

Pelosi the Hawk Foreign Policy In Focus/IPS April 27, 2009, by John Feffer & Stephen Zunes

Reports by international human rights groups and from within Israel in recent weeks have revealed the massive scale of war-crimes and other violations of international humanitarian law, committed by Israeli forces during their three-week offensive against the Gaza Strip earlier this year. Despite this, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi has steadfastly stood by her insistence that the U.S.-backed Israeli government has no legal or moral responsibility for the tragic consequence of the war.

This is just one episode in a long history of efforts by Pelosi to undermine international humanitarian law, in regards to actions by a country she has repeatedly referred to as America's most important ally in the Middle East. It's also part of her overall right-wing agenda in the Middle East. As the powerful Speaker of the House, Pelosi could very well undermine efforts by President Barack Obama in the coming years to moderate U.S. policy toward that volatile region.

Support for the Gaza War

During the height of Israel's devastating offensive on the Gaza Strip in January, Pelosi pushed through a resolution putting the House of Representatives on record calling "on all nations...to lay blame both for the breaking of the calm and for subsequent civilian casualties in Gaza precisely where blame belongs, that is, on Hamas." [emphasis added]

Not only did the resolution ignore Israel's attacks in Gaza in November and other violations of the ceasefire that served to "break the calm," it put forward an extreme reinterpretation of international humanitarian law apparently designed to absolve any nation that kills large numbers of civilians, as long as the other side allegedly initiated the conflict.

The resolution favorably quoted Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, as well as Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, regarding responsibility for civilian deaths and for the causes of the conflict, but cites no one else. Though the Gaza War should be considered "a final and eloquent testimony to the complete failure of the neoconservative movement in United States foreign policy," as Juan Cole has written, Pelosi instead aligned herself and the Democratic congressional majority with the failed ideology of the outgoing Bush administration. Indeed, some of the language of Pelosi's resolution was even to the right of Bush: For example, while the January 8 UN Security Council resolution — which received the endorsement of Rice and other administration officials — condemned "all acts of violence and terror directed against civilians," Pelosi's resolution only condemned the violence and terror of Hamas. Similarly, her resolution placed conditions for a ceasefire on the Palestinian side that was even more stringent than those advocated by the Bush administration and endorsed eventually by the Israelis.

And, despite International Red Cross reports of Israeli forces illegally preventing emergency workers from reaching wounded civilians, killing aid and health workers, and attacking hospitals and ambulances, Pelosi's resolution went on record praising Israel for having "facilitated humanitarian aid to Gaza."

Pelosi's resolution also cited the Israeli invasion as part of Israel's "right to act in self-defense to protect its citizens against Hamas's unceasing aggression, as enshrined in the United Nations Charter." In reality, the UN Charter explicitly prohibits nations going to war unless they "first of all, seek a solution by negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or other peaceful means of their own choice." Yet Israel — with strong bipartisan U.S. support — has refused to even meet with Hamas. Furthermore, while Article 51 does allow countries the right to resist an armed attack, it

doesn't grant any nation the right to engage in such massive and disproportionate warfare against densely packed cities and refugee camps.

Pelosi also claimed that Hamas bore responsibility for the more than 700 deaths of Palestinian civilians because of the alleged use of "human shields." Hamas was certainly guilty of less-severe humanitarian violations, such as not taking all necessary steps to prevent civilian casualties while positioning fighters and armaments, but this isn't the same as using civilians as shields. And, as Human Rights Watch noted, even the presence of armed personnel and weapons near civilian areas "does not release Israel from its obligations to take all feasible precautions to minimize harm to civilians and civilian property during military operations." Furthermore, the nature of urban warfare, particularly in a territory as densely populated as the Gaza Strip, makes the proximity of retreating fighters and their equipment to civilians unavoidable in many cases. In any case, there have been scores of well-documented cases of civilian casualties in areas where there were no Hamas fighters.

The American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the influential "pro-Israel" lobby, did not draft Pelosi's resolution, unlike some similar resolutions in recent years. The wording of the resolution came primarily out of the offices of Pelosi, Senate Majority Leader Reid, and House Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Howard Berman. This was a completely Democratic initiative led by Pelosi herself.

Pelosi's siding with the Bush administration in its defense of violations of international humanitarian law by U.S. allies was nothing new. When Bush defended Israel's assaults on Lebanon's civilian infrastructure in 2006 and defied the international community by blocking UN efforts to impose a ceasefire, Pelosi voted in favor of a resolution commending him for "fully supporting Israel." This Pelosi-backed resolution claimed that Israel's actions were legitimate self-defense under the UN Charter and, despite evidence to the contrary, praised "Israel's longstanding commitment to minimizing civilian loss and welcom[ed] Israel's continued efforts to prevent civilian casualties." Directly contradicting empirical studies by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and even the U.S. Army War College, all of which noted the absence of any credible evidence of even a single civilian fatality resulting from such practices, she went on recording insisting that the nearly 800 civilian deaths were a result of Hezbollah using "human shields." Pelosi also echoed Bush's defense of Israel's 2002 West Bank offensive, which also was directed primarily at civilian targets. Once again contradicting findings by reputable human rights groups, she voted in favor of a resolution sponsored by right-wing Republican leader Tom DeLay claiming the massive assault was "aimed solely at the terrorist infrastructure."

Pelosi attacked the International Court of Justice for its landmark 2004 ruling calling for the enforcement of the Fourth Geneva Convention in Israeli-occupied territories. She also voted in favor of a resolution condemning the World Court for its near-unanimous advisory opinion that Israel's separation barrier shouldn't be built beyond Israel's internationally recognized border into the occupied West Bank in order to incorporate illegal settlements into Israel, warning that members of the international community would "risk a strongly negative impact on their relationship" with the United States if they dared push for the implementation of the ruling. (See my article "Attacks Against World Court by Congress Reveal Growing Bipartisan Hostility to International Law.") And Pelosi has even gone as far as defending Israel's use of death squads in the extra-judicial killings of suspected militants.

Pelosi's Middle East Record

Pelosi's right-wing agenda in the Middle East goes beyond efforts to undermine international humanitarian law. During the Bush years, she tried to push congressional Democrats to support the administration's broader Middle East agenda. "There is no division on policy between us and President Bush, be it on Israel, Palestine or Syria," she declared.

Nancy Pelosi doesn't view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in terms of the many rights and wrongs of both parties. For her, it's all the fault of the Palestinians, and the responsibility for the violence and the failure of the peace process rests on them alone.

Pelosi has long insisted that the Palestinians' 1993 decision to recognize Israeli control over 78% of Palestine was not enough. She has even portrayed former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's 2000 proposal to create a Palestinian Bantustan on approximately 18% of Palestine — which would have effectively divided the territory into four non-contiguous units with Israel controlling the borders, airspace, and water resources — as “a generous and historic proposal.” She further insisted that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's rejection of that proposal was indicative of the Palestinians' lack of commitment to peace, ignoring his subsequent acceptance of President Bill Clinton's peace plan put forward five months later. Echoing the Israeli right's claim that the Palestinians' various peace proposals are all just a ruse and that they simply want to destroy Israel, Pelosi insists that the conflict is about “the fundamental right of Israel to exist” and that it is “absolute nonsense” to claim it has anything to do with the Israeli occupation.

Subsequently, Pelosi has sought to undermine the road-map for Israeli-Palestinian peace. In May 2003, she signed a letter to Bush insisting that the peace process must be based not on an end to Israeli occupation and colonization of Palestinian land seized in the 1967 war, but “above all” on the end of Palestinian violence and the establishment of a new Palestinian leadership. Though the road-map called for both Palestinians and their Israeli occupiers to simultaneously work to fulfill their obligations, she insisted that the Palestinians alone were responsible for implementing the first stage of the Road Map and failed to even mention any of Israel's reciprocal responsibilities, such as ending the sieges and military assaults on Palestinian population centers and halting construction of additional illegal settlements.

Speaking about a visit to one of the illegal Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip in 2004, Pelosi referred to an infiltration by local Palestinians that had taken place that morning as part of “the daily reality of Israel: even moments of peace and beauty are haunted by the specter of violence.” By implying that the Gaza Strip, seized by force by the Israeli army in 1967, was part of Israel, Pelosi apparently hoped to reinforce efforts by the Israeli right to resist compliance with a series of UN Security Council resolutions, and a ruling by the International Court of Justice to withdraw these settlements in accordance with international law.

When Israel finally withdrew its illegal settlements from the occupied Gaza Strip the following year, keeping the territory under a strict siege and blockade, she praised it as a “courageous,” “gut-wrenching” decision for Israel, as if the Gaza Strip wasn't actually occupied territory but instead a part of Israel itself, generously given up by the Israeli government in the interest of peace..

Double Standards

Pelosi has supported strict economic sanctions and even threats of military force against Middle Eastern governments targeted by the Bush administration — such as Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Iran, or Syria — that were slow in complying with UN Security Council resolutions. Yet she has never publicly called on Israel to abide by any of the dozens of Security Council resolutions on international humanitarian law, illegal annexation of militarily-occupied territory, or nuclear proliferation with which that government remains in material breach. In Pelosi's worldview, a country's obligations to comply with the UN Charter and UN Security Council resolutions depend not on objective international legal standards but on their relations with the United States.

After supporting false assertions that Saddam Hussein had somehow reconstituted his “weapons of mass destruction” in 2002, Pelosi now claims it's actually Iran — another oil-rich Middle Eastern nation — that “represents a clear threat to Israel and to America.” She has refused to support calls for a nuclear weapons-free

zone for all of Southwest Asia, which would include nuclear states Israel, Pakistan, and India, and would link up with already existing nuclear weapons-free zones in Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the South Pacific. Instead, while believing that these U.S. allies need not be pressured to give up their nukes, she argues that Iran “must be confronted by an international coalition against proliferation.” Indeed, she threatened Iran for its nuclear program while defending Israel for its development of a sizable nuclear arsenal.

Pelosi voted in favor of sanctions against Syria based on its refusal to unilaterally give up its missiles — even though Israel (along with such other U.S. allies as Turkey, Israel and Egypt) have even more advanced missile programs — and its refusal to unilaterally give up their chemical weapons stockpiles, even though Israel and Egypt have much larger chemical weapons arsenals.

In short, Pelosi supports the position advocated by the Bush administration rejecting law-based universal standards to challenge the threat of weapons proliferation in the volatile Middle East, insisting the United States can unilaterally decide which countries can and cannot have certain weaponry.

Prior to the division of power between the Fatah-controlled West Bank and the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip in 2007, Pelosi supported Bush’s policy of refusing to resume normal relations with the Fatah-led Palestine Authority, unless the cabinet excluded members of Hamas or any party that doesn’t recognize Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state, refuses to renounce violence, or fails to endorse previous agreements in the peace process. By contrast, Pelosi has raised no concerns about the new Israeli government, led by officials who refuse to recognize Palestinians’ right to statehood, refuse to renounce violence, and fail to endorse previous agreements. Indeed, despite Israel’s new foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman calling for the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from Israel and much of the West Bank, Pelosi has not uttered a word of concern.

Moreover, Pelosi has also repeatedly pushed to increase U.S. military aid to Israel, rejecting calls by Amnesty International and other human rights groups to condition the arms transfers on an improvement in Israel’s human rights record in the occupied territories and an end to attacks on civilian population centers.

Undermining International Law

Such double standards are part of Pelosi’s larger effort to undermine international law and UN authority. She has from the beginning sought to exclude the United Nations from any role in monitoring or implementing the roadmap for Middle East peace. According to Pelosi’s aforementioned letter to Bush, allowing the United Nations or the European nations that cosponsored the roadmap to share responsibility in overseeing implementation as originally planned “might only lessen the chances of moving forward” toward peace since “the United States has developed a level of credibility and trust with all parties in the region which no other country shares.”

In short, Pelosi was arguing that the Bush administration — despite its contempt for the UN Charter and basic premises of international law and its support of Israeli occupation forces — was more reliable than the United Nations or the European Union in monitoring the peace process.

Pelosi has also supported legislation that attacks the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). For example, Pelosi faults UNRWA for making “no effort to permanently resettle Palestinian refugees,” even though this would go well beyond its mandate and be against the wishes of the majority of refugees, who insist upon returning to their homeland in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. She joined far-right UN critics in raising dubious allegations that “UNRWA facilities have been used for terrorist training and bases for terrorist operations,” and that the UNRWA educational system of using textbooks and educational materials “promote anti-Semitism, denial of the existence and the right to exist of the state of Israel, and exacerbate stereotypes and tensions between the Palestinians and Israelis.”

Right-Wing not Pro-Israel

Nancy Pelosi isn't, as some of her critics would have it, too "pro-Israel;" rather, she is simply too right-wing. Her positions on U.S. policy toward Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and a number of other nations in that region put her closer to the right-wing Christian Coalition than the moderate National Council of Churches, closer to the neoconservative Project for a New American Century than to the liberal Peace Action, and closer to right-wing Zionist groups like AIPAC than liberal Zionist groups like Americans for Peace Now or Brit Tzedek v'Shalom.

The 2006 Lebanon War, which Israel launched after months of pressure by the Bush administration to attack its northern neighbor, ended up as a disaster for Israel, as outlined by the Israeli government's 2007 Winograd Report. During the fighting, as thousands of Israeli peace activists took the streets of Tel Aviv chanting "We will not kill or die for Bush," Pelosi was back in Washington essentially saying, "Oh, yes you should!"

Where Pelosi's allegiance lies in the Israeli political spectrum is not only illustrated by her opposition to the Israeli peace movement, but in her outspoken support of former prime minister and war criminal Ariel Sharon. She repeatedly praised the right-wing Israeli leader for his "remarkable leadership," endorsing Sharon's construction of a separation barrier deep inside the West Bank as well as his "disengagement plan," which would eventually annex most of Israel's illegal settlements in the occupied territory into Israel.

And she has been quite intolerant of Democrats who dissent from her hawkish views, heavily pressuring House Democrats to support various resolutions supporting Bush's Middle East policy and seeking to damage the campaigns of insurgent Democrats who challenge her right-wing views. For example, Pelosi attacked Howard Dean, early in his campaign for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination, for suggesting the United States should be more "even-handed" towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She has even condemned former President Jimmy Carter for opposing Israeli occupation policies in the West Bank. No Democratic leader has ever criticized either a former president or the front-running presidential candidate of his or her own party on any issue as harshly as Pelosi criticized Dean and Carter on Israel and Palestine.

Pelosi's views don't reflect her role as a major Democratic fundraiser. Her antipathy toward Palestinians goes back long before she came into leadership. As a junior congresswoman in 1988, without links to wealthy national contributors, she was an outspoken opponent of Palestine's right to exist, helping lead an effort to defeat a ballot proposition in San Francisco supporting the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel.

Pelosi's right-wing Israel policy is less a matter of AIPAC's power and more about the inability of the progressive community in San Francisco and Democrats elsewhere to force her to do otherwise. She changed her position in support of the U.S. occupation and counterinsurgency war in Iraq only because her constituents and Democrats nationwide demanded it, fearing the political consequences of doing otherwise. She isn't likely to change her position on these other important Middle East policy issues unless we do the same.

Unfortunately, few Democrats are even aware of how far to the right Pelosi is when it comes to the Middle East. Not only has the mainstream media failed to call attention to her Middle East agenda, but progressive publications have failed to do so as well. In *These Times* praised Pelosi for her "solid record" on human rights issues, while *Ms. Magazine* lauded her for having a "voting record strong on...human rights," failing to even mention her defense of Israeli war crimes against Palestinian and Lebanese civilians.

Obama was initially able to withstand attacks by right-wing Republicans over the Chas Freeman appointment and tentative plans to participate in the UN Anti-Racism Conference, but he capitulated once prominent Democrats began pressuring him as well. Unless, then, rank-and-file Democrats are willing to challenge Pelosi on the Middle East, there is little hope that Congressional Democrats will allow the Obama administration to take human rights or international law seriously, not just in terms of Israel and its neighbors - but anywhere else.