



PERSPECTIVES

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The Tlaib-Omar Trainwreck: A First Assessment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Israeli decision to ban US Representatives Tlaib and Omar on the basis of their support for BDS has elicited a firestorm of comments from Israel's detractors and supporters. The decision, warranted but unnecessary, illustrates the deep dysfunction that has come to characterize US-Israeli relations. The poisoning of American attitudes initiated by President Obama and the hysteria that accompanies everything associated with President Trump (and Prime Minister Netanyahu) set the stage for Tlaib and Omar to create a lose-lose situation for Israel. Their trip would have resulted in condemnations at the end, or worse. But the manner in which Israeli public diplomacy failed to make its case shows bad situational awareness and crisis management that was unable to overcome the Congresswomen's bad faith or Trump's unwanted intervention.

The last minute Israeli decision to ban US members of Congress and prominent BDS supporters Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar is the culmination of a drama set into motion several weeks ago when their trip was announced. It represents a bad outcome of a simple, predictable trap set by the two and their supporters. The episode also depicts the dysfunctional condition of Israeli and American politics and the relationship between the two.

The trip was announced in July after Tlaib and Omar refused to participate in the now traditional Israel trip organized by AIPAC. The matter was initially subject to much speculation and conflicting statements from Israeli officials about whether the two would be denied entry, with the conventional wisdom being [that they would be admitted](#).

But from the beginning it was apparent that Palestinian-American Tlaib, who had regularly met with American [Muslim Brotherhood and Hezbollah supporters](#) and [accused American Jews of “dual loyalties,”](#) and the Somali-American Omar, who introduced BDS legislation in the House of Representatives, constructed (perhaps even unwittingly) a no win situation for Israel. The Israeli choices were unpalatable: they could have been admitted and create a media circus for the duration of the visit, when they would undoubtedly have issued various condemnations of Israel, or denied admission.

Arguably, the worst outcome would have been a visit to the Temple Mount by the two, which could have sparked riots resulting in injuries perhaps even to the Congresswomen themselves. More likely is that Israeli (or even American) security officials would have prevented them from visiting the Temple Mount at all, resulting in a well-publicized confrontation.

From the Israeli side the conflicting messages and last minute denial depicted government indecision. But this decision was followed by the release by the [Prime Minister's](#) office of information showing the trip had been partially funded by Miftah, a leading BDS organization, and an itinerary that featured no meetings with Israeli officials or private citizens, only Palestinian ones. Their trip was hardly two sided or even educational; it was simply a propaganda mission.

Had this information been released earlier - even by a matter of hours before the final decision was announced - it could have forced their hand or at least made the Israeli decision more comprehensible. As is so often the case the optics of a potentially justifiable decision were muddied by delay, indecision, and apparent lack of concern.

The American responses were equally predictable. President Trump had broadcast his belief that the two should be denied entry and with characteristic caprice [tweeted](#) “It would show great weakness if Israel allowed Rep. Omar and Rep. Tlaib to visit. They hate Israel & all Jewish people, & there is nothing that can be said or done to change their minds. Minnesota and Michigan will have a hard time putting them back in.”

By doing so and for whatever reasons, this made it appear that Trump was alternately forcing Netanyahu's hand or attempting to support his decision (prior to the Israeli elections), and that Netanyahu was kowtowing to an American *diktat*. Trump's antipathy towards the “squad” of socialists and

particularly Omar and Tlaib, who have accused him repeatedly of “racism” and “Islamophobia,” is deep, as is his overwrought philosemitism.

Democratic presidential candidates, none of whom are particularly disposed towards Israel in the first place, expressed outrage. Senator [Elizabeth Warren stated](#) “Israel doesn't advance its case as a tolerant democracy or unwavering US ally by barring elected members of Congress from visiting because of their political views. This would be a shameful, unprecedented move.”

Senator Bernie Sanders went further and stated the move was “a sign of enormous disrespect to these elected leaders, to the United States Congress, and to the principles of democracy”. For her part, Omar called the move an “affront.” More gentle disapproval came from Israel supporters including [AIPAC](#) and other communal organizations.

These and other condemnations conveniently overlook that Israel has done the [same with legislators from other countries](#), as the US has with an Israeli parliamentarian as well as a host of others including football great Diego Maradona, singer Amy Winehouse and the prominent Indian politician (and current Prime Minister) [Narendra Modi](#), on far flimsier grounds. Denying entry to legislators is unusual but hardly unprecedented.

That seemingly intelligent commentators like *Washington Post* columnist [Anne Applebaum depicted the decision](#), however misguided, as somehow authorizing “authoritarian leaders” around the world to begin “barring opposition politicians from travel” is as bizarre as it is disheartening. “Authoritarians” do not need a license to do what they have been doing forever. The fact that it was Israel barring (Muslim) Congresswomen apparently has permanently changed global politics.

In general, the venom of denunciations of Israeli policy and expressions of hurt may index the desire to fundamentally change the relationship between the two countries. But the disproportionate response, the sheer outbreak of hysteria and hyperbole, also measures the outsized role Israel plays in American politics.

Beyond this, the description of the decision as unprecedented and an affront to Congress is not only deliberately exaggerated and ahistorical: it is also an un-ironic endorsement of Israel's vassal status. Vassalage was “proven” by “taking Trump's' advice” and by making a sovereign decision. But Democrats also expect to be kowtowed to, to perhaps even more than Trump, only as Israel's saviors and in the name of “preserving Israeli democracy.” Coupled with this were threats, which quickly emerged to the effect that payback

should be expected when a Democrat eventually assumes the presidency. Here too Israel was destined to lose. In this sense, Netanyahu's largely uncommented on foreign policy strategy to shift Israeli reliance away from the US seems prescient.

That the Tlaib-Omar story overshadowed a [far more consequential revelation](#) that former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's emails had been directly sent from her home server to a web address in China speaks volumes about the tendentious if not bizarre priorities of the interlocked US media-political establishment. There was no way the Tlaib-Omar visit was not going to become front-page news, since real front-page news is actively downgraded. Israel invariably leads. This is a sign of dysfunctional American politics, awash with conspiracy theories and antisemitism since Trump's election.

But the lack of anticipation on the part of Israeli officials rankles; the train was sighted long before the wreck occurred. An impetuous and destructive intervention by Trump should have been anticipated and contingencies planned for. There is no sign this was done. Israeli public diplomacy, clumsily divided between the Prime Minister's Office, the multifaceted Strategic Affairs Ministry, and the kneecapped Foreign Ministry, fell between the chairs. Coordination with the US at the formal diplomatic level and that of various legislators and organizations was also lacking.

In the end, it would have been wise to allow Omar and Tlaib to visit and to have been gracious in the face of their animus. Nevertheless, despite the storm, it is unlikely that this particular train wreck will destroy the Israeli-American relationship or even invigorate the BDS movement. It will instead cement views, including hostility, on all sides and reinforce sadly warranted views of Israeli diplomatic ineptitude. The fixation on the Great Satan Trump has also long been firmly joined with that of the Little Satan Netanyahu and this incident will only intensify that perception, at least among the left-leaning chattering classes.

But the sheer abnormality of the US-Israel relationship, where demands for vassalage mix with stubborn and often clumsy assertions of sovereignty, against the backdrops of a deep and invaluable strategic alliance, antisemitism and regional chaos, and rapid changes in American Jewish and broader US and global demographics, cannot be understated. That abnormality, a unique artifact of culture and history, cannot be overcome, only managed. Both sides had better start taking the challenge seriously.



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