

US backs Israeli inquiry into aid flotilla massacre

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15 June 2010

The Israeli government's announcement yesterday of a so-called Independent Public Commission into last month's bloody Israeli commando raid on a Gaza aid flotilla underscores the Zionist state's contempt for international law and world opinion. Rejecting calls for an independent and international inquiry into the incident, which saw nine Turkish activists killed, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has instead created a mechanism to exonerate the Israeli military and blame the victims of the illegal attack on the MV Mavi Marmara on May 31.

Senior government and military figures have made little pretence that the inquiry will be anything other than a whitewash of the Israeli massacre. According to the Israeli *Ynetnews* website, Netanyahu told his cabinet yesterday: "Two principles guided us [in forming the inquiry]: first, maintaining the freedom of IDF [Israeli Defence Forces] soldiers to act and the credibility of the IDF investigation, and second, giving a credible and convincing response [for] the responsible states in the international community."

Netanyahu's communications minister Moshe Kahlon added: "The [inquiry] decision will create a balance between the international demand for a committee and the Israeli government's obligation to protect the IDF."

The prime minister and his colleagues could not have put the matter more clearly—the inquiry is to counter demands for a proper investigation, also ensuring the Israeli military retains its free hand in maintaining the illegal blockade on the 1.5 million Palestinian residents of Gaza. An Israeli inquiry was never going to be anything but a cynical farce. The Netanyahu government is comprised of senior figures who ought to be facing war crimes charges for their various roles in previous Israeli military assaults on Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon. The Zionist state is now internationally notorious for its brazen provocations, military attacks, cover-ups and disinformation campaigns.

The US administration of President Barack Obama worked from the outset to shield Israel. After leaning on the Turkish government not to press its demand for an international inquiry in the United Nations, Washington succeeded in having the Security Council pass a watered down resolution. The White House has now declared: "The structure and terms of reference of Israel's proposed independent public commission can meet the [Council resolution] standard of a prompt, impartial, credible and transparent investigation... Israel has a military justice system that meets international standards and is capable of conducting a serious and credible investigation."

The Turkish government has rejected the Israeli inquiry. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu insisted: "A commission which will conduct an inquiry into an attack staged in international waters should be international."

US State Department spokesman Philip Crowley yesterday dismissed the objection, making the extraordinary suggestion that Ankara could, if it wished, mount its own investigation. The spokesman continued: "We believe that Israel certainly, as a government, has the institutions and certainly the capability to conduct a credible, impartial and transparent investigation... We stand by Israel, and we'll voice our strong views against any action that is one-sided or biased by an international organisation. That's why we voted against the resolution [on the Goldstone report] at the Human Rights Council," Crowley said.

The UN's Goldstone inquiry into Israel's three-week bombardment of Gaza in 2008-09 found that the Israeli military had carried out war crimes and that senior commanders ought to be investigated by the International Criminal Court. The Obama administration is clearly concerned about the prospect of having its military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and other theatres subject to criminal investigation. Its strident efforts to ensure there is no proper investigation into the Mavi Marmara attack is

partly motivated by the need to draw a line under the Goldstone report and not permit a further precedent to be established for international inquiries into other atrocities.

The UN is complicit in these manoeuvres, and is now preparing to back the Israeli inquiry. UN spokesman Farhan Haq yesterday said that secretary general Ban Ki-moon “takes note” of Israel’s announcement, adding: “A thorough Israeli investigation is important and could fit with the secretary general’s proposal, which would fully meet the international community’s expectation for a credible and impartial investigation.”

The composition of the Israeli government’s inquiry was determined through discussions between Washington and Tel Aviv. Former Israeli Supreme Court Justice Jacob Turkel will head the three-member committee. Reuters reported that he is “described by Israeli pundits as a conservative jurist”.

Two international observers are to participate—Canadian Brigadier-General Ken Watkin and former Northern Ireland Ulster Unionist Party First Minister David Trimble. Together with Spain’s right-wing ex-prime minister Jose Maria Aznar, Trimble last month helped launch a “Friends of Israel Initiative”, motivated by their opposition, a statement explained, to the “unprecedented delegitimation campaign against Israel, driven by the enemies of the Jewish state and perversely assumed by numerous international authorities”.

The inquiry will not question the Israeli commandos who attacked the Turkish activists. Committee members will only be able to access military and government documents deemed “directly relevant”. Hearings that are “liable to endanger the state’s security or its foreign relations” must be held behind closed doors. Netanyahu has emphasised that one of the committee’s central lines of inquiry will be “consideration of the actions taken by those who organised—and participated in—the flotilla, and their identities”. No deadline has been set for the committee’s investigation; once the final report is completed it is to be given to Netanyahu and his cabinet prior to public release.

In the meantime, the siege of Gaza will continue. Yesterday the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) declared that the blockade violated the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, ratified by Israel, which prohibits the collective punishment of civilian populations. “The whole of Gaza’s civilian population is being punished for acts for which they bear no responsibility,” the ICRC

said in a statement. “The closure therefore constitutes a collective punishment imposed in clear violation of Israel’s obligations under international humanitarian law.”

Sharp criticisms of the planned inquiry have emerged within Israel. In an editorial published Sunday, *Haaretz* described the self-investigation of the Mavi Marmara operation as a “farce”. It stated: “The truth that Netanyahu wishes to bring out involves the identity of the flotilla’s organisers, its sources of funding, and the knives and rods that were brought aboard. He does not intend to probe the decision-making process that preceded the takeover of the ship and the shortcomings that were uncovered.”

Uri Avnery of the Gush Shalom activist organisation raised a series of questions about the proposed inquiry. “Where does the argument come from that soldiers must not be called to testify—when in all previous investigations senior officers, junior officers and enlisted men were indeed subjected to questioning?” he asked. “Why does the government refuse to appoint a State Commission of Inquiry under the Israeli law that was enacted by the Knesset in 1966 for this very purpose? Does the government have something to fear from such a commission, whose members are appointed by the President of the Supreme Court, and which is empowered to summon witnesses and cross-examine them, demand the production of documents and determine the personal responsibility for mistakes and crimes?”

The reality is that the inquiry is not intended to get to the truth. It is a propaganda exercise designed to justify Israel’s continued collective punishment of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.



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