The case of the USS Liberty: anatomy of an Israeli provocation

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The stonewalling and lies used to cover up Israel's targeting Tuesday of a United Nations outpost in Lebanon and the deaths of four observers recall another well-known incident. In June 1967, in the middle of the Six Day War, Israeli planes and ships attacked a US intelligence ship, killing 34 sailors and wounding another 171 out of a crew of 292.

The USS Liberty had been sent to the eastern Mediterranean to monitor communications of the belligerents in the wake of Israel's June 4 surprise assault on Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Iraq. The former WWII freighter, formally designated a "technical research ship," had been outfitted with the latest in electronic surveillance equipment by the National Security Agency, enabling navy technicians to intercept and record radio communications in the air and on land.

The Israeli Air Force was well aware of the identity of the Liberty. The weather was clear and the ship was flying a large American flag as it sailed in international waters off the coast of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. The vessel had been circled regularly by Israeli warplanes. Some of the planes had come so close that sailors were able to wave at the pilots, who waved back. Unconcerned, American sailors were on the deck sunbathing.

On the afternoon of June 8, without warning, low-flying Israeli fighters repeatedly strafed the USS Liberty with rockets, napalm and cannon. The attack lasted 20 minutes. Rockets tore holes in the ship deck killing and wounding scores of sailors and setting the vessel on fire. Among the wounded was the ship's captain, William McGonagle.

Torpedo boats continued the assault. Attempts to signal the Israelis to stop the attack were ignored. Instead, the Israeli vessels fired torpedoes at the USS Liberty. One made a direct hit on the ship's intelligence area, killing 25 US sailors instantly. The boats then advanced to close range, where it would have been impossible not to see the Liberty's markings. They circled the ship and strafed it with machinegun fire, targeting sailors who were attempting to put out the fires.

With the vessel taking on water and listing, the order was given to abandon ship. When sailors threw rubber life rafts overboard, they were raked with machinegun fire, forcing the sailors to abort the attempt and move below deck.

The Liberty was initially unable to call for help since the Israelis were jamming radio channels. The ship finally reached the aircraft carrier USS Saratoga. Immediately a squadron of fighters was sent to help the Liberty repel the attack. However the planes never arrived. They were recalled under mysterious circumstances on orders from Washington, which evidently was more concerned about avoiding embarrassment for Israel than it was about defending the lives of US sailors.

The attack continued for about one hour and 15 minutes. When the Israelis withdrew, the Liberty was a smoking hulk, two thirds of its crew dead or injured. About one hour later Israeli vessels returned and asked the Liberty if it needed help. The offer was rejected curtly.

It took 16 hours for two US destroyers to reach the assaulted vessel and rescue the crew. Survivors were immediately instructed not to discuss the attack with anyone.

An official Israeli/US cover-up of the incident began immediately. Israel issued a statement that its forces had accidentally attacked a US ship. The excuses advanced were absurd on their face, given the Liberty's clear markings, the fact that the attack lasted over one

hour and the clear indications that it had been earlier correctly identified as a US vessel.

Unofficially, US authorities were well aware the attack was deliberate. Top US officials, Secretary of State Dean Rusk among others, were convinced the Liberty had been deliberately targeted. One CIA report insisted that Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan had personally ordered the attack.

Nevertheless, President Lyndon Johnson appeared on television to announce that 10 US sailors had been killed in a six-minute accidental attack. A report issued three weeks after the incident uncritically accepted this falsified version of events, and Israel eventually paid a derisory $6 million in damages and the matter was dropped.

Crew members who later sought to tell their stories were attacked by pro-Israeli groups as anti-Semitic. For example, James Ennes, an officer on the Liberty, was branded an "Arab propagandist" for publishing a book critical of the official cover-up.

McGonagle, the Liberty's captain, received a Congressional Medal of Honor for his role in rescuing wounded crew members. However, the ceremony was held virtually in secret. To this day, calls for a new inquiry by survivors of the attack have been rebuffed.

Why was the Liberty attacked? There were many things for Israelis to hide. Undoubtedly they feared that intelligence gathered by the ship could be used to undercut their false claims that the long planned lightning offensive by Israel and the seizure of vast amounts of Arab land in 1967 was an act of self defense.

The Liberty would have been in a position to monitor communications at the outbreak of the war, which would have demonstrated that Israel was the aggressor. There was also the possibility that the ship might collect evidence documenting war crimes, such as the summary executions of captured Egyptian soldiers.

The sinking of the Liberty preceded by one day the Israeli invasion of Syria and the seizure of the Golan Heights. Had the ship still been operational it might have been able to gather evidence to disprove Israel's later claim that Syria had attacked first.

The cynical and brazen cover-up of Israeli crimes by the United States—from the sinking of the Liberty, to the countless massacres of Palestinian and Lebanese civilians, to the recent bombing of the UN outpost—are connected by a single thread. The United States is willing to tolerate any crimes by Israel, including the killing of its own soldiers, as long as it serves as a guardian of American imperialist interests in the Middle East.