Pelosi's Misguided Middle East Visit

By Dr. Marcy Newman

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This week U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi concluded her visit to the Middle East in Damascus, Syria, to which President George W. Bush's response was that her visit "sends mixed messages." While Pelosi's delegation to the region should be met with applause for refusing to participate in isolating Syria, her visit to Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria should be met with a great deal of caution.

Twice in the last month Pelosi delivered a speech — of more or less the same message — before the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) annual policy conference and before the Israeli Knesset. In these speeches, she unequivocally stated: "When Israel is threatened, America's interests in the region are threatened. America's commitment to Israel's security needs is unshakable." Statements such as this have made Pelosi, along with her traveling companion Congressman Tom Lantos, one of the top ten recipients of AIPAC donations. She received a standing ovation for these sentiments in the Knesset where she linked the U.S. and Israel's "common cause": " a safe and secure Israel living in peace with her neighbors."

Perhaps Pelosi genuinely wants to secure peace in the region. If this were the case, however, we would have seen some indication of balance in her fact-finding mission. While in Israel, Pelosi discussed her visits with the families of Israeli soldiers taken last summer in Gaza and Lebanon, naming them and relaying stories about them. Not once was a Palestinian or Lebanese killed or wounded in Israel's wars dignified with any such humanizing gesture. Instead Pelosi focused entirely on Hezbollah's violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 for failing to disarm. Not once did she mention Israel's almost daily violation of that same resolution with military jets invading Lebanese airspace or recent military incursions into the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Moreover, she failed to mention Israel's continued occupation of Shaaba Farms and Ghajar, which are also violations of 1701; nor did she engage with serious discussions of the occupation of the Golan Heights or the Palestinian Territories with leaders in the region.

If Pelosi, Lantos, and the other congressional leaders traveling in their delegation wanted to understand what peace means to all parties they could have spent their time in Lebanon meeting with victims of Israel's war and she could have toured the areas of the country destroyed by Israel. She could have visited with Lebanese families affected by American-made cluster bombs. Such meetings could have helped Pelosi to respond to a report on her desk from the State Department, which states Israel may have violated legal agreements made with the U.S. in the 1970s when it dropped between 2.6 and 4 million American-made cluster munitions on Lebanon last summer in the last 72 hours of the war after the cease fire agreement had been brokered. The report explores Israel's violation of the Arms Export

Control Act, which stipulates that American-manufactured weapons must only be used in self-defense, in an open area against two or more invading armies, and never used against civilians.

As Speaker of the House it is Pelosi's job (along with Senator Majority Leader Joseph Biden) to review this report and if the violations are corroborated, which evidence from organizations like Human Rights Watch already substantiated, Israel could be sanctioned. Indeed, in response to Israel's use of American-made cluster bombs in Lebanon last summer, Steve Goose of Human Rights Watch reported, "we've never seen use of cluster munitions that was so extensive and dangerous to civilians ... The issue is not whether Israel used the American cluster munitions lawfully, but what the US is going to do about it." As Speaker, Pelosi can and should do something about it. After all, there is a precedent: Ronald Reagan imposed a six-year ban on the sale of munitions to Israel in 1982 after Congress investigated Israel's use of cluster bombs against civilians.

For all the talk about "peace" before AIPAC and the Knesset, if Pelosi were actually invested in regional peace she could begin by holding Israel accountable for its violations of the Arms Export Control Act by sanctioning Israel. But this option seems rather unlikely given her congressional voting record. For instance, last summer she voted for her colleague Lantos' resolution in Congress (HR 921), entitled "Condemning the recent attacks against the State of Israel, holding terrorists and their state-sponsors accountable for such attacks, supporting Israel's right to defend itself, and for other purposes." That bill, which overwhelmingly passed (410-8), led to "other purposes," namely selling $120 million of oil to re-fuel Israel's American-made fighter jets that bombed and killed civilians in Lebanon as well as an expedited delivery of 1,300 M26 artillery rockets for Israel to use in its war on Lebanon.

If Pelosi's delegation to the Middle East is seriously interested in creating "peace" here, it should begin at home. She should respond to the report on her desk and make the decision to sanction Israel. Moreover, Pelosi and Lantos should both draft legislation that does not focus exclusively on Syria, Lebanon, and Iran for their weapons if only because the U.S. itself provides Israel with extensive military support and political cover. The burden should be shifted to Israel as the occupying power of Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine. Further, Pelosi would do well to join her colleagues in the Senate who drafted the Cluster Munitions Civilian Protection Act of 2007 (S 594) and support the effort of forty other nations who have banned cluster munitions.

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