

POLITICS

Rep. Mark Pocan's balancing act on Israel-Hamas war draws him into feud with pro-Israel group



Lawrence Andrea

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WASHINGTON – When Hamas militants stormed into Israel on Oct. 7 and killed more than 1,200 Israelis, Wisconsin Democratic Rep. Mark Pocan was quick to address the attack.

He condemned what he called “the heinous attacks by Hamas on Israel.” But he also hinted at what has become a top concern among some progressives on Capitol Hill during the conflict.

“I also hope for understanding that not everyone in Gaza is Hamas,” Pocan wrote in the hours after the initial attack. “Targeted response and humane restraint towards non-combatants is essential.”

In the weeks since, Pocan has attempted to maintain that careful balance. He expressed support for Israel by signing onto an overwhelmingly bipartisan House resolution while at the same time criticizing the country’s aerial campaign that has killed thousands of civilians in the Gaza strip, referring to Israel’s retaliation as a “collective punishment against all Palestinians” — a phrase that received some pushback from members of his own party in Wisconsin.

And he notably began a public, ongoing feud late last month with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a powerful pro-Israel lobby in Washington that he accused of being anti-democratic.

Taken together, Pocan’s actions and comments suggest the Madison Democrat is walking a fine line on an issue that has opened fissures within the Democratic caucus. He is operating on the periphery of the group of far-left progressives known as the Squad — one of whom has been formally reprimanded for her comments — while also remaining critical of Israeli Prime

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and warning the retaliation could lead to a broader regional conflict.

“It’s hard to say anything in the Middle East is a white and black issue,” Pocan recently told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. “There’s a whole lot of shades of gray, and I just try to call it out as I see it.”

Pocan's public feud with pro-Israel lobby AIPAC

Perhaps the most visible signs of Pocan’s pushback are seen in his back-and-forth with AIPAC on the platform X, which began Oct. 23 when the group singled out Pocan and progressive Democrats Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, Jamaal Bowman, Cori Bush and Summer Lee saying a ceasefire would keep Hamas in power. (Pocan was the only member of that group not to sign onto a ceasefire resolution led by Bush.)

Days later, after the House passed a resolution pledging unwavering support for Israel — which Pocan supported — AIPAC tweeted again at the group, accusing them of “trying to keep Hamas in power.”

“.@AIPAC is good at not telling the truth,” Pocan said in response to the group that spends millions of dollars to support candidates running against what it calls “anti-Israel candidates.”

Pocan added that the U.S. sends “BILLIONS annually to assist Israel. Pocket change to feed millions of Palestinians who live in an open air prison Gaza, who are not Hamas. We don’t support Hamas. We just don’t support killing kids which it seems you do.”

Ocasio-Cortez of New York later attacked AIPAC for endorsing “scores of Jan 6th insurrectionists,” calling them “one of the more racist and bigoted PACs in Congress as well, who disproportionately target members of color.” The group also drew a rebuke from Kentucky Republican Rep. Thomas Massie when it went after him and members of the Squad for opposing the Israel resolution.

In an interview, Pocan accused AIPAC of “disingenuously” spending money in Democratic primaries and decried the group’s “big outside special interest money” as cancerous to democracy.

“I don’t give a f*** about AIPAC — period,” he told Slate earlier this month.)

While AIPAC gives to both Democrats and Republicans, the group boosted its involvement in Democratic primary races during the 2022 cycle and has reportedly begun to get involved in efforts to oust Democrats who are not aligned with their thinking in 2024.

Pocan noted AIPAC included him in its social media attacks despite his vote in favor of the resolution pledging support to Israel. He speculated that they continue to tag him “to make them not appear to be bigoted because everyone else was a person of color, largely women of color, and I was the token white guy to make this not about race.”

“I support the funding of the Iron Dome like they also support,” Pocan said of AIPAC, referencing Israel’s missile defense system. “I voted for the resolution and I co-sponsored the resolution that they supported. I’ve been, in my comments, in alignment with many of the things that they’ve said. And it doesn’t matter, I guess, at the end of the day. Even if you agree with them, it does appear that they got this bent to go after progressives.”

“I think they represent conservative leanings both here and in Israel... They should just come out as a conservative group. I came out as an out elected official — it’s great you can live your life freely,” added Pocan, who is gay. “They should do the same thing. But to play anything other than that is disingenuous.”

AIPAC spokesman Marshall Wittmann in a statement to the Journal Sentinel accused Pocan of making “false and slanderous attacks” that charge Israel with “deliberately killing civilians as it fights Hamas’s barbaric terrorism.”

“We have simply responded to his attacks on the Jewish state, which are far outside the mainstream of his fellow Democrats in Congress,” Wittmann said of the exchanges.

AIPAC gave money to all but four of Wisconsin’s members of Congress in the 2022 cycle: Democratic Reps. Pocan and Gwen Moore, Democratic Sen. Tammy Baldwin and Republican Rep. Derrick Van Orden, according to Open Secrets.

Outside of the feud with AIPAC, Pocan has been more cautious with his rhetoric. He has repeatedly advocated for a stop to the bombing in Gaza that the Hamas-run Gaza Health Ministry said has killed more than 11,000 people but avoided using the term ceasefire, which he claimed carries a different meaning than the “government vernacular.” Instead, he told the Journal Sentinel he’d like to see more targeted strikes.

“The problem is I think they’re doing surgery with an ax right now, and we need more precision,” Pocan said, referencing strikes on schools and buildings in northern Gaza. He

acknowledged, however, that ceasefire “has become the common vernacular of ‘stop the bombing.’ It’s the same as a cessation of hostilities.”

(Pocan said he didn’t sign onto the ceasefire resolution because “it is going nowhere” in the current Congress. He led a letter Wednesday to the Biden administration with Ocasio-Cortez and Rep. Betty McCollum of Minnesota inquiring about the process for a ceasefire.)

Concerns over escalation to broader regional conflict

He’s also worried the Israeli response could open up the region to broader conflict and called Israel’s commitment last week to daily four-hour pauses in fighting to allow for humanitarian aid into Gaza and passage for those fleeing the strip “not enough.”

“The only way this ends is you either completely flatten Gaza and make everyone leave, or you eventually have a ceasefire,” he said, adding later: “What they need right now is just to stop this wide-scale bombing.”

With his maneuvering, Pocan has largely avoided much of the heat some progressive Democrats have seen from their own party. And his comments have drawn only muted criticism in Wisconsin.

“I appreciate he and so many other folks in Congress who have condemned Hamas,” Democratic state Rep. Lisa Subeck, one of two Jewish members of the Wisconsin State Legislature, told the Journal Sentinel. “That said, I obviously disagree with some of the statements that he has made.”

Subeck, who represents the west side of Madison, said she is glad to see Pocan “hasn’t joined with the Squad” and called for an outright ceasefire but pushed back on his claims that Israel’s response is a “collective punishment.”

“I think that a two-state solution can be reached,” Subeck said. “But it can’t be reached if Hamas terrorists are in control. We have to be able to deal with the terrorists and their threats before we see a real solution.”

Other members of the Jewish community in Madison shared similar sentiments, noting Pocan has been accessible even when they disagree with him.

“There have been times when we may have respectful disagreements on specific policies and the descriptions of policies and the rhetoric that’s used,” said Jeremy Tunis, an executive

committee member of the Jewish Federation of Madison. “But I think we’ve stayed very engaged even in areas of Israel policy, Palestinian policy, where we have respectful disagreements.”

Alan Klugman, executive director of the Jewish Federation of Madison, added: “He represents a district and a district that has Jews and non-Jews and Christians and Muslims and everything in the world, so we don’t always agree. But we have managed to keep the dialogue very open.”

Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman of the Shaarei Shamayim synagogue in Madison said Pocan visited her congregation late last month to discuss why he’s calling for a cessation of hostilities and noted she is “in agreement” with him.

Shaarei Shamayim, which Zimmerman described as having a “diverse” congregation, was among at least two dozen Jewish groups from across the country to sign a form urging the Biden administration to de-escalate the violence against Palestinian civilians days after Hamas’ attack.

“I don’t believe there’s a military solution to this conflict,” Zimmerman told the Journal Sentinel. “The only solution is going to be a political solution.”

All 10 members of Wisconsin’s congressional delegation have publicly condemned Hamas’ attack on Israel. But they’ve offered varying viewpoints in the weeks since.

Baldwin was among the first Democratic senators to call on the Biden administration to re-freeze \$6 billion in Iranian assets following the Oct. 7 attack, acknowledging at the time that Hamas’ coordination with Iran, which has long supported the militant group, was unclear. In the weeks since, Baldwin has joined her colleagues in pushing for the replenishment of Israel’s defense systems while also advocating for humanitarian support for civilians in Gaza.

During a recent discussion with students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Baldwin expressed support for humanitarian aid to the region but was interrupted by protesters urging a ceasefire.

Reps. Tiffany and Grothman call for a ban on Palestinian refugees in the U.S.

Republican Reps. Tom Tiffany and Glenn Grothman, meanwhile, have called for preventing Palestinian refugees from entering the United States. Van Orden, a Republican from Prairie

du Chien, has argued against aid to civilians in Gaza and has frequently attacked those advocating for the aid as Nazis.

Van Orden in late October referred to Pocan as an antisemite and “terrorist sympathizer” — remarks Pocan labeled as “crossing the line.”

Still, other vocal progressives in the House have faced more public backlash.

The House last week voted to censure Michigan Democratic Rep. Rashida Tlaib, the only Palestinian American in Congress, for comments that Israelis considered a call-to-arms to end the Jewish state.

Twenty-two Democrats voted with nearly every Republican in favor of the censure, though Pocan and Moore, who represents Milwaukee, voted against it.

Asked about his vote, Pocan referenced the First Amendment right to free speech and suggested such a censure could start the “dangerous” precedent of punishing members of Congress for their opinions. But when pressed on Tlaib’s comments, he declined to weigh in.

“She has a different perspective, that’s all,” he said. “I’m not going to tell her what she can say, and I’m not going to tell some of my colleagues who strongly disagree with her within my party what to say either. You speak from your life experience. I think it’s harder when someone is either Jewish or Palestinian on this because I think it does hit a little closer. And I’m not going to tell you I know their life experience to be able to tell you why they say or don’t say what they do.”

For Pocan, who in September received permission to travel to Gaza before the attacks scuttled those plans, his recent statements are in-line with what he’s been saying for the past several years.

“At times, there are some who say, ‘Oh you are still in the pocket of Israel,’ and then I’ve got people on campus saying that I’m being charged with genocide of Palestinians in Gaza,” Pocan said.

“All of that’s chatter as far as I’m concerned,” he said. “I don’t listen to it because I’m just doing the best I can with the role I have and the values that I have and what I’m seeing.”