A Dangerous Contender for U.S. Senate in Michigan Primary

The Progressive by Stephen Zunes July 29, 2026 [& hear the podcast audio version]

Haley Stevens, now a member of the House of Representatives, exudes hostility toward the International Criminal Court.

Michigan Democrats face a critical choice next Tuesday in what polls show is a tight primary race for the U.S. Senate. It pits Representative Haley Stevens, one of the more hawkish and pro-corporate Democratic members in the U.S. House of Representatives, against public health official Dr. Abdul El-Sayed, a prominent progressive advocating Medicare for all, progressive taxation, and getting corporate money out of politics.

Much attention has been given to the Stevens campaign's dependence on contributions from corporate donors and conservative political action committees (PACs), including those affiliated with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Various PACs supportive of Israel's far-right government have donated up to $30 million to her campaign in appreciation of her strident opposition to conditioning military aid to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu amid ongoing occupation, ethnic cleansing, apartheid, and genocide.

Stevens has supported Israel's genocidal war on Gaza, voted to defund U.N. agencies helping Palestinian refugees, denounced Amnesty International and other human rights groups for documenting Israeli war crimes, and attacked the International Court of Justice for investigating Israeli violations of international law.

El-Sayed, on the other hand, opposes Israel's actions in Gaza and the U.S.'s provision of military aid. He has underscored the importance of conditional military aid in adherence to internationally-recognized human rights standards to all nations and supports international legal institutions that consistently advocate for universal standards. He has stressed the differences between criticizing a government and attacking the religion or ethnicity of a nation's population. For example, he also opposes U.S. military aid to Egypt, an Arab Muslim country from which his parents came.

But Stevens's dismissal of international humanitarian law goes well beyond Israel. She opposes any accountability for war crimes by any U.S. ally.

Stevens was one of only a handful of Democratic members of the House to support a 2025 Republican-sponsored bill designed to impose "sanctions against foreign persons (individuals and entities) who assist the International Criminal Court (ICC) in investigating, arresting, detaining, or prosecuting certain individuals."

The bill, which passed the House that June but never made it to the floor of the Senate, was rooted in the belief that the prosecution of certain suspected war criminals by the International Criminal Court (ICC) should be based not on the available evidence, the severity of the crimes, or what the law says, but on the geopolitical orientation of the government of those accused. While Stevens has no objections to prosecuting war criminals belonging to organizations or governments that the U.S. government opposes, her backing of this bill would seem to indicate that she believes those supported by Washington should somehow be held unaccountable.

It's not as if the ICC has an anti-Western bias. Since its founding in 2002, the ICC has indicted seventy-three people, including African warlords, Vladimir Putin and other Russian officials, and Hamas terrorist leaders. Only two of those seventy-three indicted have been affiliated with U.S.-allied governments. However, it would appear that even that is too many for Stevens.

Indeed, Stevens's list of those impacted by the sanctions she supported would have included some of the world's most prominent human rights lawyers and international jurists, along with their immediate family

members. Their property and other assets held in the United States would have been subjected to seizure and they would have been banned from entering the country.

Almost all of these targeted individuals have been involved in other war crimes prosecutions, including those stemming from atrocities in Rwanda, Sudan, the former Yugoslavia, Myanmar, Liberia, and elsewhere. None of them have ever shown any ideological bias against Israel or any other U.S. ally. They simply believe that international humanitarian law should be defended regardless of political considerations—which is exactly what seems to upset Stevens.

Among those targeted by these sanctions would have been Theodor Meron—a Holocaust survivor, former Israeli Ambassador to Canada, and president of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia—because he was one of the experts consulted by the ICC regarding suspected war crimes committed by Israeli leaders.

Another target would have been the prominent British human rights lawyer Amal Clooney, who has been involved in human rights cases in dozens of countries. She would be subjected to sanctions for her participation in an ICC Panel of Experts in International Law which, in addition to recommending the prosecution of three Hamas terrorist leaders, also supported the prosecution of two Israeli leaders. She is married to American actor George Clooney, a major Democratic Party fundraiser, and would have been banned from ever again living with or even visiting her husband in California.

The Biden Administration, despite its own criticisms of the ICC and support for Israel in the face of large scale war crimes in Gaza and elsewhere, issued a statement in June 2024 saying that it "strongly" opposed the bill because it "could require sanctions against court staff, judges, witnesses, and U.S. allies and partners who provide even limited, targeted support to the court in a range of aspects of its work."

Stevens, however, sided with Trump and her Republican House colleagues against the Democratic administration.

Indeed, the Trump Administration imposed its own sanctions on the ICC in February 2025, although they were not quite as severe or comprehensive as those supported by Stevens. She could potentially use her position in the Senate, if elected, to support the Trump Administration's efforts to "dismantle" the International Criminal Court.

Stevens's hostility to the ICC is not popular. Polls show that Americans have been broadly supportive of the ICC, with only a small minority supporting sanctions. And a poll released July 23 showed that Americans, by a nearly 2 to 1 margin, support arresting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who was indicted by the ICC in 2024 (along with a Hamas leader) for multiple war crimes, including crimes against humanity.

This could be a big political mistake. If Michigan Democrats nominate someone so out of touch with her constituents and so supportive of Trump's opposition to international law and human rights, many thousands of Michiganders will likely vote third party or stay at home in November, thereby risking handing this critical Senate seat to a rightwing Republican.

Editor's note: *This article has been corrected to indicate that it was not H.R.8282 - Illegitimate Court Counteraction Act (in the 118th Congress), but rather H.R.23 - Illegitimate Court Counteraction Act (in the 119th Congress) in which Stevens voted in favor.*