

Jamaal Bowman, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the DSA's long record of military support for Israel

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Last week's decision by the Democratic Socialists of America's (DSA) National Political Committee (NPC) not to expel New York Democratic congressman and DSA member Jamaal Bowman does not mark a break from DSA tradition. On the contrary, it marks a continuation of the organization's long history of support for US imperialism's military aid to Israel.

For over 50 years, the DSA and its predecessor organization, the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), have served as a faction of the capitalist foreign policy establishment, providing pseudo-humanitarian justifications for American imperialism's machinations abroad, with particular support for Israel's military funding. Bowman's vote to support billions in funding for the Israeli military, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's vote of "present," as well as Bowman's participation in a propaganda visit to boost the right-wing government of Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, are the outgrowth of this history.

Michael Harrington, Israel and the origins of the DSA

Michael Harrington, the founder of DSOC and longtime leader of the DSA, was an acolyte of ex-Trotskyist Max Shachtman, who, upon splitting from the Socialist Workers Party in 1940, drifted to the right and became a proponent of the US wars in Korea and Vietnam.

Though less naked in his support for the interests of American imperialism in Vietnam than Shachtman, Harrington opposed calls for a withdrawal of US troops until 1970. He directed substantial attention to attacking the Viet Cong and the National Liberation Front as "communist" and "authoritarian" along the same lines as the Johnson administration, which Harrington had served as a member of a domestic task force. In 1965 Harrington said, "I am anti-communist on principle because I am pro-freedom."

In June 1967, after the Israeli military launched preemptive airstrikes against Egypt, Harrington signed an advertisement in the *New York Times* demanding that Lyndon Johnson enforce the opening of the Straits of Tiran, which had been under Egyptian blockade.

"We call upon the President of the United States ... to act now with courage and conviction, with nerve and firmness of intent, to maintain free passage" through the Straits of Tiran, the advertisement read. Alongside Harrington, signatories included Milton Friedman and Daniel Patrick Moynihan as well as fellow future DSOC founder Irving Howe. After six days of fighting, Israel captured the West Bank from Jordan, the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, and parts of the Golan Heights from Syria.

The 1967 war marked a turning point in the development of Israeli-US

relations. Israel proved itself capable of suppressing the colonial movement of the Palestinian people, militarily defeating the Arab nations backed by the Soviet Union, and thereby came to serve as America's policeman of the Middle East. While the US provided just \$50 million a year to Israel in 1967, that figure rose to \$3 billion by 1986.

Over this critical period, Harrington's position mirrored that of the US military-intelligence apparatus, advocating increased support for Israel. Carrying over the same anti-communist tactic Harrington used against opponents of the Vietnam War, he denounced student protesters who supported the PLO, writing in 1970 that they are "activists who were so isolated in their homeland that they could not change the course of events" and therefore "romanticized a distant, noble third world which was to save them from their own irrelevance."

Author Michael Fischbach writes in *The Movement and the Middle East: How the Arab-Israeli Conflict Divided the American Left* that when Harrington left the Socialist Party, he worked "to form a new democratic socialist organization in October 1973 called the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee" which "continued the old SPA's strong backing for Israel."

The same month as the founding of DSOC, Egyptian soldiers crossed the ceasefire line in the Suez Canal, and war with Israel broke out again. Fischbach writes, "One of the first resolutions adopted by DSOC at its founding convention called for strong American support for embattled Israel, then in the midst of the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War." Fischbach cites a DSOC publication as noting, "Support for Israel runs deep in the organization."

To Harrington, opposition to the colonial movement was bound up with anti-communism. Harrington argued that the Soviet Union's military support for the Arab nations obliged the United States to arm Israel.

In a November 1973 article in *Democratic Left* entitled "The Middle East: Is Peace Possible?" Harrington wrote, "If the United States had not intervened to give military aid to Israel when the Russians were re-supplying the Arab powers, then the very existence, the very survival of Israel would have been menaced. For that reason I supported that aid."

He demagogically sought to tie anti-communism with opposition to the influence of oil companies and to thereby cover support for imperialist war with pseudo-left phraseology: "The oil industry has been running the Middle East for several generations. But whatever the United States does, it is both a moral and pragmatic outrage if we line up with the Arab 'haves' and become an avowedly counterrevolutionary and imperialist power. That will not help us, it will harm Israel, and it will help either the Russians or the Chinese or perhaps both."

In a 1975 interview with Mitchell Cohen, Harrington further laid out DSOC's foundational position of supporting US imperialist aid for the Israeli military and supporting the possibility of US military involvement

in defense of the Israeli state.

“First, the US should support Israel with the necessities for defending itself,” Harrington said. “Second, the US does have a peacekeeping role.” He continued to present Israel as a victim of a conspiracy of the oil companies: “It is clear from the evidence and the workings of American capitalism in general that American imperialism is pro-Arab. It has been political struggle in favor of Israel that has offset the forces of oil, the State Department and Defense Department.”

DSOC merger with New America Movement

In the early 1980s, DSOC initiated merger discussions with the New America Movement (NAM), comprised of ex-Stalinists and former members of Students for a Democratic Society. In the merger, DSOC’s representatives brought immense pressure to bear on NAM to repudiate its past statements of support for the Palestinian anti-colonial movement.

In *The Movement and the Middle East*, Fischbach explains that “The two groups’ different stances on the Arab-Israeli conflict proved to be one of the most difficult points of disagreement during the merger talks.” DSOC representatives took exception to the fact that the NAM had previously called for the US government to recognize the PLO as a viable negotiator in any peace talks with Israel.

At a meeting of DSOC in New York City on June 21, 1980, over 70 DSOC members issued a letter opposing the merger on the grounds that “NAM’s position is explicitly pro-PLO.”

As merger discussions continued, Harrington led a DSOC delegation to attend the congress of the Second International in Madrid at which the Israel-Palestine conflict was subject to debate, with Harrington and DSOC supporting the Israeli Labor Party on the congress’s right wing.

In January 1981, Harrington reported on the congress for *Democratic Left* and referenced DSOC’s support for a statement signed by former (and future) Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres calling upon “all neighboring parties and especially Jordan to shoulder their responsibilities and to enter into constructive negotiations with Israel.”

In the same report, Harrington also made clear the organization’s opposition to a rival resolution by the Spanish PSOE and Italian Socialist Party which instead “called for negotiations between Israel and the PLO.” Harrington explains that this resolution “did not, however, insist that the PLO recognize Israel’s right to exist prior to such negotiations, a fatal flaw in the opinion of the DSOC delegation.” Harrington notes that “after a lengthy debate in the Bureau of the International,” the congress approved the resolution supported by DSOC which “deliberately did not mention the PLO.”

Soon thereafter, the NAM and DSOC reached an agreement on the merger, which went into effect in 1982. Fischbach writes:

“The compromise unity position on the Middle East finally ended up saying, ‘We support the right to self-determination expressed in the Jewish state of Israel—and the right of self-determination of the Palestinian people,’ a statement that pointedly referred to a ‘state’ for the Israelis but mere ‘self-determination’ for the Palestinians. The compromise also asserted that there could be no peace in the Middle East if Israel’s neighbors did not recognize its right to exist, or if the Palestinian’s right to self-determination was not guaranteed.”

Harrington later acknowledged that “every word and comma” of the merger agreement “was subjected to careful scrutiny.” DSOC put forward an amendment to the merger resolution stating, “DSOC reaffirms its commitment to Israel as the only democratic state in the Middle East.” The amendment passed 158 votes to 3, with 30 abstentions.

Critically, the 1981 document securing the merger made clear the new

organization’s support for *military* aid to Israel. “The US should continue to provide such aid as is necessary to guarantee Israel’s secure existence,” the statement read.

DSA’s position on Israel following the merger

In June 1982, weeks after the formal founding of the Democratic Socialists of America, Israel invaded Lebanon and launched a war that was to kill an estimated 20,000 civilians. The invasion was a conscious attempt to derail the peace plan sponsored by Saudi Arabia’s then-prince Fahd ibn Abdelaziz which would have mandated Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967.

Israel’s military aim, as then-Defense Minister Ariel Sharon later acknowledged, was “to solve the problem of Lebanon once and for all” by destroying the PLO in the country. Lebanon had served as the political headquarters of the PLO since 1976, six years after the organization was expelled from Jordan by King Hussein.

A resolution published by the DSA’s National Executive Committee on June 20, 1982 called for an end to the war, but condemned both sides in equal terms. “We condemn both the massive bombing of civilian population centers in Lebanon by the Israeli forces and the continual reckless use of the civilian population as shelter by the Palestinian combatants.” It called for the withdrawal of Palestinian and Israeli forces from Lebanon and conditioned opposition to the war on the grounds that it made clear “the right of Israel to a secure existence.”

On September 18, 1982, the IDF surrounded the Sabra and Shatila refugee camp in Southern Lebanon and stood guard as fascists from the Lebanese Phalange carried out a massacre that killed 3,500 people. *Democratic Left* does not contain a reference to “Sabra” or “Shatila” until 1986, and its first reference to the war in Lebanon after the massacre praised a film for making “the Moslim fighters seem as fascist as the Christians” [i.e. the Lebanese Phalange].

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon did not spur any shift in the DSA’s policy toward Israel. In a March 1983 interview with DSA leader Jo-Ann Mort in *Democratic Left*, Israeli politician Elazar Granot of the Mapam political party was asked, “In the US there has been increasing talk of cutting off military aid to Israel in response to the invasion of Lebanon. What is Mapam’s position on this question?”

Granot replied: “Mapam is against any economic pressure being placed on the government of Israel from outside... The fact that the [right-wing Prime Minister Menachem] Begin government uses the money the way that it does doesn’t mean that we don’t need the money. We still have objective problems of existence ... we can’t say that Israel doesn’t need aid.”

Elsewhere, Granot declared, without critical comment from his DSA interlocutor, that “Israel has got real security problems. As long as the Arabs don’t recognize our existence and as long as the Palestinian Covenant calls for the destruction of Israel, we must be part of every war... We on the left can’t give the reactionary forces in Israel any claim to the responsibility of security.” When Israel launched the war in Lebanon, Mapam’s representative in the Knesset refused to oppose the war motion and abstained from the vote instead.

The meaning of Bowman and AOC’s votes

Following the two mass uprisings of Palestinian youth in the occupied

territories, the DSA position evolved slightly, but not in terms of substance, as Bowman's and Ocasio-Cortez's votes show.

In the aftermath of the brutal 2012 Israeli bombing campaign of Gaza, an NPC statement of December 21, 2012 called for "pressuring the United States to adopt a balanced Middle East approach, including an end to military aid to Israel *that is used for occupation purposes.*" A January 2, 2017 NPC statement praising the Obama administration for opposing Israeli settlements used the same language by calling for an end to "all forms of military assistance to Israel *that aids the inhumane occupation.*" (Emphasis added in both instances).

This language was carefully written to allow US military aid to support Israel's Iron Dome program, which was functional by 2012. The language is meaningless in terms of its impact, since any resources Israel receives from the US to fund the Iron Dome frees up equal resources to support the occupation and the commission of criminal bombardments.

The past 30 years have seen a massive expansion of Israeli settlements and a powerful growth of the far-right within Israel. The Labor Party has been reduced to a rump. It has become ideologically impossible to present Israel as "democratic." For this reason, the 2017 statement also called for a boycott of companies benefiting from the occupation. In 2019, the DSA then supported a full boycott amid widespread popular revulsion over the repeated crimes of the Israeli state against the people of Palestine.

But the decision by the NPC to reject calls for expelling Bowman and Ocasio-Cortez establishes that the recent resolutions are simply for show and have no binding character. They only serve to prop up the DSA's "left" bona fides while its congressional representatives in the imperialist Democratic Party vote "yes" or "present" to arm the IDF and prepare for the next round of war crimes.

The NPC statement announcing that Bowman will not face expulsion is an apology for the New York congressman, calling him "a Black socialist" who "has continued to criticize the Israeli government" and claiming that he can advance the cause for "Palestinian rights and anti-imperialist struggle at the federal level," i.e., from the US federal government, the cockpit of world imperialism itself!

The reality is obvious. The DSA is true to its roots as a critical part of the imperialist foreign policy establishment. Michael Harrington declared that the DSA would play "a pro-American, Cold War, State Department kind of role," and that is exactly the role it is playing.



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