

Trump doubles down on racial attack, tells Dem congresswomen to 'apologize to Israel'
President lashes out at criticism for tweeting that progressive U.S. female lawmakers of color should go back to countries they came from

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WASHINGTON -- Injecting race into his criticism of liberal Democrats, President Donald Trump said four congresswomen of color should go back to the "broken and crime infested" countries they came from, ignoring the fact that all of the women are American citizens and three were born in the U.S.

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His attack drew a searing condemnation from Democrats who labeled the remarks racist and breathtakingly divisive.

L-R: Ilhan Omar, Donald Trump and Rashida Tlaib (Photos: AFP)

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Even as White House officials moved Monday to defend his incendiary weekend tweets, Trump refused to apologize and instead asked on Twitter when "the Radical Left Congresswomen" would "apologize to our Country, the people of Israel and even to the Office of the President, for the foul language they have used, and the terrible things they have said."

"So many people are angry at them & their horrible & disgusting actions!" he wrote.

Asked whether Trump's comments were racist, Marc Short, chief of staff to Vice President Mike Pence, defended Trump, telling reporters he had been responding to "very specific" comments made by Rep. Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, who was born in Somalia, and was not making a "universal statement."

But Trump didn't make that distinction in his tweets. He cited "Congresswomen" -- an almost-certain reference to a group of women known as "the squad" that includes Omar, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan.

L-R: Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib and Ayanna Pressley (Photo: EPA)
L-R: Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib and Ayanna Pressley (Photo: EPA)

"I don't think that the president's intent any way is racist," said Short, repeatedly pointing to Trump's decision to choose Elaine Chao, who was born outside the country, as his transportation secretary.

"The administration is welcoming of all nationalities into the United States," he said.

Even as Short spoke, Trump, who has a long history of making racist remarks, continued to fan the flames, tweeting that, "If Democrats want to unite around the foul language & racist hatred spewed from the mouths and actions of these very unpopular & unrepresentative Congresswomen, it will be interesting to see how it plays out."

Omar ignited a bipartisan uproar in Washington several months ago when she suggested that members of Congress support Israel for money, while Tlaib riled up a supportive crowd by calling the president a profanity and predicting that Trump would be removed from office.

Following a familiar script, Republicans remained largely silent after Trump's Sunday morning broadsides that caused Democrats to set aside their internal rifts to rise up in a united chorus against the president.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Trump wants to "make America white again," while Ocasio-Cortez said Trump "can't conceive of an America that includes us."

"Mr. President, the country I 'come from,' & the country we all swear to, is the United States," she tweeted, adding that, "You rely on a frightened America for your plunder."

Nancy Pelosi (Photo: AFP)
Nancy Pelosi (Photo: AFP)

Omar also addressed herself directly to Trump in a tweet, writing: "You are stoking white nationalism (because) you are angry that people like us are serving in Congress and fighting against your hate-filled agenda."

Meanwhile, Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham, a close ally of the president who golfed with Trump over the weekend, advised the president to "aim higher" during an appearance on "Fox and Friends," even as he accused the members in question of being "anti-Semitic" and "anti-American."

"Don't get personal. Don't take the bait," said Graham. He said Ocasio-Cortez and her colleagues "are American citizens" who were "duly elected," while adding: "We all know that AOC and this crowd are a bunch of communists. They hate Israel. They hate our own country."

With his tweet, Trump inserted himself further into a rift between Pelosi and Ocasio-Cortez, just two days after he offered an unsolicited defense of the Democratic speaker. Pelosi has been seeking to minimize Ocasio-Cortez's influence in the House Democratic caucus in recent days, prompting Ocasio-Cortez to accuse Pelosi of trying to marginalize women of color.

On Sunday, Trump's tone took a turn.

"So interesting to see 'Progressive' Democrat Congresswomen, who originally came from countries whose governments are a complete and total catastrophe, the worst, most corrupt and inept anywhere in the world (if they even have a functioning government at all), now loudly and viciously telling the people of the United States, the greatest and most powerful Nation on earth, how our government is to be run," he tweeted.

"Why don't they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came. Then come back and show us how it is done."

He added: "These places need your help badly, you can't leave fast enough. I'm sure that Nancy Pelosi would be very happy to quickly work out free travel arrangements!"

The attacks may have been meant to widen the divides within the Democrat caucus, which has been riven by internal debate over how far left to go in countering Trump and over whether to proceed with impeachment proceedings against the president.

Instead, the president's tweets, which evoked the trope of telling black people to go back to Africa, brought Democrats together.

Former Vice President Joe Biden, the Democratic presidential front-runner, tweeted Sunday that Trump "continues to spew hateful rhetoric, sow division, and stoke racial tensions for his own political gain."

"Let's be clear about what this vile comment is: A racist and xenophobic attack on Democratic congresswomen," tweeted Sen. Elizabeth Warren, a Democratic presidential candidate.

Few Republicans weighed in on the president's comments. Congressional leaders, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, did not respond to requests for comment, nor did Sen. Tim. Scott of South Carolina, the only Republican black senator.

Trump appeared unbowed Sunday night when he returned to Twitter to say it was "so sad" to see Democrats sticking up for the women. "If the Democrat Party wants to continue to condone such disgraceful behavior," he tweeted, "then we look even more forward to seeing you at the ballot box in 2020!"

It was far from the first time that Trump has been accused of holding racist views.

In his campaign kickoff in June 2015, Trump deemed many Mexican immigrants "rapists." In 2017, he said there good people on "both sides" of the clash in Charlottesville, Virginia, between white supremacists and anti-racist demonstrators that left one counter-protester dead.

Last year, during a private White House meeting on immigration, Trump wondered why the United States was admitting so many immigrants from "shithole countries" like African nations.

Repeatedly, Trump has painted arriving immigrants as an "infestation" and he has been slow in condemning acts of violence committed by white supremacists. And he launched

his political career with false claims that President Barack Obama was not born in the United States.

Despite his history of racist remarks, Trump has paid little penalty in his own party.

Though a broad array of Republicans did speak out against his reaction to Charlottesville, they have largely held their tongues otherwise, whether it be on matter of race or any other Trump provocation.

Fearful of his Twitter account and sweeping popularity among Republican voters, GOP lawmakers have largely tried to ignore the provocative statements.

Ocasio-Cortez, who is of Puerto Rican descent, was born in the Bronx, New York, and raised in suburban Westchester County.

Pressley, the first black woman elected to the House from Massachusetts, was born in Cincinnati.

Omar, the first Somali native elected to Congress and one of its first Muslim women, was born in Somalia but spent much of her childhood in a Kenyan refugee camp as civil war tore apart her home country.

She immigrated to the United States at age 12, teaching herself English by watching American TV and eventually settling with her family in Minneapolis.

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Tlaib was born in Detroit to Palestinian immigrants from the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

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Tensions rise in Gulf as US, UK up their forces

Many are worried the continued face-off will lead to 'tanker war' similar to that which took place in the '80s during the 8-year Iran-Iraq War, when that conflict - as well as one between the Americans and the Islamic Republic led to many similar vessels being attacked

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Britain is reinforcing its military presence in the Gulf by sending a second warship to the area.

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Things are heating up in the crowded seaway as the UK and the US have both announced they are dispatching additional forces.

HMS Duncan heads to the Gulf (Photo: Shutterstock)

HMS Duncan heads to the Gulf (Photo: Shutterstock)

A UK government spokesman said the Royal Navy destroyer HMS Duncan was “deploying to the region to ensure we maintain a continuous maritime security presence while HMS Montrose (a frigate) comes off task for pre-planned maintenance and crew changeover.”

British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt said that sending the destroyer was “about our responsibility to do everything we can to protect British shipping.”

British Foreign Minister Jeremy Hunt
British Foreign Minister Jeremy Hunt

He spoke following an acknowledgement by Prime Minister Theresa May's office that Britain was in consultation with the US about building up its military presence in the oil-rich Middle East.

Last week, London accused Tehran of ordering Iranian military vessels to try to intercept a British oil tanker in the vital Strait of Hormuz shipping lane.

Iran denied the accusation.

This comes after British forces impounded an Iranian oil tanker off the coast of Gibraltar they claimed was headed for Syria in violation of international sanctions on the war-torn nation.

Political analyst Hasan Awwad, a Middle East expert, told The Media Line that the seizure of the tanker might spark violence.

“The British role in the tanker incident is a dangerous escalation to the conflict and could be considered as another step toward war,” said Awwad.

On the other side of the Atlantic, US President Donald Trump likewise stepped up pressure on the Islamic Republic.

“Iran better be careful,” President Trump told reporters outside the White House. “They’re treading on very dangerous territory.”

Last week, in what was viewed by the West as a breach of elements of the 2015 nuclear agreement, Iran announced it would ramp up its enrichment of uranium to levels exceeding the 3.67 percent limit allowed under the accord.

British Tanker British Heritage (Photo: Shutterstock)
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Washington pulled out of the agreement in May 2018.

Gulf-based political analyst Ahmad Obaid Syaf believes that despite the spike in tensions, the situation was not liable to spiral out of control.

“The conditions in the Gulf are rather volatile, but it does not rise to the level of war in the region, at least not in the near future,” he said.

Foreign Secretary Hunt seemed to reinforce this notion on Friday, calling for “cool heads” to prevail.

“We want to do everything we can to make sure that we don’t have an unintended escalation which could be very dangerous for the world,” Hunt said.

Many are worried the continued face-off will lead to a “tanker war” similar to that which took place in the 1980s during the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, when that conflict as well as one between the US and Iran led to many such vessels being attacked.

Syaf said the changing geopolitical landscape has contributed to Iran's current behavior.

“The involvement of new parties helped Iran to challenge the status quo,” he said. “In the past it was just Iran by itself. Today, it is Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen. Add to that the entry of Turkey.”

The UK and US have proposed a multinational military coalition that will increase protection for commercial ships passing through Gulf waters.

USS Abraham Lincoln deployed in the Gulf
USS Abraham Lincoln deployed in the Gulf

Millions of barrels of oil and huge quantities of gas transit the Strait of Hormuz each day, accounting for about 40% of the global oil trade and a third of the world's liquefied natural gas.

Awwad believes, however, that the UK and US may face resistance from nations besides Iran.

“One should bear in mind Iran's allies Russia and China. These two global powers will not stand still watching,” he said. “They also need to protect their interests in the region.”

As for the tough talk from Washington, Awwad insists it is just that.

“Though we can't predict the next step, especially from someone like Trump, I still believe he's not a man of war.”

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