

[Congressional Democrats Supported Violent Force Against Protesters in 2010](#)

In 2010, many Democratic lawmakers actively supported Israel summarily execute nonviolent peace activists.



The use of lethal force by police, National Guard, and other security forces has come under increasing scrutiny in the wake of the George Floyd killing and resulting uprisings. Congressional Democrats have begun speaking out against police-perpetrated killings as well as the use of excessive force against protesters and journalists across the country, such as the [notorious incident](#) in Lafayette Park across from the White House late last month.

Democrats have rejected the notion that if some members of an initially nonviolent crowd fight back when attacked by security forces, it therefore legitimates the targeting of protesters or those recording the incident, much less justifying lethal force.

However, 10 years ago this week, a majority of congressional Democrats went on record defending Israel's killing of 10 passengers and crew on the *Mavi Marmara*, which was sailing in international waters as part of a humanitarian aid flotilla bound for the besieged Gaza Strip. The Israelis shot 10 people aboard the ship to death, including five who were not resisting. Autopsy reports [reveal](#) that most of the victims of the Israeli raid were shot in the head at close range.

One of them, Furkan Dogan, a 19-year-old U.S. citizen, was — according to an autopsy and eyewitness accounts, confirmed in [a report](#) by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights — initially shot filming the raid and then fatally shot in the face at point-blank range while lying wounded on the deck. At least 48 activists suffered gunshot wounds and scores of others were badly beaten.

Israeli commandos initiated the attack on the ship using stun grenades, tear gas, paintballs and rubber-cased steel bullets, with soldiers [firing down](#) on the activists from their helicopters prior to Israeli soldiers boarding the ship. The initial response from those on board was to try to fend off the attackers with water hoses while attempting to form a defensive cordon around the wheelhouse to prevent the attackers from seizing the ship. Crew used railings and other improvised weapons to defend against the attackers. Despite this, [Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schulz](#) (D-Florida), former chair of the Democratic National Committee, insisted that, “The Israeli Navy worked to plan a nonviolent interception of the flotilla and only used force when soldiers’ lives were at risk” and were attacked “while trying to peacefully escort this ship to shore.”

Similarly, then-[Rep. Gary Peters](#) (D-Michigan), now a U.S. senator, insisted that the killings were all “acts of self-defense.” [Rep. Mike Quigley](#) (D-Illinois) 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.”



In [a letter](#) to President Barack Obama dated June 17, 2010, 329 out of 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives referred to Israel's May 31 attack on the unarmed sailors 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."

The House letter insisted, despite the fact that several of those killed on the *Mavi Marmara* were [shot in the back at point-blank range](#), 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 in the flotilla were "commandeered peacefully and without incident," even though passengers on the other ships, despite their completely nonviolent resistance, were tasered, brutally beaten, tear gassed and shot with rubber bullets, with House Majority leader [Steny Hoyer](#) (D-Maryland) insisting "there was no violence" on the other ships. 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."

This tradition of fabricating incidents to justify lethal violence is also regularly used by police departments across the country. Given the eagerness of congressional Democrats to utilize such deliberate misrepresentations to justify actions by a foreign government, even when it takes the life of a U.S. citizen on the high seas, raises questions as to whether the Democrats are actually serious about transparency and accountability regarding the use of force.

Just as Trump has tried to label nonviolent protesters "terrorists," congressional Democrats made similar false accusations regarding the flotilla. Organizers and endorsers of the humanitarian aid effort included such reputable U.S. peace groups as CODEPINK, Jewish Voice for Peace, Pax Christi, the American Friends Service Committee, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the Resource Center for Nonviolence, War Resisters League, Women in Black, and others.

Supporters of this nonviolent effort to bring humanitarian aid to the people of the Gaza Strip also included such Israeli groups as Yesh Gvul, Coalition of Women for Peace, New Profile and the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, among others.

Despite this, [Rep. Elliot Engel](#) (D-New York), chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, insisted that the ships were actually "filled with hate-filled provocateurs bent on violence" and claimed 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-New York) argued that Israel's attack on the unarmed flotilla laden with humanitarian supplies was part of the country's effort to "defend herself against terrorism." [Rep. Brad Sherman](#) (D-California), then chair of the House Foreign Relations Committee's subcommittee on terrorism, nonproliferation and trade, called for the prosecution of U.S. citizens who were involved with or on board the flotilla.

Despite the participation of large numbers of pacifists on the ships, Rep. Adam Schiff (D-California) claimed they were "jihadist provocateurs" and [Engel](#) — who steers the Democratic Party's foreign policy agenda in Congress — claimed that the flotilla "was really a Trojan Horse designed to attack the Israelis." Majority Leader [Hoyer](#) (D-Maryland) insisted that "Israel — rightfully so — invoked its right to self-defense" by preventing the humanitarian supplies from reaching Gaza.

Trump's tweet that the [elderly Catholic pacifist](#) assaulted by police in Buffalo, New York, could have been part of what he considers [a terrorist group](#) was widely ridiculed. Yet equally bizarre claims that peace and human rights groups supporting the mission of *Mavi Marmara* were instead involved in a plot to support terrorism seem to have largely been forgotten.

Democratic politicians' calls for transparency in investigations of police-perpetrated killings are also questionable in light of their rejection of a UN or other impartial investigation of the flotilla attack. Despite concerns over a [whitewash](#) 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."

Democrats' rejection came in spite of a [public opinion poll](#) that showed a clear majority of Americans — including 65 percent of Democrats — favored an international inquiry over allowing Israel alone to investigate the circumstances of the attack. This raises questions as to whether Democrats actually support independent investigations of police misconduct.

A decade later, despite Israel's right-wing prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, subsequently [apologizing](#) for the attack, it appears that none of the Democrats who made these statements or signed these letters have backed away from their claims. They have not received much pressure to do so. Many are in leadership positions in the party and have been repeatedly endorsed by progressive organizations for reelection. Even this year, despite the heightened awareness of such crimes, groups like Progressive Democrats of America and [Peace Action](#), which are normally highly selective in their endorsements, are still backing such candidates.

The support for the flotilla attack was not simply because these Democrats wanted to appear "pro-Israel." Scores of pro-Israel Democrats refused to sign the letters or defend the attack with no apparent damage to their political careers. It raises the question, despite recent rhetoric to the contrary, as to whether their support for the Israeli assault constitutes a dangerous attitude about the rights of a government to kill with impunity, an expansive definition of "self-defense" by those in uniform, a belief that nonviolent direct action can constitute "terrorism," and rejection of independent accountability.

The denials, rationalizations and false narratives these members of Congress utilized to defend the killings of the activists by the Israeli military are far too similar to those which have been used to defend the murders of Black people by U.S. police. Across the country, police and city officials are finally being held to account for such cover-ups. So should these members of Congress.

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[The GOP's Police Reforms Won't Do It. We Need to Defund the Police.](#)

The GOP police reform bill seems more concerned with stopping the protests than stopping the abuses that sparked them. By [Dan Berger](#), [Truthout](#)