

Was Israel Right to Ban Congresswomen Omar and Tlaib?

The dueling headlines said it all. On the right, the Breitbart homepage proclaimed, "Bibi Bans Jew Haters." On the left, the Huffington Post announced, "Israel Extreme: Muslim Critics Not Welcome." The question is: Did Israel do the right thing in banning Reps. Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib from entering Israel? And did President Trump influence the decision?

According to Trump, letting the Congresswomen into Israel would "show great weakness." Conversely, according to Tlaib, not letting them in was a "sign of weakness."

What are we to make of this?

In favor of Israel's decision, Breitbart's Aaron Klein wrote, "An organization run by notorious Palestinian extremist and Israel boycott defender Hanan Ashrawi co-sponsored and organized the planned visit to Israel by controversial Representatives Rashida Tlaib of Michigan and Ilhan Omar of Minnesota."

So, not only are Omar and Tlaib supporters of the boycott, divest, sanctions (BDS) movement (who recently compared the Israeli government to the Nazis), but their visit was partially hosted and organized by Miftah. This organization "'has accused Israel of committing 'massacres,' 'apartheid,' 'summary executions' of Palestinian youth and 'Judaizing' Jerusalem. It has also accused Israel of 'ethnic-cleansing of Palestinian-Israeli Arabs.'"

So much for Omar and Tlaib having any good intentions.

As Israel's Interior Minister stated, "it is inconceivable that Israel would be expected to let into the country those who wish to hurt it, including by means of the visit itself."

Accordingly, the logic for banning them was simple: Omar and Tlaib were not going to engage in a fair-minded, fact-finding mission. Instead, they were going to engage in a predetermined, Israel-bashing mission, using their time on the ground as a glorified, propaganda-driven, photo-op.

In short, these Israel-haters would be given lots of fuel for their hostile fire. Why should Israel allow them to step foot in their country? For what purpose?

In response, Omar wrote, "Denying entry into Israel not only limits our ability to learn from Israelis, but to enter the Palestinian territories. Sadly, this is not a surprise given the public positions of Prime Minister Netanyahu, who has consistently resisted peace efforts, restricted the freedom of movement of Palestinians, limited public knowledge of the brutal realities of the occupation and aligned himself with Islamophobes like Donald Trump."

Interestingly, AIPAC (the American Israel Public Affairs Committee), was critical of Israel's decision, tweeting, "We disagree with Reps. Omar and Tlaib's support for the anti-Israel and anti-peace BDS movement, along with Rep. Tlaib's calls for a one-state solution. We also believe every member of Congress should be able to visit and experience our democratic ally Israel firsthand."

Israel's decision also prompted "Democratic lawmakers to rally around Omar and Tlaib— including members of Congress who had previously expressed criticism over their positions— uniting moderates and progressives who have disagreed over this broader issue for months."

What, then, should we make of Israel's decision?

In my opinion, if Prime Minister Netanyahu decided to ban Omar and Tlaib because of pressure from President Trump, it would be a wrong decision, especially if Trump's opposition to their visit was personal more than pragmatic.

What if the decision was not because of Trump? In effect, Israel would be saying, "We are not going to allow lawmakers who support BDS to enter our country for the purposes of mounting a propaganda war against us. Their minds are made up, they are the guests of Israel-hating militants, and no good can come out of their visit. For the sake of our own dignity, we close the door in their faces."

Certainly, I can respect this.

The positions of Omar and Tlaib are extreme. Their Palestinian hosts are extreme. Who says you have to be doormats, trampled by your enemies? As a sovereign nation, exercise your sovereignty. Simply say no.

The problem here, of course, is optics.

If Israel is concerned with Omar and Tlaib making them look bad, in the process, Israel made itself look bad, playing into the stereotype of being an oppressive, controlling bully.

In fact, according to Herb Keinon, writing for the Jerusalem Post before Israel announced its decision, "U.S. Congresswomen Rashida Tlaib (D-Michigan) and Ilhan Omar (D-Minnesota), who have never hidden their deep dislike of Israel, have successfully boxed Israel into a lose-lose situation.

"If Israel lets in the congresswomen, it will lose because they will use every opportunity—at the al-Aqsa Mosque, at the security fence, at a refugee camp—to bash the Jewish state. And the press—both local and international—will eat it up. . . .

"And if Israel doesn't let them in, it will lose, because it will make the country look undemocratic, and will give a full arsenal of ammunition to those who want to paint it as such."

What, then, was Israel to do? If Keinon is correct, it was a lose-lose deal for Israel.

Perhaps he is right. But in an ideal world, Israel could have said, "We will be glad to host you and show you the real Israel. The free Israel. The enlightened Israel. The Israel that loves peace."

This would mean that the government would play a key role in setting the agenda, making sure Omar and Tlaib saw the freedoms enjoyed by the Arab (also known as Palestinian) citizens living in Israel. That they saw the trauma that residents of Sederot have lived with for years, as Hamas has rained rockets in their direction. That they toured the Holocaust museum and spoke to victims of terror attacks. That they interviewed Israelis and Palestinians living side by side in peace. That they saw clear evidence of the corruption of Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. And yes, of course, that they also saw the hardships experienced by Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza.

Israel, then, could turn the visit into a positive propaganda campaign, documenting every step of their journey. And should Omar and Tlaib turn around and put a different spin on the trip, Israel could say, "Here's what they said, but here's the reality. See for yourself."

In my view, that's the best way to defeat the critics and the naysayers: Put all the cards on the table and let people make an informed decision. (For a great example, see the story of a group of Millennials who were exposed to the best arguments of both Palestinians and Israelis.)

Apparently, however, that was not a real option, and it's hard to believe that Omar and Tlaib were on a fact-finding mission at all.

In the end, this is Israel's decision, which I respect. I'm just not sure it was the best decision. In the words of the pro-Israel, former-Congressman Steve Israel, "Fewer decisions could be more damaging to relations between the United States

and Israel than the one managed by President Trump and the Israeli government to bar two members of Congress from visiting the state of Israel.”

Or, more simply, it might just be bad public relations.

Update: After being banned, Rep. Tlaib requested permission to enter Israel to visit her 90-year-old grandmother with assurances that she would not engage in any anti-Israel activity while there. Israel granted her request, but then Tlaib changed her mind, saying it would be too “humiliating” to go under these circumstances.