

Israel defends murderous assault on Gaza aid flotilla

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The bodies of the eight Turkish citizens and one US citizen of Turkish origin killed in the Israeli attack on a Gaza aid ship were returned to Istanbul Thursday, provoking tens of thousands to pour into the street behind their coffins in an angry and emotional demonstration.

The Israeli government remains belligerent in the face of worldwide outrage at its acts of piracy and murder of at least nine unarmed passengers aboard the international flotilla taking much needed aid to Gaza.

The identification of one of the victims as Furkan Dogan, a 19-year-old high school student born in the United States, has failed to shift Washington's defence of Israel's actions. Reports have indicated that Dogan died after being shot in the head four times, and once in the chest.

The government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has threatened a fresh confrontation with the Irish-registered vessel, the Rachel Corrie, due to dock in Gaza at the weekend.

On board are some 11 people, including Nobel Peace Laureate Mairead Corrigan Maguire, Denis Halliday, an Irish former senior United Nations diplomat, and seven civilians from Ireland and Malaysia. The ship is carrying medical equipment, wheelchairs, school supplies and cement, a material Israel refuses to allow into Gaza.

A spokesman for the Israeli Defence Force threatened ominously, "We will also be ready for the Rachel Corrie".

In a televised address on Wednesday night, Netanyahu defended Monday's murderous assault on the Mavi Marmara, claiming—without a shred of evidence—that it was smuggling arms for Hamas and Iran.

He insisted that the aim of the flotilla was to break

the blockade of Gaza, not to bring aid, and that if the blockade ended, ships would bring in thousands of missiles from Iran to be aimed at Israel and beyond, creating an Iranian port on the Mediterranean. He added, "Israel will continue to maintain its right to defend itself. Therefore, we will stand firm on our policy of a naval blockade and of inspecting incoming ships".

Defence Minister Ehud Barak also defended the commando assault, repeating the lie that that it was an act of self-defence. "We need to always remember that we aren't North America or Western Europe; we live in the Middle East, in a place where there is no mercy for the weak", he said.

Israel's statements have been endlessly parroted in the media. Yet not one of these claims about the flotilla can be substantiated.

Not a single weapon was found on board the ships, which had been checked by the authorities in Greece and Turkey. Indeed, the Israeli authorities have agreed to pass on the aid cargo—with the substantial exception of cement and metal products—to Gaza.

Numerous activists aboard the Mavi Marmara have testified that Israeli commandos opened fire before boarding the ship. British activist Sarah Colbourne told the BBC, "I couldn't even count the amount of ships that were in the water. It was literally bristling with ships, helicopters and gunfire. It was horrific, absolutely horrific".

According to Haneen Zoubi, an Israeli Arab legislator and passenger on board the Mavi Marmara, Israeli naval vessels had surrounded the ship and fired on it a few minutes before commandos abseiled from a helicopter, forcing passengers off the deck. She said there had been no provocations or resistance by the passengers, who were all unarmed, and that two of the

passengers had gunshot wounds to the head, which suggested executions.

Al-Jazeera producer Jamal Eshayyal said that Israeli commandos began by firing rubber-coated metal bullets, teargas and sound grenades at the passengers, but within five minutes opened up with live ammunition. “There was definitely live fire from the air and from the sea as well”, he said. Eshayyal added the troops refused passengers’ pleas that they take away the wounded, and as a result they bled to death on the deck.

Tel Aviv has rejected calls to lift the blockade that has subjected Gaza’s inhabitants to wretched poverty. Instead there is evidence that it is stepping up its repression, with reports of Israeli air strikes on the tiny strip of territory on Tuesday, killing at least three people.

Washington had been in touch with Israel over the flotilla prior to Monday’s raid, the *Washington Post* reported Thursday. It quoted State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley as saying that the administration had “communicated with Israel through multiple channels many times regarding the flotilla”.

Crowley said that “We emphasized caution and restraint given the anticipated presence of civilians, including American citizens”. Nonetheless, with the Israeli government having acted with unrestrained violence and an American citizen dead, US President Barack Obama has refused to condemn Israel’s actions or even acknowledge that they constituted an act of piracy and a war crime.

Having succeeded in stripping a UN Security Council resolution of any criticism of Israel, Washington is insisting that it is up to the Israeli state to conduct its own supposed “inquiry” into Monday’s raid, perhaps with a US observer to assist in the whitewash.

The *Washington Post* reported that “Israeli ambassador Michael Oren and National Security Adviser Uzi Arad spent four hours in meetings at the White House on Tuesday, focused on how to contain the diplomatic fallout from the raid, which has endangered America’s push for sanctions against Iran and peace efforts in the Middle East”.

This tying of the attack on the Mavi Marmara to the US strategy against Iran and in the region generally suggests that there are deeper motives behind this violent episode than merely a brutal and arrogant

government having seemingly lost its head in the face of what clearly represented no threat to Israeli security.

It suggests that Tel Aviv deliberately staged the wanton killings last Monday to advance unstated geostrategic aims. These may include the issuance of a warning to Turkey that it is not immune to the military aggression that Israel has visited upon every other neighbouring country.

Under conditions in which the Turkish government is playing an increasingly assertive role in the region, including with the recent Turkish-Brazilian effort at brokering a nuclear power deal with Iran, Israel has definite reasons to provoke a confrontation aimed at radicalizing the situation in Turkey and destabilizing the alliance between Ankara and Washington.

Whatever the precise calculations of the strategists of the Zionist state, this is clearly a reckless policy that holds the threat of drawing the entire region into a catastrophic war.

Within Israel, when the news broke about the military attack on the flotilla, several thousand people protested in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Their banners read, “End the siege on Gaza”, “Security is not built on the bodies of demonstrators”, “War criminals to trial” and “Stop the army, not the flotilla”.

Students, including Arab Student Unions, in Haifa, Jerusalem, Beer Sheva and Tel Aviv, demonstrated. Some activists attempted unsuccessfully to enter the port of Ashdod where the flotilla boats and captive passengers had been taken. A protest vigil has been called for Friday evening in Jerusalem.

Angry demonstrations broke out in numerous Arab towns and villages inside Israel. The Arab High Monitoring Committee called a general strike and demonstrations and rallies of Israeli Arabs in protest at the massacre and to appeal against the detention of its representatives on the aid convoy.



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