

OPINION

Just Because It Makes You Uncomfortable, Doesn't Make It Anti-Semitism

BY MATTHEW IUNG



Photography provided by Sarah Silbiger of The New York Times

REPRESENTATIVE ILHAN OMAR is the first woman to wear a hijab on the floor of Congress and she has been drawing a lot of media attention lately. This attention is related to her comments regarding the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine, as well as lobbying groups here in the states.

According to NPR reporter Cody Nelson, this all began in February when, “Omar responded to a tweet from journalist Glenn Greenwald, who posted about House GOP Leader Kevin McCarthy threatening to punish Omar and another congresswoman for being critical of Israel.” Omar fired back with a Puff Daddy line “It’s all about the Benjamins baby.”

I’m not going to lie, this makes me laugh a little because it this simple quote was actually very quickly made into an issue of anti-Semitism. At the very worst, this is an insensitive stereotype-fueled joke, but it’s much more likely that she was trying to make a point, and a joke while she was at it. Following this, Omar made a point of calling out the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

It’s worth pointing out that Omar did indeed apologize, but she also held strong to her critique of AIPAC, which brought things back into balance— at least until the media found something else they could hold against her. In response to claims of prejudice and bigotry from congresswoman Nita Lowey, Omar responded via Twitter, “Our democracy is built on debate, Congresswoman! I should not be expected to have allegiance/pledge support to a foreign country in order to serve my country in Congress or serve on the committee. The people of the 5th elected me to serve their interest. I am sure we agree on that!” This was quickly conflated as an accusation of dual loyalty.

This may not have been so controversial had she not already been in the news. Dual loyalty has been leveled at Catholics regarding the Pope, the Japanese Americans during world war II, as well as German and Italian American citizens. Like so many things it has also been unfairly thrown at Jews as well. The thing is, a lot of people are going to accuse Omar of the exact same thing for no other reason than because she is a Muslim woman.

It’s not hard not to see why this is a perfect wedge issue to drive the Democratic party. No one wants to be labeled as anti-Semitic for simply asking questions, let alone taking a stance as Omar has. At the same time, they are all able to agree on the broadest of broad strokes in their most recent anti-hate resolution. From the other side of the aisle, the Republicans who have been attacking Omar haven’t stopped to consider their own use of anti-Semitic slips, whether they be recent, in the past, or made by the

president, and they certainly have not stopped to question or show any concern over their own Islamophobic rhetoric.

In addition to the media, her own party, and the Republicans weaponizing Omar’s words in order to silence her, President Trump has suggested that Omar resign. She has also received death threats, one was written in the men’s room of a Holiday she frequents it simply said “Assassinate Ilhan Omar.” These are extreme responses to what are admittedly poorly worded comments, questions and critics. There’s no more malice in what Omar is doing than when Bernie Sanders wrote a letter to the Secretary of State in favor of Palestine. He emphasized that more aid is sent to Palestinians, stressing the facts of the humanitarian crises while holding Israel responsible in part. This suggests the Sanders has an understanding of how complex the issue truly is, he has also come out in support of Omar recently.

Omar may not have taken a less-than-elegant route in making her point on a sensitive issue, but that does not negate what she has to say. She is trying to call attention to the fact that whenever someone wants to talk about Palestine, they are labeled a “jew hater”, and then the cycle starts all over again, ensuring that we never get to talk about Palestine. Is it so different this time?

Whether or not this version of the conversation continues is yet to be seen, but the line is moving. From these comments, I believe that it is a far cry to say that Representative Omar is an anti-Semite. On the contrary, she seems to understand that being pro-Israel is no longer the simplest position to hold. With the walls around this issue begging to break down, it’s important to be listening to the voices that are willing to speak out. Even if that means we have to ask for clarification or have uncomfortable conversations. Overall, it’s better to be confronted by something that provokes thought than to simply have the party line wrapped around your neck. †

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