

Leading House Democrat retracts and apologizes for criticism of Israel

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Representative Pramila Jayapal (D-Washington), who leads the Congressional Progressive Caucus, the largest grouping of Democrats in the House of Representatives, issued a groveling apology Sunday night to the party's leadership and the members of the House. Her offense? She voiced a frequently denied truth, calling the state of Israel "racist" for its treatment of the Palestinian population, both within the borders of Israel and in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza.

Jayapal was speaking Saturday at the Netroots Nation conference in Chicago. She was one of eight Democratic representatives who attended the three-day assembly of liberals and adherents of the pseudo-left. Typically, this annual meeting is focused entirely on identity politics and electoral tactics to boost Democratic candidates, and the overseas depredations of American imperialism are not even mentioned. At the 2023 affair, as a case in point, only two of the dozens of panel discussion sessions focused even tangentially on US foreign policy.

There was no panel discussion of the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, which has the fervent support of the entire Democratic Party, including "progressive" Democrats like Jayapal and congressional representatives affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America.

The question of Israel came up in the course of a session of the conference Saturday, where Jayapal was a featured speaker. The session was interrupted by pro-Palestinian protesters. In response, Jayapal declared, "As somebody who's been in the streets and participated in a lot of demonstrations, I want you to know that we have been fighting to make it clear that Israel is a racist state, that the Palestinian people deserve self-determination and autonomy, that the

dream of a two-state solution is slipping away from us, that it does not even feel possible."

As news of her comments began to circulate in Washington, there was an immediate backlash in the Democratic leadership, among many right-wing and fanatically pro-Zionist Democratic representatives, and, no doubt, in the Biden White House.

A group of seven Democratic members of Congress, all Jewish, drew up a letter of protest against Jayapal's remark, seeking to equate criticism of Israel with antisemitism. This is the method increasingly used to smear all opposition to Israeli oppression of the Palestinians.

"Israel is the legitimate homeland of the Jewish people and efforts to delegitimize and demonize it are not only dangerous and antisemitic, but they also undermine America's national security," the letter declared. "We will never allow anti-Zionist voices that embolden antisemitism to hijack the Democratic Party and country."

The top leaders of the Democratic caucus—Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, Minority Whip Katharine Clark, and Caucus Chair Pete Aguilar—issued their own statement Sunday which did not mention Jayapal by name but flatly declared, "Israel is not a racist state."

They conceded only, "There are individual members of the current Israeli governing coalition with whom we strongly disagree," but did not identify them as racist or fascist, although they are advocates of removing the entire Palestinian population of the West Bank and depriving Israeli Arabs of citizenship.

Jayapal took her cue from the leadership statement, issuing a lengthy response on Sunday night declaring she did not "believe the idea of Israel as a nation is racist" and apologizing to "those who I have hurt with my words ... I in no way intended to deny the deep pain

and hurt of Israelis and their Jewish Diaspora community that still reels from the trauma of pogroms and persecution, the Holocaust, and continuing anti-Semitism and hate violence that is rampant today.”

She allowed herself only a timid reservation, adding, “I do, however, believe that Netanyahu’s extreme right-wing government has engaged in discriminatory and outright racist policies and that there are extreme racists driving that policy within the leadership of the current government.”

The House Democratic leadership is particularly incensed over any public criticism of Israeli policies because Israeli President Isaac Herzog is to address a joint session of Congress on Wednesday, a day after he visits the White House for talks with President Biden. A number of Democratic representatives have declared they will not attend the session, including Rashida Tlaib, who is Palestinian-American, and Ilhan Omar, who is Somali-American and Muslim.

Omar issued a statement pointing out that she and Tlaib had been denied entry into the Israel-occupied West Bank—where Tlaib has family she intended to visit—because of their support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign.

It is not the first time that Jayapal has beaten a hasty retreat after criticism for straying from the foreign policy line espoused by the Biden administration. Last fall she issued a letter calling for negotiations in the war against Russia in Ukraine, supposedly signed by 30 members of the Progressive Caucus. After a few hours of pushback, she withdrew the letter and made an abject apology. “Every war ends with diplomacy,” she wrote, “and this one will too after Ukrainian victory.”

The immediate and vociferous Democratic Party reaction to Jayapal’s comments is in sharp contrast to the Democratic leadership’s response to the actual antisemitism expressed by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination and longtime advocate of conspiracy theories about vaccines being the cause of autism.

The remarks by Kennedy, claiming that COVID-19 was targeted against white and black Christians, while Jews and Chinese were largely immune, were made public Saturday, the same day Jayapal spoke at the Netroots conference.

A statement from the Anti-Defamation League declared that Kennedy was feeding “into sinophobic

and antisemitic conspiracy theories about COVID-19 that we have seen evolve over the last three years.”

But no statements have been issued by congressional leaders, the Democratic National Committee or the White House over Kennedy’s overt antisemitism, which echoes the worst fabrications of tsarist Russia and Nazi Germany.

Kennedy is scheduled to appear Thursday before a Republican-controlled hearing of the House Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government. He will be a friendly witness to attest to alleged censorship of dissenting views by the federal government and “big tech,” because his anti-vaxx comments have been blocked. He will appear alongside a representative of the ultra-right website Breitbart News.



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