

THE ANGRY ARAB: Why Ilhan Omar is a Dangerous Woman for the US

Washington doesn't like its Muslims or Arabs to take pride in their heritage or oppose the Israeli occupation, writes As'ad AbuKhalil.

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Washington was not expecting the arrival of Reps. Ilhan Omar or Rashida Tlaib. The nation's capital has seen Arabs and Muslims before but they were not like these two new assertive and defiant members of Congress.

The White House, under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, hosted Iftar dinners for Ramadan and invited a variety of Muslims (including of course the Israeli ambassador because he is wildly popular among the world's Muslims), but they were of a different brand. The Bush administration even employed Muslim Arabs or Muslim-born Americans who preached Bush's doctrine to anyone who would listen in the Middle East.

But those were different Arabs. They were the "non-threatening" Arabs who made Westerners feel comfortable in their racism and bigotry. The Arabs who are welcomed in the halls of Congress are usually mimics of the late president of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, and the current king of Jordan. They are the type of Arabs who praise Western wars and downplay Arab anger at the long record of Israeli occupation and aggression.

Some of those Arabs in D.C. are employed as correspondents for Gulf-regime media. Some had even received their training at the research arm of the Israeli lobby, while others work for racist Congress people. They are the kind of Arabs who are paraded before Western audiences to show them that there are Muslim Arabs who are exceptions: the ones who are willing to insult other Arabs and Muslims, and who tell tales about how they were saved from the terrorism of the religion or the culture of the region.

But Minnesota's Ilhan Omar and Michigan's Rashida Tlaib are different. The Muslims whom Washington has been used to receiving from Lebanon or from Gulf embassies are Muslims who are embarrassed about their religion and about their culture. They are the Muslims who apologize day and night for the terrorism of Muslims, as if all Muslims are responsible for the crimes of the few. (The blaming of all Jews for the crimes of Israel is certainly anti-Semitic—just as the blaming of all Muslims for the crimes of the few Muslims is Islamophobic.)

Ilhan Omar, from the second she entered Congress, has made her audience feel uncomfortable, and the press has had a hard time dealing with her.

Acceptable Extremism

Acceptable and subservient Muslims or Arabs are allowed to hold extremist views and to express hatred and hostility to Jewish people as long as they don't offend Israel or Western governments. Anwar Sadat's background as an anti-Semitic Nazi was never an issue for Israel or Western Zionists. In fact, Stuart Eizenstat, Jimmy Carter's domestic policy

advisor, downplays the Nazi sympathy of Sadat and attributes it dismissively to anti-British sentiments, in his recent book, "President Carter."

And when Mahmoud Abbas, the president of Palestine, agreed after the assassination of Yasser Arafat to serve Israeli occupation interests, his anti-Semitic past (his PhD dissertation in Moscow contained Holocaust denial) was also forgiven. The Saudi regime, the largest-by far-purveyor of anti-Semitic propaganda among Muslims in the last century is also forgiven.

It is not about anti-Semitism, as evidenced by Israeli alliances with evangelical Christians and European far-right groups. Zionists object to anti-Semitism—real or concocted as is the case with Omar—when there is criticism of Israel and calls for boycott, divestment and sanctions on Israel, or BDS.

Ilhan Omar also doesn't look the part. Westerners prefer whiskey-drinking Muslims who are willing to mock fellow Muslims, and who are willing to denigrate Palestinian political aspirations for the amusement of the Zionist think-tank crowd in D.C.

And what is rarely mentioned about Ilhan Omar is that she wears the veil. At least in France, where Islamophobia has become the national secular religion of the republic, the hostility to the veil has become unmasked at all points of the political spectrum, left, right and center.

Hostility to the veil has been less vocally expressed in D.C. (veiled Muslim women have numerous stories of harassment and abuse to tell). But Congress had to change

its rules to allow Omar to wear the veil under its roof, even though exceptions to the longstanding hat ban had reportedly been made for the wearing of yarmulkes.

It would have been less irksome for Omar's haters if she did not wear the veil. Westerners prefer Muslims to be atheists or non-practicing Muslims. (In the second teaching position I held at Tufts University, the most senior member of the department of political science once rushed to my office and asked me hurriedly: "You are not Muslim, are you?" I said: "Well, I am from a Muslim family but I am personally an atheist." He said: "Oh, that is good," and left.)

Unacceptable Candor

And Omar speaks in a refreshingly candid language that does not stick to the rhetorical clichés of D.C. politicians.

By contrast, New York's Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has learned to censor herself. Ever since she was attacked for previous remarks she had made about Palestinians, Ocasio-Cortez has resorted to speaking in the vague generalities that U.S. diplomats also use to avoid the wrath of Israel and its supporters. She no longer seems to even utter the word Palestine. She has become too aware of the price to be paid.

Omar and Rashida Tlaib have also supported BDS, which is the biggest sin, as far as Israel and AIPAC are concerned. The U.S. has made it very clear that BDS has emerged as the second danger to Israel after the threat of military resistance to Israeli occupation and aggression.

The endorsement of BDS by two members of Congress bestows

official legitimacy on a movement that Israel has been desperately trying to paint as an anti-Semitic reincarnation of Nazism. But this has been the history of Israeli propaganda: all enemies of Israel, communists, Arab nationalists, Palestinian nationalists, rightists, leftists, have been labeled as anti-Semitic. Even the secular Arab nationalist leader, the late Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, was accused of anti-Semitism by Israel when none of his speeches ever contained an anti-Semitic word.

And now, the U.S. Congress, which sat silent about the wave of Islamophobia unleashed during and after the Trump campaign, suddenly sees the need to issue a proclamation against religious bigotry and racism.

It is a bitter irony that the U.S. Congress has, for the first time, condemned Islamophobia in a statement widely understood to be an attempt to discipline the first Muslim American female member of Congress. The resolution had nothing to do with ostensible congressional outrage against Islamophobia. (Since Sept. 11, many members of Congress have become vocal anti-Islam bigots, as is U.S. President Donald Trump, who advocated a ban on all Muslim visitors to the country). The reference to Islamophobia was added to appease those new progressive members of Congress and the African American members who protested against a very selective standard of outrage.

Weeks after Omar's election to Congress, the Zionist lobby succeeded in turning her into a caricature. They inserted the word "Jewish" every time she spoke against support for Israel (she did not once refer to Jews in her discourse about Israel and its supporters).

The word “trope” is now a convenient tool to turn someone’s criticisms of Israel into grotesque anti-Semitic hatred. Even the progressive Michele Goldberg, one of the few refreshingly courageous columnists in *The New York Times*, insisted that Omar resorted to anti-Semitic “tropes.”

The Israeli lobby and the government want to send a clear message through the mistreatment and abuse of Ilhan Omar: that progressive members of Congress, especially if they are Muslim Arab women of color, won’t be allowed to express their views on Israel without mobilizing the entire AIPAC machinery in Congress against them.

Ilhan Omar is indeed dangerous. She has broken taboos, along with her colleague Rashida Tlaib. She is dangerous to the hegemony imposed on the nation’s capital by the supporters of Israel (and evangelical Christian, not Jews, are now the most fanatical Zionists in U.S. politics). Because Omar is seen as dangerous, the abuse won’t end. It has just started.

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