

## **Why the Dems Have Failed Lebanon**

**By Stephen Zunes | August 9, 2006**

The Bush administration's unconditional support for Israel's attacks on Lebanon is emblematic of the profound tragedy of U.S. policy in the region over the past five years. The administration has relied largely on force rather than diplomacy. It has shown a willingness to violate international legal norms, a callousness regarding massive civilian casualties, a dismissive attitude toward our closest allies whose security interests we share, and blatant double standards on UN Security Council resolutions, non-proliferation issues, and human rights. A broad consensus of moderate Arabs, Middle East scholars, independent security analysts, European leaders, and others have recognized how—even putting important moral and legal issues aside—such policies have been a disaster for the national security interests of the United States and other Western nations. These policies have only further radicalized the region and increased support for Hezbollah and other extremists and supporters of terrorism.

The Democratic Party could seize upon these tragic miscalculations by the Bush administration to enhance its political standing and help steer America's foreign policy in a more rational and ethical direction. Instead, the Democrats have once again overwhelmingly thrown their support behind the president and his right-wing counterpart, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

### **Supporting the Israeli Offensive**

Soon after Israel began its offensive on July 12, House Republican leader John Boehner, along with House International Relations Committee Chairman Henry Hyde, introduced a resolution unconditionally supporting Israel's military actions and commending President Bush for fully supporting the Israeli assault. Despite reports by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the UN High Commissioner for Human

Rights that Israel (and, to a lesser extent, Hezbollah) were committing war crimes in attacking civilians, the resolution praised Israel for its "longstanding commitment to minimize civilian loss" and even welcomed "Israel's continued efforts to prevent civilian casualties." The resolution also claimed that Israel's actions were "in accordance with international law," though they flew in the face of longstanding, universally recognized legal standards regarding the use of force and the treatment of non-combatants in wartime.

Despite such a brazen attack against the credibility of reputable human rights groups and the UN Charter that limits military action to legitimate self defense, Rep. Tom Lantos signed on as a full co-sponsor. Lantos is the ranking Democrat on the International Relations Committee and likely to chair the committee should the Democrats



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win back the majority in November. Even more alarmingly, all but fifteen of the 201 Democrats in the House of Representatives voted in favor of the resolution.

In supporting the Republican-authored resolution, Pennsylvania Democrat Allyson Schwartz invoked the September 11 tragedy and insisted that the United States had a “moral obligation” to “stand by” Israel “on the side of democracy and freedom versus terror and radicalism” since to do otherwise would “undermine our national security.” Democratic Congressman Robert Wexler of Florida praised Israel’s efforts “to eradicate this global threat” and insisted that Syria and Iran should be held responsible for the violence. Even though the Hezbollah rocket attacks on Israel began only *after* Israel started bombing civilian areas of Lebanon, Democratic Congressman Rush Holt of New Jersey insisted that the killings of these Israeli civilians took place “despite every attempt” by the Israeli government “to demonstrate their genuine commitment to peace.”

One reason for such broad Democratic support for the resolution may stem from the fact that the Arms Control Export Act forbids arms transfers to countries that use American weapons for non-defensive purposes, such as attacking civilians. Thus, in order to protect the profits of politically influential American arms merchants, the Democrats joined with Republicans in supporting language in the resolution claiming that Israel’s actions were “legitimate self-defense.”

The Senate endorsed by a voice vote a similar resolution unconditionally supporting Israel’s military offensive. Introduced by Republican

Senate leader Bill Frist, the resolution was co-sponsored by Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid and the majority of Senate Democrats, including Barack Obama and Dick Durbin of Illinois, Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein of California, Russell Feingold of Wisconsin, Edward Kennedy and John Kerry of Massachusetts, Daniel Akaka of Hawaii, Tom Harkin of Iowa, Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell of Washington, Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow of Michigan, Frank Lautenberg and Robert Menendez of New Jersey, and Barbara Mikulski and Paul Sarbanes of Maryland, among others.

The Democrats’ support for the Bush administration’s defiance of the international community was most clearly articulated by Democratic Senator Charles Schumer of New York, another co-sponsor of the resolution, who claimed that the European community and others who called on Israel to “show restraint” believed that “Israel should not be given the ability to defend herself” and that those who advocated “any other course” than that pursued by the Bush administration and Israeli government would constitute an “appeasement of Hezbollah.”

## Hillary Takes the Lead

Yet another Democratic co-sponsor of the Senate resolution was Hillary Rodham Clinton, a front-runner for the Democratic Party presidential nomination in 2008. Speaking at a rally in New York City in support of the Israeli attacks against Lebanon, she praised Israel’s efforts to “send a message to Hamas, Hezbollah, to the Syrians [and] to the Iranians,” because, in her words,

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they oppose the United States and Israel's commitment to "life and freedom."

Clinton's statements were challenged by her opponent in the Democratic primary for Senate, union activist Jonathan Tasini, who pointed out that "Israel has committed acts that violate international standards and the Geneva Conventions," citing reports by a number of reputable human rights organizations, including the Israeli group B'Tselem. Clinton's spokesperson dismissed Tasini's concerns about Israeli violations of international humanitarian law as "beyond the pale."

Tasini, a former Israeli citizen who has lost close relatives in the Arab-Israeli wars and Palestinian terrorism and whose father fought and was wounded in the Israeli war of independence, correctly observed that "Hezbollah's actions violate international law" as well. He argued that his criticism of Israel's policy of collective punishment and attacks on civilians comes from the perspective of being a "friend of Israel," citing the Jewish tradition of *Tikkun Olam*, or "repairing the world." Facing vicious attacks from Clinton supporters for his liberal views, Tasini has called for a debate with his opponent to demonstrate how her unconditional U.S. support for Israeli militarism actually threatens Israel's security interests. The Anglo-Saxon Protestant Clinton, who—like the vast majority of the overwhelmingly WASP Democratic Party leadership—has never lost a relative to the region's violence, has thus far refused the challenge.

## Democrats Attack Maliki

The perversity of the Democrats' Middle East policies can be illustrated in their reaction to the

visit to Washington in July by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Maliki's government, primarily through its Interior ministry, has been responsible for the ethnic cleansing of thousands of Sunni Arabs in Baghdad and elsewhere and the massacre of hundreds more. Amnesty International and other reputable human rights groups have documented gross and systematic human rights violations by Maliki's government, including torture and ill treatment, arbitrary detention without charge or trial, and the excessive use of force resulting in countless civilian deaths.

With so much blood on Maliki's hands, one would think that at least some Democrats would have chosen to protest or even boycott his speech before a joint session of Congress on July 26. Yet few concerns were aired. However, once the Iraqi prime minister criticized Israel's attacks on Lebanon, only then did the Democratic leadership decide to speak out against the Iraqi prime minister.

House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi stated that unless the Iraqi Prime Minister "disavows his critical comments of Israel ... it is inappropriate to honor him with a joint meeting of Congress." Given that the leaders of America's most important allies have also made critical comments about Israel's offensive, very few foreign dignitaries will be given such an honor in the coming years if the minority leader's recommendations are followed.

The Democrats' offensive against Maliki may have been part of a broader campaign to oppose discontent within their own ranks regarding criticism of the Israeli offensive. For example,

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Democratic Congressman Rahm Emanuel of Illinois declared that the Iraqi prime minister's comments inflicted "hate upon another democracy," linking criticism of a particular Israeli policy with hate against Israel (an important warning, given that he heads the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.)

Democratic Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky of Pennsylvania claimed that Maliki, in criticizing Israel's attacks against civilian targets in Lebanon, had "condemned Israel's right to defend itself against terrorism," an apparent effort to equate criticisms of Israeli war crimes with denying Israel's legitimate right to self-defense. Senator Schumer claimed that Maliki's criticisms of the Israeli destruction of Lebanon's infrastructure and the large-scale killings of Lebanese civilians raised questions as to "which side is he on in the war on terror," thereby insinuating that those who oppose Israeli attacks against civilians are supporters of al-Qaida. Democratic Party chairman Howard Dean, in a speech on July 26, went so far as to insist that Maliki was an "anti-Semite," perhaps as a warning to party liberals that anyone who dared criticize any policy of America's top Middle Eastern ally would be subjected to similar slander.

Ironically, 2004 Democratic Presidential nominee John Kerry defended his support for the Iraq war by claiming that sacrificing American lives to defend the Iraqi government was worthwhile in part "because it's important for Israel." In other words, the Democrats want it both ways: condemning the Iraqi government for being "anti-Israel" while justifying the ongoing U.S. war in Iraq because the Iraqi government is "pro-Israel."

## Behind the Democrats' Hawkish Stance

The decision by Democratic members of Congress to take such hard-line positions against international law and human rights does not stem from the fear that it would jeopardize their re-election. Public opinion polls show that a sizable majority of Americans believe U.S. foreign policy should support these principles. More specifically, only a minority of Americans, according to a recent *New York Times* poll, support President Bush's handling of the situation or agree that the United States should give unconditional support to Israel in its war on Lebanon.

Nor is it a matter of Democratic lawmakers somehow being forced against their will to back Bush's policy by Jewish voters and campaign contributors. In reality, Jewish public opinion is divided over the wisdom and morality of the Israeli attacks on Lebanon. More significantly, the vast majority of Democrats who supported the resolution came from very safe districts where a reduction in campaign contributions would not have had a negative impact on their re-election in any case.

Perhaps more important than pressure from right-wing political action committees allied with the Israeli government to support the Bush administration's backing of the Israeli attacks has been the absence of pressure from the liberal groups who oppose such policies.

For example, MoveOn not only continues to work for the re-election of many prominent Democratic hawks who backed Boehmer's resolution, but has not even sent out an alert to its supporters to contact their representatives and

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senators to protest their defense of Israeli attacks or to support proposed House resolutions calling for a cease-fire. And while Peace Action, the country's largest peace group, has called on its supporters to encourage their elected officials to back a cease-fire, its political action committee turned back efforts to rescind endorsements of incumbents who supported the House resolution.

This reticence contrasts with other foreign policy issues related to international law and human rights from U.S. intervention in Central America during the 1980s to Iraq today. In these other cases, liberal groups made it a priority to hold their elected representatives in Washington accountable for backing administration policy. However, it appears that if the victims of such policies are Lebanese or Palestinian civilians, there are—with some notable exceptions—few organized protests heard on Capitol Hill. With so little pressure from progressive groups, elected representatives have little inclination to withdraw support for administration policy toward Israel and its neighbors.

In reality, the Democrats' support for Israeli attacks against Lebanon is quite consistent with their support for the U.S. invasion of Iraq. In both cases, Democrats rushed to the defense of right-wing governments that have run roughshod over international legal norms, that have gone well beyond their legitimate right to self-defense, and that have taken an incredible toll in innocent civilian lives.

For example, when President Bush ordered the invasion of Iraq in 2003 in violation of the UN Charter, only eleven House Democrats voted against a resolution that "reliance by the United

States on further diplomatic and other peaceful means alone" could not "adequately protect the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq." If such an overwhelming majority of Democrats believe that the United States invading a country disarmed of its offensive military capabilities, overthrowing its government, and indefinitely occupying its territory is an act of self-defense, it would be quite easy for them to believe the same about Israel's assault against its northern neighbor. Indeed, to this day, despite not finding any "weapons of mass destruction," an overwhelming majority of Democrats in both houses of Congress continue to support funding the war despite polls that show a growing majority of Americans now oppose it.

In other words, the Democratic Party's support for Israel's attacks on Lebanon is quite consistent with its disdain for international law and human rights elsewhere and its defiance of public opinion on other foreign policy issues. It is not, therefore, something that can simply be blamed on "the Zionist lobby." Rather, it indicates that the Democrats' worldview is essentially the same as that of the Republicans.

This ideological congruence calls into question whether the increasingly likely prospect of the Democrats regaining a majority in Congress in November will make any real difference on the foreign policy front. Many supporters of human rights and international law are debating whether to continue to support the Democratic Party or instead support the Green Party or other minor parties that embrace such principles.

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The tragic misdirection in U.S. foreign policy in recent years cannot be blamed on the Bush administration alone.

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*Stephen Zunes is Middle East editor for Foreign Policy in Focus. He is a professor of Politics at the University of San Francisco and the author of Tinderbox: U.S. Middle East Policy and the Roots of Terrorism (Common Courage Press, 2003).*

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at [www.ips-dc.org](http://www.ips-dc.org)). ©Creative Commons - some rights reserved.

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Recommended citation:

Stephen Zunes, "Why the Dems Have Failed Lebanon" (Silver City, NM and Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, August 9, 2006).

Web location:

<http://www.fpiif.org/fpiftxt/3423>

Production Information:

Writer: Stephen Zunes

Editor: John Feffer, IRC

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC

**p. 6**

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