

Democratic Party Defends Israeli Attack

Tens of thousands of Israelis protested in the streets of Tel Aviv last weekend against their right-wing government's attack on an unarmed humanitarian aid flotilla sailing in international waters. International condemnation of the raids continued in foreign capitals. Meanwhile, in Washington, Democratic congressional leaders were lining up alongside their Republican colleagues to defend the Israeli assault. Countering the broad consensus of international legal scholars who recognize that the attack was in flagrant violation of international norms, prominent Democrats embraced the Orwellian notion that Israel's raid, which killed at least nine activists and wounded scores of others, was somehow an act of self-defense.

The offensive by the Democratic leadership has been led by Gary Ackerman (D-NY), who serves as House Democrats' unofficial spokesman on Middle East policy from his position as chair of the House Foreign Relations Committee subcommittee on the Middle East. [According to Ackerman](#), the killings were "wholly the fault and responsibility of the organizers of the effort to break through Israel and Egypt's legitimate closure of terrorist-controlled Gaza." According to Rep. Ron Klein (D-FL), due to the determination of activists on the ships to deliver humanitarian aid to the people of the besieged Gaza Strip, "Israel was left with no choice but to ensure the safety of its people." Similarly, Democratic majority leader Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-MD) insisted that in attacking an unarmed flotilla carrying humanitarian aid in international waters, Israel had simply "invoked its right to self-defense."

To rationalize what virtually the entire international legal community recognizes as an act of war, congressional Democrats have engaged in a series of falsifications and radical reinterpretations of international law. The first involved a radically overextended notion of maritime sovereignty. The attack took place in international waters, roughly 85 miles from the Israeli coast. International maritime law has long recognized that territorial sovereignty extends only 12 miles out to sea. A Libyan effort in the 1980s to extend its claim of sovereignty into the Gulf of Sidra beyond the 12-mile limit led to a series of deadly clashes between U.S. and Libyan armed forces in order, according to then-President Ronald Reagan, to enforce America's "global Freedom of Navigation program" to defend "our rights on and over the high seas under international law." At the time, congressional Democrats joined their Republican colleagues in defending the use of force to challenge Libya's illegal overreach of its maritime boundaries.

However, congressional Democrats are quite willing to grant allied governments in the region far more latitude in extending their claims to Mediterranean waters. Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) argued that responsibility for the violence lay with the organizers of the flotilla, not with "those who defended Israel's borders." Rep. Michael McMahon (D-NY) made a similar argument that the Israeli action was justified because Israel "has the right to maintain and defend its own borders." The flotilla was aiming directly toward the port of Gaza, not toward any area close to Israeli territorial waters, and no country recognizes the Gaza Strip as part of Israel. Nevertheless, Rep. Kendrick Meek (D-FL) insisted that Israel's assault on the flotilla was justified because the ships were "on the verge of breaching its sovereign borders." Similarly, Klein insisted that the ships were "threatening to breach Israel's defenses of its coastal border," and therefore "Israel was left with no choice but to ensure the safety of its people" by attacking the flotilla.

Redefining "Self-Defense"

The Free Gaza campaign had made clear that the cargo was exclusively humanitarian. Indeed, all of its previous eight voyages over the past two years were completely free of any weaponry or weapon parts. The plethora of peace and human rights groups participating in the flotilla would have never taken part were there any hint of arms being on board. Most crucially, customs officials rigorously inspected all the ships at their disembarkation points. Indeed, no weapons bound for the Gaza Strip were found on any of the six ships on the flotilla seized by Israel or on the seventh several days later. As a result, no reasonable person could claim that the Israelis had reason to suspect arms smuggling. The congressional Democratic leadership, however, is apparently not very reasonable.

For example, Rep. Frank Pallone (D-NJ) insisted that the Israelis attacked the flotilla to ensure that "dangerous resources do not reach the terrorist organization Hamas." This kind of paranoia was evident on the Senate side as well, as Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) justified the Israeli attack on the grounds that the peace activists might have been trying to smuggle missiles or even a radiological weapon. Similarly, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-MA) declared that "Israel has every right in the world to make certain that weapons are not being smuggled in." Rep. Jim Costa (D-CA) insisted that "Israel has every right to defend itself against radical activists" in order "to prevent innocent civilian aid from being used as a facade for arms trafficking" by those "threatening the safety and security of our ally Israel."

Despite the participation of large numbers of pacifists on the ships, Rep. Elliot Engel (D-NY) claimed that the flotilla "was really a Trojan Horse designed to attack the Israelis." The assault against the unarmed flotilla, according to Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-NY), was simply a case of the Israeli government "defending" their citizens and "exercising its right to self-defense." Paul Hodes (D-NH) argued that Israel's intent in attacking the flotilla was simply "to protect itself and its citizens" while House Majority Leader Hoyer insisted that "Israel -- rightfully so -- invoked its right to self-defense on the Mavi Marmara." Rep. Patrick Murphy (D-PA) also insisted that Israel was simply invoking its right to self-defense, while Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA) insisted that "those aboard the Mavi Marmara never intended to carry out a peaceful humanitarian mission" and that "It was only when faced with violence that the soldiers reacted in self-defense."

The Israelis confiscated all recording equipment from those on board, only showing their carefully edited version of events surrounding their assault on lead vessel in a widely circulated videotape. The refusal to return any of the recording equipment to the kidnapped activists would normally raise questions as to what the Israeli government might be trying to hide. But that didn't bother Democratic lawmakers, who repeatedly cited the Israeli video as "evidence" to support their case that the people defending their ship, not the ones attacking it, were the aggressors. There are conflicting reports of what happened when Israeli forces illegally boarded the Mavi Marmara, but what is known is that Israeli commandos initiated the attack on the ship using stun grenades, teargas, paintballs, and rubber-cased steel bullets. The initial response from those on board was to try to fend off the attackers off with water hoses while the ship's passengers attempted to form a defensive cordon around the wheelhouse to prevent the attackers from seizing the ship.

Michael Oren, Israel's ambassador to the United States, acknowledged that the flotilla was simply "too large to stop with nonviolent means." Despite this, Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schulz (D-FL) insisted that "the Israeli Navy worked to plan a non-violent interception of the flotilla and only used force when soldiers' lives were at risk." At least 48 activists suffered gunshot wounds and scores of others were badly beaten.

The British newspaper *The Independent* [reported](#) that soldiers fired down on the activists from their helicopters prior to any Israeli soldiers boarding the Mavi Marmara. One journalist reported that a man standing next to him

was shot through the top of his head, killing him instantly. Rep. Gary Peters (D-MI), however, insisted that the killings were all "acts of self-defense," while Rep. Shelley Berkeley (D-NV) blamed "passengers on the vessel, not Israeli forces, as the instigators of violence." Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA) said the "violent force [was] in fact initiated by those whose boat was boarded." Though the overwhelming majority of those on the ships were from peace organizations like War Resisters International, the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, Pax Christi, and others, Rep. Engel insisted that the ships were actually "filled with hate-filled provocateurs bent on violence." Rep. Mike Quigley (D-IL) claimed the responsibility for the killings were "those who chose to run an internationally recognized blockade and attack uniformed personnel." Though there were no guns found on board any of the ships, Quigley insisted that the activists "shot Israeli soldiers as they landed on the main ship."

Autopsy reports [reveal](#) that most of the victims of the Israeli raid were shot in the head at close range. Fulkan Dogan, a 19-year old U.S. citizen, was shot five times from less than 18 inches away. Similarly, despite Israeli troops using stun guns and severely beating passengers on the other ships who offered no violent resistance, Rep. Shelley Berkeley (D-NV) insisted that the Israeli seizure of the five other vessels took place "without incident," demonstrating that "Israeli personnel had no intention to use force and only did so in self-defense."

The Turkish crew -- which, unlike the vast majority of people on board the ships, had not gone through the mandatory nonviolence training -- should not have fought back. It should be noted, however, that international maritime law clearly gives crew members the right to defend their vessel from attacks in international waters. Apparently, these congressional Democrats believe, however, if you are attacked by the navy of a strategic ally of the United States, you have no right to defend your ship.

Accusations of Terrorist Ties

The most dangerous accusation by congressional Democratic leaders involves charges that the activists on board and the organizers of the flotilla had ties to terrorism. Rep. Brad Sherman (D-CA) chair of the House Foreign Relations Committee's subcommittee on terrorism, nonproliferation, and trade, called on U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder to prosecute American participants in the flotilla. Because the Gaza Strip is currently ruled by Hamas, according to Sherman, any humanitarian aid to the people of that territory is "clearly an effort to give items of value to a terrorist organization." Sherman also announced he would be working with the Department of Homeland Security to ensure that the more than 700 non-U.S. citizens who took part in the flotilla would be permanently barred from ever entering the United States. This would include European parliamentarians and Nobel laureates, as well as leading writers, artists, intellectuals, pacifists, and human rights activists, virtually none of whom is in the least bit sympathetic with Hamas or terrorism.

A series of Democrats in Congress have joined in insisting that the organizers of the flotilla have, in Sherman's words, "clear terrorist ties." Indeed, Frank insists that these groups are "pro-Hamas people" and that, rather than provide aid to the people of the Gaza Strip, they were actually "seeking to land in Gaza to aid and support Hamas." Engel insisted that the organizers of the flotilla have "links to Hamas and reportedly played a role in the attempted Millennium bombing in Los Angeles." Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-NY) insisted that the United States "must stand up for the right of Israel to defend herself against terrorism -- which is what Israel did when she blocked the attempt by the Flotilla to forcefully breach the blockade." And Rep. Ackerman claimed that the humanitarian relief effort was "to provoke a confrontation with Israel for the benefit of Hamas and as part of the international effort to delegitimize Israel's existence."

The very idea that pacifist, feminist, Jewish, and Christian organizations like CODE PINK, Jewish Voice for Peace, and the American Friends Service Committee would ally with a violent, misogynist, Islamic group like Hamas -- much less any group that engages in terrorism -- should be recognized as absurd on face value. When prominent Democrats -- including the head of the House subcommittee on terrorism -- imply that leading American and Israeli peace groups are linked to terrorism, it is no longer simply heated rhetoric in defense of the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip, but a dangerous attack on civil liberties. These congressional Democrats also ignore the fact that the Free Gaza campaign is supported by such Israeli groups such as Yesh G'vul, the Coalition of Women for Peace, New Profile, and the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, among others. Such organizations and their members were already being

subjected to violent attacks by far right-wing groups, some of whom have openly called for the murder of Knesset members who supported the flotilla. By falsely accusing these groups of being part of an effort that supports Hamas and other terrorist groups, these members of Congress appear to be willing to put the lives of Israeli peace and human rights activists at risk.

Shutting Out the United Nations

Democratic congressional leaders were quick to praise the Obama administration for blocking the United Nations from criticizing the Israeli attack. Hoyer reiterated how the "administration and Congress are determined to prevent condemnation of Israel at the UN Security Council." One clear role for the United Nations -- given the conflicting accounts of what transpired during the Israeli attack -- would be to launch an international investigation. A [recent public opinion poll](#) shows a clear majority of Americans -- including 65 percent of Democrats -- favor an international inquiry over allowing Israel alone to investigate the circumstances of the attack.

Despite this, congressional Democrats have also joined the Obama administration in insisting that Israel, not the UN or other international body, should conduct any investigation into the attack. This comes despite reports from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International documenting the right-wing Israeli government's notoriously poor record at conducting credible internal investigations regarding possible war crimes by its armed forces. Rejecting such detailed reports from reputable human rights organizations, Frank nonetheless insists "the Israeli government" has a very good record of holding the Israeli government to account," and that "the Israeli government has a better record of legitimate self-criticism than almost any other government in the world." Turning the consensus of international human rights organizations on its head, Frank argues that the only a group "commissioned by the Israeli government" would have credibility, while "clearly no inquiry chartered by the U.N. would have the credibility."

Other congressional Democrats have also been lining up insisting that the right-wing Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu be entrusted with the investigation. Rep. Brad Ellsworth (D-IN) insisted that "We must allow Israel, not the United Nations. . . to conduct a formal investigation into the flotilla incident." Similarly, Rep. Jesse Jackson, Jr. (D-IL) has called for an "Israeli-led investigation" as have Rep. Michael McMahon (D-NY) and Rep. Sestak (D-PA), who is currently the Democratic nominee for Senate. Reid underscored his confidence in the right-wing Israeli government in noting how "Israel has pledged to carry out a transparent and thorough investigation of this incident, and I look forward to its findings."

Denying the Humanitarian Crisis

Democrats have also lined up to defend the blockade of the Gaza Strip, even as corporate media outlets such as [Newsweek](#) acknowledge that the blockade has little to do with preventing weapons smuggling. Some have gone as far as challenging the credibility of the UN and a plethora of aid agencies that have documented the public health crisis and food shortages in the Gaza Strip. For example, Sherman insists "the health circumstances in Gaza are better than they are in many American cities." In reality, UN officials have called the situation "grim," "deteriorating," and a "medieval siege." A bare minimum of 400 truckloads of goods needs to enter Gaza each week, and only an average of 171 get in. [According to the World Health Organization](#) (WHO), one in 10 Gazans suffer from "chronic malnutrition," and the UN says six in 10 Gaza households are "food insecure."

As reported in the Israeli press, as elsewhere, Israel has repeatedly refused to allow humanitarian goods into the Gaza Strip. This fact did not stop Reid from claiming that Israel "put in place a process to ensure that legitimate humanitarian relief reached Gaza." Similarly, Rep. Steve Rothman (D-NJ) praised Israel for "allow[ing] trucks loaded with humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza on a daily basis," ignoring that such vehicles allowed by Israel are far less than what's needed. Rep. Ted Deutch (D-FL) insisted that "there are alternative methods of delivery that are available," ignoring the fact that restrictive Israeli checkpoints have repeatedly turned away WHO medical supplies and rejected or delayed the delivery of UN food aid. Despite efforts to blame Hamas, Israel is in fact the source of the humanitarian crisis. Yet Democrats continue to be in denial.

'Creating an Incident'

Israel had allowed five of the previous eight ships from the Free Gaza Campaign carrying humanitarian supplies to deliver their goods to the port of Gaza without interception. So there was some genuine hope that the Israelis would allow this flotilla to dock unimpeded as well. To leading Democratic lawmakers, such as Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), however, "this flotilla was more about creating an incident than helping people." Similarly, Mikulski insisted that the activists "cared more about inciting a confrontation that they did about delivering aid."

These lawmakers seem to have forgotten, however, the longstanding tradition of strategic nonviolent direct action to "create an incident." The four African-American students who sat at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro back in 1960 weren't just interested in a cup of coffee. Similarly, when civil rights activists protested in downtown Birmingham in 1963, there was reason to suspect that Sheriff Bull Connor would use force to break up the demonstrations.

When people struggle nonviolently for justice against an oppressive state apparatus, there is no contradiction between helping people and creating an incident.

Relations with Turkey

Much of the wrath of congressional Democrats centers on the government of Turkey, a longstanding NATO ally. Pallone demanded that Obama condemn the Turkish government for supporting the relief effort and reacting negatively to the attack, which killed nine Turks on board. According to Rep. Anthony Wiener (D-NY), "We know this tragedy was instigated by Turkey." Though Turkey remains in NATO, Wiener went as far as referring to Turkey as "our former ally." Similarly, Rep. John Sarbanes (D-MD) argued that criticism of Israel's action "neglects the role that Turkey played in staging the flotilla and Turkey's readiness to condone this kind of brinkmanship."

Putting the blame on Turkey for the deaths of its own citizens in international waters taking part in a multinational humanitarian relief efforts is particularly ironic given that, as recently as two months ago, many of these same members of Congress refused to support the [recent House resolution](#) commemorating the 1915 Armenian genocide on the grounds that it would offend the Turkish government.

In the world view of congressional Democrats, however, defending what is essentially an act of piracy and the murder of nine Turkish citizens is worth damaging relations with this key NATO ally, but acknowledging the genocide of one and half million Armenians is not.

Withdraw Support from the Democratic Party

This is certainly not the first time that Democratic congressional leaders have defended violations of international legal norms by U.S. allies. The history of supporting the Salvadoran junta, Nicaraguan Contras, Indonesian occupation forces in East Timor, and Moroccan occupation forces in Western Sahara all attest to the way the Democratic Party, like the Republican Party, is wedded to the notion that U.S. allies should be held to a lower standard of adherence to international law than perceived adversaries.

Indeed, one can imagine the reaction of these same Democrats had it been the Iranian navy that attacked a humanitarian flotilla in international waters, killed passengers and crew members, and kidnapped 750 people (including journalists) and held them incommunicado for several days in Iran.

Republican congressional leaders have certainly done no better in supporting Israel's raids. Yet many Democrats who have engaged in these right-wing attacks on human rights and international law consider themselves "progressive." Democratic members of Congress have ended their defense of the Salvadoran junta, the Indonesian dictatorship, and other criminal policies only when pressured by their constituents. Peace and human rights activists should similarly raise an outcry in response to the dangerously intemperate and inaccurate statements from congressional Democrats and then deny support for the re-election of any member of Congress who continues to support this latest Israeli atrocity.

For More Information: All quotes from congressional representatives taken from the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee, "Congressional Statements on the Gaza Flotilla Incident, June 9, 2010; [click here](#)