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# Representative Ilhan Omar Ousted from Foreign Affairs Committee; GOP Cites Past Tweets

Naja Johnson, News Editor

Republicans on the House Foreign Affairs Committee voted to officially remove Minnesota Democratic Representative Ilhan Omar from her committee seat Feb. 2. The 218 to 211 vote was cited as a response to resurfacing remarks from Omar on social media, which conservatives and some Democrats perceived as antisemitic.

“Representative Omar, by her own words, has disqualified herself from serving on the Committee on Foreign Affairs, a panel that is viewed by nations around the world as speaking for Congress on matters of international importance and national security,” the resolution stated, adding that her comments “have brought dishonor to the House of Representatives.”

Progressive critics argue that Omar’s expulsion from the committee has more to do with her identity as a woman of color than her statements on foreign policy. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez



Ilhan Omar. Image courtesy of Kristie Boyd

condemned the decision to remove Omar and described her own experiences as a woman of color working in D.C..

“Don’t tell me that this is about a condemnation of antisemitic remarks, when [Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene] has talked about Jewish space lasers and an entire amount of tropes, and also elevated her to some of the highest committee assignments in this body. This is about targeting women of color in the United States of America,” Ocasio-Cortez said in a speech.

Maria Tedesco, who works as an assistant teaching professor at Seattle U and specializes in Islamic studies, agrees with sentiments that Omar’s removal from the foreign affairs committee was unjust.

“[Omar’s removal] reveals three elements of our political climate: lingering Islamophobia, silencing of women of color, and a tendency to equate criticism of the policies of the state of Israel with antisemitism,” Tedesco said.

Omar first drew fire in 2012 for tweeting that “Israel has hypnotized the world” and “may Allah awaken the people and help them see the evil doings of Israel.” Jewish commentator Bari Weiss felt that the language went beyond critique of Israel into antisemitic rhetoric.

“Criticisms cross the line into anti-Semitism when they ascribe evil, almost supernatural powers to Israel in a manner that replicates classic anti-Semitic slanders,” Weiss wrote.

In 2019, Omar alleged that lobbying groups were actively pushing American politicians to take an anti-Palestine position. At the time, Omar defended her remarks, noting that she is criticized by her Republican peers as not being pro-American if she is not pro-Israel. She also emphasized that that being opposed to Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is not the same as being antisemitic in her view.

Another tweet cited in the decision was from 2021.

“We have seen unthinkable atrocities committed by the U.S., Hamas, Israel, Afghanistan and the Taliban,” Omar wrote, in a tweet that some read as equating Israel with terrorist groups.

Beatrice Lawrence works as an associate professor of theology and religious studies at Seattle University, where she teaches Hebrew and Jewish studies. Lawrence remarked on the narrow margin between criticism of Israel’s policies, and bigotry towards Jewish people.

“A lot of what happens in congress is dysfunctional. Conversations about Israel are loaded with emotion,” Lawrence said. “It’s possible to critique Israel without being antisemitic, but there is a line a lot of people are crossing. Ilhan Omar skirted that line.”

Zain Clements-Hall is a fourth-year English and history double major who also studies Hebrew and German at the University of Washington and interns at the Holocaust Center for Humanity. Part of their work is to interview survivors of the Holocaust, as well as their descendants, to ensure their stories are preserved. Clements-Hall pointed out that recognition of antisemitism and antisemitic violence is sometimes complicated, in part because of the intersections surrounding Jewish identity.

“The fact that it took four years for [Omar’s] comments to really come to light makes sense because Jewish people in American society hold lots of privilege even though they aren’t seen as the Christian norm,” Clements-Hall said. “These comments are obviously antisemitic but it didn’t register with people until later.”

Sometimes, antisemitic sentiment spills over into violence. In 2021 the Anti-Defamation League released an audit showing that antisemitic attacks were at an all-time high in the United States. 2,717 incidents were reported, including attacks on synagogues, Jewish community centers and other institutions.

Clements-Hall emphasized that too much focus on Omar specifically is missing the point.

“It’s not just necessarily Ilhan Omar who’s made these comments,” Clements-Hall said. “It’s coming from a long history of people who used the careers of Jewish people and their relative wealth to discriminate.”

However Omar, along with other Democrats, argued that her removal was racially and politically motivated.

“Well, I am a Muslim. I am an immigrant, and, interestingly, from Africa. Is anyone surprised that I am a target? Is anyone surprised I am somehow deemed unworthy to speak about American foreign policy? Or that they see me as a powerful voice that needs to be silenced?” Omar said during the beginning of her speech.

Omar also stated that her ability as a politician was being questioned due her immigrant background.

“That is what this debate is about. There is this idea out there that I do not have objective decision making because of who I am or where I came from and my perspective, but we reject that, and we say there is nothing objective about policymaking. We all inject our perspective, point of views, our lived experience and the voices of our constituents. That is what democracy is about,” Omar said.

Omar then ended her speech with declarations that she will continue to advocate for others and critique political systems domestic and foreign.

“I will continue to speak up because representation matters. I will continue to speak up for the sake of little kids who wonder who is speaking up for them. I will continue to speak for the families who are seeking justice around the world,” Omar said.

Omar drew a substantial amount of support from her democratic constituents. Three other democratic representatives from Minnesota, Angie Craig, Dean Phillips and Betty McCollum, voted to keep Omar remaining on the committee. The final decision to remove Omar left the house divided and prompted an uproar between Democrats and Republicans.

Lawrence agreed that Omar’s removal from the committee was an incendiary move.

“This decision was not necessary or beneficial,” Lawrence said. “It has only fanned the flames of a conflict of conversation that needs to take place and it’s very unfortunate. Ilhan Omar could have done a lot of good on that committee,”

In February 2019, Omar released an apology for her comments and said that her intentions for her past statements were to draw attention to the dominant influence that lobbyists have in politics.

“Anti-Semitism is real, and I am grateful for Jewish allies and colleagues who are educating me on the painful history of anti-Semitic tropes. My intention is never to offend my constituents or Jewish Americans as a whole... At the same time, I reaffirm the problematic role of lobbyists in our politics, whether it be AIPAC, the NRA or the fossil fuel industry,” Omar wrote.

Tedesco believed Omar’s apology to be sincere, and reaffirmed her belief of the utility Omar could provide on the congressional committee.

“In my opinion, the fact that she promptly and publicly apologized for her comments provides sufficient ground for her continuing service on the Foreign Affairs Committee, a body in which voices like that of Omar, a Muslim woman of color who personally experienced civil war and refugee status, are deeply needed,” Tedesco said.

Omar’s recent ousting has sparked conversation on how politicians should be held accountable, the presence of antisemitism in American politics and the role that racial and cultural bigotry plays in determining who receives consequences.