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MINNESOTA NICE

American Ingrate: Ilhan Omar and the Progressive-Islamist Takeover of the Democratic Party, by Benjamin Weingarten.
Bombardier Books, 372 pages, \$17

FEW FIRST-TERM LEGISLATORS HAVE had a more toxic effect on U.S. political culture than Democratic House Representative Ilhan Omar of Minnesota. Her career deserves critical study, especially as the Democratic Party becomes increasingly governed by identity politics, which Omar exploits, and indifferent to left-wing anti-Semitism, for which she is notorious. Benjamin Weingarten's *American Ingrate: Ilhan Omar and the Progressive-Islamist Takeover of the Democratic Party* positions itself as a study of both Omar's rise and the Left's recent degeneration.

Weingarten, a senior fellow at the London Center for Policy Research, dutifully narrates Omar's personal and professional history to date. He notes that her family worked as civil servants for the Somali dictator Siad Barre. When Barre was violently deposed, the family fled. Weingarten speculates—plausibly—that Omar's experience with Barre's Islamic socialist regime (she was 13 when she arrived in the U.S.) inspired both her hard-Left views and her affinity for Islamist governments.

Specifics about the family's activities in Somalia are sparse. But *American Ingrate* should have explored Omar's political rise in the United States in greater detail. In 2016, Omar ousted a longtime Democratic state representative in a three-way primary that also included her fellow Somali immigrant Mohamud Noor, whose bid for office she had previously supported. Two years later she defeated Margaret Anderson Kelliher, the former Speaker of the Minnesota House of Representatives, in an open-seat congressional primary with a margin of almost 20 points.

Weingarten leaves the impression that Omar's triumphs revealed the power of identity politics among Democratic activists. That's likely so, but surely there were other Somali refugees—even female Somali refugees—interested in politics in Minneapolis. Why did Omar emerge? Does she represent the beliefs of the Somali community in Minnesota, or did she exploit Somali voters to advance her preconceived beliefs? Why were local Jews, some of whom recognized Omar's bigotry from the start of her career, unable to make themselves heard among primary voters?

THE SECTION WHICH OUTLINES OMAR'S shocking anti-Semitism—and the failure of House leadership to condemn it—is well done. Weingarten correctly observes that Omar's partnership with fellow first-term extremist Representative Rashida Tlaib of Michigan has allowed more mainstream Democratic legislators to oppose Israel strongly while still seeming moderate by comparison. Omar once responded to criticism from pro-Israel groups by tweeting, "It's all about the Benjamins baby" (implying that Jewish lobbyists were using their wealth to corrupt American politics). But when Speaker Nancy Pelosi proposed a resolution condemning anti-Jewish hate in response to the tweet, Omar outmaneuvered her. In what Weingarten calls a "craven cave," Pelosi generalized her resolution and shifted the focus onto Donald Trump's own explosive Twitter rhetoric. That episode alone speaks volumes about the contemporary development of left-wing American thought.

Weingarten also highlights Omar's hypocritical tendency to invoke universal values such as human rights and non-interventionism, while excusing the humanitarian atrocities of governments she favors. She was one of only two House Democrats to vote "present" on a resolution condemning the Armenian genocide, objecting that the measure did not also criticize "earlier mass slaughters like the transatlantic slave trade and Native American genocide." She has been similarly forgiving toward Somalia and Iran. On the other hand, she has consistently criticized Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, even though their human rights abuses seem comparable to those of the Islamist states for which she roots. As Weingarten notes, these shifting positions "simultaneously undermine her purported devotion to justice and upholding human rights, while illustrating her support for an authoritarian Islamist regime."

Engaging with Omar's ideas, however, is difficult. She rarely articulates detailed positions in legislative debates, interviews, or give-and-take discussions with centrist or center-Right commentators. There has been no probing interview of Omar as there was of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez by Margaret Hoover on PBS, and doubtless there will not be. Instead,

Omar mostly communicates through tweets or in vague, jargon-laden statements.

"WE NEED," OMAR TWEETED IN December 2017, "to have conversations about race and class, and we need to understand the linkage between those things to dismantle ideas of patriarchy, misogyny, racism, and capitalism, and what autonomy and self-determination needs to look like for women." Or, outlining her economic agenda in July 2019: "Medicare for All. Homes for All. Universal School Meals. A Green New Deal. We are fighting for policies that lift up all Americans. We are fighting for the many, not the few!" Or these meaningless platitudes, in the *Washington Post*: "I believe in an inclusive foreign policy—one that centers on human rights, justice and peace [and]... that is sincere about our values."

Whatever else she is, Omar is not a deep thinker.

Weingarten tries to lend her cogency by positioning her as a protégée of other figures (President Barack Obama, former Black Panther Angela Davis, revisionist historian Howard Zinn) or within more detailed intellectual traditions—intersectionality, political Islamism, contemporary progressivism. Yet Omar displays such little intellectual curiosity that it seems hard to imagine her as shaped by any coherent set of ideas. As a result, much of this material, which consumes a good chunk of the book, seems a stretch.

Omar, in the end, most resembles former British Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn. Like Corbyn, Omar is (at best) indifferent to leftist anti-Semitism. Both traffic in hardline anti-capitalist rhetoric without explaining how they would translate their economic ramblings into policy. And both have an almost entirely reflexive vision of foreign policy: allies of the United States deserve condemnation; critics deserve praise.

That a figure such as this has become a major player in our national politics is perhaps the most depressing aspect of Weingarten's valuable book.

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