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Some Initial Considerations on Ihlan Omar, the Palestinians, and Anti-Semitism

Ron Tabor

March 27, 2019

To me, the saddest part about the recent brouhaha over Congresswoman Ihlan Omar's tweets and comments on the matter of the Palestinians, Israel, and the Zionist lobby is that none of the issues involved got seriously discussed, let alone clarified. Although some young activists seem to feel that the number of people rallying to Omar's side reflects progress in the struggle to raise and defend the justice of the struggle of the Palestinians to liberate their land, I am not convinced this is the case. On the contrary. As I see it, Omar's comments and the controversy that ensued served to muddy the waters still further and to allow those who wish to tar all defenders of the Palestinian cause with the brush of anti-Semitism to continue to do so.

I am prepared to accept that Ihlan Omar is not personally anti-Semitic. However, there is little doubt in my mind that her tweets and other comments promoted anti-Semitic motifs which I, person-

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Retrieved on 11th August 2021 from utopianmag.com

Published in *The Utopian* Vol. 18.2.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

ally – as both a militant supporter of the Palestinians and a strongly identified Jew – found offensive.

Some of these motifs are:

- A. Representative Omar’s comments implied that “the Jews” act in concert, that we are not distinct and separate individuals who, despite a common religion and/or cultural background, have our own diverse views on a variety of subjects (among them, Israel, Zionism, and the Palestinians) that deserve to be addressed as those of individuals and not those of a unified and disciplined political bloc, This dovetails with the long history of the notion, most vividly promoted by the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (now recognized as a forgery perpetrated by the Okhrana, the Tsarist secret police), that “the Jews” are all participants in an international conspiracy to subvert “Christian civilization” and take over the world. It is worth noting in this regard that some of the most active and dedicated supporters of the cause of the Palestinians and opponents of Zionism and the Zionist project have been, and continue to be, Jews. This includes many scholars from around the world, some of whom have run considerable risk to their careers and even their lives to discover and disseminate the truth about the history of Zionism, Israel, and the tragedy of the Palestinians. I include here the Frenchman, Maxime Rodinson; the Israelis, Ian Pappé and Avi Raz; and the Americans, David Hirst and Norman G. Finkelstein. I am sure there are many others.
- B. Omar’s comments also cast doubt on the patriotism of American Jews by raising the subject of “divided loyalties”, thus implying that most Jews are or are likely to be more loyal to Israel than to the United States. This, too, has a deep past in the history of anti-Semitism, the so-called “wandering Jew” of the Middle Ages, the alien poisoners of

the Aryan peoples of the Nazis, and the “rootless cosmopolitans” of the Soviet Union under Stalin and after. Although I, personally, do not consider myself to be a patriot, it is my firm belief that the overwhelming majority of Jews in the United States are deeply committed to the United States, to the U.S. Constitution, and to the other institutions of the country. They are particularly grateful for the fact that the United States has offered observant and non-observant Jews alike a homeland in which they have been at least somewhat safe from the discrimination, contempt, and periodic mass assaults (“pogroms”) to which they and their ancestors were subject in Russia, other countries of Eastern and Western Europe, and elsewhere in the world. In fact, many Jews, including Soviet Jews who were allowed to leave the Soviet Union for Israel, much preferred to immigrate to the United States rather than go to or remain in Israel. Not least, why does Omar appear to single out Jews, among the myriad of immigrant groups (including Somalis) living in the United States, as being likely to harbor divided loyalties?

- C. Omar seems to imply that the main reason Jewish politicians and other prominent figures support Israel is because of the money disseminated by the “Zionist lobby” (or, as some still call it, the “Jewish lobby”) and other wealthy Jews. (“It’s all about the Benjamins”, meaning the \$100 bills that feature the picture of Benjamin Franklin one side, Omar tweeted.) This, obviously, refers to the anti-Semitic motif that Jews are obsessed with (and especially gifted at making and hoarding) money, in other words, that we are all rich money-grubbers. There definitely exists a “Zionist lobby” in the United States, a group of very powerful organizations (among them the American-Israel Political Action Committee, the Congress of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, the American Jewish Congress, and the Anti-Defamation League) who mil-

itantly defend Israel and quickly rush to attack and impugn the reputation of any public figure (including, quite recently, former president Jimmy Carter) who dares to challenge the Zionist/pro-Israel/anti-Palestinian consensus that currently dominates political and intellectual discourse in the United States. But there are (at least) two things that need to be said here:

1. A major and very powerful wing of this lobby does not consist of Jews at all but of evangelical Christians who, for their own (and anti-Semitic) reasons, are fanatical defenders of the state of Israel. In their conception, Israel is to be the site of the Second Coming of Jesus, who will in-gather all the Jews from around the world into Israel, turn all non-Christians, (including the Jews) into devout Christians (thus doing away with Jews and Judaism altogether), and bring about God's Kingdom on Earth.
2. The main reasons those Jews (and others) who do support the state of Israel hold to this position have nothing to do with money. Rightly or wrongly, ignorantly or in full knowledge of the situation there, they support the state of Israel because they believe it is politically and morally the right thing to do. Among the reasons for this are: that the existence of the state of Israel makes Jews around the world safer than they would otherwise be; that Israel, for all its faults, is the only democratic state in the Middle East at a time when democracy is on the retreat there and elsewhere; that Israel helps to defend the secular West against the rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism that threatens to engulf the world; that the Palestinians, for whatever reason, have come under the political hegemony of fanatical anti-Semitic leaders and organizations whose

aim is not only to destroy the state of Israel but also to drive all the Jews into the sea, that is, to carry out another Holocaust; that for these and other reasons, the rights of the Palestinians deserve little or no consideration.

Without going into details here, my own view is that none of this justifies the horrible injustice that has been done, and is still being done, to the Palestinians: their expulsion, at gunpoint and through other forms of coercion, from the land in which they and the ancestors worked, farmed, maintained their businesses and their political and cultural life for generations; the destruction of their farms and businesses; the daily brutalization – insults, beatings, arrests, imprisonment, torture, and assassinations, to which they are subjected; their marginalization and oppression within Israel itself; their demonization and dehumanization, painted as the descendants of Nazis and other radical anti-Semites, made to pay the entire price of the Holocaust themselves, even though that catastrophe occurred in Europe and not in the Middle East and was carried out by Europeans not by Palestinians; essentially forced to atone, all by themselves, for the horrors that were perpetrated on the Jews in Europe and around the world throughout all of history.

Perhaps Representative Omar deserves praise for having had the courage to raise the cause of the Palestinians in the pro-Israel cauldron that is Washington, D.C. If it turns out that she is not personally anti-Semitic and is truly interested in defending the rights of the Palestinians and in fighting anti-Semitism, it might be good if she were encouraged to run her tweets and other comments on the issues of the Palestinians, Israel, and the Jews by her friends, comrades, and colleagues who have had more experience on American politics and who might know better how to avoid playing into the hands of the enemies of the cause of the Palestinians and of justice around the world, before she releases them to the public.