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USA/Israel

# On Trump and Netanyahu and mutual interests

- IV Online magazine - 2019 - iV535 - August 2019 -

Publication date: Friday 23 August 2019

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**It has been an interesting week.. Two members of Congress, Representatives Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib had been invited to visit the Israeli-occupied territories under the auspices of an organisation called Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue & Democracy (aka Miftah). [1]** The tour was not organised by Israel or by a group sympathetic to the actions of the Israeli government and military; instead it is a Palestinian group and these Congresswomen were not going to see the usual tour that most American Congresspeople take. Tours for Congress members are organised regularly by AIPAC through the aegis of the AIEF (American Israel Education Foundation); given the politics of AIPAC these tours have specific aims, the primary one being building support for Israel. [2] J Street also has organised alternative tours to Israel by Congresspeople in the past.

Needless to say, the Israeli government was certainly not happy about the visit to the occupied territories by the two Congresswomen and was looking for a way out. [3] Given the law allowing the prohibition of visas to those supporting the Boycott, Divestment and Sanction (BDS) movement, they could have done this easily; this is not a new law and discussions began in 2015 with the law being passed in 2017 where BDS is viewed as a strategic threat to Israel. [4] However, one thing is blocking political activists; it is quite another situation to prevent US Congress members from visiting using this law given the amount of money the Israeli government gets from the US. [5] The other point relates to the idea of Israel as a democracy; what kind of democracy prohibits entry by its critics? [6] In fact, in July, the Israeli government said that they will allow the congresswomen to visit “out of respect for Congress.” [7]

**So what was the Israeli government to do?** Enter President Donald Trump to the rescue. Earlier this week, the President in an interesting day on twitter tweeted that Israel should not to allow the two congress members to enter the country; to add insult to injury he describe the two as antisemites.

The Israeli government clutched at the lifeline given by Trump. It is not as though Trump has been reticent to support the wishes of the Israeli government; both the move of the embassy to Jerusalem and his recognition of Israel's control over the Golan Heights have come to mind (many American Jews were very uncomfortable with his decisions, but the feelings of American Jews were not what he was interested in to be honest). Within hours the Israeli government said that Tlaib and Omar were not welcome in Israel. [8]

Reading their decision is almost bizarre, it is as if they only just found out about Omar and Tlaib's support for BDS (which is odd as that is well known as they sponsored legislation supporting the use of BDS). [9] What is also extremely amusing is the bizarre meme circulating that Trump bullied Netanyahu into blocking their visit. [10] AOC's statement that Trump is exporting his bigotry only demonstrates her ignorance on this question; there is a law in place already blocking entry to the country on the basis of support for BDS; this was put in place under Netanyahu. [11] To think that “poor Bibi” is an innocent in this matter is absurd.

But there was certainly a miscalculation on both Trump's and Netanyahu's parts and it was a serious one; within hours, the Democratic Party leadership (Pelosi and Schumer), AIPAC, other Jewish groups and newspapers and even a few Republicans (e.g., Marco Rubio) came out against the decision by Israel to block their visit. [12] Bernie Sanders's statement is notable:

“Sanders said Thursday that “the idea that a member of the United States Congress cannot visit a nation which, by the way, we support to the tune of billions and billions of dollars is clearly an outrage.”

“And if Israel doesn’t want members of the United States Congress to visit their country to get a firsthand look at what’s going on”and I’ve been there many, many times”but if he doesn’t want members to visit, maybe [Netanyahu] can respectfully decline the billions of dollars that we give to Israel,” Sanders added.” [13]

Almost as grotesque as the initial refusal, the Israeli government offered to let Tlaib in to Israel as a private citizen to visit her grandmother with the condition that she doesn’t discuss BDS. [14] Tlaib has correctly refused the offer; having conditions imposed on her visiting her family is beyond inappropriate and being banned as a congresswomen but allowed in as a private citizen is ridiculous. [15] Saying that she was setting them up as she had asked for a visit to her grandmother is cynical; she obviously realised that this was not a great idea. To have to make this decision to not visit her family must have been extremely difficult; Jewish Voice for Peace celebrating Shabbos with her in Detroit stood by their representative; recognising her courage and how heart-breaking it must have been to make this decision, they stood with her in solidarity. [16]

## On the normalisation of antisemitism

“I am only involved from the standpoint of they are very anti-Jewish and they are very anti-Israel,” Trump said. “I can’t imagine why Israel would let them in, but if they want to let them in, they can, but I can’t imagine why they would do it [17]”

Given Trump’s antisemitism, it was almost actually humorous that he felt he had the right to accuse anyone of antisemitism (I do recognise that I have a cynical sense of humour).

But Trump has form in accusing others for what he is; like calling “the squad” racist and calling someone that he thought was disrespecting him at a speech “fat.” So his calling other people antisemitic when he is an antisemite is just more of the same crap. [18]

**Why do I think that Trump is an antisemite?** Trump’s use of antisemitic tropes in speeches and tweets are well known, especially his attacks on George Soros (criticism of Soros is not antisemitic in itself, it is the nature of the criticism itself which reveals the antisemitism of Trump and his supporters, in many senses George Soros has replaced the Rothschilds in modern antisemitic discourse by the far right (and that is not limited to the US, see Hungary for example, where Viktor Orbán’s last campaign victory was based on anti-immigrant and anti-Soros rhetoric); google Soros and Rothschilds if you don’t believe me, it is disgusting). Â-Â- [19]

My personal favourite example of his antisemitism relates to his telling American Jews that Netanyahu was our Prime Minister; American Jews do not have a prime minister, we are instead blessed with an antisemite as President. [20] Trump’s statement usually fall under what is called classic antisemitism like the Jewish Bankers meme, that American Jews have dual political allegiances (the “you are not to be trusted by fellow citizens due to your dual loyalty”) and the other wonderful one that you are not really Americans because you have another country to go to which has your allegiance. [21] The problem, of course, with this position is that it ignores the reality that American Jews have different political and religious beliefs; moreover, we have very different perspectives on political Zionism as a solution to antisemitism.

To add to the continuing pile of evidence concerning Trump’s antisemitism, there is his latest statement accusing American Jews that vote for the Democratic Party of disloyalty falling into classic antisemitism of the dual loyalty of Jews. Given that American Jews overwhelmingly vote for the Democratic party, this is a very dangerous accusation. [22]

# Criticism of Israel is not antisemitic, neither is Anti-Zionism

How to fight antisemitism is an old debate among Jews; you can go back to the end of the 19th century to see the arguments among Jews; we all agree that antisemitism exists, but how do we fight it? Zionism is only one “solution” to deal with antisemitism. Other beliefs have included Assimilationism, Bundism (we struggle as Jews together to fight antisemitism and in favour of dignity and socialism where we live) and the struggle for socialism as part of the broader movement as socialists not as Jews. [23] It was the horror of the holocaust that led to a shift in support for the creation of a Jewish state to address antisemitism.

However, the Israeli government’s and military’s actions have led to a situation where, in absolute, more and more Zionists are actually Christian fundamentalists (that is no surprise given the number of Christian fundies as compared to American Jews) but there also has been a relative shift among American Jews away from support of Israel (especially unconditional support), this is especially among young American Jews as they shift towards the left and away from liberalism. [24] But the passage of nation-state law in 2018 which in many senses legalised apartheid in the country was just the latest in a series of actions in Israel which made American Jewish liberals extremely uncomfortable and the reaction of the Israeli government to the Pittsburgh murders (covering for Trump’s antisemitism) infuriated many American Jews. [25] Disavowing Trump’s responsibility for rising antisemitism in the US is not only insulting, it made it very clear who the Israeli government was willing to protect and it was not American Jews.

When I became an anti-Zionist at the age of 14, anti-Zionist Jews were called self-hating and antisemites. We were considered as shande (a disgrace, shame) such was the strength of support for Zionism amongst American Jews. This perspective has been shifting for some time and it derives as much from the actions of the Israeli government and military as it does from the revival of the left in the US. American Jews have been very active in the protests against the anti-immigration policies of Trump and ICE; the recognition that we must stand together with the oppressed against oppressors is once again becoming fundamental to the political and religious beliefs of Jews. [26] To quote Marek Edelman, the last surviving commander of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (and a member of the Jewish Bund):

“To be a Jew means always being with the oppressed, never with the oppressors. Never with the oppressors.” [27]

The reality is that most Zionists these days are Christian fundamentalists and they are also antisemites; their support for Israel is based on their belief that in order for Christ to return, the Jews must be in Israel and they will then fight the battle of Armageddon. [28] It is interesting to contrast this with the religious Zionism among Jews where the Jews can only return to the Holy Land after the Messiah returns. But what needs to be understood is that antisemitism and being a Zionist are not contradictory and it is not only Trump that exhibits that position. For many antisemites having a place to send the Jews (rather than being in their countries) is incredibly useful; they really do not want us there and this kills two birds with one stone.

Watching the rise of antisemitism in the US has been more than disconcerting. From the chants of neo-Nazis in Charlottesville chanting “The Jews will not replace us” to the murder of Jews in a synagogue in Pittsburgh, the antisemitism of the far right has always been frightening, but they were a small number of disgusting people. But when the President of the US uses antisemitic tropes this is a normalisation of antisemitism that should worry everyone that opposes racism. We cannot stand silent in the face of racist ideology and attacks; we must stand in solidarity with those facing racism, misogyny, antisemitism, Islamophobia and homophobia.

My first reaction to the murderous attack on a Jewish synagogue in Pittsburgh was “oh my god, no!” My second was, “thank god my mother is dead and doesn’t have to see this; it would kill her.” My mother knew that antisemitism

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existed in the US (she was not stupid; I remember driving with my parents in Miami and her pointing out a hotel that didn't allow Jews to stay there), but she loved the US, she said, at least there are not pogroms here.

Pittsburgh destroyed this sense of security for American Jews and the additional armed attack against a synagogue in California and prevented attacks by antisemites against other synagogues are extremely worrying. However, it is the response by many American Jews against ICE raids and standing with refugees and migrants that fills me with pride; it is recognition of the role of Jews in repairing the world (tikkun olam) and represents a positive struggle for the future.

Standing in solidarity with Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar is obvious; not only I will never support Trump's racism and his attempt to play divide and rule, I always stand in solidarity with those facing oppression – it is quite simple.

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