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Washington Comes to the Aid of Israel over Gaza Convoy Massacre

by Jean Shaoul
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The Obama administration has come to the aid of Israel in its efforts to quell criticism of its murderous act of piracy on the international aid convoy to Gaza and to manage the worsening diplomatic fallout. The early Monday morning raid has sparked international condemnation, against a background of global protests and calls for Israel to lift its three-year blockade of Gaza.

An Israeli commando force attacked the six ships, which were carrying supplies that included cement, wheelchairs, paper and water purification systems, in international waters, 70 miles off the Gaza coast. The commandos boarded the Mavi Marmara passenger ferry, one of three ships provided by İnsani Yardım Vakfı (IHH), a Turkish aid organisation.

The Mavi Marmara was carrying 600 of the 700 activists, nationals from Turkey, the United States, Britain, Australia, Greece, Canada, Belgium, Ireland, Israel and elsewhere. Prominent figures included the Swedish author Henning Mankell, two Australian journalists, three German parliamentarians, and Hanan Zu'bi, an Arab Israeli and a member of the Knesset. The Israeli commando unit killed at least nine people and injured dozens more. Most of the victims are believed to be Turkish.

The ships were diverted to Ashdod in Israel. At least 40 passengers are in hospital. Nine are believed to be in a serious condition. Six Israeli soldiers are in hospital, with light to serious injuries. The passengers who refused to sign documents agreeing to deportation—only about 50 agreed—were dispersed to detention centres throughout Israel for questioning. At least 30 have been arrested for refusing to give their names and detained in prison. Israel has as yet to give a list of who has been killed, injured, deported or imprisoned.

Two more ships that were organized by the Free Gaza Movement, an international coalition of Palestine solidarity activists, are expected to challenge the Israeli blockade. Organizers said one, a converted merchant ship christened the Rachel Corrie, for the American activist who was killed by an Israeli bulldozer, is already on its way from Cyprus and is expected to enter Gazan waters Wednesday, June 2. Among its passengers are the 1976 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Mairead Corrigan-Maguire of Northern Ireland, and a Holocaust survivor.

An Israeli navy commander indicated to the Jerusalem Post that the military was readying violence against the next two ships as well. “We boarded the ship and were attacked as if it was a war,” he said. “That will mean that we will have to come prepared in the future as if it was a war.”

Turkey expressed outrage at the commando raid for targeting the Turkish ship and killing mostly Turkish activists. In a speech to parliament, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Prime Minister, called Israel’s raid a “bloody massacre”.

The Obama administration put enormous pressure on Turkey, currently a member of the United Nations Security Council, to accept a watered-down statement from the Security Council, as discussions dragged on for 11 hours in an emergency session throughout the evening and night.

As a result of US arm-twisting and use of its power of veto, the UN made no direct condemnation of Israel and removed the call for an international investigation of the

incident. It also weakened the demand to end the economic blockade of Gaza that the activists were trying to break.

The Security Council issued a statement saying that it “deeply regretted the loss of life and injuries resulting from the use of force during the Israeli military operation in international waters against the convoy sailing to Gaza”. It requested the immediate release of the ships as well as the civilians held by Israel and meekly suggested that the situation in Gaza was “not sustainable”. It called only for an impartial inquiry into Israel’s raid, which Washington interprets as leaving Israel free to organise its own whitewash.

According to the Israeli daily Haaretz, the Obama White House placed no pressure on Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to cancel his scheduled visit to Washington, citing a White House source who said that the two sides talked about moving it up to Monday, but it was not possible.

A summary of Obama’s phone conversation Monday with Netanyahu posted on the White House web site said that the meeting would be rescheduled “at the first opportunity”.

A State Department statement on the massacre was even clearer in its support for Israel’s justification for the attack, appearing to blame the killings on the Palestinians and their supporters.

After calling upon the Israeli government to conduct a “full and credible investigation” of its own crime, the State Department added: “However, Hamas’ interference with international assistance shipments and work of nongovernmental organizations, and its use and endorsement of violence, complicates efforts in Gaza. Mechanisms exist for the transfer of humanitarian assistance to Gaza by governments and groups that wish to do so. These mechanisms should be used for the benefit of all those in Gaza.”

There have been demonstrations against Tel Aviv’s actions in London, Manchester, Paris, Sweden, Norway, Italy, Cyprus and more than 20 cities in Greece. More are planned for the weekend.

Israel has imposed a complete media blackout on its actions, just as it did during its assault on Gaza in 2008-09, in order to make sure that only its own version of the events—that the commandos acted in self-defence against an imminent lynching—gets a hearing. With major media outlets accepting censorship and the passengers in prison, Israeli officials are largely in control of the news. The naval base at Ashdod is off-limits to journalists and has been declared a closed military zone.

Netanyahu claimed that the commandos were enforcing a legal blockade and only fired in self-defence. Israel’s Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, told European diplomats that the ship’s passengers were “terrorist supporters who fired at IDF soldiers as soon as the latter boarded the ships.”

The IDF issued an edited video shot from a helicopter, showing what it says was a melee on deck, in which its forces were met with a barrage of weapons and during which activists tried to “kidnap” a soldier. But according to Ron Ben Yishai, a journalist with the Yediot Aharonot newspaper who was an eyewitness, these “weapons” were improvised and Israeli troops opened fire, with permission from their superiors, once they realised they were being overwhelmed. The IDF video stops as a soldier aims his pistol at a passenger.

The Israeli version of the massacre has been flatly contradicted by passengers on board the Mavi Marmara, who reported that violence was initiated by the Israeli commandos who boarded the vessels firing sound and gas bombs and using live fire against unarmed civilians, even after a white flag was raised.

Passengers on other vessels, where the Israeli government claimed there was no violence, reported that, on the contrary, they were shot at with plastic bullets and subjected to beatings, blows from rifle butts and the use of electrical stun guns. The activists were forced to lie on the deck and were brutally questioned by the commandos.

“During their interrogation, many of them were badly beaten in front of us,” said Aris Papadokostopoulos, a passenger on the Free Mediterranean, which was travelling behind the Turkish ship.

Uri Avnery, a former member of the Knesset and leader of the Gush Shalom peace group in Israel said, “No one in the world will believe the lies and excuses which the government and army spokesmen come up with.”

Richard Falk, a professor of international public law at Princeton University and the UN Special Rapporteur for the Occupied Palestinian Territories, said that the raid was “clearly a criminal act, being on the high seas.”

“The people on these boats would have some right of self-defence,” he added, as they were the ones who were under unprovoked attack, not Israel.

The raid was no accident. All the signs are that Israel has been stepping up its provocations to engineer a casus belli for a war against Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Tel Aviv sees as unfinished business its inconclusive wars: the first in Lebanon in 2006, and the second in Gaza in 2008-09.

The military assault on the convoy was approved by Israel’s inner security cabinet, headed by Ehud Barak, the Defence Minister. The IDF confirmed this saying, “This IDF naval operation was carried out under orders from the political leadership...”

Tensions have risen in Gaza, where there were protests at Israel’s raid. Shortly after the UN statement was released, there was an exchange of fire on Gaza’s border with Israel

that resulted in the deaths of two Palestinian militants. Later, Israeli planes killed five Palestinian militants in Gaza.

Within Israel, the Arab Higher Monitoring Committee has organised a general strike among Israeli Arabs and police have been placed on high alert in anticipation of protests and demonstrations.

The raid has inflamed tensions throughout the region. There have been demonstrations in Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad and Tehran. The regime of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, which has played a key role enforcing the blockade, is in a particularly invidious position. It has been forced by the strength of public opinion and protests outside the foreign ministry in Cairo to open the Rafah border crossing between Egypt and the Gaza Strip to allow humanitarian aid through, although it is unclear for how long.

The strongest reaction came from Turkey, where there have been furious demonstrations against Israel. Ankara, a longstanding military ally of Israel, has recalled its ambassador from Tel Aviv and announced that it was cancelling three joint military drills. Israel's foreign ministry has called on people planning trips to Turkey to delay or cancel their visits and urged Israelis in Turkey to return home.

In his hour-long speech to the Turkish parliament—which was translated simultaneously into English and Arabic, an unprecedented move—Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan stated: “It is no longer possible to cover up or ignore Israel's lawlessness. This bloody massacre by Israel on ships that were taking humanitarian aid to Gaza deserves every kind of curse. This attack is on international law, the conscience of humanity and world peace. Israel in no way can legitimize this murder. It cannot wash its hand of this blood.”

The Turkish government criticized Washington for refusing to directly denounce the Israeli attack. “We expect a clear condemnation,” said Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu Tuesday as he prepared to go into meetings with his US counterpart Hillary Clinton and the Obama administration's national security adviser, James Jones.

“We expect full solidarity with us,” Davutoglu added. “It should not seem like a choice between Turkey and Israel. It should be a choice between right and wrong, between legal and illegal.”

Asked whether the Turkish government would send naval vessels to escort future convoys headed towards Gaza, the foreign minister said that the government had not yet reached a decision on such action.

The Jerusalem Post quoted unnamed Israeli military officials as saying that while they viewed the deployment of Turkish warships as unlikely, given Turkey's membership in NATO, Tel Aviv still saw it as a “great concern.”

“This is a definite possibility that we need to prepare for,” a senior defence official told the paper Tuesday, suggesting that the Israeli state is getting ready for a confrontation that could trigger a catastrophic war in the region.