

Ilhan's Country

Traveling through East Africa and Minnesota reveals a story more quintessentially American than either the congresswoman or her detractors want to admit

BY ARMIN ROSEN



On July 2, 2022, Ilhan Omar briefly appeared onstage with Suldaan Seeraar, a Somali pop star making his U.S. debut. It was the first time the sizable Minneapolis Somali American community had held an event at the Target Center, the arena that's home to the Twin Cities' NBA team. Like Omar's political career, the concert marked the power and permanence of a relatively new community of Americans, one that barely existed just 30 years earlier. Presented before thousands of young Somalis, many of whom had come from Columbus, San Diego, and other centers of Somali American life, Omar, the world's best-known person of Somali ethnicity and one of the only members of the U.S. House of Representatives who is a bona fide national figure, faced a torrent of booing. The jeering accelerated as she began to address the crowd. "We don't have all night," she chided with a wide and unembarrassed smile across her face, as if the congresswoman was reveling in the open scorn.

That Omar is unpopular among some Somalis should not be surprising by now. Her primary campaign for the Minnesota state legislature in 2016 pitted her against a former Somali American political ally, Mohamud Noor, as well as against Phyllis Khan, an incumbent supported by Minneapolis City Councilman Hassan Warsame, then the Somali community's leading elected politician. Omar defeated them both. Her supposedly heroic opposition to

the religious and social conservatives of her own community was a major theme of *This Is What America Looks Like: My Journey from Refugee to Congresswoman*, Omar's May 2020 memoir. From the beginning of her political career, her views on abortion, homosexuality, and a range of other topics were not those of a staunch Muslim traditionalist, and were even to the left of what a standard-issue Minnesotan typically believed. At the Target Center, she brought onstage her husband Tim Mynett, a political consultant who is not Somali and only converted to Islam around the time he ended his previous marriage and married Omar. Ahmed Hirsi, Omar's previous spouse, was a well-known and once relatively popular figure in Twin Cities Somali affairs.

Perhaps, one source in the Minneapolis Somali community suggested to me, the booing expressed the growing edginess of a younger generation that was more open to taking a hard line on matters of religion and morality than even their parents had been. The Somali American community has produced plenty of young people vocally committed to progressive politics—the boosers didn't seem to represent a majority of the Target Center crowd, after all—but also many others who have gone sharply in the other direction, toward a religious fundamentalism that was itself a reaction to distinctly American realities. It could all be very bewildering, including to Somali Americans themselves. "Our children, they look like us," said the man, a political strategist and activist

in south Minneapolis, “but they are not Somali. They are American.”

Omar didn’t get to where she is by reconciling any of these contradictions but by making them work to her advantage. For most politicians, it would be a humiliating rebuke to have thousands of members of their ethnic and religious community rain boos upon them at a major public event held on their home turf. The smiles and laughter with which she greeted the opprobrium of young Somalis didn’t come from nervousness or surprise. This was the kind of confrontation that had helped turn her into a political star.

Omar’s instincts are rarely wrong, however polarizing a figure they’ve made her. In 2020, she ran 16 points behind Joe Biden, underperforming the president-elect by more than every one of the other 200-plus Democratic members of the House of Representatives up for reelection. But she still won 64% of the vote on the strength of a firm base of support that included far-left activists, college students, left-wing children of culturally conservative Somali immigrants, and the social-justice-minded bourgeois, newly activated by the protests and riots that broke out after the killing of George Floyd, which occurred in Omar’s congressional district. The Target Center incident might have looked like an ugly scene to people who knew little about her life and career, or like an opportunity for political opponents wrongly convinced that she’s beatable this year. Omar is up against former city council member Don Samuels in August’s Democratic primary, an unexciting alternative from an earlier political era who is likely headed for the same double-digit defeat that an earlier and even more promising challenger suffered in 2020. It’s unclear that any attack on Omar has ever landed particularly hard.

Being a lightning rod would have harmed Omar if she hadn’t proven to be such a skillful manager of her own story and her own image. That’s especially true when it comes to the more sensitive aspects of her dizzyingly complex life, which she has either ruthlessly

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neutralized, cleverly spun, or kept scrupulously out of view.

On June 15, 2020, Omar announced that her father had died of complications from the coronavirus. When Somalia plunged into its still-reverberating civil war in the early 1990s, Nur Said, then in his 30s, braved the spreading anarchy to make sure his children and extended family made it from Mogadishu to Kenya, and then from a refugee camp to final safety in the United States. Since he is someone who rescued his loved ones from a war zone and raised a pathbreaking contemporary political figure, it is a permanently lost opportunity that Nur Said never seems to have recorded his life story in any public form, or given a single media interview of any real depth. His contribution to his daughter’s astonishing political rise remained vague until the very end. In *Time for Ilhan*, a 2018 documentary about Omar’s victorious 2016 campaign for the Minnesota state legislature, Nur Said is shown eating lunch and talking in Somali with Omar, hanging around rallies and polling places with other older Somali men, and accompanying her to an election-night victory party. When he speaks in Somali, his words are only rarely translated. He is introduced in *Time for Ilhan* as “Nur Said,” though Omar named him as Nur Omar Muhammed Omar in her tweet announcing his death

Omar’s father is one of the heroes of

her memoir. Yet she offers scant details about his life in the old country, in contrast to other family members. For instance, we learn that Omar’s maternal grandfather held “a government job, helping to run the country’s network of lighthouses.” He was also an accomplished Italian gourmand, Italy being Somalia’s former colonial ruler. In 2016, Omar told the Minneapolis alternative newspaper *City Pages* that her grandfather had been Somalia’s “national marine transport director” and had gone to college in Italy, although neither detail appears in her book.

Omar’s memoir does mention the “unusual privileges” that the future congresswoman’s mother, who died during Omar’s infancy, had been “afforded by her father,” Omar’s politically connected grandfather. The family compound in the Somali capital, which belonged to Omar’s mother’s side, was behind a protective wall and filled with books, music, and art. The family owned its own car, a Toyota Corolla, something also unusual for subjects of an impoverished communist dictatorship. Readers don’t learn about Nur Said’s prewar life or social status at the same level of specificity, aside from finding out that he grew up in one of the major towns of the Puntland region, northeast of Mogadishu, and belonged to a subclan that the regime of Siad Barre had once persecuted. He is twice referred to as an “educator,” with no further detail given.

This lingering gray zone would not be filled in until after Nur Said’s death. In a Somali-language condolence tweet, Omar Sharmarke, who served as Somalia’s prime minister from 2009 to 2010 and then again from 2014 to 2017, described Nur Said as “Col Nur”—that is, as a colonel—and noted his service in Somalia’s armed forces. Sharmarke is a former Somali ambassador to the United States who speaks fluent English; his father, a president of Somalia, was assassinated shortly before Siad Barre’s coup in 1969. Within the Somali clan system, he belongs to the same sub-sub-clan as Nur Said and Omar.

During the six months before Nur Said’s death, over a half-dozen Somali Americans in the Twin Cities and Virginia—among them a former post-civil

war Somali government official, the son of a general who had served just before the civil war, and multiple people close to either Omar or her ex-husband Ahmed Hirsi's family—told me that Nur Said had not been an “educator” but a mid-ranking professional officer in the Somali military during Barre's regime. Public messages from Sharmarke, as well as from Somali community members in Minnesota, presented additional proof that Nur Said once held rank in a military that was notorious for torturing political prisoners, bombarding the country's own cities, and persecuting clans deemed disloyal to Siad Barre's ruling clique. Minnesota Public Radio-affiliated website Sahan Journal eventually described Nur Said as “a prominent Somali military officer.”

For Omar and other Somali refugees, life in the United States offered the possibility of a complete break with the war, and with the decades of accelerating national breakdown that made the conflict possible. In America, Somalis were free to recreate some of what they'd had in East Africa, in a country where a societywide self-immolation was at that point unthinkable. Religious and social life, including aspects of the Somali clan system, quickly reasserted themselves in places like Minneapolis. This diasporic revival was only possible because of a shared impulse toward leaving the worst of the civil war in the country they'd escaped. At almost no point have Minnesota's Somali Americans ever accused one another of decades-old crimes back in East Africa. “There's this kind of a collective social attitude: Whatever the hell happened, we left it in Somalia,” explained Ahmed Yusuf, a Minneapolis high school teacher and author of the book *Somalis in Minnesota*.

As an immigrant, a racial and religious minority, and a survivor of war, Omar had a tougher path to Congress than fellow “squad” member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, or nearly anyone else for that matter. But navigating Somali politics in both the Twin Cities and the Horn of Africa gave Omar a head start in understanding what it would take to make it in a fracturing near-future America. The Minneapolis Somali community, recent Somali history, and

Omar's own personal history turned out to be perfect preparation for a consequential political career in an ever more divided United States.

Conveniently for Omar, the only people who have seriously investigated her past during her now 6-year-old career in electoral politics are writers for right-wing websites. Fringier media have accused Nur Said of being a war criminal or the commandant of a prison camp, stories that have not been persuasively supported and that reflect a mix of conjecture and rumors circulating within the Twin Cities Somali community. These insinuations allow Omar's critics to present her as having personally benefited from human rights atrocities, only to then appoint herself an uncompromising accuser of her adopted country's injustices once she entered politics.

Holistic treatments of her life and career are largely absent in mainstream or nonideological outlets. The few that have been written are built around narrow biographical questions or seem to be almost entirely based on Omar's own statements, which most publications haven't bothered to check or challenge.

In 2019, the year the newly elected congresswoman became a household name, the closest a major national publication came to a full profile of Omar was a July piece in *The Washington Post*. The article noted a number of factual misstatements she had made—she told a veterans' group that 45% of military families were on food stamps, which was nine times greater than the actual number. She told a group of high school students that she had once watched a “sweet, old African American lady” sentenced to a weekend in jail and an unpayable fine for stealing a \$2 loaf of bread.

The *Post* allowed for the possibility that the incident, for which there was no evidence but Omar's recollections, had been made up on the spot. “If true, it is also probably embellished,” the newspaper determined, adding Omar “said she may have flubbed some facts.” No matter: The story was undeniably powerful. Omar probably already understood that its truth was immaterial, and that the risks of getting caught in the fabrication

were worth the payoff. Much of the article was dedicated to soft-focus accounts of congressional busywork and interviews with Minnesotans who had nothing critical to say about her.

That Omar could secure such light treatment from an outlet as powerful as the *Post* further confirms her mastery of the modern-day political media ecosystem. But such mild scrutiny also does a disservice to Omar, who is often reduced to a series of clichés—whether as a vindication of liberal immigration policy, or evidence of the country's inevitable march leftward, or an affirmation of America itself, with its ability to make winners out of people the crueler regions of the world had victimized. The press's evident lack of curiosity about Omar also smacks of self-regard: Dissecting Omar's life story is seen as a right-wing pastime. An absence of interest in her biography, and even in her pre-congressional political career, serve as proof of being enlightened enough not to belong to the wrong club.

Aided by the media's tactical retreat, Omar has become the public's first and final source for understanding how one of the country's major political figures got to where she is. She has ensured that certain aspects of her life—like her father's services to the Siad Barre regime, along with everything it suggested about how and why Omar was able to escape a collapsed state and then succeed in a country thousands of miles from her troubled birthplace—are mentioned only by her opponents. With the help of dedicated supporters, an incurious media, and the racial and religious antagonism of Donald Trump, Omar succeeded in streamlining her labyrinthine history into a stirring tale of an indomitable spirit achieving its destiny, demolishing American backwardness in the process.

Omar has now been in Congress for over three and a half years. American politics has lost much of its local and even regional character, thanks in part to figures like her. The country's political life is now almost entirely national-scale and personality-driven, a clash between controversy-seekers who are essentially celebrities, and who are constantly vying for attention and

adoration before a third of a billion citizens. Omar recognized this shift to a world of Ocasio-Cortezes and Marjorie Taylor Greenes earlier than nearly anyone. She understood that she was playing on a field larger than a single state assembly or congressional district, or even any single country. She realized that politics was becoming an arena defined less by policy and action than by narrative and personal emotional investment. Proceeding from this insight, she became a lone voice willing to stake out provocative or maximalist positions that some growing portion of the country wanted to hear: on Israel, on race relations, on student loan forgiveness, on the integrity and inner motives of her own Democratic Party colleagues.

American politics has risen—or perhaps fallen—to meet Omar’s level of stridency. The upheavals of the post-George Floyd moment, the coronavirus pandemic, and the chaotic aftermath of the 2020 presidential election accelerated an existing process: The realignment of the country into durable and often impenetrable enclaves of competing narratives, each convinced that the American project is under existential threat from nearly everyone outside of their own camp, whether those enemies are Trumpists, QAnoners, white supremacists, cops, Zionists, COVID-truthers, neoliberal capitalists, anti-vaxxers, the trans movement, Black Lives Matter, critical race theorists, police abolitionists, democratic socialists, or the professional managerial class. The other side is often believed to be guilty of evils so appalling that even attempting to win them over to your side, rather than forging ahead to isolate and destroy them, is seen as self-betrayal.

American politics now resembles a tribal struggle, a competition between a constellation of in-groups over scarce resources and even scarcer channels of actual power. Protecting and advancing one’s political tribe using the full range of available tools, including media manipulation, calculated dishonesty, and mass protest, is often an objective that supersedes any loyalty to a political party or ideological system, as well as to any higher ideals, like the truth.

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One example of Omar’s command over this ascendent mode of politics was her blockbuster tweet of April 16, 2022, in which she shared a video of a group of Christians singing a religious song in the middle of a packed flight. The only hijab-wearing congresswoman in American history spoke up to stigmatize this public display of religiosity, which she saw as proof of the bigotry of the country in whose national legislature she serves. “I think my family and I should have a prayer session next time I am on a plane,” she quipped. “How do you think it will end?” The people in the video were completely anonymous, lacking Omar’s profile and power. They had no connection to Omar’s district in Minneapolis, or to any question of policy, major or minor. But Omar recognized that the video was a chance to teach certain Americans about how awful they are, and to amplify a grievance so forcefully that any further debate would be less pithy, less interesting, and less instantly divisive than Omar’s initial shot. Her name trended on Twitter for two days. The tweet generated op-eds and

news segments and currently has over 200,000 likes.

Omar’s attention-grabbing and divisive political theater serves her purposes even when it verges into absurdity. On July 19, police escorted the congresswoman off the grounds of the Supreme Court during a pro-abortion rights protest. Along with Ocasio-Cortez, Omar held her hands behind her back, creating the false impression she had been handcuffed. The ruse worked: ABC News, among others, tweeted to announce the arrest of the two legislative stars. Whether or not corrections are on their way, the image of Omar half-grinning behind thick sunglasses, wearing a necklace whose dark amber beads matched her shirt and hijab, with a cop appearing to restrain her and the high court’s Corinthian facade looming in the background, has a power far exceeding that of whatever the bare facts might be.

Ilhan Omar’s emergence as one of the era’s defining political figures, and the likely longevity of her congressional career, make it all the more important to understand how and why she got this far. Her story, and its fateful intersection with both Somalia’s and America’s modern history, are reassuring proof that the United States remains a land of reinvention. For Somali refugees, as for Jews a century earlier, America was an escape hatch from history, the only place on Earth where a painful recent past could be peacefully reconciled. Ilhan Omar’s story is the journey of Somalis and other vulnerable populations that found safety in contemporary America, in part by gaining the freedom to choose what to take with them and what of their old lives to leave behind. Omar, like centuries of ambitious newcomers to America, fully inhabited the freedom to transform into whatever she imagined herself to be.

Ilhan Omar was born in Mogadishu in 1982. Her mother was from a Somali clan that traces its origins to Yemen; she died when the future congresswoman was still a baby. In a poignant scene in *Time for Ilhan*, the state legislature candidate reflects

on her mother's absence as she braids her youngest daughter's hair. "When I was little like you, my sisters would cut off my hair and make me bald all the time. You know why? Because I didn't have a mommy, and nobody had the patience to do this crazy business." Her father was from the Osman Mahmoud subclan of the Majeerteen branch of the Darod. Clan is patrilineal in Somalia, so Omar and her siblings are also considered part of the Osman Mahmoud, a grouping that traces its descent from a line of medieval sultans. "Like me, she comes from a royal family," Haji Mohamed Yasin, a Nairobi-based analyst and political activist, explained when I met him in Kenya in the fall of 2019.

The young Omar lived in a safety and comfort unimaginable to nearly everyone in what was largely a very poor country. Per Omar's memoir, her mother had been a "secretary for a government minister," while her paternal grandfather was the government maritime administrator with a talent for Italian cooking. Omar writes that her "family of civil servants and teachers was well off enough to have a guarded compound and driver. But I didn't like the attention I received from the other kids for the in-your-face privilege of our white Toyota Corolla and our driver Farah—nor the constraints."

It is not in itself morally compromising to have acquired wealth and safety in Barre-era Somalia, as Omar's family had. "In the case of Ilhan Omar and her family, they've been privileged from the get-go, before the establishment of the Somali state," said Adam Matan of the London-based Anti-Tribalism Movement in late 2019, speaking to a general perception among diaspora Somalis of Omar's origins. "She was in Mogadishu, part of the well-off people in Somalia. Then literally out of nowhere, you have to flee for your life."

Nearly every path to bourgeois comfort and the kind of multigenerational, multibuilding family compound that Omar describes in recollections of her early life in Mogadishu ran through Siad Barre's regime. Beginning in the 1970s, the authoritarian dictator had put the country on a glide path to catastrophe.

Barre gained power in a 1969 military

coup, ending the nine-year democratic experiment that followed Somali independence from Italy. He was known as "the Old Man," a stoic and distant figure who surrounded himself with younger military officers he could control. Many dictators are lazy or stupid, and rule on nothing more complicated than fear, but Barre had a reputation as a cerebral workaholic who would stay in the office until the early morning hours. "Barre was an extremely shrewd dictator," said Ali Abdullahi, a Nairobi-based scholar, when I met him in 2019. "He knew his friends and foes really well. He mastered the art of clan dynamics."

Ruling as a communist revolutionary, Barre sought to impose an alien ideology on a society of herders, farmers, oral poets, and traders bound together by family, religion, and various other sources of meaning and cohesion that communism sought to anathematize. Though he counted a widely praised literacy push among his successes, Barre's rule was never secure. Ruling over a Soviet client state made him into a minor enemy of the United States. Internally, he was up against forces far older and more respected than any single dictator or political ideology, Islam high among them. One of Barre's first major atrocities was the 1975 execution of 11 religious leaders accused of preaching against the regime's "women's emancipation" campaign.

By 1977, Barre's attempts to impose socialism had cratered the country's agricultural and industrial production. The dictator launched the most reckless gambit of his time in power and invaded the Somali-majority regions of eastern Ethiopia, which he hoped to annex. The campaign failed when the Soviet Union switched sides in the conflict and started backing the brutal communist regime of Ethiopian junta leader Mengistu Haile Mariam, which repelled Barre's expedition into the Ogaden region with the help of Soviet weapons and military advisers, as well as 12,000 Cuban commandos. The humiliating defeat left Barre with one possible path to survival: The exploitation of Somalia's clan system, which, like Islam, was a rival to communism entirely organic to Somali society.

Clan acts as a framework for the current Somali political system. At the 2001 Djibouti peace conference, negotiators arrived upon an idea known as "4.5," in which one member from each of the four largest clans must fill exactly one of the highest offices in the government, with the "point five" referring to a representative of one of the so-called "minority" clans. Today, Somali politicians frequently travel to Minnesota to fundraise among fellow clan members.

The organization of the Somali political system along genealogical lines—or the perceived lack of any clear, nonviolent alternative to such a method of organization—is less absurd in light of everything that clan encompasses beyond electoral politics. In the most ethnically, linguistically, and religiously homogeneous place in Africa, clan remains the identity of both first and last resort. "For some, the clan has always been a kind of insurance," explained Abdirahman Abtidon, a Somali-language author and a research collaborator at the University of Rome's Somali Studies Center. "If some group attacks, who defends you? Your family." During periods of clear centralized authority, like Barre's rule, clans provided ready-made channels of loyalty. During periods of no authority, the clan was one of the last social institutions that endured. "Somalis survived the civil war because they had other constitutions, not just written ones," Abtidon said.

One of Barre's first atrocities in re-making the clan system to suit his political ends was his persecution of the Majeerteen subclan of the Darod, whom he scapegoated for the Ogaden disaster. Barre belonged to the Marehan, a different branch of the Darod. In 1978, his regime executed 17 Majeerteen officers accused of plotting a coup, and then launched a broader campaign of persecution. "Hundreds of military officers were rounded up, the civil service was purged, and political leaders, elders, intellectuals, businessmen, religious leaders, even women were sent to Barre's worst prisons," historian Lidwien Kapteijns writes in her 2012 book *Clan Cleansing in Somalia*. Outside this social and political elite, the regime burned 18 Majeerteen villages, massacring an

estimated 2,000 people, seizing cattle, and planting mines under agricultural lands. The purge fractured the Majeerteen elite. Some left Somalia to join various opposition movements in exile. Other Majeerteen stuck around, including Omar's father.

Serving the Barre regime as a Majeerteen did not make Nur Said a target of suspicion among Somalis in Minneapolis. He was widely respected and remained active in Somali affairs in the city. Omar made an effort to incorporate her father into her political campaigns; in a Facebook post, Sahra Noor, Omar's older sister, described him as "a great political strategist and fundraiser." In Omar's memoir, she recalls her father interceding with Somali communal elders in Minnesota who had sworn to crush the progressive upstart's state legislative campaign in 2016. Somali Americans in the Twin Cities say he was a frequent presence at the Starbucks in Cedar-Riverside, a gathering place for Majeerteen men. A Nur Said Mohamed Elmi appears as a signatory on an open letter from "Concerned Jubaland Communities" supporting the creation of an autonomous Jubaland state within Somalia's fragile federal system. (Though Nur Said was from Puntland, both areas have large numbers of Darod; both are also in constant tension with the weak central government in Mogadishu.)

Nur Said was a member of "the older generation," as one Somali community source in Minneapolis put it—someone who kept with people his age, and who usually only spoke in Somali. Another Minnesotan friendly with the family described him as "very mild-mannered guy, subdued almost. But very smart. He had this quiet wisdom about him. He also had something completely different from any Somali father I know. He had this kind of deference to his daughters... he wanted the attention for her, not for himself. You could sense it."

Practically everyone in the Somali state apparatus had an intimate look into the country's slow-motion collapse. Abdirashid Buule, who became a field worker for the Ministry of Livestock after graduating from high school, recalled that by the mid-1980s, his teams

could no longer access certain areas unless they had the explicit permission of local clan militias. The government had its own preferred militant groups, which meant that local-level contests for authority were raging even before civil war broke out. "What we had was better than without a government," Buule told me in Nairobi in 2019. "But the system was only for itself. Barre only thought of that day, when he had power."

Defections of senior regime officials, including Barre's ambassador to the United States, began in the early '80s. Civil war erupted in 1987 when Barre's air force flattened Hargeisa, the largest city in a region in which the Ishaq clan was dominant. The dictator had leaned on the clan system as his rule deteriorated, favoring the Marahan, Ogaden, and Dulbahante sub-clans of the Darod and killing thousands of Ishaq in order to terrorize the restive north of the country into submission.

From Nairobi to Melbourne to Minneapolis, much of the Somali diaspora traces its creation to the final weeks of 1990, when rebels reached Mogadishu and the country descended into a chaos from which it is yet to fully emerge. Mohamed Farah Aidid's United Somali Congress entered the city, kicking off months of reprisal killings targeting any member of any branch of Barre's Darod clan, regardless of whether they supported the regime. "All those associated with 'the' Darod—a genealogical construct that encompassed a score of clans and a large percentage of the inhabitants of Mogadishu and the country as a whole—now, irrespective of their individual histories, came to be seen as enemies to be killed and driven out," Kapteijns writes. In its first year, the conflict is believed to have killed 14,000 people and displaced another 400,000 in Mogadishu alone. Many of the first to arrive in the United States as refugees were Darod, like Omar.

Somalis often gave nearly everything they had to rescue their families. Yaxia Osman, a former shopkeeper in Mogadishu whom I met in Mombasa in 2019, watched people being killed around him and then spent his entire savings, totaling roughly \$30,000, renting trucks to get his extended family to the border.

Most displaced Somalis, who were a great deal poorer than Osman, simply began walking to places the war hadn't reached yet. Abdullahi Ali Aden, a refugee I met at the Dadaab complex of camps in the Kenyan desert in late 2019, hiked barefoot to the Somali-Kenyan frontier after the outbreak of war. His family of five slept by the roadside; they survived because they brought along their flock of 28 goats, nearly half of which they slaughtered during their weeks-long trek to relative safety.

The story of the conflict's most famous refugee is also one of the war's stranger escapes to safety. Omar's family stayed in Mogadishu for months after Barre's ouster. One night, per Omar's memoir and various other accounts she's given, attackers from an unspecified militia group tried to scale the gates and walls of the compound as the family gathered in their courtyard after dinner. As Omar recalls in her book, the family locked itself in the compound's main building; the young Omar hid under a bed. A "volley of gunfire" clattered the front gate. An aunt and an older sister recognized two of the militants, who they had known since childhood, and boldly began negotiating for the family's lives. The attackers withdrew when the two women effectively shamed them into leaving.

Omar's father and grandfather put their escape plan into action early the next morning. Omar and a female relative traveled to the coastal city of Kisumu in the back of a truck and eventually got out of Somalia by air: "We were smuggled out of the country at great cost on a small plane used to bring in contraband shrimp," she writes. "My aunt and I traveled in one aircraft, and my grandfather in another." According to Omar's memoir, her father did not come with her—she does not explain what route he took into Kenya.

The Mogadishu airport shuttered on December 31, 1990 as fighting intensified; chartering international flights in a Somalia rapidly descending into anarchy was practically unheard of. Yet by Omar's recollections, her extended family of some 20 people successfully evacuated a country of militant checkpoints,

firefights, and inter-clan violence by truck and by multiple aircraft. Such an escape required a combination of resources, luck, and advanced planning that almost no other escapees had. Barre himself arrived in Kenya later in 1991, by land.

The origin myth of the Minneapolis Somali American community involves a turkey factory three hours to the west, in a town called Marshall, Minnesota, which has a current population of 13,000. During the icy winter of 1992, a group of about 20 young men made their way to Marshall, where a Somali man worked as one of the factory's shift supervisors. The newcomers barely spoke English, and had few marketable skills. They were living through a tragedy that was both alien and invisible to their new neighbors, almost all of whom were Christian and white, and had no first-hand experience of civil war.

The Somalis came to America as refugees from a conflict that had killed their friends and relatives, wiped out everything they had saved or built, and stranded family members in slums and refugee camps across East Africa and the Middle East. The men had mostly lived in San Diego upon arriving in America, and fanned out to seek work wherever they could find it. They slept in the bus station in Sioux Falls the night before the final leg of their trip to Marshall, a place where they were not made to feel especially welcome. No one would rent them housing—the workers lived in trailers that the factory's owners provided. In the freezing pre-dawn hours they would queue at a payphone in the center of town to call relatives in Nairobi or Sanaa or London to learn who had and hadn't made it out of Somalia. A police car would sometimes pull up, with the officer inquiring as to why these Black men were gathering at such an odd time of day, wrapped in blankets.

It was not until the infamous October 1993 Black Hawk Down incident, in which militants killed 19 American soldiers in Mogadishu's Bakaara Market, that the people of Marshall understood that these mysterious new neighbors were survivors of a living hell, dispossessed by a war that had consumed

everything of their previous lives. The townsfolk grew more willing to rent to the Somalis, who began to learn English and develop a better grasp of life in rural Minnesota. The Somalis found a lot to like about Marshall. There was an abundance of low-skill jobs, along with a Minnesotan ethos of steely reserve that tended toward leaving people alone regardless of how outside the mainstream they might appear. "In Somali culture there is a concept called *sahan*—scouting," explained Yusuf. Somalis discovered they could live relatively comfortably in Minnesota and still have enough money left over to support their relatives overseas. "Once they found out that they were able to feed their families in Ethiopia or in Kenya or in Yemen, the word was out."

Somali refugees who the U.S. government had resettled in the warmer and seemingly more hospitable climates of San Diego and northern Virginia gradually made their way to the frigid north of their new country, a place whose bleak climate, landlocked geography, gun-metal skies, and homogeneously white and Christian population amounted to nearly the polar opposite of the place they had fled.

From Marshall and other small towns, the Somalis began to look toward the state's largest metropolis, an emerging city in need of taxi drivers, factory workers, and hotel staff. It helped that Minneapolis was an altogether calmer and safer place than other major American population centers.

Like any creation myth, the story of how Somalis got to Minneapolis is interesting for what it omits. A significant number of Somalis made it to Minnesota because of the U.S. State Department's refugee resettlement program, which identified the chilly upper midwestern state, then roughly 97% white, as a place in need of fresh supplies of impoverished foreigners. More importantly, the United States cared about Somalis relative to other imperiled populations because of a perceived national interest in helping people who had suffered on America's behalf. Barre's regime had become a U.S. ally during the tail end of the Cold War, and in December of 1992, the United States sent 25,000 soldiers to

Somalia to supplement a United Nations force in a last-ditch attempt to stabilize the country. American policy in Somalia had been a failure, but acceptance of Somali refugees, who would be on track to receive the globally coveted privilege of U.S. citizenship after just five years, was proof at the time that America would meet its moral obligations to its foreign partners, even when its bets went wrong.

By March of 1995, all foreign troops had withdrawn from Somalia, as the conflict deepened into a chronic social condition that endures to this day. The exodus of some 18,000 Somalis to the United States by the end of 1996, and nearly 110,000 by the end of the 2010s, included American security partners and senior Barre regime officials with blood on their hands, as well as average Somalis with family in the United States from before the outbreak of the war, along with others who got incredibly lucky.

While the most fortunate minority of Somali refugees wound up in America, a far greater number became marooned in Dadaab, an hour's flight from Nairobi in eastern Kenya. Despite its closeness to East Africa's most important city, Dadaab is a desert twilight zone, almost impossible for a non-Kenyan to visit: In late 2019 a trip there required permits from the country's Department of Refugee Affairs, followed by multiple layers of permission from various U.N. offices, followed by a brief police questioning when I finally arrived via a U.N. Humanitarian Air Services flight, followed by looks of astonishment from U.N. staff that I had even made it there at all. From the sprawling and blast wall-encased U.N. compound in the center of a nervous mud-shack town—al-Shabab, the brutal Somali al-Qaida affiliate, is alleged to operate nearby—it was a jolting 20-minute ride down a dust-clouded unpaved road before a visitor hit the first of the area's three camps, which once formed the world's largest refugee community and was then home to an estimated 200,000 people.

Few places on earth reveal the tenuousness of human existence quite like

Dadaab, a manufactured catastrophe that also previews a maybe not-so-distant future in which most everywhere else on Earth is just as arid, featureless, and desperate. The land is dry and flat, more like sand than earth—after a brief rain, refugees began digging compacted dirt out of the roadways to use as building material. Inside the camps, mazes of winding footpaths are lined with makeshift thatched walls layered in discarded tins of cooking oil from the United States Agency for International Development, rows of metal American flags shimmering in the dull desert sunlight.

Modern-day Dadaab is the dark reverse image of the Somali American experience—it's the fate from which Somali arrivals in the United States like Omar were saved. Many of the camps' refugees have been stuck in the desert for decades because it is unsafe for them to return to Somalia, and because Kenya has placed punitively strict regulations on where Somali refugees can live and work. Most Dadaab residents are effectively banned from living outside the camps, which have no parks, no real libraries, few recreation centers, and few permanent buildings. Dadaab is not a war zone in the strictest sense. But it inflicts a cruel stasis: Few can leave, and life can't progress for the residents until they leave.

Many of the refugees showed up at the Kenyan-Somali border sometime in the early '90s only to spend the remainder of their lives waiting for the war to end, or for resettlement opportunities that never came. "We are in a caged place," said Fardowso Abdullahi, who was born in the area's Hagadera camp and whose parents had been livestock herders back in Somalia. "We cannot go anywhere." When I traveled there in 2019, Western countries had only made 975 total annual resettlement slots available to Dadaab's refugees. "It seems the world is tired of the Dadaab camps," Abdullah Ali Aden, the elected chairman of Dushale camp told me. "A lot of people get a lot of knowledge here," he added. "The knowledge you get is how to survive in a harsh life. It's unbearable."

Anab Gedi Mohammed, a child of poor shopkeepers from the Darod

clan who had their home and business destroyed by militants from the rival Hawiya clan during the civil war, told me I was the fifth foreign journalist she had talked to in her life, including an Al Jazeera team, and that she'd had nearly identical conversations with all of us recalling her 27 years in Dadaab. "You do not know what it is like in the camp," she said in English as I stood beside the door of her small compound, moments away from leaving. "Nothing will change."

For a time, people briefly cared about Dadaab. On Aug. 11, 2018, Omar won the Democratic Party primary for Minnesota's 5th Congressional District, putting her on track to be the first Somali American member of Congress and the first hijab-wearing congresswoman in American history. Reuters, *The Guardian*, and *The Washington Post* all reported that Omar and her family had lived in Dadaab for four years.

Memories of Ilhan Omar linger there. "There are people telling me that they were neighbors in 1994 ... they could see she was a very intelligent woman," reported Ali Aden, a refugee I met in Ifo, one of Dadaab's three camps. My fixer, a journalist for one of the camp's radio stations, said he was certain of the family's former address: block A-7 of the dusty Ifo camp. "Ilhan was here," said Shardid Abdikadir, a refugee and trader in Ifo's sprawling marketplace. He recalled seeing Omar's father there. "The way I remember, he was a very tall man. I haven't met him, but we used to see each other."

In fact, Omar never lived in any of Dadaab's camps—she merely visited on a humanitarian mission in 2011—and any memories of her there are not based on real events. It is unclear how the notion that she spent time at Dadaab got started, or if Omar herself ever tried to correct this misperception, or even knew about it at all. Her family instead registered as refugees at Utange, outside of Mombasa, as she recounts in her memoir. In the early '90s, any Kenyan refugee camp was a grim place, and Omar's story shows how far determined people can go even when they've been deprived of seemingly every possible opportunity in life. As a result, Somalis look upon Omar as "an extended cousin

who made it," said Mohammed Ibrahim, a founder of the Anti-Tribalism Movement. "It says a lot about us. We're very resilient people."

Until the publication of her memoir Omar never talked publicly about her years at the Utange refugee camp in any real detail, which is perhaps one reason the impression grew that she had lived in Dadaab. Today, there is no outward sign that a refugee camp was ever in Utange, which looks like any of Mombasa's many other palm-shaded outlying slums. It was Utange's closeness to one of Kenya's major commercial and population centers, which boasts a strip of fancy beach resorts and an old quarter thick with buildings left behind by British, Portuguese, and Arab conquerors, that made the camp's 1997 closure inevitable. "There was always a language barrier—no one understood each other," recalled Abdulla Ahmed, a peddler who lived next to the camp site before, during, and after the refugees were there. "It led to fights here—people's homes were harmed on both sides. That's why they decided the camp had to be liquidated."

For civil servants and other former members of the Somali ruling class, it was common to register in Utange and live somewhere else. "Most of the people accommodated in Utange, they told me they lived in Mombasa. The elites that is—the poor people lived in the camps," said Mohamed Ingiiris, a visiting professor at the African Leadership Center at King's College in London who grew up in Somalia and lived there until 2002.

Willis Okech, a journalist with *The Standard* newspaper who covered the refugee influx into Mombasa in the 1990s, had a similar recollection. "Utange refugees were the poor ones. Most of them were transferred to Dadaab. The rich ones were never transferred. They could get a refugee ID that allowed them to stay anywhere they wanted." Yaxia Osman, the former Mogadishu shopkeeper, recalls that "people lived on both sides—you lived in the camp, but you also lived in the city."

Omar writes in her memoir that she was reunited with her father in Utange in 1992, after the flight that took her

from coastal southern Somalia into Kenya. The camp was a place of extraordinary suffering: Omar watched helplessly as a beloved aunt died of malaria. Her father submitted his family to the U.N.'s refugee agency as resettlement candidates. After an interview with U.N. staff, Omar and her immediate family "earned one of those golden tickets to America," she writes, with no further explanation given—she doesn't say which family members secured the "golden ticket," or what made her family an ideal resettlement case from the U.S. government's perspective, or how long the process took between the initial application and the issuing of the family's refugee visas.

Omar visited Dadaab on that relief mission in 2011, but she is a nonpresence in Utange. In late 2019, one of the only surviving structures from the area's six years as a refugee camp was a peak-roofed, one-story building whose bottom half was still painted in U.N. powder blue. It was now an orphanage, where children played on a rusting swingset and a broken-down Volkswagen Beetle.

Francis Kinyua, the orphanage director, pulled up a plastic chair and offered to tell me "the history of this place" as we sweltered under the high, swaying palms. "Before the refugees, life was almost sleeping. There were only trees, no noise." He breezily accused the refugees of smuggling weapons into the camp but also said he admired his former neighbors. "The world is becoming a global village and economy, and the Somalis knew that a long time ago when everybody else was not aware." He claimed that refugees who had kept up their foreign business contacts would ship consumer electronics into Mombasa. "With the entry of Somalis, almost every household owned a TV or radio," he claimed. The man had never heard of Ilhan Omar.

Wherever they came from, making it to the United States in the mid-'90s was among the best possible outcomes for a Somali refugee—America admitted 2,506 Somali refugees in 1995, the year Omar writes that her family moved to Virginia.

Typically, the U.N. provides countries

"Modern-day Dadaab is the dark reverse image of the Somali American experience—it's the fate from which Somali arrivals in America like Omar were saved."

offering resettlement with the names of potential candidates, a laborious and bureaucratic process that can sometimes drag on for the better part of a decade. But in the mid-'90s, the United States often made slots available to accommodate former political or security partners or to reunite the families of people who had already made it stateside.

American acceptance of displaced Somalis wasn't strictly a humanitarian enterprise. Superpowers operate at such a vast scale that their failures often contain the germ of some future opportunity. American policymakers realized that Somali refugees could be an exploitable channel of communication and patronage moving from west to east, with Somalis in the United States acting as a ready-made pathway into the anarchic vacuum that contained Africa's longest coastline, near one of the world's most important maritime chokepoints. A safe, prosperous, and pro-American Somali diaspora could become an asset for U.S. defense and intelligence planners, a means of pursuing American security interests in a stateless void where a half-dozen countries competed for influence. The highest ranks of the Somali government are now stacked with people who spent significant time in the United States, including Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo, the country's president between early 2017 and this past May, and a longtime Buffalo-area resident who holds American citizenship.

Omar has been notably guarded in explaining the circumstances of her family's arrival in the United States. In October of 2018, months after winning the Democratic congressional primary, she showed *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* reporter Stephen Montemayor "cellphone photos of documents from her family's U.S. entry in 1995 after fleeing Somalia's civil war," listing her father and six other siblings as relatives. Montemayor wrote that these documents were "refugee resettlement approval forms and identification cards," but also notes he was given no opportunity to authenticate them or to probe them in depth. In an email exchange with the Minneapolis lawyer and conservative writer Scott Johnson, Montemayor wrote that "Omar did not allow me to jot down names or provide a copy of the images."

Omar writes in her memoir that she arrived in New York with her father, where she had a strongly negative first impression of the United States as grimy, graffiti-covered, and heartless. She recalls her disgust at length: "To be promised a utopia only to be brought to a city or town that might have a little less trash and crime and a few more buildings than where you came from is disorienting and disappointing." In some ways America was even worse than where she'd come from: "When we lived in Somalia, in the big city, even next to the major outdoor market, I never saw a person who slept on the street while others just went about their day. That concept did not exist in my country's communal society."

In her memoir, Omar doesn't consider the possibility that her failure to see or notice extreme poverty, which certainly existed in Mogadishu even before its descent into anarchy, was a function of her young age or her privileged, cloistered upbringing, rather than proof of the superior social solidarity, compared to the United States, of a Somalia on the brink of three decades of civil conflict. "In Kenya, we saw groups of young men hanging out on the street in dirty clothes," she continues. "The adults talked about how they were on drugs, but they didn't seem completely dejected like the old woman I saw lying across a New York City park bench with

only her shopping cart as protection. The Kenyan street kids weren't treated like objects to be walked around and ignored." The favorable comparison of Kenya to the United States is especially attention-grabbing, given the East African nation's long and arguably continuing history of official discrimination against both Somali refugees and native-born Somalis.

Northern Virginia, the first place Omar's family settled, has had a small Somali community since the early 1980s. During Barre's time, Somali elites who had a chance to get an education in the United States often chose to come to Washington, D.C., home to the country's embassy. Several of Barre's top henchmen ended up living in the greater D.C. area after the war, including Hussein Kulmia and Ali Samatar, two of Barre's former vice presidents, the latter of whom was considered among the most brutal of the dictator's deputies. Yusuf Ali Abi, an army colonel who participated in the destruction of Hargeisa, had quietly lived in the area for 17 years until he was sued over alleged past human rights abuses in 2019.

Most of the Somalis in the D.C. area weren't quite so prominent. "In that time, 90% of them were cab drivers," explained one member of the northern Virginia community whose father had been a senior Barre-era security official. "Ambassadors ended up here. But the who's who went to Canada, Europe. Washington's very tough, man. In Washington you have to work." One benefit of America in the mid-'90s, though, was that a single refugee could sponsor the resettlement of numerous family members. Hundreds of people would arrive in town and then leave for Minneapolis within a few months. The source said that Omar had family in the D.C. area that included an older female relative who had worked for the Somali Central Bank under Barre; a Nairobi-based former senior politician in a post-civil war Somali government recalled meeting this Omar relative in northern Virginia in the 2000s. Although Nur Said found work in a local airport, the family's stay in northern Virginia was relatively brief. Omar's maternal grandfather had already settled in Minneapolis, according

to her memoir, although his path from Kenya to the Midwestern city goes largely unexplained.

For Somali refugees on either coast, Minnesota was the real land of opportunity in the 1990s. Mohamed Amin Ahmed, founder of Average Mohamed, an anti-extremism nonprofit in the Twin Cities, also made the journey from Virginia to Minneapolis not long after reaching the United States. He said it was possible for a non-English speaker who had arrived in the Twin Cities in the morning to have a \$16 per hour job as a foundry worker by nightfall. For Somalis, the draw went far beyond easy employment. As Ahmed put it: "When I came from Virginia and got off the plane a Somali guy helped carry my baggage. The cab driver was Somali. The hotel check-in desk clerk was Somali. The mosque was Somali. I went to a Somali restaurant. That's how I knew it was home."

Today, the Twin Cities are the largest star on the globe-spanning map of the Somali diaspora—more politically influential than London, richer than Toronto, arguably more important than even Nairobi, despite being a fraction of its size. In a world made small by cheap air travel, modern communications technology, and the often unforeseen complexities of American policy, an arcane social or political dispute in a distant country can create new and often vibrant subcultures in places that have little to no previous connection with those communities' places of origin.

After the outbreak of the civil war, Somalis considered America a better destination than Europe; it was perceived as less racist and wasn't seen as incentivizing idleness the way European societies were believed to. That perception endures among those who remember the early years of resettlement. "Over there they don't call you immigrants, they call you foreigners," said Hashi Shafi, a community activist in Minneapolis. "In the U.S., [refugees] only got eight months of welfare. That leads many Somalis to be hard workers."

Somalis remained tightknit regardless of where they landed. "The social fabric is very strong," said Ahmed Asmali, a businessman and community leader in Eastleigh, Nairobi's rambunctious Somali downtown. "If someone sends \$100 to the Twin Towers," he said, naming a nearby apartment complex, "it gets divided to 100 people."

Because of the particularity of Somali language and culture, the power of family and clan ties, and the still-reverberating shock of losing their homeland, the diasporic centers don't feel quite as far apart as they are geographically. They don't feel all that far from Somalia either, even when Mogadishu is half a planet away. Yussuf Hasan Abdi, the member of parliament for Eastleigh, said that Nairobi has its specific hangouts for Somali political factions, restaurants and hotel lobbies where backers of a given party or political figure gather. This was characteristic of other diasporic centers, including in the United States. "It's everywhere—even in Minnesota and in London it's exactly mapped out," Abdi told me when I met him in Nairobi in 2019. "It's a mirror of the problems of Somalia."

Prior to the 9/11 attacks, which forced a political awakening among Muslim Americans of all backgrounds, Somalis in Minnesota had "a suitcase mentality," Shafi said—an unspoken belief that America was not their permanent home. Even now, people from different regions or clans have a tendency to stick to their own centers of communal life in Minneapolis: The Ogaden have their mall near Chicago Avenue and 24th Street; the Hawiyya have the larger Karmel Mall a mile away, and the Majeerteen have the massive Starbucks in Cedar-Riverside, in addition to a mall of their own.

The Karmel Mall is a four-level behemoth owned by Basim Sabri, a Palestinian American developer and one of Omar's leading local supporters; on a typical day its travel agencies, grocery stores, money transfer counters, cafes, traditional medicine shops, and mosques are a credible recreation of places thousands of miles away. The malls have few windows; only Somalis tend to go to them.

The war lingers in the Somali

diaspora, in ways that are often invisible. Before he became an educator and author, Ahmed Yusuf was a social worker who often assisted Somali refugees in Minnesota, many of whom were still coping with the trauma of the conflict. He strongly suspects some of them had committed atrocities back in Somalia. “Did I see a single person who said they’d killed anybody? No. ... Did I confront anybody myself? No.” Confrontation might not have been constructive anyway. As Yusuf notes, “Everyone became a victim one time or the other, by the end.” As a result, Somalis in Minnesota have “this kind of bipolar personality” of wanting to leave the past behind but never quite allowing its wounds to fully heal.

In London in 2019, Fatima Hagi, an organizer of that year’s London Somali Week, had similar reflections. I spoke to her moments after the performance of a play titled *Home* at that year’s event, which explored the relationship between three young, first-generation Somali British women who are never entirely at ease within their own families or society at large. “We have this attitude of don’t worry about things, be happy to be alive, be thankful,” said Hagi. “We don’t take a moment to acknowledge the pain we all carry.”

The Minnesota Somali community set itself apart from the other centers of diaspora life through its quick attainment of political influence. “What made Somali Americans Somali Americans is their involvement in politics,” said Ibrahim Hirsi, a Ph.D. candidate studying immigration history at the University of Minnesota. “What brought this community here is politics—in a way, broken politics.”

The initial political breakthrough for the Minnesota Somali community came in 2010 when Hussein Samatar won a race for the Minneapolis school board, becoming the city’s first Somali elected official. Abdi Warsame’s election to the City Council in 2013 was an even more vivid sign of the community’s growing power and the progress it represented.

As religious and family-oriented small business owners who had recently

toiled under a socialist dictator, Somalis were a natural Republican constituency, at least on paper. In reality, outside of Florida there are few urban minority communities of any racial or ethnic background in the United States that do not almost monolithically favor the Democrats—the Republicans were irrelevant on a local scale in Minneapolis, while the national party was seen, and is still widely seen, as being an exclusively white and Christian enterprise. The Somalis became a potential outlier within the local Democratic Party coalition: A community of Black, religiously conservative Muslim war refugees with their own needs and values.

Somalis quickly became some of the most enthusiastic Democrats in Minnesota, in part because the local party was structured toward distributing patronage—as all competent political operations are, in one way or another—and open to letting immigrants rise through its ranks. Caucus sites in Cedar-Riverside, the southeastern Minneapolis neighborhood dominated by a high-rise public housing complex where many Somalis settled, went from having a few dozen participants in the early ’90s to several hundred 20 years later. One of Omar’s first volunteer jobs in politics involved getting Somalis to the polls: In 2012, she became a leader of the Somali caucus of the Minnesota Democratic-Farm-Labor Party (DFL), the state-level branch of the Democratic Party. AK Hassan, now a member of the Minneapolis parks commission, recalled that Omar “traveled across the state educating people, engaging and asking people to vote.”

She was already eyeing a career in politics. In 2012, a community activist named Habon Abdulle began leading meetings of women interested in getting involved in the political process, gatherings that Shafi says were held in his offices. There were about a half-dozen frequent attendees, a small and serious group that included Omar, a recent graduate of North Dakota State University who was then in her early 30s.

Almost a decade ago, in the very early days of Omar’s life as a public figure, Minnesota Democratic Party and Somali community activist Mohamed Amin

Kahin remembers seeing her just about everywhere. “There was not one event in the Somali community she wouldn’t attend. She was preparing herself,” recalls Kahin. “She was mingling, getting to know people. She knows every person who holds some little power in the community. She knew who supported her, and who didn’t.”

At the same time, Omar got involved in her local DFL chapter. After attending a caucus in 2012, she caught the eye of a group of activists who sought to replace the associate director of the DFL’s 59th State Senate District. They had no idea who Omar was, but in the DFL that doesn’t always matter. Minnesota’s Democratic Party is a throwback to a more participatory and less overtly corrupt era of American democracy, and it is not uncommon for total newcomers to rise quickly. “As far as I know she didn’t even know what it meant to be the associate chair of the district,” said one of the activists who recruited Omar. They later met with her to explain the position and gauge her interest. “Literally around here nobody knew her until we introduced her at the senate district convention.”

The DFL work attracted the attention of an aide for a 28-year-old City Council candidate named Andrew Johnson, a systems engineer for Target. Running as a progressive, he aimed to be the first millennial elected to the council and hired Omar as his campaign manager in early 2013. Omar had worked as a nutrition outreach coordinator for the Minnesota Department of Education, and her position as Johnson’s campaign manager, in which she organized an ambitious and inevitably victorious door-knocking campaign, was Omar’s first significant job in politics. She was then hired as Johnson’s policy aide in City Hall.

Omar wanted to be more than just a City Council staffer. In her memoir, she writes that she feared a “loss of autonomy involved in working for an elected official.” In reality she had little to worry about. Johnson was aware that Omar had been a player in local campaigns and expected she would continue to be one even as a City Hall aide. “It’s good to be aware of the complications

that can arise,” Johnson told me in late 2019. “But you know, she’s free.”

In 2016, Preya Samsundar, then a reporter for Alpha News and now a GOP communications staffer, found that Ahmed Hirsi, the father of Omar’s children, had listed an address on a 2009 business application identical to one that Omar and a man named Ahmed Nur Said Elmi used on their marriage license three months earlier. This suggests Ahmed Hirsi had at one point lived or worked out of an address that Omar shared with a second person, Elmi, who at the time was her legal husband. A marriage certificate that Samsundar obtained seems to show that Elmi and Omar’s wedding was conducted by a Protestant minister.

Hirsi had met Omar in the late 1990s, when she was in her teens. In her memoir, Omar writes that she and Hirsi applied for a marriage license in Minnesota’s Hennepin County in 2002 but were never actually issued a marriage certificate. As Omar later explained, they had a traditional Islamic wedding that year and then ended their marriage in 2008—“traditional” in this case meaning a marriage with no legal registration or status. Omar and Hirsi had a third child in 2012, when Omar was still legally married to Elmi, whom she did not legally divorce until 2017. Per over a dozen public condolence notes from members of the Twin Cities Somali communities culled by David Steinberg—several of them from prominent supporters of Omar’s—Elmi is her late father Nur Said’s last name.

The identical surnames could be coincidental, but they also buffer the once-widely circulated claim that Omar married her brother, perhaps in order to help him obtain a U.S. green card, which would be a violation of U.S. immigration law. Still, enforcement of any crime Omar might have committed in marrying Elmi would be unfairly selective. The opportunity to obtain U.S. citizenship, like any other desperately scarce resource, is a constant object of potential and very often unpunished fraud, including among refugees: In 2008, the United States halted a program aimed at reuniting the families of East African refugees when DNA tests

“The opportunity to obtain U.S. citizenship, like any other desperately scarce resource, is a constant object of potential and very often unpunished fraud, including among refugees.”

revealed that a large percentage of the new arrivals were not in fact related to their supposed kin in America. In any case, Hirsi and Omar legally married in 2018, shortly after she divorced Elmi, then divorced in late 2019 amid news that Omar was in a relationship with Tim Mynett, the married head of E Street Group, a political consulting firm that received \$2.9 million in disbursements from Omar’s 2020 congressional campaign, accounting for about 51% of her over \$5.6 million in electoral spending, according to records available on the Federal Election Commission’s website. Mynett is now Omar’s husband. (According to the FEC website, the consultancy receiving the majority of the outreach and advertising-related spending for Omar’s 2022 campaign is Authentic, a firm headed by Mike Nellis, former senior adviser to the failed 2020 presidential campaign of Vice President Kamala Harris.)

Through mid-2020 there was a notable pro-Hirsi segment in the Minnesota Somali American community that credited Hirsi, Omar’s now ex-husband, with her entire political career. This surprisingly common local sentiment is patronizing to Omar, but consistent with a common view among Somalis in Minneapolis, London, and Kenya that Hirsi had been a communal mover and shaker,

a wannabe political fixer, and someone who aimed to be a figure of stature in Somalia, whose politicians use Minneapolis as a funding pool much as Israeli leaders use New York and Los Angeles.

Hirsi worked as an activist with Kajoog, a local Somali cultural and community services organization in Minneapolis, until an acrimonious split in 2014. Some view Hirsi as being generically pro-Somali, without any significant political or clan allegiances. For 11 years, Hirsi also worked as a bank teller with Wells Fargo, which was one of several financial institutions operating in the Minneapolis area that were effectively forced to stop transferring money to Somalia in the early 2010s amid U.S. government concerns over terror financing. By 2013, Somali Americans were sending \$208 million a year in on-the-books remittances to Somalia; without the Twin Cities banking system being able to facilitate these transfers, the area’s Somalis began sending cash to the country in suitcases.

Hirsi’s activism often took him outside the Twin Cities. He traveled with Kajoog to Kenya, met Somali President Hassan Sheikh in D.C., and attended a forum for the global Somali diaspora held in Istanbul in 2014, an event co-sponsored by the Turkish government. As one of the city’s notable young members of the Hawiya clan, Hirsi was of potential use to politically active clan members visiting the Twin Cities, including then-Somali President Hassan Sheikh, who reclaimed the presidency in May of 2022. “When Hassan Sheikh came, he contacted his tribe here,” said one longtime Somali American political activist in Minneapolis. “Hirsi was one of the volunteers.” Under Hashi Shafi’s guidance Hirsi worked on a committee that welcomed Sheikh to Minneapolis and arranged accommodations for the president and his entourage. “Whenever politicians come to Minnesota he’s always there,” Shafi explained of Hirsi in late 2019.

Also involved in the Sheikh welcoming party was a bookish and sharply intelligent activist and Hennepin County employee named Mohamed Keynan, who was known both locally and among clued-in Somali diasporans as an

advocate for Puntland, one of the autonomous regions of Somalia that has been locked in acrimony with the country's flailing central government, and a place that became a focus of Pentagon efforts in the Horn of Africa amid the rise of al-Shabab and other jihadist movements.

Keynan is married to Sahra Noor, Omar's older sister. Along with his father-in-law, Nur Said, Keynan was one of the 35 initial signatories of a 2012 statement in favor of Jubaland's autonomy. By 2015, he worked for President Sheikh as a senior communications official. It is possible he first came to the Somali government's attention through Talo iyo Tusaale, a Google Group, now largely dormant, with over 1,000 members where Somalis from around the world gathered to talk politics. The Listserv was one of the Somali elite's known recruiting grounds for possible political talent—the name roughly translates to “advice and example.” There are other such channels for diasporans, especially in Minnesota. The Fagaaraha Forum, which hosts discussions of Somali political affairs in the Twin Cities, was founded by a future Somali labor minister and is closely watched back in East Africa. “People build popularity through it,” one Nairobi-based Somali source said of Fagaaraha. “It's a gateway into the politics.”

Omar was also active in the Somali community in the early 2010s. One communal figure remembers seeing her in attendance at a pro-Jubaland gathering in 2011. A few months after our conversation in late 2019, the source got back in touch with me to urge Tablet not to name him. “Please do NOT use my name at all since I do NOT need any trouble from this group by my [children],” the source texted.

Omar's political career soon placed her on one side of a Somali American generational fault line. Somali-speaking war refugee parents, often social and religious conservatives who see America as their lifesaving shelter from a living nightmare, raised liberal-minded, English-speaking children who are as dissatisfied and often as cynical about their society as anyone else their age tends to be in 21st-century America. Omar was of this newer mentality, widely labeled

as “progressive.” The progressives emphasized Somali and Muslim identity in a way that could take on the trappings of a revived traditionalism: The only image of Omar's mother in *Time for Ilhan* shows her without a headscarf; her daughter, who grew up in a majority-Christian and majority-white society, decided to begin wearing the hijab as a marker and an assertion of identity in places where she didn't always feel welcome, as Omar explains in her memoir. Omar's experience as a war refugee also seems to have fed her criticism of the American society that sheltered her, relative levels of gratitude toward America being another point of division between middle-aged Somali Americans and their kids.

In her memoir, Omar illustrates this generation gap by describing a long-running philosophical disagreement with her father. “Whether I'd be able to wear a hijab on the House floor was just the latest iteration of a long debate between us about the American system,” she said, referring to the body's 175-year-old rule against head coverings, which was repealed after Omar's election, thanks largely to her own efforts. By Omar's account, her father was naive about such an obviously heartless country's potential for gradual self-correction. “Aabe believes things ultimately work out for everyone who wants them to. I thought that was naive from the minute I arrived in this country and saw homeless people on the ride into Manhattan from the airport.”

In 2014, Mohamud Noor, a fellow progressive, decided to run against state Rep. Phyllis Kahn, then a 21-term incumbent. If Noor defeated Kahn, he would become the first Somali American state lawmaker in American history. But the race would prove divisive within the Somali community, where Noor's progressivism wasn't an automatic sell. More importantly, Kahn had the staunch backing of City Councilman Abdi Warsame, the community's biggest political star and a relative moderate widely supported among older voters and business owners. A brawl allegedly broke out at a Feb. 4, 2014 caucus in Cedar-Riverside that Omar attended—police were called to the scene, although a detailed account

from MinnPost said that no arrests were made. Omar claimed she was attacked and suffered a concussion, allegations that she repeats in her book. She also accused Warsame of threatening her with physical violence during a pre-caucus phone call with Johnson, a claim that led to an inconclusive internal investigation at City Hall. (St. Paul Police were later called in to investigate the caucus incident out of concern the case was too political for Minneapolis law enforcement to handle. No charges were ever filed.) Omar explained her role at the caucus as “neutral”; even so, she went on to become an adviser to Noor later in the race. (Warsame, meanwhile, is out of electoral politics for the time being—he was appointed head of the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority in 2020.)

The other notable Omar-related public blowup of that 2014 race, which Noor lost, involved a naked appeal to Somali ethnic identity. On June 27, 2014, at an absentee voting site at Minneapolis City Hall, multiple Somali speakers overheard an election judge asking voters in Somali whether they were there to cast their ballot for “the Somali brother,” i.e., Noor, or “the old Jewish lady,” Phyllis Kahn.

According to affidavits submitted to the Minnesota state Supreme Court, Omar, who was then one of Noor's top advisers, had been on the scene conferring with the election judge in question. “I also observed Ms. Yusuf communicating with Ilhan Omar,” Mohamed Jama, a Kahn backer who was acting as an interpreter for elderly Somali voters, stated for the court. “Ilhan Omar is a supporter of Mohamud Noor. Omar was also bringing people to vote at City Hall like me. I saw Omar shouting instructions to Ms. Yusuf while Yusuf was assisting people in voting.” Michael Molzahn, another Kahn supporter, said in his affidavit that Omar repeatedly attempted to prevent Jama from serving as an interpreter for one particular voter, who eventually left the polling area in frustration. “Omar did more than stand and loiter; she was allowed to interject herself twice into conversation with the elderly man while standing in the balloting area without assisting voters,” Molzahn's affidavit reads. “Omar was

interacting with the voter despite no apparent request of the voter to have her assist him.”

Kahn’s campaign petitioned to get the election judge removed, although she was reassigned before the case reached the court. The court rejected the city of Minneapolis’ argument that it had no jurisdiction over deciding local election personnel, a ruling that essentially settled the matter in Kahn’s favor.

None of this—the alleged attack, Omar’s participation in the losing campaign of Noor, a soon-to-be rival of hers, the dramas at City Hall and the state Supreme Court—made it into *Time for Ilhan*, or into profiles of Omar published in Minneapolis’ *City Pages*, *The Washington Post*, or even *The New York Times*. The state Supreme Court case goes totally unmentioned in her memoir. Coverage of Omar’s early career tends to elide an important reality: She was an elbow-throwing political survivor before she ever ran for office herself.

Video of the November 2015 kickoff of Omar’s campaign against Phyllis Kahn for the state House of Representatives shows a half-empty room in Cedar-Riverside and an audience that was almost entirely Somali. Omar’s political gifts were on display in her launch speech, among them her talent for speaking dividing lines into being. “She is a great liberal,” Omar said of the incumbent Kahn, a cuttngly spare compliment. “Do any of you know what the definition of a liberal is? Being a liberal to me is being open to new ideas. But do you know what the definition of being progressive is? It’s acting on those new ideas. Isn’t that what we all want? Isn’t that what we all need? I want progress. I’m progressive.”

The speeches that followed hinted at the two forces that made Omar’s early political career possible, namely the Somali community and progressive organizing. Habon Abdulle spoke in Somali for about 10 minutes. Abdulle would become more than just a mentor: On the 2018 form 990 for Abdulle’s organization Women Organizing Women, Omar was listed as receiving \$9,300 as the group’s director of policy; Abdulle was Omar’s guest for the 2019 State of the

Union. Then Joelle Stangler, a University of Minnesota senior and president of the student body, spoke in English. Stangler said she had herself considered running against Kahn, until a dazzling yet brief interaction with Omar changed her mind. In the speech, Stangler recalled that immediately after that fateful meeting, she told her roommate, “not only do I not want to run, I want to be 100% full force behind Ilhan.”

Although Stangler was never officially in charge of Omar’s 2016 campaign, numerous sources, including Phyllis Kahn, identified her as Omar’s most important aide during the race. Stangler was someone “with a really strong analysis of field stuff,” as one Democratic Party source recalled. She became Minnesota field director for Bernie Sanders’ 2020 presidential campaign, and also worked as a political director for Take Action, an activist group that organizes on behalf of progressive candidates in the Twin Cities. During Omar’s first race, the then-22-year-old helped mobilize support on the University of Minnesota campus, finding decisive votes for a primary held in August, when class was out of session.

The 2016 race pitting Omar against Noor and Kahn was a clash between the Democratic Party’s past and one of its possible futures. Kahn, the incumbent, was a very liberal 79-year-old Yale biophysics Ph.D. who had been a women’s rights activist in the ’70s, spearheaded the country’s first indoor smoking ban, and taken up causes like lowering the voting age and legalizing industrial hemp production. She was a pugacious Brooklyn-born Jew running on decades of achievement; the challenger, a young African-born Muslim in her first run for elected office. “Do you want an established legislator or do you want a symbol? The answer was, we want a symbol,” said the vanquished candidate, Phyllis Kahn, summarizing their matchup in an interview with Tablet in the winter of 2019. Kahn remembered it being a fairly respectful contest.

Time for Ilhan undermines such an assessment. In one scene, Omar reports the latest of Kahn’s attacks on her with almost giddy disbelief. “Phyllis said my scarves have gotten silkier, my jeans

have gotten tighter and my skin has gotten lighter,” Omar announces. Cutaway shots to her young staff reveal looks of horror and confusion. The only evidence Kahn ever said this is the film itself. When reached for comment in January of 2020, the former lawmaker denied ever making this statement, and said she was not aware that the allegation appeared in the film until I brought it to her attention. “I definitely did not say it,” said Kahn. “It’s not the kind of thing I would say.” This alleged bigoted slander from a powerful elected official and electoral opponent does not appear in Omar’s autobiography.

While Kahn and Omar occasionally clashed, as during a short debate on Minnesota Public Radio, in her memoir Omar reserves her sharpest acrimony for Noor, who abruptly shifts from being a progressive standard bearer to a stand-in for a shadowy “Somali establishment.” In the book, Omar’s most formidable enemy isn’t the pro-Israel lobby, Nancy Pelosi, or even Donald Trump. Instead, it’s a nexus of local Somali power brokers, old men who are described as if they’re a roundtable of Mafia dons. She writes that a group of “elders of the Somali community,” who all supported Noor, tried to intimidate her father into getting her to drop out of the 2016 race. The men explained that “they planned to use all their resources to fight me if I insisted on continuing to run. My father should also not consider returning to complain later when I was shunned. ‘This is your warning,’ the elder said. ‘There will be no other.’ ... The elders kept their word and a terrible smear campaign spread through the Somali community.”

In Omar’s telling, Minneapolis’ Somali Americans were easily manipulated by this gang of graying overlords. “The idea that I’m a Qatari plant in the government is way less creepy than the Somali videos where I’m talking but instead of my voice, devilish male tones come out of my mouth,” she writes. She reports that Somalis spread rumors about a secret lesbian relationship and claimed that Omar’s children were not her own. Omar believes that the controversy over her alleged multiple marriages began as part of this gangsterish plot,

and thus originated within her own community. “This was what the Somali establishment—who had been against my election—counted on: that the level of obsession and panic in the community would be too much for my family.”

There is something self-aggrandizing about her emphasis on Somali American perfidy, as if it is her repeated elections and her shining moral example that vindicate her community’s progressivism and rescue it from its most reactionary elements. Omar’s attempts to distance herself from her community’s allegedly malign mainstream are not entirely credible, though, since her husband and brother-in-law were fairly high-level participants in Somali life in the Twin Cities and beyond.

DFL primaries are a three-round obstacle course consisting of caucuses that select delegates for an endorsement convention where a candidate must reach a 60% threshold to earn the DFL’s stamp of approval before the actual primary vote. Omar was under the impression Noor had promised his supporters to her in the event of a hung endorsement convention in which Omar held the lead but failed to reach 60% support. In *Time for Ilhan*, Omar berates him in Somali before the final vote: “If you want to unite the Somali community, today is the day,” the subtitles read. The convention ended with no endorsement. It was the last electoral setback Omar has ever faced.

On Aug. 10, 2016, Omar won the primary with 41% of the vote. She likely did not get a majority of Somali support, which was divided among the three candidates. In races with multiple Somali contenders, support can sometimes break along clan lines: The Darod, who were systematically persecuted in the early years of the civil war, form a large share of the Twin Cities community and could have been expected to vote for her, while Omar’s marriage to Hirsi, a Hawiya, made it possible to mobilize support from another important wing of the area’s Somali population. At Omar’s victory celebration, captured in *Time for Ilhan*, one supporter prominently displayed the flag of Ogaden, the Somali-majority region of Ethiopia that is home to a branch of the Darod clan.

But it was young white progressives, rather than bloc voting among Somalis, that pushed her to victory.

According to her memoir, the Somali community, as personified in her former ally Noor, stood against her at every turn. Some of the book’s most gleeful score-settling involves Noor and his supporters. Noor was elected to Omar’s former state legislature seat in 2018, but in Omar’s telling this win only made permanent the humiliation she had meted out to him two years earlier. “That moment, as I suspected at the time it would be, was his undoing,” she wrote of her confrontation with Noor at the 2016 party convention, when he refused to drop out of the race despite failing to secure the party’s endorsement. “Nothing could erase that image, even two years later, as Noor ran for my seat when I was running for Congress. The gender-based attacks he had deployed against me were turned on him as Somalis openly mocked him about that day. ‘You were so afraid that a girl would beat you.’ ‘I’m so glad she finally gave you the seat that you cried for, for years.’”

Omar would be no ordinary state lawmaker, just as she had been no ordinary City Hall staffer. In August of 2017 she was on the cover of *Time* magazine, which declared her to be part of a group of “women who are changing the world.” She had already made her first *Daily Show* appearance that July.

Given the sharply critical treatment of the Twin Cities Somali American community in her memoir, it is perhaps unsurprising that Omar soon invested what little political capital she had in trying to prevent state funds from flowing to a coalition of local Somali organizations. In 2017, Omar introduced a bill that effectively opposed a package for Somali cultural and arts funding that had been making its way through the Republican-controlled House and Senate—her alternative measure would only have funded the Somali American Museum in Minneapolis. Omar refused to work toward a compromise; instead she had an allied member of the state Senate shift half of the bill’s total funding to the museum. She remained intransigent to the end, opposing all

nonmuseum funding even when the bill passed both houses and made it to conference committee, one of the final steps of the legislative process. “We told the committee chair: This is something the Somali community wants, rather than what representative Omar wants,” recalled Shep Harris in the summer of 2020, a lobbyist who worked on behalf of a coalition of Somali communal organizations to advocate for the larger funding bill, and who is now the Democratic mayor of Golden Valley, a suburb of Minneapolis.

To an outside observer, it would seem petty, irrational, or even self-destructive to hold up needed funds earmarked for one’s own community. But Ilhan Omar knew better than her doubters: At that embryonic point in her legislative career, the political benefit of a petty and inexplicable act of obstructionism outweighed its costs. It showed a comfort with standing alone, a core unpredictability—and, given her husband Ahmed Hirsi’s tumultuous history with Kajoog, which was slated to receive funding from the original bill, a possible willingness to act on personal and political grudges.

During her sole term in St. Paul, Omar would become notable for things she did far away from Minnesota. In late 2016, shortly before taking office, she traveled to Somalia with Ahmed Hirsi and met with president Hassan Sheikh. That February, Omar and Hirsi were keynote speakers at a rally celebrating the Somali parliament and senate’s selection of a former New York State bureaucrat named Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, nicknamed Farmaajo, as the country’s president. Shortly after that, in early March of 2017, Omar’s brother-in-law Mohammed Keynan was named as permanent secretary to Hassan Ali Khayre, a former official with the Norwegian Refugee Council who Farmaajo appointed as his prime minister.

Even as a Minnesota state representative Omar had close connections at the highest levels of Somalia’s political system. But she boasted even more impressive contacts. Omar had a closed-door meeting with the autocratic Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan in New

York in the fall of 2017, long before she was in Congress.

The Turkish government was then, and still is, one of the major political and economic players in Somalia. The sitdown likely came as a result of Omar and Ahmed Hirsi's work with Hashi Shafi, who helped organize a yearly delegation of Somali Americans to support Erdogan's annual trip to the opening of the U.N. General Assembly. While Shafi was not on that specific mission, he explained, when I met him in Minneapolis in late 2019, that Erdogan's people would reach out to him to bring together a small group of Somali Americans to travel to the General Assembly kickoff each year. "Somalis, wherever we are, we have a very respectful relationship with the Turkish community," said Shafi in late 2019. "They did something no country had ever done for us before. They brought the hope of Somalia back that had been forgotten for a long time."

Shafi was one of the leaders of the Turkish Somali American Friendship Association, whose Facebook page depicted a group of Somali students visiting with Umat Acar, then Turkey's consul general in Chicago, before leaving on a trip to Istanbul. Acar also spoke at the 2017 Somali festival in Minneapolis, another event documented on TSAFA's Facebook page.

Acar had once served as chief of staff to Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey's once-powerful foreign minister and architect of the country's failed "Zero Problems" foreign policy. When Davutoglu fell out of favor, Acar shrewdly positioned himself as an attack dog against the Midwest's Greek and Armenian communities. He also targeted the area's numerous followers of the Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen, Erdogan's archrival. The consul general urged local members of Congress not to recognize the 1915 slaughter of the Ottoman Empire's Armenians as a genocide, tried to get a local restaurateur deported to Turkey over his alleged past life as a Kurdish terrorist, tweeted intemperately about the violent history between Greeks and Turks, and issued an intentionally misleading doctored video in which Steven Cook, a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, appeared to mock Turks

killed during the country's 2016 coup attempt. "He crossed some lines that you just never saw crossed, especially by Turkish diplomats—they historically have been good diplomats. Now they're all Erdogan loyalists," recalled Endy Zemenides, executive director of the Hellenic American Leadership Council. Zemenides said Acar left town in early 2019, not long after Zemenides and other Chicago-based activists opened "discussions with Illinois authorities, the State Department, and Congress about making him persona non grata for inciting violence against American citizens."

Part of Acar's job was fostering support among newer, smaller, or generally overlooked groups of Muslims in the Midwest. That included the Minneapolis Somali American community, which Erdogan rightly saw as a potential American base of support. Omar and Ahmed Hirsi met with Acar at his office in Chicago in June of 2017. The meeting between Erdogan and Omar that fall made perfect sense for Erdogan, Acar's autocratic boss. Omar was the most famous Somali American in the country, as well as someone close with pro-Turkey figures in her own community.

Turkey isn't the only foreign player in Somalia. Ethiopia and Kenya both have legions of ground troops in the country, whose central government doesn't control much of anything outside of Mogadishu. Qatar, a close Turkish ally, has issued cash disbursements to Somali political figures through Fahad Yasin—Somalia's young intelligence-chief-turned-presidential-national-security-adviser and a former Al Jazeera employee—at least until a recent downturn in his political fortunes. The UAE is building a port and possible military installation in Berbera, in the separatist region of Somaliland.

Later, during her congressional career, Omar would continue to operate as a self-appointed diplomat who appeared to be stepping into contentious foreign disputes on her own initiative—in April of 2022, Omar infuriated diplomats from India, a U.S. ally, when she visited a part of Pakistani-controlled Kashmir that India considers to be under foreign military occupation. The visit came just days after a vote of no-confidence had

ousted Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, making it seem like Omar was conveying her, and possibly America's, approval of the country's new leadership. Omar's involvement in Somali politics during her term in the state legislature was crucial practice for her later international freelancing. Omar could have appeared to be lending her ever-increasing gravitas to one side of any number of volatile Somali political debates. Sheikh, Farmaajo, Acar, and even Erdogan might all have wanted to use Omar, already a history-maker and a *Time* cover subject, to prove they had support in Minneapolis, a capital of the Somali diaspora. "That's how Somali politics works," the King's College London professor Mohamed Ingiriis said. "No one can come to you in a charitable way. It's a marketplace—a violent marketplace."

Even in her first year in elected office, there were hints that Omar's fastidiousness hadn't kept pace with her fame. In 2018, Steve Drazkowski, a Republican member of the state House of Representatives, accused Omar of a number of campaign finance improprieties, including the use of campaign funds to pay for out-of-state travel, as well as to cover costs related to her divorce from Elmi. The Minnesota Campaign Finance Board found the claims credible enough to warrant an investigation.

The conservative blogger and Minneapolis lawyer Scott Johnson has reviewed the case in detail, as has the reporter David Steinberg. For possible reasons ranging from innocent carelessness to the deliberate concealment of her actual marital status, Omar filed a joint tax return with Hirsi in 2014 and 2015, according to testimony the board collected in the course of its investigation. Couples may file a joint return, which entails various benefits and deductions, only if the state they live in recognizes them as legally married. At the time, Omar was legally married to Elmi, not Hirsi. The investigation ended with the board ordering Omar to pay \$3,500 to her campaign committee along with a \$500 civil penalty, an episode that goes unmentioned in Omar's book.

Omar's memoir, which claims that

the story about her marriage to Elmi first surfaced on a Somali community website, largely treats the scandal as a continuation of the Mafia-like Somali establishment's plot against her. The story broke not long after Omar's primary victory in 2016. In *Time for Ilihan*, the documentary team had its access pulled for two entire weeks while Omar's crisis managers, which included some of the state's top DFL-affiliated political consultants, sought to present the entire subject as an attack on her Somali and Muslim identity. If the filmmakers lodged any objection to this abrupt suspension of their privileges during perhaps the most interesting episode of Omar's political career up to that point, they do not appear in the movie.

Today, the marriage to Elmi is interesting for how little it ended up mattering to Omar's political future. After Omar weathered the initial wave of controversy, voters simply ceased to care about the matter—the marriages and the campaign improprieties were quickly priced into the public's perception of Omar, who was too charismatic, too divisive, and now too significant of a figure to be felled by anything so ambiguous as the differing treatment of cultural and legal marriage among Somali Americans, or so trifling as a small state-ordered reimbursement to her campaign committee.

Omar avoided any further controversy thanks to a masterstroke on the part of her strategist and PR-stacked crisis management team, which got the region's top prosecutor to appear to instantly exonerate her of any wrongdoing. On Aug. 22, 2016, Andrew Luger, then the federal prosecutor for the Twin Cities area, sent a letter to Omar's campaign confirming that his office was not investigating the presumptive state representative for any alleged crime. In June of 2019, Johnson emailed Luger, who had since moved on to private practice. "I wonder whether you actually reviewed any documents before sending out your August 22, 2016 letter ... I also wonder if you ever sent out another such letter announcing that anyone was not under investigation by the Minnesota U.S. Attorney's Office," Johnson

wondered. Luger responded, "Thanks. I will pass on this." Luger declined to comment on Omar or the letter when reached by email.

By the summer of 2018, Omar had made herself someone of more than just local importance. Her family was influential on two continents. Her sister Sahra Noor had moved to Nairobi, abruptly leaving her career as the leader of a Minneapolis health nonprofit and founding a one-woman consulting firm in the Kenyan capital, a 90-minute flight from her husband's work in Mogadishu. That October, Noor tweeted a picture of herself in Garowe, the administrative capital of Puntland, standing alongside the autonomous region's minister of international relations.

In June of 2019, David Steinberg plumbed the source code of the website for Noor's consulting business and found evidence that a user named Ahmed Elmi, the name of Omar's former husband, had been logged into his personal Instagram account while setting up a link to the new company's Instagram. "There is no reasonable explanation for this code to exist besides Elmi working for Noor," Steinberg concluded. Omar had stated in her 2017 divorce filing that she had not been in contact with Elmi since 2011 and did not know his whereabouts, which is difficult to square with him possibly working for Omar's sister over the summer of 2018. But again, these familial entanglements are now only interesting as an example of the types of things that Omar, through force of personality and sheer political skill, was able to render irrelevant.

For her next act, Omar rode a rising tide that remade both the Democratic Party and the national political landscape: A millennial leftism whose avatars are often frustrated recent college graduates who dream of dislodging a corrupted and unprincipled Democratic Party establishment. A younger generation of activists and politicians, while still representing only a sliver of Democrats in elected office, have indeed taken the party further left on immigration, abortion, Israel policy, student loan forgiveness, and a host of other issues. As Omar's victory over Kahn showed, this

process was well underway in Minneapolis before Gov. Mark Dayton decided he wouldn't run for a third term, leading to Attorney General Lori Swanson's decision to run for governor, which cleared the way for Congressman Keith Ellison to run for Swanson's soon-to-be-former job.

Omar declared her candidacy for Ellison's suddenly empty seat in early June of 2018. The primary election was nine weeks away. In private, she had already been musing about a future congressional run as early as the spring of 2017. Omar's opponents included Margaret Anderson Kelliher, former speaker of the Minnesota House, and Patricia Torres Ray, the first Latina to serve in the Minnesota state Senate. Omar still won the immediate endorsements of Dayton and of Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey. In a characteristic reversal, Omar would be harshly critical of Frey in the aftermath of the 2020 George Floyd protests.

Omar was a sound bet from the beginning, regardless of how qualified the rest of the field might have been. Her allies included Brandon Schorsch, who was head of the DFL 5th Congressional District's executive committee, itself filled with young progressives supportive of Omar. Schorsch had been a staffer for the campaign of progressive Minneapolis mayoral candidate Raymond Dehn, who had received a surprising 43% of the primary vote with Joelle Stangler as his campaign manager.

The DFL district scheduled its endorsement convention for Father's Day weekend, a mere 12 days after the seat opened and 10 days after the convention was called. Endorsees have access to the DFL's resources and voter information during the primary. The weekend convention called by Omar supporters was considered so overdetermined that few candidates even bothered to contest it. "I wouldn't say it was rigged exactly, but it was set up in a way to almost ensure her endorsement," one party activist told me in late 2019.

Stangler returned as Omar's campaign manager. The candidate could prove oddly oblivious to the requirements of campaigning, though: She was the only one of the major contenders to skip a "meet the candidates" forum that

the organization Black Women Rising hosted.

The only forum of the race that every leading candidate attended took place at the Beth El Synagogue, a large Conservative movement congregation in St. Louis Park on Aug. 6, 2018. As a member of the state legislature, Omar had been one of 28 members of the House who voted against the state's anti-BDS law in 2017. In one of her first floor speeches as a lawmaker, Omar laid out many of the themes of her later career, and of the near future of American politics, while opposing the bill. She opened by using the ongoing moral scandal of American racism, and her own constant ill treatment in the United States, to frame the debate over BDS. "I think I know a little bit about discrimination—I face it every single day. I carry multiple identities that are constantly, constantly being discriminated against," she said before analogizing BDS of Israel to the boycott of apartheid South Africa and sharing her belief that "you never get to having peace without justice."

A different Omar from the one who defended BDS on the statehouse floor, one who had been in contact with J Street activists and center-left, Democratic-voting Israel supporters in the Twin Cities area, showed up to the Beth El event. She assured voters that she was not a supporter of BDS, which was no longer presented as a cousin of the anti-apartheid struggle. "In order for us to have a process of getting to a two-state solution, people have to be willing to come to the table and have a conversation about how that is going to be possible and I think that stops the dialogue," Omar now contended. "I believe right now with the BDS movement, it's not helpful in getting that two-state solution." The Minneapolis attorney Bruce Goldstein allowed Omar to use his offices for a fundraiser, where the lawyer and the candidate "talked about how the stories of immigration of Jews and Somalis were so alike ... She said all the right things." Omar waltzed to victory. When Anderson Kelliher called to concede on election night, Omar was less than gracious, according to two Minnesota Democratic Party sources: "The message was, you get what you organize

for. It was a verbal slap across the face," one said, summarizing the conversation. (Goldstein, meanwhile, would later rent out space in his office to Antone Melton-Meaux, Omar's primary challenger in 2020.)

One of Omar's first interviews as congresswoman-elect that November was with a website called Muslim Girl. Her statement on BDS at the forum turned out to have been a calculated sidestep or worse. As her campaign told the website, "Ilhan believes in and supports the BDS movement, and has fought to make sure people's right to support it isn't criminalized."

Jewish leaders in Minneapolis soon realized Omar would present a challenge different than the one her predecessor, Keith Ellison, had posed. Elected in 2006, Ellison had been the first Muslim member of Congress in American history. Though he had volunteered on behalf of the Nation of Islam in law school, Ellison came from an earlier, more pragmatic progressive tradition than Omar and other more youthful Democratic Party firebrands. "The 2018 election was a complete change in what's possible," said Jaylani Hussein, the Minnesota director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), said when asked to compare the two lawmakers.

Ellison had a "key contact" in the American Israel Public Affairs Committee's system for reaching members of Congress, which depends on a specific AIPAC activist being able to personally speak with their congressional representative within 24 hours. That key contact was Avi Olitzky, then the energetic young JTS-ordained rabbi at Beth El. "When I reached out initially we barely got a meeting," he recalled when we met in late 2019. "The next year, it was with a staffer in a hallway. The next year, it was with a staffer in an office. The next year, it was 30 minutes with Congressman Ellison. The next year, it was 90 minutes. And it was a meeting we looked forward to ... he didn't talk out of both sides of his mouth," the rabbi recalled.

Olitzky met with Omar at Beth El in January of 2019, shortly before she took office. Omar did not attempt to

hide her actual views, as she had at the forum four months earlier. When we met 10 months later, the rabbi recalled "a really interesting conversation with Ilhan Omar that covered two states, foreign aid, peace, demilitarized Palestinian state, negotiations, and anti-BDS. She had two comments where I knew it would be difficult. First, she said Israel is surrounded by wolves, but Israel is a lion. And that's a different construct than Congressman Ellison ever seemed to me to have. Second, she said: I believe in justice and justice is equality ... what one side gets the other side gets." Olitzky explained that such an approach would upend a major premise of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which takes Israel's existence as one of its starting points. "She says, Israel wouldn't get a state until the Palestinians get a state. I said to Representative Omar: 'You don't understand, you just made a radical statement.' ... Her response was, so be it." (Olitzky left Beth El in early 2022 to start a consulting firm.)

Omar would not motion toward greater moderation or open-mindedness in order to maintain friendly links with establishment institutions, even if only out of consideration for the 40,000-odd Jews in her district. Before her election to Congress, Omar had met state Sen. Ron Latz at his home to discuss her approach to Jewish and Israel-related topics. Latz, who had defended Ellison against accusations of antisemitism, was wary of a 2012 tweet in which Omar had accused Israel of "hypnotizing the world." As he later told the *Twin Cities Pioneer Press*, "Most of us came out of that conversation very troubled by the answers we received. I was not convinced she was going to give a balanced approach to policy in the Middle East, and I was not convinced ... where her heart is on these things." Local rabbis could not get Congresswoman-elect Omar to return their calls in the month before her swearing-in.

A pattern soon emerged when she began her term in Washington: Omar would make some controversial or insensitive statement about Israel. Then, Jewish leaders from across the communal spectrum would meet with Omar

in an attempt to educate her about why her statement had been unconstructive or worse. Then, a few weeks later, she would say something else and the cycle would repeat.

First there was the “Benjamins” tweet in February of 2019, in which Omar, now a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee in a Democratic-controlled House, seemed to suggest that AIPAC had purchased the loyalty of both her Democratic and Republican congressional colleagues. The tweet led to a meeting at local Jewish Community Relations Council leader Steve Hunegs’ office in which he tried to explain the reasons for American support for Israel. “I said, Representative Omar, the depth of support for the American-Israel relationship flows from our patriotism,” he recalled in late 2019. He showed her a picture he kept in his office of a cousin who had been killed in combat in World War II in Europe, proof of the Jewish commitment to America. “Not 10 days later she’s at the bookstore in Washington talking about dual loyalty.”

During an appearance at the Busboys and Poets restaurant and bookstore in Washington in February of 2019, Omar announced, “I want to talk about the political influence in this country that says it is OK for people to push for allegiance to a foreign country,” a formulation that bigots could easily have applied to her own ties to Somalia. Those comments precipitated Omar’s showdown with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi over an antisemitism resolution that Omar opposed, on the grounds that other categories of hatred were not also included. The two lawmakers would bury their emerging rivalry—at least in public—and travel on a congressional delegation to Africa that summer.

In early March 2019, with her Israel controversies still fresh, Omar participated in a congressional trip to Eritrea, home to a regime with a North Korea-like human rights record. She issued a single tweet about the visit, which mentioned nothing about the abuses of the government whose officials she would soon be dignifying through her presence: “I am in the Horn of Africa this weekend, proud to see peace prosper here and to be part

of the first American delegation to Eritrea in decades is one I am grateful for. I fight [for] peace and justice because only those who experience the pain of war, know the joy of peace.” As if to draw a deliberate contrast to her treatment of the two countries, the tweet came near the end of a long thread in which Omar defended her rhetoric on Israel, recapitulating much of the language she had used at Busboys and Poets. “I should not be expected to have allegiance/pledge support to a foreign country in order to serve my country in Congress or serve on committee,” she wrote, as if such a thing had ever been asked of her, adding, “I am told everyday that I am anti-American if I am not pro-Israel. I find that to be problematic and I am not alone ... I know what it means to be American and no one will ever tell me otherwise.”

Then there was a planned summer 2019 trip to Israel and the West Bank, for which Omar solicited local Jewish organizations for advice on a possible itinerary for her delegation, which would have included pro-BDS Michigan Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib and whose schedule listed meetings with Miftah, a West Bank pro-BDS group that had spread blood libels and praised suicide bombers. In any case, the trip never happened, and Israel’s decision to not issue visas to the lawmakers—possibly in compliance with tweets from then-President Donald Trump asking for them to be barred from the country—drew opposition from the local JCRC and Rabbi Olitzky. Then, in August, Omar tweeted a cartoon by Carlos Latuff, the second-place finisher in the Iranian government’s notorious 2006 contest for satirical art about the Holocaust. By the time Omar wrote a December 2019 tweet storm explaining her decision to vote against a resolution in support of the two-state solution that she herself had co-sponsored, the Twin Cities’ organized Jewish community had mostly grown tired of dealing with her. The area’s Jewish leadership has realized they have no real ability to change her mind or her behavior. “It’s our impression that the picture unfortunately has become clearer: Antagonizing the Jewish community seems like a default setting at times for her,” Hunegs, head

of the Jewish Community Relations Council in the Twin Cities, said in mid-2021. “Now that doesn’t mean it’s true at all times, or that somehow she’s always stoking difficulty or controversy, because that’s not true either. But there’s this unfortunate pattern of adding combustion to difficult situations instead of building consensus.”

Around the time Omar’s second term began in January 2021, her office started holding off-record quarterly meetings for Jewish organizations in her district in which groups and community leaders, including some who had been publicly critical of her, are invited to raise their concerns—even though many of her actions and statements since then raise doubt as to whether Omar has taken those concerns all that seriously. In May, Omar and Tlaib co-sponsored a resolution in Congress commemorating the Nakba, the Palestinian name (meaning “disaster” or “catastrophe”) for the 1948 Middle East war, in which Israel successfully defended itself against a half-dozen invading Arab armies. The resolution opened by condemning the 1947 U.N. Partition Plan for Palestine, which would have given the Palestinian Arabs a far larger state than anything contemplated under any peace plan since.

In late 2019, Omar pulled a revealing legislative bait-and-switch regarding a bill that included \$35 million in debt relief for Somalia. She hailed the legislation in an official statement—only to vote against the bill, a larger package that, according to her, included such anti-progressive heresies as “creat[ing] a backdoor way to eliminate aid and starve the Palestinian people” and “recogniz[ing] support for Juan Guaidó as President of Venezuela.”

The vote against debt relief was barely noticed outside of Minnesota’s Somali community. And yet it epitomized both a personal and a political shift for Omar. Older Somalis often expressed a certain puzzlement at her focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a Western obsession that does not rank high among the community’s immediate concerns. “Among the Somalis nowadays I think many people understand this not as a religious but more of a political dispute

between Arabs and Israelis,” Ahmed-nasir Abdullahi, a Nairobi lawyer and analyst, said in late 2019. “I’ve seen her district, it has a substantial number of Jews. Her adoption of Palestinians as a cause doesn’t make much sense for me, or I think for many Somalis.”

By the end of 2019, Omar, now a Washington superstar, belonged to a new community. She was a latter-day American progressive, someone with the politics and outlook of urban millennials across racial and ethnic backgrounds in the era of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. Also, her Somali husband wasn’t her husband anymore. Omar and Hirsi split in mid-2019 as word of an affair with her white progressive political consultant Tim Mynett broke.

According to friends, the separation sent Hirsi into a deep despair. He became what one acquaintance described as a “born-against Muslim” and planned a trip to Mecca, which he visited that winter. One friend recalled seeing him a couple days after a divorce court hearing in 2019. “He was upset—he had become slimmer. He complains, ‘Do you know what she’s doing to me?’ I think he loves her.”

Omar’s public denials of the affair with Mynett, which became known through divorce court filings by Mynett’s soon-to-be ex-wife, were never credible. It turned out that some 51% of Omar’s campaign spending during the 2020 election season had gone to Mynett’s firm. Like every other potentially unflattering Omar-related event, the alleged dishonesty and self-dealing simply hasn’t damaged her.

For her 2020 reelection campaign, Omar amassed a war chest of over \$5 million, most of it from out-of-state donors. Her opposition to Saudi Arabia, outspoken support for Venezuelan strongman Nicholas Maduro, and sweeping denunciations of American foreign policy had made her either a gadfly, a factional standard-bearer, or her party’s leading edge. Omar will likely have a long enough political career to grow into one of these roles.

In August of 2020, Omar fended off a primary challenge from a legal mediator and part-time pastor named Antone Melton-Meaux, who raised some \$3.2 million in the second quarter of 2020 and earned the endorsement of the *Star Tribune*. She was worried enough about the challenge to send an official campaign mailer in late July 2020 that seemed to accuse Melton-Meaux of acting as a stealth agent for Jewish interests. “Can we trust Antone Melton-Meaux’s money?” asked the mailer, which accused Omar’s opponent of being in “the pocket” of both “Wall Street” and the “GOP” and noted contributions from three wealthy Jews the mailer mentioned by name, as well as from “Michael, a donor from Scarsdale, New York.”

As always, Omar had an unflinching instinct for what she could get away with. The mailer was a nonstory. With an endorsement from the DFL and with Ellison acting as a public campaign surrogate, she defeated Melton-Meaux by nearly 20 points. Her 103,000 votes were almost 40,000 more than she’d received two years earlier, an astronomical total for any congressional primary. She even improved her vote share in St. Louis Park, which is home to most of Minnesota’s Jews. The notion that Omar would be a short-lived phenomenon—that her scandals and missteps would doom her, or that she could be waited out or ignored—was exposed as a fantasy.

Beth Gendler, director of the National Jewish Women’s Council of Minnesota through February of 2022 and someone who was involved in Jewish community efforts to discuss Israel-related issues with Omar throughout the first half of 2019, noted to me in late 2019 that her organization “has a broad progressive policy agenda that Omar supports in its entirety.” In Gendler’s view, Omar could have a positive impact on the state’s Jews. The “current climate,” she said, had “giv[en] us the opportunity to have hard conversations with our friends and allies and rather than call them out publicly, call them into conversation and dialogue and relationship-building.”

Omar has found acceptance from at

least one of the major organizations in institutional American Judaism. On June 30, 2021, amid fallout from her incendiary claim that her Jewish Democratic House colleagues had been particularly insufficient “partners for justice,” Omar posted an elliptical nonapology on Twitter, invoking Abraham Joshua Heschel and highlighting her alliances with Jews for Racial and Economic Justice and The Jewish Vote, far-left groups with almost no mainstream Jewish communal following. But it doesn’t get much more mainstream than the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, the activist arm of the country’s largest Jewish denomination, whose director tweeted in response to Omar’s thread: “Thank you Rep. Omar for lifting up this history.”

In late May of 2020, George Floyd’s murder at the hands of the Minneapolis Police Department in Omar’s district set off the largest nationwide protests in American history, and unleashed a disorienting mix of energies. Waves of hope and anger broke across the country, resulting in an NFL team changing its name, rioters burning police cars in Manhattan’s Union Square, and the mayors of nearly every major city ordering that the words Black Lives Matter be painted across downtown intersections.

For many Somali Americans in Omar’s district, all of this occurred alongside extensive physical destruction of their businesses and neighborhoods. On Lake Street, the main commercial artery in midtown Minneapolis, nearly every Somali business was boarded up behind plywood even in late July of 2020. One Somali restaurant burned down only four days after it opened; other immigrants lost nearly everything they’d built over 25 years in America. Order was not restored until the Minnesota National Guard deployed following several nights of rioting.

For some Somalis, the aftermath of the Floyd killing was a throwback to the conditions they’d fled nearly three decades earlier. “People say whenever we go down Lake Street we think of Mogadishu, and we’re not out of the woods of that,” Nur Ahmed, the manager of

Durdur, a halal grocery store that had its facade smashed during the unrest, said when I met him in Minneapolis in July of 2020. He shared another common sentiment spreading among the area's Somali immigrants: "We realize why Americans carry guns. We need to be responsible for our security."

Of course, Somali Americans were not the only ones who suffered in the Twin Cities' post-Floyd riots. There were intersections around Lake Street where every structure had been torched: Taquerias, diners, a Chinese buffet, a science fiction bookstore, and a hotel-turned-homeless-shelter were among the buildings that were vandalized, burned, or otherwise vacated. In the months following, police were largely withdrawn from south and north Minneapolis, home to much of the city's Black and immigrant communities, in accordance with demands, backed by the entirety of the City Council, that the Minneapolis Police Department be abolished. Crime exploded: Minneapolis equaled its 2019 murder totals by early August of 2020, and violent crime continued to increase in 2021.

Still, many Somali Americans supported the Floyd protests, especially the young. "It clearly showed what side of America we stand on," said AJ Awed, a legal mediator and police abolition activist. "It showed we're very much part and parcel of the Black American community." But some wondered, with no small amount of bitterness, why progress had to come at the Somali community's expense, and whether it could be called progress at all—especially when that cost was being denied or ignored even by elected representatives. Mohamed Kahin, who had helped organize a listening session between elected officials and East African business owners affected by the riots, believed that Somali American office-holders had proved just how little they cared about their own community. "Somali elected officials are just gatekeepers," he told me in July of 2020. That included Ilhan Omar: "There's not a single thing she has done for the community."

The Floyd eruption happened amid another tumultuous stretch of Omar's

first term. On March 12, 2020, she married Tim Mynett. Conservative elements in the Somali community questioned her marriage to a non-Muslim. (Mynett, who was born to Jewish parents, reportedly converted to Islam around the time of their marriage.) "The younger generation didn't give a damn. The more informed and the more educated don't care either. The older generation, the baton-carriers for cultural purity—they care," as one Minneapolis Somali community source put it.

"My father always exhorted me to 'Go live your life,'" Omar wrote in her memoir. "But he jokingly warned, 'Don't do anything that would make me unable to sit with my peers.'"

In the two years since Floyd's killing, Omar became a leading instigator of the unending moral and rhetorical escalation of American politics: accusing her Democratic colleagues of treating racial justice as "just a hashtag" over their failure to vote for a resolution she had co-sponsored opposing police brutality, questioning the social justice commitments of supporters of Israel, and tweeting about "unthinkable atrocities committed by the U.S." to draw attention to her questioning of Secretary of State Antony Blinken over why the United States didn't subject itself to the authority of the International Criminal Court. But back in the summer of 2020, during a moment of both national and personal turmoil, Omar appeared to deliver one of the only sensible statements on the Floyd riots that any major politician could muster. "If you care about Black lives you cannot set a fire in Minneapolis risking Black lives," she pleaded during a press conference in south Minneapolis on May 30, 2020. "We can be angry, we can ask for justice, we can protest, we can take it to the streets, we can blow up the phone of the people who represent you. But what we cannot do is start a fire that can take lives." She wore a somber black hijab and was nearly in tears.

For a moment, Omar's detractors could appreciate the same qualities that her supporters so admired: She followed a strong internal sense of right and wrong, had exhilaratingly little regard for the demands of party or faction,

and could say what others didn't have the guts to say. Her moral compass had once again compelled her to take a difficult or unpopular stance. Whatever inner guidance allowed her to be one of only three pro-BDS members of Congress also gave her the boldness to denounce violent protest in a time when the tactic was gaining acceptance on the activist left.

But this was America in 2020, and a reassuring sense of balance isn't anyone's natural mode, least of all a political superstar's. A few moments before her heartfelt plea, a visibly emotional Omar had launched on another one of her trademark flights of insinuation. "We all know that we have collectively fought for business development to take place on Lake Street," she said. "When you see a destruction to one of the most valued business corridors for minority communities in Minneapolis, you know those are not minorities that are doing that destruction." This became a common trope for a small but vocal sliver of apologists for the Twin Cities riots: That right-wing whites had used the Floyd protests as cover to drive in from the suburbs and the countryside and torch immigrant Minneapolis. Omar gave no evidence for her inflammatory claim. She probably didn't have any, given that the riots had only ended the night before. For Omar, the mere existence of the still-smoldering ruins proved that those who lit the matches were outsiders bent on victimizing immigrants of color. Any tension between rioting and social justice was resolved in the space of a single unsubstantiated claim, forcefully made. Not for the first or last time, Omar had defined a troubling reality out of existence, and remade the world on her terms alone. ■

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