

Palestine Unbound

Published each issue, this section strives to capture the tenor and content of popular conversations related to the Palestinians and the Arab-Israeli conflict, which are held on dynamic platforms unbound by traditional media. Therefore, items presented in this section are from a variety of sources and have been selected because they either have gone viral or represent a significant cultural moment or trend. A version of Palestine Unbound is also published on *Palestine Square* (palestinesquare.com), a blog of the Institute for Palestine Studies.

This Quarter's Topics

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#TweetYourThobe*

On 3 January, Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) made history as the first Palestinian American woman to be sworn into the U.S. Congress. Unlike her counterpart, Rep. Justin Amash, a Michigan Republican who rarely nods to his Palestinian roots, Tlaib has not shied from proudly celebrating her heritage. On election night, she draped a Palestinian flag over her shoulders and soon afterwards became the first member of congress to endorse the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. She is also organizing her own congressional trip to the occupied Palestinian territories.

In December 2017, Tlaib shared a photo on Instagram of the Palestinian thobe that she planned to wear for her swearing-in. Writing in *Elle*, she explained her decision as follows: "Throughout my career in public service, the residents I have had the privilege of fighting for have embraced who I am, especially my Palestinian roots. . . . This is why I [have] decided to wear a thobe when I am sworn into the 116th Congress."

A thobe is a traditional embroidered Palestinian gown, often passed down from mothers to daughters, which is worn on special occasions, both joyous and somber. The embroidery



A map depicting thobe patterns unique to different regions of Palestine. (4 January, Twitter)

* This story was originally written by Khelil Bouarrouj and first appeared on *Palestine Square*. The version here has been adapted and further developed for the *Journal* by JPS staff. -Ed.

patterns often include motifs unique to a particular locality in historic Palestine. Since the beginning of the First Intifada, the thobe has also taken on a more overtly political character. In villages of the occupied territories where the display of Palestinian flags and colors was criminalized by the Israeli military authorities, women began to embroider symbols of Palestinian nationalism onto their gowns to protest Israeli repression and encourage women's participation in the resistance.

Tlaib said her thobe, a picture of which she shared on Instagram, was especially meaningful to her because her mother used to embroider Palestinian dresses as a seamstress in the West Bank village of Bayt 'Ur al-Fauqa. Tlaib's Instagram post drew over eleven thousand likes, as well as coverage in the *New York Times*, *Haaretz*, and *Middle East Eye*. Inspired by Tlaib's pride in her heritage, Palestinian American novelist and academic Susan Muaddi Darraj created a Facebook group to promote the hashtag #TweetYourThobe, encouraging Palestinian (and other) women around the world to share photos of their thobes on 3 January, the day of the swearing-in ceremony. Tlaib was already becoming the object of racist backlash and for Darraj, the hashtag was a way "to make [Tlaib's inauguration] a teaching moment . . . to educate America about Palestinian culture, about how the thobe connects generations of Palestinian women to our history and to each other."

The hashtag sparked a viral movement. More than four thousand thobe posts were subsequently shared on Instagram, including one of human rights lawyer and Palestinian rights activist Noura Erakat. International news outlets, including a Chinese newspaper, covered #TweetYourThobe, with Arab media translating the hashtag as #GharidiBiThowbek (or Gharidi_Thowbek).

At the investiture ceremony, Tlaib was sworn in with her hand on a copy of the Qur'an that had belonged to U.S. "founding father" Thomas Jefferson, and wearing her thobe. The gesture was not only a powerful reminder of her family heritage but also represented a tangible link to Palestinians all over the world. In the words of Muaddi Darraj, "I was proud of our community on that day—we finally took charge of the headlines, seized our own narrative, and celebrated together."



A Twitter user shares a photograph of her grandmother's thobe. (4 January, Twitter)



Noura Erakat models a thobe-inspired gown designed by Palestinian *Project Runway* runner-up Rami Kashou. (5 January, Instagram)

#StandWithIlhan

In February 2019, notable progressive U.S. figures, including Women’s March organizers Linda Sarsour and Tamika Mallory, civil rights icon Angela Davis, and performer/activist Harry Belafonte, joined tens of thousands of people in expressing enthusiastic support for Ilhan Omar (D-MN), the newly elected Democratic representative from Minnesota.



Activist Angela Davis displays her support for Minnesota congresswoman Ilhan Omar. (February 14, Twitter)



Linda Sarsour sends a message of resistance against the suppression of pro-Palestinian voices. (12 February, Instagram)

Part of the youngest, most diverse, and solidly progressive group of women politicians to enter the U.S. House of Representatives, Omar and her fellow Muslim congresswoman, Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), were dragged into several controversies on the topic of Israel almost immediately after their investiture on 3 January. One such furor broke out over a six-word (plus one music-note emoji) tweet posted by Omar in response to a comment by House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) attributing Omar and Tlaib’s stance on the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement to anti-Semitism and alleged links to white supremacy. In her tweet, Omar retorted, “It’s all about the Benjamins baby”—a lyric from U.S. hip-hop artist Sean “Diddy” Combs’s 1997 ode to money and a rebuke to fellow legislators and politicians whose positions on BDS are largely shaped by their connections with the powerful pro-Israel lobbying group American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

While there is nothing particularly controversial about the assertion that U.S. lobbies have considerable sway over elected officials—similar criticism is regularly leveled at the National Rifle Association and Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (so-called Big Pharma)—making such claims in relation to AIPAC sets off political alarm bells. According to her detractors, Omar’s tweet, whether simply careless or deliberately anti-Semitic, perpetuated centuries-old stereotypes associating Jews with money. In response to the indignation, from both the Republican and Democratic leaderships as well as sections of the public, Omar apologized, all the while insisting that the offense read into her tweet was entirely mistaken.

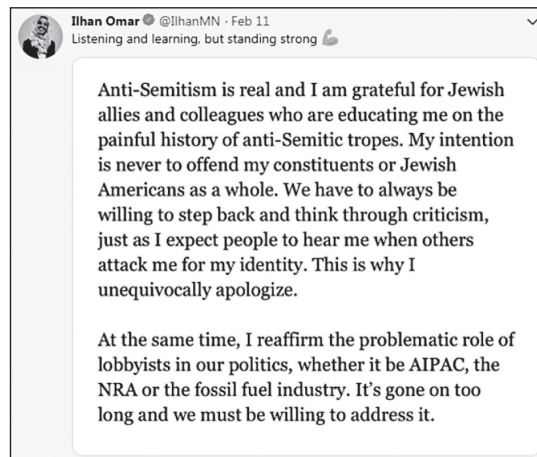
The next day, the congresswoman issued a public statement in which she “unequivocally apologize[d]” for any offense caused to “[her] constituents and Jewish Americans as a whole.” Her 11 February statement affirmed her belief in the painful reality of anti-Semitism and asserted that her mission was to listen, learn, and “think through criticism.” To many Republicans’ dismay, it also reaffirmed her view about the “problematic role of lobbyists in our politics,” including AIPAC.

Right-wing politicians refused to accept Omar's apology. In fact, U.S. president Donald Trump called it "lame" and suggested Omar resign from Congress. To his accusation that she harbored hate "deep in her heart," Omar fired back: "You have trafficked in hate your whole life—against Jews, Muslims, Indigenous, immigrants, black people, and more. I learned from people impacted by my words. When will you?" Her retort was retweeted thirty thousand times.

Condemnation of Omar was widespread and persistent this quarter, but not universal. Progressive activists, journalists, and members of the public, including several Jewish voices, expressed comparably enthusiastic support for Omar, emphasizing that racism and Islamophobia had both played significant roles in the reactions to her remarks.

The fact that anti-Israel criticism remains a largely taboo topic that has been weaponized to smear Israel's detractors as anti-Semitic partly accounts for AIPAC's almost unassailable support among the majority of U.S. elected representatives (see Trachtenberg and Stanton in JPS 48 [2]). How then, Omar's supporters asked, could they challenge the prohibition on speaking critically of Israel in mainstream politics?

On 12 February, U.S.-based activist groups Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) and CODEPINK started #StandWithIlhan campaigns to "reject attempts to silence [Omar's] criticism of Israeli policy and her support for Palestinian rights and freedom," in the words of a JVP press release. The CODEPINK campaign called on Omar's defenders to sign a petition asking their representatives to vote "No" on a congressional resolution formally condemning the incoming legislator. The JVP social media campaign, for its part, invited those favorable to Omar to post photos of themselves displaying signs at the campaign's tumblr: www.istandwithilhan.org. By the quarter's end on 15 February, over two hundred photos had been submitted to the campaign.



U.S. representative Ilhan Omar posts an apology for her controversial "Benjamins" tweet. (11 February, Twitter)



Jewish Voice for Peace tweets an illustration of Ilhan Omar in support of the congresswoman. (14 February, Twitter)

#IStandWithMLH

On 29 November, the U.S. news network CNN caved to unspecified public pressure and fired Temple University professor and activist Marc Lamont Hill, who had been a commentator for the network, following a speech he made at UN headquarters the day before, which marked the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. In his speech, Hill called for the mobilization of a global solidarity movement committed to political action that would “give us what justice requires—and that is a free Palestine from the river to the sea.”

While those words—“Palestine from the river to the sea”—have been widely used throughout the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century to evoke the notion of a unified, democratic state in all of historic Palestine (the slogan was claimed by the Palestine Liberation Organization until the Oslo Accords in 1993), it is a phrase that also provokes strong reactions among Zionist sympathizers, as evidenced by the uproar that followed Hill’s statement.

“HOL-EE RAVIOLI,” Washington Examiner editor Seth Mandel tweeted almost gleefully. Mandel described Hill’s words as “anti-Semitic” rhetoric and went so far as to claim that his UN speech was “an explicit call for Jewish genocide.”

In a mournful op-ed for his hometown newspaper, the Philadelphia Inquirer, Hill wrote that instead of registering his speech for what it was—an urgent call for political action—“many heard a dog-whistle that conjured a long and deep history of violence against Jewish people.”

The many critics of CNN’s decision used the hashtag #IStandWithMLH to voice support for Hill and to ask why his call for basic human rights in Palestine was considered controversial enough to terminate his employment with the network, pointing out that former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum, who has point-blank denied the existence of a Palestinian people, has



Marc Lamont Hill defends his position. (29 November, Twitter)



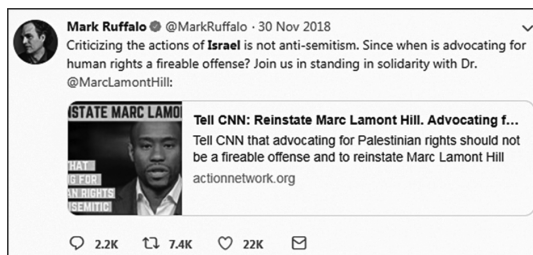
Comic book and science-fiction writer Saladin Ahmed responds to Marc Lamont Hill’s firing. (29 November 2018)

comfortably retained his job as a CNN commentator. The U.S. Jewish activist organization IfNotNow also launched a petition calling on CNN to reinstate Hill; the petition had gathered eight thousand signatures at the quarter's close.

Shortly thereafter, Temple Board Chair Patrick O'Connor told the *Inquirer* that Hill had "blacken[ed] [Temple's] name unnecessarily." His statement sparked concern that the university would follow in the TV network's footsteps. "No one at Temple [was] happy with his comments," O'Connor went on. "People wanted to fire him right away." Hill's colleagues came to his defense, however, and in a letter of no confidence in the board chair that was also published by the *Philadelphia daily*, thirty-five faculty members staunchly argued in favor of Hill's right to free speech.

Hill is not the only academic whose career has been derailed, if not wrecked, by comments critical of Israel. Scholars Norman Finkelstein and Steven Salaita have both been fired from prestigious university appointments for their outspokenness, and many others have been the target of intense criticism for their pro-Palestinian views (for more on this topic, see Trachtenberg and Stanton in JPS 48 [2]). As Palestinian rights advocate Noura Erakat pointed out in a piece for the *Washington Post*, Hill's firing fits a well-established pattern of historical punishment for black U.S. intellectuals who have championed an "internationalist vision for liberation." (For more on Black-Palestinian solidarity, see the forthcoming special issue, JPS 48 [4], curated by Noura Erakat and Marc Lamont Hill.)

For now, though, Hill remains at Temple.



U.S. actor Mark Ruffalo encourages fellow Twitter users to sign a petition demanding CNN reinstate Marc Lamont Hill. (30 November, Twitter)