

New US lawmakers' criticism of Israel pressures Democrats

Author:

Sun, 2019-02-10 22:56

WASHINGTON: The support for a boycott of Israel by the first two Muslim women in the US Congress has opened a breach in the Democratic Party and threatens to create a fissure in the ironclad US-Israeli alliance.

Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib made their debut in the House of Representatives in January openly declaring their support for the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement, or BDS.

The movement, launched more than a decade ago and modeled on the 1960s movement to pressure South Africa over apartheid, calls for people and groups to sever economic, cultural and academic ties to Israel, and to support sanctions against the Jewish state.

But for Israel partisans – including many Democrats and Republicans in Congress – BDS smacks of anti-Semitism and poses a threat to Israel.

Tlaib, 42, has Palestinian roots and represents a district of suburban Detroit, Michigan that is home to thousands of Muslims.

She argues that BDS can draw a focus on “issues like the racism and the international human rights violations by Israel right now.”

Omar, 37, is the daughter of Somali refugees who was elected to represent a Minneapolis, Minnesota district with a large Somali population.

She accuses Israel of discrimination against Palestinians akin to apartheid, but denies that she is anti-Semitic.

Her remarks in January to Yahoo News however sparked anger among the large pro-Israel contingent in Congress, the powerful, largely Democratic US Jewish community, and Israel itself, where BDS is seen as a national threat.

“When I see Israeli institute laws that recognize it as a Jewish state and does not recognize the other religions that are living in it, and we still hold it as a democracy in the Middle East, I almost chuckle,” she told Yahoo News.

“Because I know that if we see that in another society we would criticize it – we do that to Iran, any other place that sort of upholds its religion.”

Omar and Tlaib sparked the BDS controversy during a period when Donald Trump’s administration has strengthened relations with Israel and slashed aid to the Palestinians.

But Republicans saw their support for BDS as both a threat to Jews and an

exploitable rift among Democrats.

“Democrats have made it clear that hateful, bigoted rhetoric toward Israel is not confined to a few freshman members. This is the mainstream position of today’s Democratic Party and their leadership is enabling it,” Republicans said in a statement on Jan. 29.

The worry about the still small but growing support for BDS in the US predates Tlaib’s and Omar’s political rise.

A number of states have passed or proposed constitutionally questionable legislation and policies that would penalize supporters of the boycott movement.

But the arrival of Tlaib and Omar in Congress was greeted with the first proposed federal law to fight to that end, in the Senate.

Sen. Marco Rubio argues that BDS aims to eliminate the state of Israel, and said his legislation would protect states’ rights to exclude from public contracts any supporters of BDS.

Republicans, the majority in the Senate, along with more than half of the Democrats approved the legislation.

But a significant number of Democrats opposed it, because, they said, it violates constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression.

That has left Democrats vulnerable to charges of anti-Semitism.

To fight that, in January prominent party members formed the Democratic Majority for Israel, touting themselves as “The Voice of Pro-Israel Democrats,” which for some came across as a rebuke of Omar and Tlaib.

After Omar joined the influential House Foreign Affairs Committee, according to The New York Times, Jewish committee Chairman Eliot Engel privately made it clear that he would not ignore any “particularly hurtful” remarks she might make.

“You hope that when people are elected to Congress, they continue to grow,” he reportedly told her.

“There is obviously a serious fight going on within the Democratic Party with respect to how to deal with BDS and some within their party who advocate for it,” said Alvin Rosenfeld, who directs the Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism at Indiana University.

“Should the party swing to the far left and appear to be way out of line with America’s traditional ties to one of its strongest allies, Israel, the party will surely suffer at the polls,” he told AFP.

Amy Elman, a political science professor at Kalamazoo College, said anti-Semitism should not be used as a “political football by any party.”

“Democrats should care less where the charges of anti-Semitism come from. What matters is if the accusations are valid,” she said.



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BDS supporter fights entry ban in Israel Israel to demolish Palestinian murder suspect's home

[Israel to demolish Palestinian murder suspect's home](#)

Author:

Sun, 2019-02-10 22:18

JERUSALEM: The Israeli Army said on Sunday it had started preparations to demolish the West Bank home of a Palestinian suspected of killing an Israeli woman.

“Overnight, troops operated in Hebron, where the suspect in the murder of Ori Ansbacher is from,” the army said in an English-language statement.

“During the operation, the troops surveyed the suspect’s house in order to examine the possibility of its demolition.”

The suspect was arrested over the weekend and has not yet been charged.

The body of Ansbacher, 19, was found late on Thursday in southeast Jerusalem, and she was buried the next day in her Israeli settlement of Tekoa.

Israeli security forces arrested the suspect in a raid in the occupied West Bank city of Ramallah.

The Shin Bet security service named him as 29-year-old Arafat Irfaiya from Hebron.

Both the police and Shin Bet have said investigations have so far not found conclusively whether the killing was a “terrorist attack” or from other motives.

In the runup to Israel’s general election in April, however, politicians and Israeli media appeared to have no such doubts on Sunday.

“I have no doubts about the nationalist motives of the murderer,” Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan told public radio.

“After so many years of suffering from terror we should know – this is a nationalist attack.”

Commenting on calls to execute Palestinian militant killers, Erdan said he was in favor of applying the death penalty in certain circumstances.

“If it becomes clear that there is no possibility of rehabilitating the murderer and that he abused his victim, in such cases capital punishment should be applied,” he said.

“The time has come to employ the death penalty for terrorists, as the law allows us to do,” the daily Maariv quoted MP Bezalel Smotrich of the far right Jewish Home party as saying.

Despite a court gag order, Israeli social media were abuzz over the weekend with what Yediot Aharonot newspaper called “graphic descriptions about the alleged nature of the murder.”

Police called on the public not to share “publications and reports, especially on social media, about the circumstances of the murder case, including irresponsible horrific descriptions.”

“We hereby clarify that those are completely baseless publications,” police said.



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Netanyahu vows to freeze Palestinian funds after Israeli teen killed
Israel arrests Palestinian suspect in teenager's killing

[Pope Francis praises UAE for its modernity, while maintaining its roots](#)

Author:

Sun, 2019-02-10 19:50

DUBAI: Pope Francis has praised the UAE, describing it as a "modern country looking to the future without forgetting its roots."

Speaking in a video message broadcast Sunday at the first day of the World Government Summit in Dubai, he said he hoped his visit to the UAE last week was the start of change.

"I carry in my heart the visit I just made to the UAE and the warm welcome I received," he said.

"I encountered a modern country looking to the future without forgetting its roots. I saw a country seeking to transform into concrete initiatives the words tolerance, fraternity, mutual respect and freedom."

Pope Francis's historic visit to Abu Dhabi last week was the first by a pontiff to the Arabian Gulf and saw him lead the biggest open mass to be held in the region with a 180,000-strong congregation.

He said he returned home from a country that had risen from the desert in the hope that others could be equally successful.

"I believe it is possible," he said.

"But only if we grow together, alongside one another, with openness and respect, willing to take on everyone's problems."

Addressing world governments, he spoke of political challenges, economic development, environmental protection and the use of technology.

He said he hoped the question underlying their reflections would not only be "what are the best opportunities to take advantage of?", but rather "what kind of world do we want to build together?"

Pope Francis explained that this question pushed people to think of others rather than capital and economic interests.

"It is a question that does not look to tomorrow, but further into the future, to the responsibility weighing upon us," he added.

"Handing on this world of ours to those who will come after us, preserving it from environmental degradation and, even before that, from moral degradation. We cannot speak of sustainable development without solidarity."

During the Pope's visit to the UAE he met with the Grand Imam of Al Azhar Al Sharif University and chairman of the Muslim Council of Elders, Dr Ahmed Al Tayeb.

The pair signed a pledge of commitment to tolerance and fraternity at the end of a day which also saw the Pontiff visit the Presidential Palace of the UAE and the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque.

Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, said the Pope's visit was historic and provided opportunities for the future.

"It opens a new page in the history of religions and in the dialogue of religions," he said.

"They are two people of peace but who could have ever thought that those two symbols would overcome all limits and constraints to sign a new agreement of

peace to overcome violence and hatred?”

He said their meeting in Abu Dhabi last week was aimed at relaying an important message.

“As they said to the world: peace is hard to achieve but it is not impossible,” he added.

“Some might wonder why those two religious symbols insist on brotherhood and the answer lies in one word: peace. Therefore, all of us should be courageous enough and assume our responsibilities to put an end to conflict and wars – we might not succeed but we will most definitely try,” he said.



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Netanyahu vows to freeze Palestinian funds after Israeli teen killed

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Sun, 2019-02-10 15:19

JERUSALEM: Nudged by rightwing political rivals after a deadly Palestinian attack on a young Israeli woman, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who seeks re-election pledged Sunday to freeze money transfers to the Palestinian Authority.

Israel collects around \$127 million a month in customs duties levied on goods destined for Palestinian markets that transit through Israeli ports and then transfers it to the PA.

The Israeli parliament last year passed legislation to partially withhold funds, in response to PA payments to families of Palestinians jailed by Israel for attacks against Israelis.

"By the end of the week, the staff-work necessary for implementing the law on deducting terrorists' salaries will be completed," Netanyahu – who faces a general election in April – told journalists at the start of the weekly cabinet meeting.

"Next Sunday I will convene the security cabinet and we will approve the necessary decision to deduct the funds. Let nobody doubt, the funds will be deducted, at the start of next week," he said in Hebrew.

Earlier Sunday, Education Minister Naftali Bennett was among rightwingers pressing Netanyahu to implement the law after a Palestinian was arrested at the weekend on suspicion of killing 19-year-old Ori Ansbacher.

"The law to offset terrorist funds passed...last July," he Tweeted. "I call on the prime minister – apply the law immediately."

Palestinian civil affairs minister Hussein Al-Sheikh said that the PA would not go along with Israel withholding any part of the tax money due.

"The Palestinian Authority will refuse to receive any cleared funds if Israel deducts a penny from it," he told AFP, speaking in Arabic.

He did not say what the PA's next step would be.

The Israeli army said Sunday it had started preparations to demolish the West Bank home of the Palestinian suspected of Ansbacher's killing, named by security officials as 29-year-old Arafat Irfaiya from the flashpoint city of Hebron on the occupied West Bank.

"Overnight, troops operated in Hebron, where the suspect in the murder of Ori Ansbacher is from," the army said in an English-language statement.

"During the operation, the troops surveyed the suspect's house in order to examine the possibility of its demolition."

Ansbacher's body was found late Thursday in southeast Jerusalem, and she was buried the next day in her Israeli settlement of Tekoa.

Israeli security forces arrested the suspect in a raid in the West Bank city

of Ramallah. He has not yet been charged.

Both the police and the Shin Bet security agency have said investigations have so far not concluded whether it was a "terrorist attack" or driven by another motive.

In the runup to elections, however, politicians and Israeli media appeared to have already made up their minds.

"I have no doubts about the nationalist motives of the murderer," Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan told public radio.

"After so many years of suffering from terror we should know – this is a nationalist attack."

Commenting on calls to execute Palestinian militant killers, Erdan said he was in favor of applying the death penalty in certain circumstances.

"If it becomes clear that there is no possibility of rehabilitating the murderer and that he abused his victim, in such cases capital punishment should be applied," he said.

"The time has come to employ the death penalty for terrorists, as the law allows us to do," the daily Maariv quoted MP Bezalel Smotrich of the far-right Jewish Home party as saying.

Despite a court gag order, Israeli social media were abuzz over the weekend with what Yediot Aharonot newspaper called "graphic descriptions about the alleged nature of the murder."

Police called on the public not to share "publications and reports, especially on social media, about the circumstances of the murder case – including irresponsible horrific descriptions."

"We hereby clarify that those are completely baseless publications," it said.

Sponsors of July's law on Palestinian funds wrote at the time that the PA paid around \$330 million a year to prisoners and their families, or seven percent of its budget.

Israel has withheld payments in the past, notably in response to the Palestinians' 2011 admission to the UN cultural agency UNESCO as a full member.

The PA, which has limited sovereignty in parts of the West Bank, relies heavily on outside financial aid.



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[UN urges Lebanon's parties not to back foreign conflicts](#)

Sat, 2019-02-09 23:02

UNITED NATIONS: The UN Security Council called on all Lebanese parties on Friday to implement a policy disassociating themselves from any external conflicts "as an important priority," a statement that appears clearly aimed at Hezbollah which has sent fighters to Syria.

The council also reiterated its call for implementation of its resolutions which "require the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon so that there will be no weapons or authority in Lebanon" except those of the state. This is also aimed at Hezbollah militants.

The council statement issued on Friday night welcomed the Jan. 31 announcement of a national unity government in Lebanon, which broke a nine-month deadlock.

Council members encouraged all political leaders to build on the momentum of the new government's formation "to address the pressing security, economic, social and humanitarian challenges facing the country" and called on the new government to urgently implement reforms, fight corruption and strengthen accountability.

FASTFACT

Aiming at Hezbollah militants, the UN Security Council reiterated its call for implementation of its resolutions, which require the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon so that there will be no weapons or authority in Lebanon except those of the state.

Rival political groups had been locked in disagreement over the makeup of a new government since May, after the country's first parliamentary elections in nine years. A breakthrough became possible after weeks of backroom deals as Lebanon's economic woes mounted.

The new government is headed by Prime Minister Saad Hariri, the Western-backed politician who has held the job since 2016. But Hezbollah, the powerful Shiite group, made significant gains at the expense of the largest Sunni party and controls three ministries including the Health Ministry.

The US administration expressed concerns about Hezbollah holding three Cabinet posts and called on the new government to ensure that group is not supported by the ministries' resources.

Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah said on Wednesday the group would defend Iran in the event of war with the US.

He said the so-called axis of resistance, led by Iran, is the strongest it has ever been.

The axis groups the Syrian government of Bashar Assad with Shiite militias in Iraq and Hezbollah.



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New Lebanon government calls for 'painful economic reforms' After months of deadlock, Lebanon has new government