



## Ilhan Omar Pitches A New ‘Progressive Baseline’ For U.S. Foreign Policy

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February 12, 2020

Rep. [Ilhan Omar](#) (D-Minn.) introduced a broad package of bills Wednesday that would amount to an overhaul of America’s approach to global affairs. It’s a bold move for the already high-profile first-term representative — and one that gives her a bigger role in the national debate about reforming U.S. foreign policy and challenges the popular caricature of her as an ideologue defined by a fixation on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Designed as a statement of principles, the legislation seeks to push candidates for the [2020 Democratic presidential nomination](#), more moderate members of her caucus and [Republicans](#) to commit to a foreign policy that centers on global human rights standards and international cooperation.

The suite of proposals would initiate tighter scrutiny of U.S. support to countries that commit abuses and transfer \$5 billion in wartime funding to a new Global Peacebuilding Fund. They would also give Congress new responsibility for approving and assessing economic sanctions that come via emergency declarations from the White House — bringing new accountability to a tool many experts feel presidents have overused. Successive presidents have treated sanctions as an ideal alternative to military intervention, even though they often lead to severe humanitarian crises.

The proposals would also require the U.S. to join United Nations agreements on children’s rights and migration, as well as the International Criminal Court, which could mean unprecedented consequences for Americans linked to war crimes. And arguably the most ambitious measure would direct U.S. officials to craft a bigger international deal to address the massive displacement of people around the world.

Omar shared an advance copy of her proposal, which she calls a “Pathway to Peace,” exclusively with HuffPost and discussed it in a Tuesday interview.

Working on Capitol Hill has allowed Omar to see “the intentions” behind traditional U.S. foreign policy. “I know that it is deeply rooted in justice, in wanting to advance peace and in fighting for a more democratic and open society, but I also uniquely know and see and hear and have experienced how the outside world reacts to our foreign policy,” said Omar, a Somali American refugee and one of the first two Muslim women in Congress.

Her approach champions both an idealistic vision of what America can achieve and the importance of multilateralism, breaking with the historic bipartisan commitment to America’s exceptional status and right to act as it pleases on the world stage. She takes as an unquestioned

foundation that U.S. military intervention is a last resort ill-suited to tackle most global problems.

Omar said she is informed by the fact that Washington's choices in recent decades have meant that "what the world gets to see is policies that are deprived of our values and of our principles, and so we don't get the reaction or the outcome that we've hoped for."

Omar and her defenders have maintained in the face of hateful attacks and assumptions over the past year that she's a serious thinker focused on making an impact — and her Wednesday launch bolsters their case.

**You can't have peace if you don't figure out how to not be seen as an agitator towards the people you are negotiating peace with.** Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-Minn.)

"Whatever Ilhan Omar does is going to be caricatured by the right wing. Frankly, whatever Democrats do, even a centrist Democrat is going to be caricatured by the right wing. I think the best way to answer that is to be substantive," said Ben Rhodes, a top national security aide to former President Barack Obama who spoke with Omar about her thinking on sanctions and migration.

Omar hopes her proposals can guide fellow lawmakers and attract bipartisan support.

"I know that the fight for a just world isn't one that is about being progressive, about being a liberal, about being a moderate or being a conservative — it's about really being an American that is concerned about what our priorities should be and what it will take for us to continue to have an infusion of our values and principles in the policies we export," she said.

Different elements of her pitch might attract different allies. Her new program for economic opportunity for youth worldwide could appeal to traditional Republicans, while her requirements for congressional limits on U.S. military aid and approval of the president's proposed sanctions, as well as reports on their costs and benefits, and for limiting U.S. military aid may attract antiwar conservatives keen to curb the executive branch's ability to risk conflict.

The coalition of outside groups backing Omar's effort includes the Quincy Institute, a think tank linked to the right-wing Koch family network and committed to foreign policy restraint, and the libertarian Cato Institute. It's the latest move by a network of activists who are pushing to make America less hawkish and have helped reshape political discussions and promote unprecedented congressional action on issues like U.S. support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen. They see Omar's contribution as setting valuable goalposts.

"These are really good markers of what we would potentially want to see from a progressive White House," said Kate Kizer, policy director at Win Without War, a left-leaning national security advocacy group.

The foreign policy project is a culmination of Omar's rhetoric and work since she entered Congress and took a seat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

"Too often, U.S. policymakers are quick to place sanctions on regimes we disagree with, without considering the likelihood of success or the humanitarian consequences," she wrote in The Washington Post last year, warning that Washington should seek other means to deter Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan from attacking U.S.-aligned Kurds in Syria.

Omar has been clear about the failings of other governments, from Erdogan's support for vicious militants to Iran's crackdown on protesters, while saying the U.S. should design its response by learning from its own often-shameful history: She pressed Trump's Venezuela envoy on his role in U.S. missteps in Latin America and helped lead congressional efforts to stop a confrontation with Tehran.

She has sought to downgrade U.S. ties to human rights abusers, frequently criticizing Saudi Arabia and calling for targeted sanctions on officials from Brunei over their repressive new penal code — establishing a record on the Muslim-majority world that jibes with liberal values and experts' warnings that autocracy risks long-term chaos and defies conspiracy theorists' claim that she is more loyal to global Islam than the U.S. And she's been vocal about her identity, saying it's only right that she and others hold America accountable for its promises to immigrants and the broader world.

She's now hoping her suggestions can help a future commander in chief build a more stable world. "You can't have peace if you don't figure out how to not be seen as an agitator towards the people you are negotiating peace with," Omar told HuffPost.

Omar's plan isn't a liberal cure-all. Though it allows for some limits on sanctions and establishes bigger humanitarian exceptions to them, the way most sanctions are rolled out means Congress still wouldn't have much power to challenge particular targets. Its commitment to handling migration is to the U.N.'s broad set of ideas rather than specific policies.

But change has to start somewhere.

"She's establishing a new progressive baseline for how Congress should assert itself in this space," Rhodes said.