



[Pavlovian Congress Jumps to Israel's 'Self-' Defense](#)

Learning what actually transpired during Israel's attack on the Gaza Flotilla was apparently of little interest to the majority of congress which signed a letter in its defense.

Posted as a complement to Stephen Zunes's Foreign Policy in Focus piece [Israel's Dubious Investigation of Flotilla Attack](#).

In [a letter](#) to President Barack Obama date June 17, [329](#) out of 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives referred to Israel's May 31 attack on a humanitarian aid flotilla in international waters, which resulted in the deaths of nine passengers and crew and injuries to scores of others, as an act of "self-defense" which they "strongly support." Similarly, a June 21 [Senate letter](#) — [signed by 87](#) out of 100 senators — went on record "fully" supporting what it called "Israel's right to self-defense," claiming that the widely supported effort to relieve critical shortages of food and medicine in the besieged Gaza Strip was simply part of a "clever tactical and diplomatic ploy" by "Israel's opponents" to "challenge its international standing."

The House letter urged President Obama "to remain steadfast in defense of Israel" in the face of the near-universal international condemnation of this blatant violation of international maritime law and other legal statutes, which the signatories referred to as "a rush to unfairly judge and defend Israel." The Senate letter condemned the near-unanimous vote of the UN Human Rights Council for what it called "singling out" Israel, even though no other country in recent memory has attacked a humanitarian aid flotilla in international waters. Both letters called upon the United States to veto any resolution in the UN Security Council criticizing the Israeli attack.

What is perhaps most disturbing is that many of the key arguments in the letters were misleading and, in some cases, factually inaccurate.

The Israeli government had acknowledged prior to the writing of the letter that the extensive blockade of humanitarian goods was not necessary for their security, but as a means of pressuring the civilian population to end their support for Hamas, which won a majority of legislative seats in the most recent Palestinian election. In addition, the Israeli government announced a significant relaxation of the embargo two days after the letter was written. Despite this, the House letter claimed that the purpose of the blockade was "to stop terrorists from smuggling weapons to kill innocent civilians," thereby placing this large bipartisan majority of the House even further to the right than Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's rightist coalition.

There was no mention in the letter than no such weapons were found on board any of the six ships hijacked by the Israelis nor on the previous eight ships the Free Gaza Campaign had sailed or attempted to sail to the Gaza Strip. In addition, even though the ships had been thoroughly inspected by customs officials prior to their disembarkation, the House letter claimed that had the Israelis not hijacked the ships, they would have "sailed unchecked into Gaza."

Similarly, according to the Senate letter, Israel's naval blockade was necessary "to keep dangerous goods from entering Gaza by sea" and falsely claimed that the intent of the Israeli blockade was "to protect Israel, while allowing humanitarian aid into Gaza." Particularly striking is the fact that, despite that the [International Committee on the Red Cross](#) and a broad consensus of international legal experts recognize that the Israeli blockade of humanitarian goods is illegal, the Senate letter insisted that the blockade "is legal under international law."

The House letter insisted, despite the fact that several of those killed on the *Mavi Marmara* were [shot at point blank range](#) in the back or the back of the head and a video showing a 19-year old U.S. citizen shot execution style on the ground, that “Israeli forces used necessary force as an act of self-defense and of last resort.” Similarly, the Senate letter refers to the murders of passengers and crew resisting the illegal boarding of their vessel in international waters as a situation where the Israeli raiders were “forced to respond to that attack” when they “arrived” on the ship.

The House letter also claimed that the other ships were “commandeered peacefully and without incident,” even though on the other ships, despite completely nonviolent resistance, passengers were tasered and brutally beaten and were attacked with tear gas and rubber bullets. Similarly, the Senate letter insisted that, in spite of these potentially fatal beatings and other assaults, “Israeli forces were able to safely divert five of the six ships challenging the blockade.”

Even though the Israeli government has never entered Gaza to disperse aid to the people of that territory since the start of the siege years earlier and reputable relief organizations have documented that the Israelis had routinely refused to allow humanitarian aid to enter the Gaza Strip, these House members claimed that Israel had offered to “disperse the aid . . . directly to the people of Gaza.” And, despite the fact that the five aid ships that Israel had allowed to dock in Gaza in previous months had distributed their humanitarian cargo directly to those in need, the senators claimed that it would have otherwise gone “into the hands of corrupt Gaza officials.”

Learning what actually transpired in the tragic incident was apparently of little interest to the 87 senators who signed the letter defending the attack. Despite the apparent [whitewash](#) forthcoming in the internal Israeli investigation, the senate letter supported Israel’s alleged intention to carry out “a thorough investigation of the incident,” insisting that Israel “has the right to determine how its investigation is conducted.” This comes in spite of 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 .

Ironically, a number of progressive organizations, web sites and list serves have called on the peace and human rights community to support the re- election of some of the very senators who signed this letter, including Barbara Boxer, Ron Wyden, and Russell Feingold. MoveOn, Council for a Livable World, and other progressive groups with PAC money have been are calling on their members, many of whom are peace and human rights activists, to donate their money to these right-wing Democrats who defend attacking peace and human rights activists and lie about the circumstances to justify it. They have no problems with supporting the re-election of those who lie and mislead their constituents in order to defend illegal actions by allied right-wing governments, even when they kill and injure participants in a humanitarian flotilla on the high seas.

There may be an underlying current of racism at work here. It is unlikely MoveOn, Council for a Livable World and other groups would defend such actions if, for example, if the activists were helping those under siege in Sarajevo in the 1990s or West Berlin in the 1940s, who happened to be white Europeans.

It is important to remember that the majority of Democrats joined in with Republicans in supporting the Salvadoran junta in the early 1980s and the Suharto regime in the 1990s until voters made clear they would withdraw their support from them if they did not change their policy. AIPAC and other right-wing “pro-Israel” groups are only as powerful as the absence of counter-pressure from the peace and human rights community. Letters like these will continue to be supported by most Democrats only as long they know they can get away with it.