

April 30, 2019

Dear Honorable Members of the Congressional Black Caucus:

We write to register our deep disappointment with the Congressional Black Caucus's (CBC) failure to forcefully defend Congresswoman Ilhan Omar, the Freshmen Representative from Minnesota, whose character, faith, and progressive political agenda have been subjected to spurious accusations. The CBC's brief three-sentence statement, released on April 13, condemning President Trump's terrorist-baiting twitter attack against Omar fell far short of the robust defense her personhood and politics deserve.

One of four new African American Congresswomen and, significantly, one of only two Muslim women elected to Congress, Omar has been under attack from the beginning of her term because of her willingness to speak truth to power, especially where the intertwined questions of Palestine and Israel are concerned. Rather than supporting Omar's right to critique the American Israel Public Affairs Committee's (AIPAC) multi-million dollar lobbying efforts to pass pro-Israel legislation which, for years, has retarded the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the CBC has remained silent. The implications of this silence have included the assumption, propagated in parts of the mainstream media, that the Congresswoman was anti-Semitic for calling out the role of a pro-Israeli pressure group in shaping US policy; or, that she was disrespectful and unpatriotic for acknowledging the threats and challenges collectively faced by Muslim Americans following the September 11 attacks.

In turning its back on Omar, the CBC has also turned its back on its own history of hard-fought struggle for civil rights and international human rights. So too has it seemingly forgotten the proud history of African American support for Palestine, a support rooted in our understanding of the *shared* ravages of settler colonialism and racial(ized) discrimination in Palestine and the United States. Indeed, our belief that all of our freedom struggles are interconnected finds continued expression in our support for justice for Palestine just as we supported the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. This history has, however, come at a cost. Those who have spoken out in favor of a peaceful resolution to the conflict which preserves the dignity and right to self-determination of the Palestinian people are regularly vilified, while their views have been marginalized from popular debate. The egregious treatment of [Angela Davis](#) and [Marc Lamont Hill](#) are but two recent examples of this Gordian knot. Silence in the face of such slander has permitted this result.

The CBC's treatment of Omar is symptomatic of a larger failing on the part of the Caucus to adopt a consistent ethical position on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This puts the CBC at odds with its own stated policy aim of "promoting U.S. foreign policy initiatives...that are consistent with the fundamental right of human dignity." This objective cannot be selectively pursued. The CBC must recognize the fundamental right of human dignity for Palestinians, just as it does for Jewish Israelis.

The CBC cannot claim to be the “Conscience of the Congress,” a name it received in part because it spearheaded Congressional activism on the issue of apartheid in South Africa, while it remains silent on the ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestine and the creation of a system of apartheid in both Israel and the Occupied Territories. In leading the slow and arduous process of building congressional consensus against the evils of apartheid in South Africa, the CBC had to confront a variety of tactics that apartheid apologists deployed to delegitimize the international solidarity campaign that buoyed South African activists and freedom fighters, including both red-baiting and terrorist-baiting. Let us not forget that Nelson Mandela was on the U.S. terrorism watch list until 2008.

The return of such tactics, now deployed by the Israeli state against Palestinians and those that support their right to self-determination, is one that South African anti-apartheid activists like [Desmond Tutu](#) and [Ronnie Kasrils](#) have rightly condemned. The CBC must also take action by bravely calling for an end to the fear and intimidation that allows the Israeli state to flout international law and act with impunity against the Palestinians. The urgency of this call is underlined by the Israeli Defense Forces’ brutalization of Palestinian protesters during the recent March of Return protests on the border of Gaza. The injustice that quite logically flows from a system that sees Israel as the nation of Jews rather than a nation of the people living in that geographic space is one that African Americans cannot remain silent about given its haunting parallels with our own history of American apartheid. If the CBC wishes to once again become the “Conscience of the Congress” it must speak out.

By adopting an ethical position in support of justice for Palestine, the CBC will not only stake out a clear policy position that opens up a space for reasoned debate about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it will also better position itself to defend those, like Ilhan Omar, who have been vilified for their views. Indeed, the scurrilous attacks against Omar are largely a function of the way in which the possibility for rational debate on this important issue has been foreclosed by the discursive strategy of equating critiques of both Israeli state policy and the outcomes of pro-Israeli lobbying efforts with anti-Semitism. Such a formulation makes it nearly impossible to hold Israel accountable to international law without risking being labelled an anti-Semite.

There is no other country where the articulation of criticism directed at the state suggests a chauvinist attack on the peoples of that land. Nevertheless, the ahistorical linkage of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism has been allowed to proliferate in so-called mainstream circles in the USA and parts of Europe, and the CBC has been strangely silent in response to all of this. Can one imagine a situation where criticism of the dictatorship of Equatorial Guinea would be seen as, *ipso facto*, an attack on people of African descent? Or where criticisms of the illegal Moroccan occupation of the Western Sahara are portrayed as attacks on the Moroccan people? This predicament means that progressive Jews inside and outside of Israel must disproportionately bear the burden of speaking truth to power. We must stand in solidarity with their plight too.

We the undersigned call upon the CBC to take the following steps:

The CBC must collectively visit Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories so its members can evaluate for themselves what the situation on the ground is like. We believe that such a visit will reveal the gravity of the human rights violations that are occurring there and the impossibility of a peaceful resolution to the conflict if the status quo is allowed to persist. Bearing witness to the abuses suffered by the Palestinian people on a daily basis should goad the CBC into action.

The CBC must uphold its stated policy aim of “promoting U.S. foreign policy initiatives...that are consistent with the fundamental right of human dignity” by recognizing the fundamental right of human dignity for Palestinians.

The CBC must create a platform for further debate about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, its prospects for a peaceful resolution, and the role that the United States must play in seeking such a resolution.

The very first step that the CBC can and must take in this direction is to do more than just condemn President Trump’s attacks against Congresswoman Omar, the CBC must also defend her right to critique US foreign policy towards Israel and Palestine.

Respectfully,

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