



Congresswoman Ilhan Omar's Political Baptism by Fire in Crazy Town

By Chief Black Hawk



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Donald Trump's election victory dismissed many conventional assumptions about the conduct and content of American political discourse. Once in office, the new president began hollowing out the nation's foreign policy institutions. He threw allies under the bus, embraced dictators, and took every opportunity to undermine the multilateral institutions sustaining the post-World War II order. By jettisoning the framework containing nuclear weapon proliferation and withdrawing from the Paris consensus on global warming, he ratcheted up the risk factors facing the planet. On the domestic front, he bulldozed his party and staff into lining up behind him. The generals tried to limit the damage his maverick foreign policy was wreaking abroad. They failed.

Unlike the tweeting, dissembling, and mocking the norms governing national politics for generations, most of the president's agenda represented policy positions that can be contested or debated. But when Trump came to the defence of the Charlottesville neo-Nazis, it confirmed many critics' worse-case scenarios. The number of hate groups in the United States increased by 7 per cent last year and hate crime reports increased by 17 per cent, according to the FBI.

In a polity where elected leaders usually gravitate towards the middle to implement their agenda, Donald Trump continues to weaponise the polarising subterranean logic that turned Washington into what General Kelley, the former Chief of Staff, described as "Crazy Town".

Enter Ilhan Omar

The Democratic Party captured the US House of Representatives in the 2018 by-elections. Eighty-one of the [record](#) number of 102 women elected to the House are Democrats. The Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, expressed the hope of many: “When our new members take the oath, our Congress will be refreshed and our democracy will be strengthened by the optimism, idealism and patriotism of this transformative freshman class.”

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The Somalia-born Ilhan Omar arrived in Washington DC with the kind of backstory that synergised the attention focused on the quintet of new minority Congresswomen that included the Palestinian American, Rashida Mtaib, and the 23-year-old Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Omar walked into the national spotlight with panache and charisma, and took a seat in the high profile Congressional Committee for Foreign Relations. A successful proposal to adjust the [ban on head covering](#) saw Omar become the first woman to wear a [hijab](#) on the House floor.

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Omar has constructed her political career on domestic social issues: [affordable housing](#) and [healthcare](#), support for a [living wage](#), [student loan debt forgiveness](#), universal access to higher education, proactive climate change policies, and the protection of [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals \(DACA\)](#). She strongly opposes the immigration policies of the Trump administration and the [Muslim travel ban](#).

The pivot to Foreign Relations encouraged expectations in this part of the world that she would focus fresh attention on African issues and insight into the shifts accompanying renewed interest across the greater Horn of Africa region.

Beto O’Rourke, the presidential hopeful exemplar of the new blood political wave, was recently revealed as a member of the Cult of the Dead Cow hacker collective. An ex-hacker running for national office would have been unimaginable just a few years ago. A reporter covering the story declared, “There has been no better time to be an American politician rebelling against business as usual.”

Omar proceeded to put the hypothesis to the test by igniting a firestorm that quickly escalated into the resurgent Democratic Party’s first internal crisis. It began when she tweeted lyrics from a rap song, “Its all about the Benjamins.” The reference to the American Israel Political Action Committee (AIPAC)’s financial tentacles was far less derogatory than calling Mogadishu Somalis “skinnies”, or Iraqis “towelheads”. But Omar was vilified for promoting ethnic stereotypes, and then accused of being anti-Semitic after she defended her position.

In a Democratic primary campaign devoid of any religious or ethnic animosity, the Congresswoman defeated the Jewish incumbent of over forty years. But now she was in Trump’s Crazy Town. Instead of mollifying the critics, her attempt to place her opposition to AIPAC in context provoked even more intense condemnation. Some of the strongest reactions to her statement came from within her own party. It did not help that she broke ranks with the Party’s opposition to Venezuela’s Nicholas Maduro, the one foreign policy issue enjoying bipartisan consensus. Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu used AIPAC's annual conference to attack her, unleashing the formidable clout of the US pro-Israeli media industry.

The impunity that AIPAC has enjoyed within the Washington establishment over the years is a basic fact documented in analyses by many Jewish critics of Israel's policies. When CNN's Jake Tapper invoked the "words count" meme, the context implied that the person who utters them counts even more. A Somali news website observed that Ilhan Omar was singled out for three intersecting reasons: she is black; she is Muslim; and she is a woman.

The tweet detonated a firestorm of vindictive rage and self-righteous condemnation. The range of supporters who came to Ms. Omar's defence, including a delegation of Jewish rabbis, received considerably less coverage. Al Jazeera's Mehdi Hassan speculated that "she, perhaps naively, thought she was highlighting a powerful and reactionary lobby group, no different to the NRA."

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At the time when Ilhan Omar was being placed on the rack, Trump avoided being sucked into the anti-Semitism maelstrom. He was given a pass despite his flagrant stereotyping of ethnic minorities, including a history of insulting Jews. Private citizen Trump is on record for saying only "[short guys that wear yarmulkes](#)" should count his money—itself a dig at the black accountants working for his organisation. He used to keep a [book of Adolf Hitler's speeches](#) on his bedside table. After he became president, as the author of an [article differentiating anti-Zionism from anti-Semitism](#) reported, Trump invited Dallas pastor Robert Jeffress (who is on record for saying Jews are going to hell for not accepting Jesus) to lead a prayer at the ceremony inaugurating the US embassy in Jerusalem. The "good people" marching with Charlottesville Neo-Nazis he defended were chanting, among other things, anti-Jewish slogans.

In 2016 Trump tweeted a "Crooked Hillary" campaign ad showing Clinton next to a Star of David superimposed against a background of 100 dollar "Benjamins". David Duke, the former Ku Klux Klan Grandmaster of the recent Spike Lee *BlacKKKlansman* fame, completed the circle by congratulating her: "[Ilhan Omar is now the most important member of the House of Representatives](#)".

Crooked Hillary — Makes History! [#ImWithYou](#) [#AmericaFirst](#)
pic.twitter.com/PKQhYhMmIX

— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [July 2, 2016](#)

Instead of interrogating the long tradition of hate resurfacing in the recent series of anti-Semitic violence across the US and Europe, the Ilhan Omar news cycle provided a timely gift for the Trump White House that diverted attention from Jared Kushner's controversial security clearance, reports of the ballooning 51-billion-dollar trade deficit, and the farcical Kim Jong Un summit in Hanoi.

The House Democrats' motion to condemn crimes of hate in its diverse forms passed with only four

dissenting Republican votes. The March 15 attack by a Trump-inspired white extremist on the mosque in Christchurch in New Zealand provided the counterpoint that placed the debate in its proper perspective.

The dual loyalty contradiction

Ihan Omar was already a marked woman who has had to fend off attacks from conservative media outlets since she ran for a seat in the Minnesota Legislature. The controversy provided a fresh entry point for recycling the kind of vicious allegations the fake news industry has raised to a commercialised art form. She vented on the hypocrisy of her critics in a robust response delivered at an informal gathering in Washington. This an abridged excerpt of what she said:

“We know what hate looks like. We experience it every single day. We have to deal with death threats. I have colleagues who talk about death threats. I have people driving around my district looking for my home, for my office, causing me harm. I have people every single day on Fox News and everywhere, posting that I am a threat to this country. So I know what fear looks like. The masjid I pray in in Minnesota got bombed by domestic white terrorists. So I know what it feels to be someone who is of faith that is vilified. I know what it means to be someone whose ethnicity is vilified. I know what it feels to be of a race—like I am an immigrant, so I don’t have the historical drama that some of my black sisters and brothers have in this country, but I know what it means for people to just see me as a black person, and to treat me as less than a human. And so, when people say, ‘you are bringing hate’, I know what their intention is. Their intention is to make sure that our lights are dimmed...What people are afraid of is that there are two Muslims in Congress that have their eyes wide open, that have their feet to the ground, that know what they’re talking about, that are fearless, and that understand that they have the same election certificate as everyone else in Congress.”

Instead of setting the record straight, a semantic stumble re-energised the backlash:

“So for me, I want to talk about the political influence in this country that says it is OK for people to push for allegiance to a foreign country. I want to ask, why is it OK for me to talk about the influence of the NRA, of fossil-fuel industries, or Big Pharma, and not talk about a powerful lobby that is influencing policy.”

The politics of dual loyalty has a long history in the United States, dating back to the role of British royalists during the Revolutionary War. It evolved into an unwritten rule that capped the political mobility of minorities like Jews and Catholics. Joseph Kennedy came to understand that it was a glass ceiling that he would never be able to rise above. He curbed his presidential ambitions and instead devoted his resources and political influence to position his sons to break the myth of American Catholics’ loyalty to the Vatican. John F. Kennedy cleared the way for Catholics and Irish Americans to vie for the highest political office.

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Despite the inroads made by African, Muslim, and other ethnic candidates vying for elected offices—including Bernie Sanders’s challenge for the Democratic presidential nomination—the dual loyalty question never went away as a convenient prism for challenging the patriotism of minority communities. For American Muslims, the problem of Western Muslim radicalisation has recast the

dual loyalty issue in stark terms. During the Republican primaries, Ben Carson openly stated that a Muslim should never become president of the United States.

According to [American intelligence sources](#), as many as 20,000 foreign fighters joined ISIS's ranks, about 3,400 of them from Western nations. FBI Director James Comey's testimony to the Senate Intelligence Committee placed the statistic in perspective. He reported that "upwards of 200 Americans have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria to participate in the conflict". The Nazi's Bund operated openly in the US during the run-up to World War II without generating a significant backlash against German Americans, even while the U-boats were sinking hundreds of American vessels. Japanese-Americans, in contrast, were interred in camps after Pearl Harbor.

The integration process in the United States has evolved since these events, as Ilhan Omar's and the election of less prominent ethnic candidates to local offices indicate. But her "foreign allegiance" reference triggered an avalanche of alt-right and pro-Israel reactions focusing on her own political connections to Somalia and Islam.

[PJ Media](#) challenged Omar's automatic security clearance by citing her activism within the Somali community. It focused on a meeting with Somalia's then presidential candidate, Mohammed Abdullahi "Farmajo", referring to his subsequent victory as "[one of the most fraudulent political events in Somalia's history](#)". It alleged that the meeting led to Ilhan Omar's brother-in-law, Mohamed Keynan, being appointed to a high-level position in the Somali government.

Another website stated that her allegiance to the Qu'ran outweighs any allegiance she may have claimed to make to the US constitution. A [petition launched to remove her from office](#) claimed that the "Qur'an appears to legalise hatred of specific people groups." Anti-Israeli views gathered from ethnic Somalis serving in Minnesota jails backed up their claims while reinforcing the accusations of Omar's Islamist affiliations repeated in Saudi and Israeli press attacks during her campaign.

In an insightful analysis of citizenship, Stephen Njuguna pointed out that most Africans are dual nationals by birth. He used Kenya's post-multiparty political violence to illustrate how allegiance to community can undermine a citizen's obligations to the nation.

For Somalia - now a nation no longer tethered to a contiguous territory or physical boundaries - its diaspora citizenship combines sanctuary from the event horizon of clan politics, while supporting many unique opportunities. For example, a Somali friend of mine is an Australian-Bimaal dual citizen. He ran a business from Kenya, was appointed to serve as liaison to the diaspora by the first transitional federal government in Somalia, and assisted the Australian navy with critical intelligence on the western Indian Ocean piracy epidemic.

The Red Sea region is now an important arena for [a new Great Game](#) drawing in a complicated array of great and second-tier powers. The Somali government facilitates American military operations in one of the Forever War's most turbulent theatres. Djibouti is the base for AFRICOM (US Africa Command) operations across the continent. Both Farmajo and Keynan are American citizens; many other diaspora elites have held high political offices in the succession of post-collapse Somalia governments.

My guess is that Western intelligence mandarins for the most part view such dual nationals as insider assets - a long-term soft power advantage not available to the likes of Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin - not a dual loyalty threat.

American Jews became the most successful exemplar of minority success in the US by turning the Israel dual loyalty issue into a proxy for national security. On the other hand, Omar's relationship

with Somali leaders reinforces her anti-Islamist credentials.

But at this juncture, there is nothing to be gained and much to lose from her pre-congressional links to the Somalia homeland. As one contributor on a [Somali blog](#) stated, “If I was her I would stay out of Somali politics. You don’t want to alienate US Somali voters and people back in Somalia don’t care about her or her endorsement.”

The 2020 reckoning

The upside-down methods and polarising narratives that date back to the culture wars of the Ronald Reagan era now fuel the alt-right’s dumbed-down clash of civilisations algorithm. Their media warriors manipulate the dual loyalty issue to promote America’s own tribal rebellion.

PJ Media is the country’s [ninth most conservative website](#), and the Omar-Farmajo story spawned comments associating Democratic voters in Minnesota with the “enemy”: “The simple-minded Left-wing voters are just as much an enemy as any Jihadi, but they are too stupid to figure out how much damage they are doing to this country.” Another commenter said the problem would persist until the coming civil war sorts things out.

These words function as a thinly-veiled call for action, like the August 2017 [bombing of the Dar Al-Farooq Islamic Center](#) in Minneapolis by three members the White Rabbits militia. [Donald Trump’s threatening reference](#) to his own simple-minded supporters endorsed these sentiments: “I have the support of the police, the support of the military, the support of the Bikers for Trump – I have the tough people, but they don’t play it tough – until they go to a certain point, and then it would be very bad, very bad.”

It remains to be seen how the AIPAC furore will influence Omar’s long-term contribution to the “optimism, idealism and patriotism” Nancy Pelosi referred to. The incident underscored some cautionary observations regarding timing and strategy.

Around the same time, the few hundred MAGA-hatted protestors gathered at the March 23 event in Los Angeles where Omar was giving a speech signaled the passing of this particular storm. These kind of warnings nevertheless raise the stakes for the potentially “transformative freshman class” in the much more challenging battles now taking form. Nate Silver and his data-driven 548 crowd estimated that Donald Trump would stand a 50-50 chance of being re-elected if the national elections were to be held now.

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Omar’s freshman colleague from Brooklyn, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, reset the climate change debate by tabling her comprehensive Green Plan that featured policy positions that demanded a sober response. Although a number of Democrats dismissed the document as unfeasible, the Plan moved the discussion forward and expanded the space it occupies.

Ihan Omar would do well to use a similar comprehensive policy agenda to connect the dots between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s failed war in Yemen and Trump’s callous abandonment of the Kurds (the real warriors who defeated ISIS). She should cultivate bipartisan support for causes, such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s condemnation of the Chinese re-education camps in Xinxiang and made-to-order issues like the horrors visited on Africans trafficked through Libya. Above all, she

needs to retake control of her narrative.

Israel was not the ideal subject for a maiden foray into foreign policy, however inadvertent. In any case, the country that now ranked fourth among the world's most unpopular governments has its own [long-term security dilemmas](#), as highlighted by the in-house critique authored by the University of Jerusalem professor, [Martin von Creveld](#).

On the other side of the divide, the emergent Muslim female leadership personified by Omar and Tlaib and many other less recognised advocates elsewhere may over time invert Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* focus on the disruptive impact of the young Muslim male demographic.

There are, however, more immediate concerns at this moment. The two outspoken female representatives are popular in their constituencies but not so much elsewhere. Positive poll ratings at the national level for the articulate Alexandria's Ocasio-Cortez hover around 25 per cent, disapproval slightly higher, and her Democratic socialist colleagues are probably lower after the recent cat fight. Their rock star status and the aggressive positioning accompanying the new representatives' high profile entrance has created frictions among the [Democratic Party's rank and file politicians](#) who grind out the results. Their fascinating but too large field of presidential candidates is a [potential damper on voter turnout](#), and Donald Trump is riding the crest of a vibrant economy that has seen real worker income rise for the first time in a decade.

I expect Ilhan Omar will prove to be resilient in the face of challenges like the representation trap, which arises when controversy involving prominent minority individuals encourages more self-policing from within their community.

The shit storm over the Benjamins was a timely warning puncturing the euphoria over the new Democrats. Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell is already using their agenda as a campaign wedge. Instead of worst nightmare, Ilhan Omar is exactly the kind of prop Trump exploits to mobilise support.

I expect Ilhan Omar will prove to be resilient in the face of challenges like the representation gap, which arises when controversy involving prominent minority individuals encourages more self-policing from within their community. When Rashida Mtlaiib uttered her "We're going to impeach the motherfucker" statement, [one blogger](#) backed the American Muslims who criticised her because "when you are a minority, people judge you not as an individual but as the group you belong to".

She responded to this scenario by declaring: "There is an interest in putting us in the box of constantly defending our identities and I am not interested in being in that box. I am interested in defending my ideas and not my identity." Ayaan Hersi created a political niche for Muslim women by blowing up the box. Ilhan Omar faces a more difficult escape route. But focusing on what she does well, supporting working class social issues, and turning out the vote, she increased voter participation by 37 per cent in her district - a good place to start.

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