

In social media war against AIPAC, Rep. Mark Pocan advances antisemitic tropes

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For months since Oct. 7, Rep. Mark Pocan (D-WI) has taken to social media, on a regular basis, to level barbs at the pro-Israel lobbying group AIPAC, offering wide-ranging attacks on the organization's political spending and support for Israel's operations against Hamas in Gaza. Pocan is among the most outspoken critics of Israel in the House outside of the Squad, and he's often been even more actively involved in the progressive battle against AIPAC than his more high-profile colleagues.

Pocan's jabs at AIPAC — often coming in the form of X (formerly Twitter) exchanges with AIPAC, which frequently tags Pocan in its own posts — have frequently echoed or outright embraced a slew of antisemitic tropes, including dual loyalty, control of government and even blood libel, experts say.

In some of the most striking attacks, Pocan — who maintains a combative social media presence on a range of subjects — has accused supporters of AIPAC of being indifferent to, or even reveling in, the deaths of civilians in Gaza, particularly children.

Just last week, responding to a video of an Israeli bombing in Rafah, which included graphic imagery of the attack's aftermath, Pocan declared, "This is porn for @AIPAC. Doubt they'll show any regret."

Accusations that AIPAC seeks and is responsible for the murder of innocents, or is unconcerned by it, are a recurring theme of Pocan's attacks. Pocan generally cites casualty data provided by the Hamas-controlled Gaza Ministry of Health, the reliability of which has been called into question.

AIPAC's "call for ending Hamas is code for its ok to kill Palestinian kids. 4500 so far. Pathetic," Pocan said in November.

“31,000 dead, thousands being kids, not enough for you? Sorta sick,” Pocan posted on March 20.

“I’m starting to think that @AIPAC isn’t just a puppet of Netanyahu, but a partner,” Pocan said on Feb. 21. “They cover for his murdering of innocents in the course of supposedly going after Hamas & those actions aren’t getting hostages released. They seem fine with that & don’t mind the killing of kids.”

“They don’t care that a majority of the 30,000 dead in Gaza are women and children,” Pocan said on March 7.

“Stopping ‘collective punishment’ bombing means thousands of kids stay alive,” Pocan said, responding to a tweet by AIPAC about footage from the Oct. 7 attack. “How terribly unreligious of a position by @AIPAC.”

The comments parallel the blood libel, the centuries-old accusation that Jews seek the deaths of innocents, particularly children, experts in antisemitism said.

“They don’t mind the killing of kids? That is echoes of blood libel,” Rabbi Abraham Cooper, the associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center and the chairman of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, told *Jewish Insider*.

“Essentially, they’re being depicted as Nazis,” Cooper continued.

Pocan’s office did not respond to a request for comment.

“That crosses all lines,” Abe Foxman, the former national director of the Anti-Defamation League said, agreeing that the comments bore similarities to blood libel. “You can be critical of a lobbying group... and you may not like the government, but then to accuse people in Washington or New York who are lobbyists — which is a well-respected historical element in the American democratic institutional systems — as warmongers... that’s very clear antisemitism.”

Pocan’s posts have also held AIPAC and its supporters responsible for the actions of Israel and its leaders and demanding they apologize for their actions.

“These deeply hurtful and toxic comments by Rep. Pocan are not only divisive but potentially dangerous. He is effectively accusing supporters of AIPAC of dual loyalty, whose true allegiance is to Israel,” Julie Fishman Rayman, the American Jewish Committee’s managing director of policy and political affairs, said in a statement to JI. “This is a centuries-old bigoted trope that has led to the harassment, marginalization, oppression, and even murder of Jewish people.”

As recently as Monday, Pocan said, “Hey @AIPAC, seems your ‘leader’ doesn’t like the idea of stopping the killing of Palestinians. Comment?” referring to a statement by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s on a cease-fire proposal outlined by President Joe Biden and approved by the Israeli government.

That post was Pocan’s first, and so far only, direct response to the cease-fire plan.

Pocan’s rhetoric, observers say, invokes dual loyalty tropes claiming that Jews’ true allegiance is to Israel, rather than the nations of which they are citizens.

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“This is a time for constructive dialogue on a difficult topic,” Fishman Rayman continued. “This is not a time for character assassination of those who support Israel and its right to defend itself against an enemy bent on its destruction and the annihilation of the world’s Jews.”

The Wisconsin congressman, who represents the state’s progressive center of Madison, has often focused his attacks on AIPAC’s political fundraising and spending, regularly describing AIPAC

donations and outside spending as “toxic” to American democracy and the candidates who receive them, and repeatedly describing the group as a “Trojan horse” interfering in Democratic politics.

He has argued on numerous occasions that AIPAC is distinct from and more sinister than other issue PACs that raise money from and spend money in races on both sides of the aisle.

The “singling out [of] AIPAC as a lobbying group without singling out any other groups — and there are a lot of lobbying institutions, or governments — this is an antisemitic trope... you’re talking about Jewish power and Jewish influence in the United States,” Abe Foxman, the former national director of the Anti-Defamation League said.

Among those attacks: “Your PAC corrupts democracy,” “@AIPAC wants you to think they are just another PAC like nurses or workers. Nothing could be further from the truth,” “They skirt campaign finance law in the sleaziest way,” and “You. Are. Not. A. Regular. PAC. You. Are. A. Dark. Money. Front. Group. For. Conservatives.”

Pocan has called candidates who take AIPAC money “bought and paid for” and “monkey[s]” who are “purchased by conservative groups like you” and would otherwise be “free” to express opinions that differ from AIPAC’s.

Cooper said that Pocan’s posts, in aggregate, read like a “checklist of the tropes — Jewish power and all the rest.”

He said Pocan’s comments echo antisemitic tropes that Jews are serving as puppet masters in American politics — “they’re not just puppet [masters], they’re actually partnering in what? In murder.”

Foxman said that this “singling out [of] AIPAC as a lobbying group without singling out any other groups — and there are a lot of lobbying institutions, or governments — this is an antisemitic

trope... you're talking about Jewish power and Jewish influence in the United States.”

He argued that the implication of Pocan's comments has been that AIPAC's spending is uniquely harmful “because it's Jewish and it's Israel.”

Foxman, who wrote a book in 2007 whose subtitle was “the Israel lobby and the myth of Jewish control,” noted that such sentiments are hardly new, but Pocan is “latching on to it.”

AIPAC spokesperson Marshall Wittmann told JI that Pocan “traffics in the most despicable tropes about America's ally that reflect his extremist views about Israel and its fight against Iranian terrorist proxies. His fringe views are far outside the mainstream of American support for the Jewish state.”

David Kopstein, a retired rabbi who has lived in Madison for the past decade and described himself as an AIPAC supporter, said he's “really shocked” at Pocan's comments. “My god, he doesn't relent, does he?”

“It's awful. I'm embarrassed that he represents this town,” Kopstein said, calling the comments “astonishing.”

Jeremy Tunis, a member of the executive committee of the Jewish Federation of Madison, said he's been in touch with Pocan and his staff for several years, and met with them on numerous occasions.

“At the very least, it's juvenile. It seems beneath the dignity of somebody who's in elected office, to get into that kind of public — to use polite language — spitting match. It looks like the vitriol we see on Facebook and other social media between either emotional or uninformed commenters,” said Jordan Loeb, a Madison, Wis., lawyer and former board president at a local synagogue.

He said that he does not “believe that [Pocan] is an antisemite” or is “intentionally spreading antisemitism” but he said he’s told Pocan that “I feel like a lot of that rhetoric is at best, unhelpful, and at worst damaging both to his reputation as well as the current dialogue in the post-Oct. 7 environment.”

Tunis said he views AIPAC mostly positively, although he has had his differences with the group, and rejected Pocan’s framing of AIPAC as uniquely dangerous. He said he feels Pocan has been, in terms of his actions on Israel policy, more “reasonable” than some other progressives, “but that being said, words matter.”

He said that Pocan has also maintained a strong dialogue with local Jewish leaders since Oct. 7, and that the tenor of his social media posts does not match his approach in private. Tunis described Pocan as “extremely helpful” on other Jewish community priorities such as nonprofit security grant funding, Holocaust education, supporting Holocaust survivors and federal funding for refugee resettlement.

Jordan Loeb, a Madison, Wis., lawyer and former board president at a local synagogue, said he’s reluctant to label Pocan and his posts as antisemitic, but said he’s “disappointed in how stupid he looks right now.”

“At the very least, it’s juvenile. It seems beneath the dignity of somebody who’s in elected office, to get into that kind of public — to use polite language — spitting match,” Loeb said. “It looks like the vitriol we see on Facebook and other social media between either emotional or uninformed commenters.”

He added that, even setting that aside, “how is it helpful? How does it promote any point of view that would be helpful?”

“I would like my representative to be focused on solutions to problems,” Loeb said.

Loeb described himself as “no defender of AIPAC,” adding that he views the group as not necessarily productive to the cause of peace, but said that, “I find [Pocan’s] comments about AIPAC more alienating. They’re not nuanced in the least.”

Loeb said that he shares some of Pocan's criticisms of Israel, but Pocan's recent comments "make me question even more, where does his criticism end? Even though he claims to support Israel's right to exist, it's starting to ring a little bit hollow for me, because he says that as if it's a major concession... as if somehow he's doing the Jewish community a favor."

Foxman and Cooper said they're also concerned about the broader trends behind Pocan's comments.

Cooper said that the rhetoric that Pocan is using, "dehumanization, 'monkeys,' and 'Israelis are murderers,' and 'they can't kill enough children' and on and on and on — once upon a time, that put you on the fringes of American politics. Now, I don't see any price."

Cooper also said it's concerning that some lawmakers seem to view antisemitism as a politically useful tool for fundraising and advancing their own careers.

Foxman warned that a lawmaker using these antisemitic tropes "legitimizes it," to potentially worrisome effects.

"A crackpot who does it — OK. But this is a person elected to represent that constituency, and he continues to spew this hatred, this vitriol, this antisemitism, it makes it more legitimate, it makes it more that it's OK," he said. "If a congressman can do it... they're not the kooks out in the street."
