

Thirteen arrested as protesters tell Senators Menendez and Booker: 'No more blank check for Israel's crimes,'

August 31, 2014



Outside the Gateway Center, where Menendez and Booker have offices. (Photo by Tom Bias.)

[This article was first published on Mondoweiss.]

On Tuesday August 26, 2014, more than 50 demonstrators protested outside the Newark, New Jersey, offices of U.S. Senators Robert Menendez and Cory Booker demanding that the legislators stop providing a blank check for Israel's crimes. Thirteen demonstrators were arrested inside the building as they read out the names of some of the nearly 500 Palestinian children killed in Gaza.

(When B'Tselem, the Israeli human rights group, had tried to run a radio ad merely listing the names of five of the hundreds of children killed, the Israeli Broadcast Authority banned them from doing so.)

The U.S. Senate has played a shameful role during the recent Israeli assault on Gaza, twice voting 100-0 to give its full support to Israel, saying nothing about its violations of international humanitarian law (indeed, condemning the United Nations' Human Rights Council for deigning to investigate war crimes), nothing about the blockade of Gaza, and nothing about the occupation, while promising Israel still more weapons.

All this, while more than 2,100 Gazans have been killed, with civilians constituting 85 percent of those whose status has been determined thus far. Families were blown to smithereens in their homes. More than 100,000 people lost their homes. UN refugee shelters were repeatedly struck. Artillery was used in densely populated areas, leveling entire neighborhoods. High-rise buildings were demolished. Water and power facilities were struck.



The cell in which some of the protesters were held. (Photo by Olivia Hazin.)

Israel says it was acting against rockets and tunnels. Projectiles have led to a total of six civilian deaths in Israel—tragic and unjust, but inevitable as long as Israel maintains its illegal and unjust occupation and as long as it enforces its cruel blockade on Gaza, a collective punishment in violation of international humanitarian law.

“We support Israel’s right to self-defense,” the Senators intoned.

But of course it’s not self-defense when you kill 500 children.

It’s not self-defense when you have someone in a chokehold and the victim is flailing about in desperation—and make no mistake, Israel has had Gaza in a chokehold for 7 years, with a brutal blockade. Before the current round of fighting, the blockade ensured that conditions in Gaza were horrendous: 41 percent unemployment, power outages of up to 12 and even 16 hours per day, 90 percent of the water from the Gaza aquifer unsafe for human consumption, 90 million liters of partially treated sewage discharged daily into the Mediterranean. Moreover, Gazans have been denied basic freedom of movement; people needing urgent medical care have died while waiting for exit visas and Palestinian couples, where one partner is from Gaza and the other from either Israel or the West Bank, have to either live apart or in live Gaza.

Israel says the only purpose of the blockade was to keep out weapons, but this is a gross lie. The blockade has blocked exports from Gaza, which obviously has nothing to do with weapons. The blockade has at various points blocked imports of coriander and notebooks.

The real aim of the blockade has been openly acknowledged by Israeli officials: not so tight as to

cause starvation, but just enough to—in the felicitous words of senior Israeli government advisor Dov Weisglass—put Gaza’s one and three quarter million people “on a diet.” Former Israeli President Shimon Peres once expressed bewilderment as to why Palestinians didn’t turn Gaza into another flourishing Singapore; he apparently forgot that becoming a trade entrepôt requires that you’re allowed to trade. To become a Singapore you need to be allowed to establish a seaport and an airport.)

So there’s long been an easy way for Israel to defend itself without having to kill 500 children: end the blockade.

It’s also not self-defense when you hold a people under occupation for nearly five decades, an occupation that is not getting lighter as time goes on, but is continually expanding, stealing Palestinian land and building new Israeli settlements.

There’s long been an easy way for Israel to defend itself—end the occupation.

But the U.S. Senate just says it supports Israel, no matter how many people it kills.

But as bad as the Senate has been, New Jersey’s Senators Menendez and Booker have been especially awful.

Menendez and Booker are the Senate’s two leading recipients of campaign contributions from pro-Israel PACs. Menendez, as head of the Senate Foreign Relations committee, has played a leading role in supine support for Israel. One of the key co-sponsors of both of the Senate resolutions relating to Gaza, he has also (following Israel) been outspoken in attacking Obama for being soft on Iran.



Outside the Gateway Center, where Menendez and Booker have offices. (Photo by Tom Bias.)

Booker, called by analyst M.J. Rosenberg “AIPAC’s Number One Puppet in Congress,” considers Rabbi Shmuel Boteach a close friend and adviser. Boteach is the Chabad rabbi and TV personality who ran for Congress as a Republican and who, with Eli Wiesel, has been publishing vile pro-Israel ads in leading newspapers. Booker’s recent Senate speech on Gaza charged that Hamas, “in order to

build their tunnels and to advocate and advance their independence,” was willing “to deny their people food” and “to deny medical supplies.” Somehow Booker forgot to mention who was actually blocking Palestinian “independence” or cutting off food and medical supplies.

What is striking about Menendez and Booker’s rabid support for Israel is how their views contrast with those of the people who elected them. We have no New Jersey polls, but there’s suggestive data from a July 22-23 national Gallup Poll. Asked whether Israeli military actions were justified, among Democrats 47 percent said “unjustified” compared to only 31 percent who said Israel was “justified.” Among Independents it was 46 percent who said “unjustified” compared to 36 percent “justified.”

In other words, the plurality of people who elected Senators Menendez and Booker stand on the side of basic decency, while Menendez and Booker stand on the side of slaughter.

Among non-white Americans, it was two to one who considered Israel’s actions unjustified—49 percent to 25 percent. These were the groups who voted overwhelmingly for Senators Menendez and Booker. Yet the Senators ignored their constituents’ views and backed Israel’s crimes.

Other polls have shown Democrats to be more divided in their sentiments, but nothing could warrant Menendez and Booker being so oblivious to Palestinian suffering and so fawning to the desires of the Israeli government.

The demonstrators on August 26 issued the following demands of their Senators:

- Rescind S. Res. 498, July 17, 2014, co-sponsored by Sens. Menendez, Booker, and 77 others, passed unanimously, which supported Israel’s military actions in Gaza, condemned Hamas, and made no mention of the horrendous toll on Gaza’s civilian population of the Israeli attacks.
- Rescind S. Res. 526, July 29, 2014, co-sponsored by Sen. Menendez and 6 others, passed unanimously, again supporting Israel’s military actions, condemning the UN’s Human Rights Council for deciding to investigate human rights violations, and calling for more military aid to Israel (not just for Iron Dome).
- Introduce legislation rejecting all military aid to Israel (as urged by Amnesty International), which has enabled the commission of war crimes.
- Call for an end to U.S. diplomatic actions designed to block the United Nations and the International Criminal Court from trying to obtain Israel’s compliance with international law.
- Demand the immediate lifting of the blockade of Gaza, a collective punishment imposed in violation of international law.
- Insist that the United States government not support Israel’s continuing settlements and its ongoing occupation.

In short, the demonstrators demanded no more blank check for Israel’s crimes.

The demonstration was endorsed by NJ Peace Action, Essex/Passaic County Green Party, NJ Labor Against War, NJ Progressive Democrats of America, Labor Fightback Network, Central NJ Coalition Against Endless War, Coalition 2 Save Our Homes, Princeton for Palestine, Green Party of Monmouth County, Socialist Party of Northern NJ, People’s Organization for Progress, and Anakbayan-NJ.

One of the news reports of the demonstration, though neglecting to mention the 13 arrests, ended on this telling note:

“We reached out to Sens. Menendez and Booker today. Both offices said the senators would have no comment, adding that the senators would let their records speak for themselves, to which demonstrators here say, ‘exactly.’”

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