

Israeli massacre of Gaza convoy supporters provokes outrage

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Israel's massacre of up to 19 supporters of an aid convoy to Gaza has provoked angry protests internationally. But the Obama administration signalled tacit US endorsement of the bloodbath, with a statement merely deploring the loss of life without criticising the Israeli action.

Commandos stormed the flotilla of ships carrying activists and essential aid to Gaza before dawn, rappelling onto the deck from helicopters. Reports put the death toll variously at between 10 and 20. Organisers said at least 30 and possibly 50 people were wounded. Among the wounded are the leader of the radical Islamic movement in Israel, sheikh Raed Salah, and the head of the Lebanese humanitarian mission, Dr. Hani Suleiman.

Al-Jazeera TV reported from the ship that Israeli navy forces had opened fire and boarded the vessel, wounding the captain. Its broadcast ended with a voice shouting in Hebrew, saying: "Everybody shut up!" Turkish TV pictures taken on board the Turkish ship leading the flotilla, the Mavi Marmara, showed people injured and lying on the ground. A woman in a hijab was seen holding a blood-stained stretcher.

Israel claimed that its soldiers were attacked and that guns were fired. "Live fire was used against our forces. They initiated the violence, that's 100 percent clear," Israeli government spokesman Mark Regev told the BBC. He did not address the fact that, since the ship was in international waters, the Israeli attack was an act of piracy and those on board had every right to resist.

In any case, Audrey Bomse, a spokesperson for the Free Gaza Movement, which organised the convoy, told the BBC there was "absolutely no evidence of live fire."

"I don't know anything about the knives and axes or anything," said Bomse. "You see this live streaming on the Turkish ship, you see the Israeli helicopters shooting. There's no evidence of fire passing them."

Greta Berlin, a Free Gaza movement spokeswoman, said, "It's disgusting that they have come on board and attacked civilians. We are civilians. How could the Israeli military attack civilians like this? Do they think that because they can attack Palestinians indiscriminately they can attack anyone?"

Cyprus Member of the European Parliament, Kyriacos Triantafyllides, who was involved with the mission, said

activists had "expected a strong reaction from Israel," but not "something akin to an invading army."

Three of the ships were Turkish-flagged, including the main passenger ship, and the convoy was led by a Turkish aid group. Most of the passengers on the main ship, the Mavi Marmara, were Turks. A Turkish official called Israel's actions "piracy" and denied Israeli claims that some on the ships headed for the Gaza Strip were armed and had attacked the Israeli soldiers.

In Turkey, protesters tried to storm Israel's Consulate in Istanbul, then marched toward the city's main square. In London, more than a thousand took to the streets. Thousands of Palestinian refugees and activists demonstrated across Lebanon, shouting slogans such as "Give us weapons, give us weapons and send us on to Gaza."

There were also large protests in Syria and Jordan.

Condemnations came from many official sources. Turkey, a close ally of Israel, withdrew its ambassador and cancelled three joint military drills. Israel's ambassador, Gabby Levy, was summoned to the Turkish foreign ministry. The ministry issued a statement saying, "By targeting civilians, Israel has once again shown its disregard for human life and peaceful initiatives.... This deplorable incident, which took place in open seas and constitutes a flagrant breach of international law, may lead to irreparable consequences in our bilateral relations."

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri issued a joint statement, warning that Israel's actions could provoke a war in the Middle East. Syria and Lebanon condemned "the heinous crime committed by Israel through the brutal attacks on unarmed civilians on board the Freedom Flotilla."

The head of the Hamas government in Gaza, Ismail Haniyeh, called on United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon "to shoulder his responsibilities to protect the safety of the solidarity groups who were on board these ships and to secure their way to Gaza." Hamas has urged Muslims and Arabs to "rise up" in response to the attack.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas described the incident as a "massacre". Saeb Erakat, the chief Palestinian negotiator, called the attack "a war crime."

The secretary general of the League of Arab States, Amr Musa, called for an extraordinary meeting to be convened

today, calling the attack “an act of terror.”

European nations with passengers aboard the ships summoned the Israeli ambassadors and called for an investigation. The Irish government expressed “grave concern” over the fate of eight of its citizens travelling on the aid convoy, with Foreign Affairs Minister Micheal Martin stating, “The reports of up to 15 people killed and 50 injured, if confirmed, would constitute a totally unacceptable response by the Israeli military to what was a humanitarian mission attempting to deliver much needed supplies to the people of Gaza.”

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said he was “shocked by reports of killings and injuries of people on boats carrying supplies for Gaza.” The European Union issued a token call for an inquiry to establish what happened. The United States declared that it “deeply regrets the loss of life and injuries sustained and is currently working to understand the circumstances surrounding this tragedy.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was forced to cut short an official trip to Canada and cancel a meeting today with President Barack Obama, probably under orders from a politically embarrassed White House.

Israeli spokesmen responded by issuing bellicose statements, with Defence Minister Ehud Barak blaming the deaths on the organisers of the Gaza aid flotilla and asserting, “There is no hunger in Gaza and there is no humanitarian crisis.” Deputy Speaker of the Israeli parliament Danny Danon said that the convoy consisted of “criminal terrorists.”

Israel has been placed on high alert, including closing checkpoints along the border with Gaza. Writing in *Haaretz*, Amos Harel warned, “Under certain circumstances, and if both sides fail to take steps to calm the situation, this could even end in a third intifada, or Palestinian uprising.”

The assault took place in international waters. Turkey’s Maritime Undersecretary Hasan Naiboglu said, “The captain of the ship called us at around 4:30 a.m. and told us that Israeli navy intercepted them. We learnt that there were a number of injured people. Then, we lost contact with the ships....”

“Israel intercepted the ships about 70 nautical miles from the mainland. Under the international law, they do not have the right to do such a thing,” he added.

Two of the other boats in the flotilla were American-flagged. The six-ship flotilla, carrying 10,000 tonnes of aid, left Turkish-controlled northern Cyprus on Sunday. The boats were led by the Mavi Marmara, which carried 600 activists. Most of those on board the boats were Turkish, but the passengers also included European and US citizens such as Mairead Corrigan Maguire, the Nobel-prize-winning Northern Ireland peace activist.

The attack on the aid convoy is only the latest in a stepped-up campaign to enforce the blockade of Gaza, in which Israel and Egypt have collaborated since the Islamist movement Hamas won power in 2007. In the early hours of Wednesday morning last week, Israel launched an air strike on Beit Hanoun, east of

Gaza City, and bombed tunnels in Rafah, near Gaza’s southern border with Egypt, injuring 22 people, one of whom was a youth of 15. The attacks followed the firing of mortars by militants from northern Gaza into Israel and a dynamite explosion on the border, delivered by donkey cart.

In the 16 months since Israel’s assault on Gaza in 2008-2009 that left 1,400 people dead, 50,000 homeless, and much of the enclave’s infrastructure in ruins, there have been very few rocket or mortar attacks from Gaza into Israel. Gaza has for nearly three years been subject to a crippling blockade by Israel and Egypt that has wrecked its precarious economy, prevented reconstruction and rendered its people destitute.

Israel claims that it allows about 15,000 tonnes of humanitarian aid into Gaza every week, but this is less than a quarter of what is needed, according to the UN. Israel has forced Gazans to abandon productive rural land, much of it situated just inside the fence that surrounds the Strip, which Israel has designated as a buffer zone. The 2008-2009 assault destroyed valuable agricultural land and a cocktail of toxic metals from Israeli munitions contaminated other areas. Israel’s Central Bank has stopped dealing with banks operating in Gaza, causing a severe financial crisis. It has stymied commercial life and made it impossible for the Hamas government to pay more than a fraction of the salaries due its employees, including those funded by the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah.

Egypt, for its part, is sealing Gaza’s southern border with an underground steel wall to prevent vital products being smuggled via tunnels. Israel is building a wall along its border with Egypt, “to turn the screws on Hamas” by blocking the only way into Israel for terror attacks, according to the *Jerusalem Post*.

Since Operation Cast Lead, Hamas has implemented a *de facto* ceasefire and cracked down on other militant groups in Gaza. But this is not enough for Israel, which views Hamas as one of Iran’s proxies in the region that must be eradicated.



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