

Panetta out of touch with constituents in his support for Netanyahu

As the ceasefire takes hold ending the fighting between the forces of Hamas and Israel, questions are being raised by central coast voters over controversial statements made by Rep. Jimmy Panetta (D-20) as the carnage was unfolding.

During the 11-day war, eleven Israeli civilians and close to 150 Palestinian civilians, including 66 children, were killed. The Biden administration initially supported Israel's assault, blocking no less than four otherwise unanimous UN Security Council initiatives to impose a ceasefire before both domestic and international pressure finally led President Biden to press Israeli prime minister Netanyahu to end the assault.

Several days into the fighting, Rep. Jimmy Panetta (D-20) issued a press release in which he quite appropriately condemned the indiscriminate Palestinian rocket attacks targeting Israelis as "despicable." By contrast, there was no mention of the far greater violence targeting Palestinians by Israeli forces. Indeed, it was revealingly entitled "Statement on Violence in Israel."

Regarding the large-scale civilian casualties in Gaza, Panetta appeared to blame the Palestinians themselves, claiming that Hamas "severely limit Israeli options to protect civilian life when acting in self-defense." However, international observers, including reputable human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have challenged that claim, noting that Israel was repeatedly violating international humanitarian law by striking targets far removed from any military activity, bombing apartment buildings and office complexes, including major media outlets, medical centers, schools, refugee camps, retail stores (including a beloved bookshop) and other civilian targets.

Earlier this spring, a bill was put forward by some of Panetta's Democratic colleagues that would forbid U.S. military aid to Israel from being used to support specific violations of international humanitarian law, such as the indefinite detention of children, destruction of homes, and seizure of property. Panetta has refused to endorse it, instead of signing on to a Republican-backed letter insisting that the \$3.8 billion in annual military aid the United States provides Israel remains unconditional.

Having lived on the central coast for a quarter-century and has spoken frequently before civic groups and local media about conflicts in the Middle East, my strong impression is that most people in Panetta's district strongly support Israel's right to exist and its right to self-defense, but also recognize that Israel—like every other country—has no right to engage in massive aerial bombardments of crowded urban areas which result in high civilian casualties. Similarly, while there is strong support for the United States ensuring that Israel has adequate military capabilities to defend itself, there is also a belief that U.S. military aid to Israel—again, like all countries—should be conditional on Israel living up to its obligations under international humanitarian law.

Indeed, polls show that a clear majority of voters, including over 80% of Democrats, believe US aid to Israel should indeed be conditional, something which Panetta rejects out of hand. Even prior to the recent fighting, the use of taxpayer-funded assistance to Israel's rightwing government has become an increasingly contentious issue within the Democratic Party as Israeli human rights violations under the Netanyahu government, including its illegal colonization of occupied Palestinian lands and displacement of Palestinians from their homes, has increased.

There is nothing wrong with Panetta's support for the Israeli people's right to live without fear of rocket attacks or any form of terror. Nor is there anything wrong with reiterating Israel's right to self-defense. However, his callous attitude towards the lives of Palestinian civilians and his rejection of human rights criteria for U.S. military aid is simply wrong.

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