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USA

The Fight Over Ilhan Omar

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“The vicious, dirty ‘smear campaign against the first two Muslim women in the U.S. Congress, Ilhan Omar (MN) and Rashida Tlaib (MI), is just beginning.’ That’s the opening of a statement by the Steering Committee of Solidarity, posted February 14, 2019 (<https://solidarity-us.org>).

That’s still true, following the big fight over a House of Representatives resolution that was first intended to isolate and humiliate Ilhan Omar, and potentially to lead to stripping her House Committee on Foreign Affairs assignment (where she already effectively grilled Elliott Abrams over his role in the U.S. genocidal Central American wars of the 1980s).

While the Democratic Congressional leadership might initially have been prepared to throw her under the bus over malicious and false charges of antisemitism, it blew up in their faces when a huge outpouring of support for Ilhan Omar came from a wide progressive swath of Black, Arab-American, Muslim, Jewish and civil liberties sectors outraged that a newly elected Muslim woman, who came to the United States as a refugee from war-devastated Somalia, was being singled out.

Instead of the original draft resolution, a new text was hastily constructed that calls out all kinds of bigotry and the way white supremacist forces have “weaponized hate for political gain, targeting traditionally persecuted peoples, including African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other people of color, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, the LGBTQ community, immigrants, and others with verbal attacks, incitement and violence.”

Pretty strong stuff, and clearly not the kind of thing that Donald Trump had in mind with his presidential tweets demanding that Ilhan Omar be condemned and forced to resign. (In fact, Trump’s antics may have made it harder for the Democratic leadership to condemn her as some of them wanted.)

There was some rather weasel-like debate over whether Rep. Omar had “adequately apologized” for earlier tweets about “the Benjamins” (hundred dollar bills), when it’s far from clear that she had anything to apologize for in the first place. In any case, among the 23 Republicans who voted “no” on the grounds that the resolution was “diluted” and Ilhan Omar not condemned by name, a typical example was Jeff Duncan of South Dakota.

Duncan previously posted a Facebook cartoon of a white man labeled “Europe” with a noose around his neck, watering a tree labeled “Islam” with the other end of the rope tied around it. (Shouldn’t the resolution have named him?)

The attack is not over by any means. The backlash against Ilhan Omar continues in the media, and not only on the right ‘Chris Cuomo on CNN being a particularly nasty example – and we can expect a tsunami of “Benjamins, baby” pouring into her and Rashida Tlaib’s districts to oppose them in the 2020 primaries (while there will undoubtedly be activist outpourings coming to counter the attack).

Curiously in view of its supposed intended focus, the resolution is actually weak in its discussion of real, factual antisemitism. It references the infamous Alfred Dreyfus trial ‘nothing to do with the United States or today, that’s from France in 1895!’ but doesn’t mention U.S. corporate and government actions such as Henry Ford publishing The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, or the U.S. refusal in 1939 to admit the refugee ship St. Louis, forcing it to return

to Europe where many of its passengers died in the Nazi genocide, or Father Coughlin's 1930s anti-Jewish syndicated radio tirades. Funny thing not to mention any of that!

In fact, this whole episode was never a serious exploration of antisemitism or anything else. It was a weapon of political destruction that didn't work.

A Truth Too Far

The crux of the issue was actually pinpointed by "a visibly upset Representative Lois Frankel" (D-FL), for whom Ilhan Omar crossed an inviolable line "by criticizing the motives of Israel's supporters instead of the policies of the Israeli government." (Emphasis added. New York Times, March 11, A12: "Democrats' Fraught Question: How Far Is Too Far?")

Exactly. Harsh criticism of Israel must now be tolerated, at least grudgingly. Israel has become an open wound in the U.S. Jewish community, especially for young people, and even more so among progressive folks in general.

Israel has normalized mass murder of Palestinians at the Gaza border, including hundreds of children in the past year; everyone knows that prime minister Netanyahu is a venal crook, who brought the overly genocidal "Jewish Power" group onto an electoral list to boost his chances in the April election; and Israel's brutal treatment of civilians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is a daily routine.

Netanyahu has now explicitly stated that the new "nation-state" law makes Israel not "the state of all its citizens," but "the nation-state of the Jewish people only." That reduces 21% of Israel's own citizens, Palestinians along with their Arabic language, to official second-class status, and there's no way to cover that up.

Under these circumstances, and with Israel's open embrace of the white-nationalist-loving Donald Trump, the curtain of silence on Israel's behavior has been partially torn open and can't be repaired. The third rail of discourse now is open political discussion of the U.S.-Israeli relationship, in particular the role of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and related organizations in terrorizing U.S. politicians.

Ilhan Omar was pilloried for stating that AIPAC enforces a pledge of "allegiance to a foreign country," the Israeli state. This supposedly "crossed that line" into antisemitism and the so-called "dual loyalty" smear leveled against Jewish U.S. citizens.

There are three essential points here. First, what Ilhan Omar said is simply the truth: AIPAC and the "pro-Israel" lobby are in business to enforce U.S. support of Israel, no matter what it does. Indeed AIPAC in recent years has become the lobby of the Likud party. Calling out that reality now defines what crosses the border of the unspeakable "a truth too far."

Second, there is nothing antisemitic in what Omar said. She never said or implied anything about "the Jews." Indeed, the "pro-Israel" lobby is by no means exclusively Jewish; its most virulent elements are rightwing Christian fundamentalists, and the U.S. military industry is a powerful though silent partner "as of course it was also during the decades of U.S. support of South Africa's apartheid regime."

Even if AIPAC claims to reflect an overwhelming consensus of U.S. Jewish opinion, empirical reality "including the

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large number of Jewish activists who spoke out in support of Ilhan Omar “ shows that it doesn’t, by a long shot.

There’s a third point that doesn’t get enough attention, in my opinion: For the “pro-Israel” lobby’s advocates, there is no divided loyalty. It isn’t a question of putting loyalty to Israel above loyalty to the USA.

In the minds of these folks, backing Israel-no-matter-what is entirely in the U.S. interest. For the fanatical religious zealots, it’s America’s obedience to divine commandments. For the militarist neoconservatives, it’s America’s alliance with a reliable partner in U.S. capitalism ruling the world and smashing anything that gets in the way. For a lot of mainstream and some liberal Democrats, Israel may sometimes be embarrassingly brutal but it’s “our counterweight against radical Islam.”

The U.S.-Israeli axis isn’t about divided loyalty “ it’s ultimately about imperialism. There is no reason to doubt that Israel’s partisans in U.S. politics love America as much as Ilhan Omar does. The real difference is that their course leads toward suicide for both Israel and the United States, while hers points toward a sane alternative “ one that, as the current struggle shows, is gaining strength.