

Representative Ilhan Omar of Minnesota: A Vindicated Voice for Peace

On February 15th, 2019, in the Coast Guard National Headquarters garage, federal agents arrested and detained a government employee. The man, a former National Guardsman and white supremacist, had been plotting a massive domestic terrorist attack for years. When authorities searched his house, they found fifteen various firearms, some of them illegally modified, and *thousands* of rounds of ammunition. On his computer they also uncovered - next to virulent neo-Nazi tracts he'd written - a spreadsheet listing his most prized targets for assassination. Among them was Minnesotan politician Ilhan Omar, who'd been elected to the House of Representatives just weeks before. (Motion for Detention Pending Trial, 2019)

This was neither the first nor the last time that Omar would be targeted: a month later, a man made an obscenity-filled phone call to the representative's office threatening to "put a bullet in her skull." He was later sentenced to prison time after investigators found he was hoarding illegal guns and ammunition. ("Steuben County Man Pleads Guilty..." Press release, 2019) For the Somali-American representative, these incidents were just the tip of an iceberg of death threats and targeted harassment that she is subjected to.

Perhaps this can be rationalized as simple, pernicious bigotry - especially considering Omar is a refugee and among the first Muslims elected to Congress - but this explanation doesn't suffice for the similarly malicious treatment she's had at the hands of her political opponents, the media, and at times even her own party. This behavior goes far beyond mere xenophobia; it's more insidious and concerted than prejudice alone.

A major flashpoint for the campaign to delegitimize Omar was the Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip in 2023, due to her outspoken criticism of the U.S. government's complicity in the

“slaughter” of civilians, women, children, and journalists. This was only an escalation, however, as the hostilities began the moment she was elected. In 2019 (the year of her election), the New York Post ran a cover with an image of 9/11 under Omar’s name and a quote from a speech she made. (*New York Post*) Omar’s Republican colleague, Lauren Boebert, dubbed her a member of the “Jihad Squad”. (Pengelly 2021) A congressional candidate in Florida claimed that Omar and other “traitors” should be hung “where they stand.” (Knowles and Mettler, 2019) Ron DeSantis, a presidential candidate, called for her deportation. (DeSantis 2024)

Many of these remarks have clearly Islamophobic undertones, and it’s unsurprising that when politicians behave like this, it’s a mandate for ordinary people to do the same. It’s impossible to separate the attempted terrorist attacks and death threats mentioned above from the inflammatory comments by politicians that preceded them. That such comments frequently use rhetoric of fighting tyranny and rescuing the country from invaders is no coincidence. Casting a political dispute as a battle between the righteous and the traitors is tantamount to endorsing any means necessary to resolve it.

It’s not just along party lines that there’s been unwarranted animosity towards Representative Omar. In the wake of the invasion of Gaza, her support for Palestinian rights has made her a pariah for large sectors of each party. The same month that the war started, October 2023, she was one of the only elected officials to directly oppose a ground invasion of Gaza. She warned that “Israel does not have achievable military objectives for a Gaza ground invasion”, prescient since hostilities have yet to cease, several more nations have become involved directly and indirectly, and the UN has reported close to 50,000 people dead in Gaza alone. (Omar 2023) (*UN News*, 2024) No opportunity was wasted to vilify her for this position. A Twitter post she made criticizing the influence of the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and

other lobbying groups in driving US foreign policy with respect to Palestine and Gaza, which was interpreted by some as having anti-semitic language, led to a barrage of criticism by Democrats and Republicans and a proposed House resolution condemning her - a measure neglected for much more egregious statements in the past. (House Resolution 241, 2019) Although Omar sincerely apologized for using offensive language, she didn't let bad-faith actors distract from the serious point she wanted to make, and she stood by her critiques of AIPAC, the lobbying industry, and the war in Gaza. (Stolberg 2019) During the election seasons, AIPAC and other special interest groups contributed millions in campaign funds towards defeating elected officials, including Omar, who had been critical of the US's relationship with Israel. (Middle East Eye Staff, 2023).

In 2024, Omar was re-elected to a second term. Many other congressmen surely have moral qualms about the war, but the threat to their political career keeps them silent. Omar, however, recognizes that a political position is a means, not an end, and that it's better to lose it standing for something than prolong it by acting cowardly. It's clear that history tends to look more fondly upon the former. As of now, after over a year of struggle by Omar, other politicians, activists, and the international community, a ceasefire in Gaza is finally imminent, owing in no small part to resilience like hers.

Throughout the threats to her career and reputation, she has continued to advocate for justice on Capitol Hill, introducing or co-sponsoring acts to protect women and immigrants, make education accessible for everyone who wants it, raise the minimum wage for workers, and other reforms on behalf of ordinary citizens. She's also worked hard for her constituents' needs, securing funding in her home district to address "the affordability housing crisis, climate resiliency, food access, workforce development and healthcare investments." (Omar 2024)

Unfortunately, her work to protect vulnerable people in her district and across the country has been overshadowed by the vicious arguments and attacks that follow her career.

As suspiciousness, insincerity, and factionalism pervade both local and national politics, it takes courage to maintain unwavering principles. Any elected official who does so is both fulfilling their promise to the constituents who chose them, and serving the public, through this integrity. Ilhan Omar is a model of this ideal, despite controversy and pressure from enemies and allies alike. More than any one position or vote, the most admirable thing about Representative Omar is her refusal to capitulate.

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