

Obama defends Israel as tactical shift prepared on Gaza blockade

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President Barack Obama's meeting with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in Washington on Wednesday again demonstrated US complicity with the Israeli government's criminal blockade of Gaza that led to the May 31 raid on an aid flotilla which resulted in nine activists being shot dead by Israeli naval commandos.

Obama described the situation in the besieged Palestinian territory as "unsustainable" and noted that there were "debates within Israel, recognising the problems with the status quo". On lifting the blockade, he declared the "key" was in "making sure that Israel's security needs are met", and that this could involve a "new conceptual framework" involving "ways of focusing narrowly on arms shipments, rather than focusing in a blanket way on stopping everything and then in a piecemeal way allowing things into Gaza."

Israel has been able to maintain the two-year blockade and inflict a humanitarian crisis upon 1.5 million people only thanks to US support. Now what Obama is proposing is a tactical shift. It is now apparent that the brutal collective punishment inflicted on the population of Gaza for the election of a Hamas administration in 2006 has not succeeded in achieving the goal of undermining and ousting the Islamists. As the *New York Times* reported yesterday: "Three years after Israel and Egypt imposed an embargo on this tormented Palestinian strip, shutting down its economy, a consensus has emerged that the attempt to weaken the governing party, Hamas, and drive it from power has failed."

The blockade has never been about preventing crude rockets being fired into Israel from Gaza—instead it has

formed part of a wider Israeli government strategy of crushing all resistance among the Palestinians to the occupation of their lands. McClatchy newspapers in the US reported Wednesday that it has obtained an Israeli government document, via a freedom of information lawsuit, which describes the siege not as a security measure but as "economic warfare".

Israel's allies are increasingly sensitive to the reality that this mode of warfare has prevented Fatah from re-establishing a presence in the territory since it was routed in the mid-2007 civil conflict. Mahmoud Abbas and his colleagues, including the unconstitutionally installed Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, now govern only the limited areas of the West Bank not directly occupied by Israel. Abbas's visit to Washington was another demonstration of his abject servility; his priority in the aftermath of the Mavi Marmara massacre has been to exploit the situation for his own purposes, urging a shift on Gaza to bolster Fatah's standing against Hamas.

The foreign ministers of France, Italy and Spain—Bernard Kouchner, Franco Frattini and Miguel Angel Moratinos respectively—yesterday issued a joint statement stressing that a "lasting solution also implies that the Palestinian Authority should be fully reinstated in Gaza" while calling for the lifting of the blockade. The foreign ministers' posturing as peace proponents is belied by the European powers' support for the Israeli government. Kouchner et al. did not refer to the European Union's role in 2006 as a member of the Quartet (EU, UN, US, and Russia), when it froze funds to the Palestinian Authority after Hamas won democratic elections. The devastating financial embargo set the stage for the subsequent Israeli

blockade on all imports and exports to Gaza.

The three foreign ministers added that an investigation into the aid flotilla operation must “be sure to avoid the mistakes made after the submission of the Goldstone report, whose follow-up was exploited by the Human Rights Council, half of whose resolutions, unfortunately, have been devoted to condemning Israel.” In other words, the Netanyahu government must be assured that no action will be taken against it irrespective of what an inquiry reveals about the violent Mavi Marmara raid.

The US and European governments all accept the pretext for Israeli violence against the Palestinians—that it represents a legitimate “security” response to the threat of terrorism. Former British prime minister and current Quartet envoy Tony Blair summed up the position when he declared this week: “When it comes to security, I’m 100 percent on Israel’s side.”

During his meeting with Abbas, Obama pledged an additional \$400 million for housing, schools, and business development in Gaza and the West Bank. This sum is a small fraction of what is required to rebuild the damage done to the Palestinian territories caused by the Israeli blockade and the criminal bombardment of Gaza over three weeks in 2008-2009. Moreover, the *New York Times* reported that only \$70 million was actually new money, and that no details were provided as to how the money would be distributed in Gaza.

A Hamas spokesman denounced the aid pledge as “cheap publicity”, adding, “This is what prettifies the image of the occupation and allows it to continue its criminal policies.”

The Israeli government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu this week permitted a limited amount of consumer goods into Gaza, including snack food and beverages. The move merely highlighted the severity of the blockade. The British *Daily Telegraph* reported Tuesday that the Netanyahu administration was preparing to ease the siege in return for US and international support for an Israeli rather than international inquiry into the killings of the nine Turkish activists aboard the Mavi Marmara. The

newspaper cited an unnamed “Western source close to international discussions with Israel” who said: “A quid pro quo deal is in the offing.”

The Obama administration has played the key role in defusing demands for an international and independent inquiry into the illegal Israeli assault. It ensured that only the vaguest language was incorporated into a UN Security Council resolution calling for an investigation and that no condemnation of Israel was included. Obama this week again refused to condemn the Israeli killings, instead declaring that “we were very clear in condemning the acts that led to this crisis”. He referred to the attack on the aid vessel itself as a “tragedy”.

Obama also refused to indicate any support for an international inquiry, referring instead to the UN Security Council resolution, which favoured a “credible, transparent investigation that met international standards”.

Haaretz today reported that Israel and the US have agreed on the nature of the Israeli investigative committee and that a public announcement will soon follow. The body is to be headed by a retired Israeli Supreme Court justice and include two jurists from the US and Europe. *Haaretz* reported: “The panel will be a government-appointed committee but will not be considered an official government inquiry convened in accordance with the Basic Law on the Government. Nor will it be a state commission of inquiry.”

The commandos involved will not be questioned. The inevitable outcome will be a whitewash. Netanyahu effectively admitted as much when he declared on Wednesday in relation to the inquiry: “We know the truth and the people of Israel know the truth.”



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