, such as the Persian Gulf, the straits of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb, and the Suez Canal. In all these areas Israel acts as a junior partner, or direct instrument, of US imperialism, the most reactionary force on the planet.

Ilhan Omar, as a Democratic politician, defends those same strategic interests of American imperialism. But as the offspring of Somali immigrants—whose country is still being devastated by American bombs and drones—and as a Muslim, she has felt compelled to state some inconvenient truths about America’s most important ally in the Middle East.

Omar issued the required apology, essentially conceding the slanders by her critics, who claimed that her reference to the money and power of the Zionist lobby was an “anti-Semitic trope.” But she tried to soften her capitulation by adding, “I reaffirm the problematic role of lobbyists in our politics, whether it be AIPAC, the NRA or the fossil fuel industry. It’s gone on too

long and we must be willing to address it.”

This is unlikely to be the last word on the subject. Republican congressional leaders are pressing for formal censure of Omar and Tlaib, as part of an effort to effectively criminalize the entire BDS protest movement. Several Democratic representatives are circulating a letter that would go much further than the statement issued by Nancy Pelosi, Steny Hoyer and four other leading Democrats. This would directly tie the statements of Omar and Tlaib, and any other criticism of Israeli policy, to anti-Semitic documents such as “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” the 2017 fascist demonstration in Charlottesville, Virginia, and the massacre of 11 elderly Jews at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh last fall.

The purpose of such foul amalgams is to smear anyone who defends the rights of the Palestinian people against Israeli oppression as hostile to Jews as a people. The letter explicitly states that “to delegitimize Israel and deny its right to exist as a Jewish state” is to support positions that “are, at their core, anti-Semitic.”

The same type of smear campaign has been raging for several years in Great Britain, targeting the leader of the British Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, and other Labourites who have expressed sympathy for the Palestinians and reservations about Israeli atrocities on the West Bank and in Gaza. The purpose is to create the fictional bogey-man of “left-wing anti-Semitism” so as to disguise the very real—and historically ominous—resurgence of ultra-right and fascist forces, many of them anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi in character, which operate as allies of both the Trump administration and the ultra-right Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu.

Among the far-right leaders Netanyahu has embraced in recent months are Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, Matteo Salvini of Italy, Hungary’s Viktor Orban, Austria’s Sebastian Kurz and the Philippines’ Rodrigo Duterte.

The impact of such campaigns against critics of Israel is magnified by the refusal of those under attack—Corbyn and his backers in the Labour Party, those “left” Democrats in the US who are mildly critical of Israeli settlements and brutality—to fight back against it. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who appeared at a joint press conference with Omar and Tlaib only a few days ago, has been resolutely silent on the campaign against Omar.

This spinelessness is in sharp contrast to the popular reaction to Omar’s comments, which is far from uniformly stamped by the pro-Zionist campaign in the corporate media. A look at the reader responses to the latest *New York Times* article on Omar demonstrates this.

The article itself, posted Monday afternoon, is viciously hostile, although it contains one truth—the observation that “what distinguished the events of Sunday and Monday from earlier controversies around Ms. Omar was the willingness of Democrats to join in.” There are certainly some readers who pile on the hate-Omar bandwagon. But there are many other more thoughtful and serious comments. Here are a few:

Jonah, from Chicago:

“As a Jewish man—I support Ilhan Omar. Thank you for your courage, Congresswoman. I don’t like it when I hear people repeat Jewish stereotypes. Among the more common comments I hear

usually have to do with money or Jewish people’s supposed control of the financial system. These comments are just dumb; I grew up in the Chicago area and knew affluent Jewish families, but many more in the working and middle class. However, I don’t think these dumb stereotypes have anything in common with Congresswoman Omar’s statement. Omar is right that Israel, under the far-right government of Netanyahu, should not have the unchecked influence that it does on US Congress. Israel does not deserve a blank check, or freedom from scrutiny, especially while being controlled so totally by the right-wing forces currently in power... I thank Ilhan Omar for her bravery, and in tandem want to express my disappointment and distrust in the House Democratic leadership.”

Matt, Seattle:

“As someone who is both a Democrat and Jewish, I am very disappointed in the actions of Pelosi and the Democratic leadership. It’s a well-known fact that AIPAC has an iron grip on Congress, which is why the US Government supports the government of Israel no matter what it does. All Congresswoman Omar did was point out that very uncomfortable truth. Let’s not forget, many American Jews do NOT support the current government of Israel or its policies, and that AIPAC does not represent the views of many American Jews.”

G Leapman, Colorado:

“Rep. Omar is being far too kind to AIPAC and its influence. I’m guessing it’s the benjamins and rhetorical support from evangelicals who are all in on our fornicator president that are the primary force behind our disastrous policies that allows Israel’s current government to oppress Palestinians in the name of God. And, of course, evangelicals support Israel in order to fulfill a biblical prophecy that will lead to the rapture that will take all Christians to heaven and destroy all Jews, Muslims and other non-Christians. So let’s not give my people in the Jewish lobby all the credit. It should be shared with their Christian friends who want to see them all destroyed. Both sides call it God’s Plan. Ironically funny.”

Such comments demonstrate a healthier response to this controversy, as part of the ongoing political radicalization and shift to the left among working people in the United States.



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