

Armed confrontation with Gaza aid ship narrowly averted

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On Wednesday morning another armed confrontation by the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) with an aid ship was averted when the captain of a Libyan government-sponsored vessel agreed to sail to an Egyptian port.

The Amalthea left Greece on Saturday with 2,000 tonnes of food, cooking oil, medicines and prefabricated houses. It had been sent to Gaza by the Gaddafi International Charity and Development Foundation, headed by one of the sons of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

It is just six weeks since IDF commandos boarded the Mavi Marmara, the Turkish lead ship in an aid flotilla, and murdered nine people and injured many more in a pre-planned operation.

The fact that the Amalthea was not attacked was not due to a lack of similar intent on the part of Israel. While en route from Greece, the vessel was subjected to repeated threats. Prior to its expected arrival in Gaza, the Amalthea was surrounded by Israeli naval ships overnight Tuesday. Instructions were given to the ship to head away from Gaza and dock at the Egyptian port of El-Arish.

On Wednesday morning the Amalthea was temporarily stranded in international waters some 75 miles off the coast of Gaza, surrounded by at least four Israeli naval vessels.

Contradictory reports then emerged regarding the final destination of the ship. Some stated that the captain was planning to accept Israel's demand that the ship dock at El-Arish, where the aid would be unloaded, some that it would defy the ban. Later Wednesday morning the ship began moving towards El-Arish, with the Israeli naval boats stationed to its left-hand side in order to prevent it from heading in the direction of Gaza.

As well as the crew, on board the ship are 15 pro-Palestinian activists.

An additional factor in preventing a confrontation is that, notwithstanding the humanitarian intentions of those

on board the ship, the sending of aid on the Amalthea by the Libyan regime is a political stunt. It had no intention of seeking any confrontation with Israel, let alone challenging its three-year economic blockade of Gaza. The aid involved, just 2,000 tonnes, is paltry in comparison with what is required and what the oil-rich state with tens of billions of dollars in revenues could provide.

Libya has routinely issued formal denunciations of attacks waged by Israel against the Gazan population and criticized other Arab governments for their complicity, but only from the standpoint of advancing its own regional political interests and currying favour at home.

The Gaddafi regime has long postured as a friend of the Palestinians, utilising anti-imperial rhetoric even as it manoeuvred for support and influence between the United States and other powers. Most infamous was its inaction when, on June 6, 1982, the IDF invaded Southern Lebanon, attacking both Lebanese and Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) forces.

In July 1982, Gaddafi issued a public message to the PLO promising that Libya "will place all of its resources at the disposal of Syria and the Palestinian resistance". He then declared, "I advise you to commit suicide rather than to accept disgrace. Your suicide will immortalise the cause of Palestine for future generations. Your blood is the fuel of the revolution. Let suicide be the priority. It is the road to victory".

PLO leader Yasser Arafat replied by accusing Gaddafi of failing to deliver on past promises of armed assistance, which if they had been honoured, would have meant "the enemy would not have dared to do what he has done". In September, Israeli forces occupying West Beirut allowed the Lebanese Christian Militia, the Phalange, into the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps where they slaughtered at least 800 Palestinian civilians. The Lebanese war claimed the lives of around 10,000 Syrian soldiers, PLO

fighters and other forces aligned with the PLO.

Neither Libya, nor any other Arab regime intends to seriously challenge Israel's brutal suppression of the Palestinians because this would bring them into conflict with the US and the European powers, without whose support the blockade of Gaza could not be maintained.

Following international condemnation of its illegal siege of Gaza in the aftermath of the Mavi Marmara massacre, the cabinet of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu voted in June to "liberalise the system by which civilian goods enter Gaza". The move, carried out following discussions between US President Barack Obama and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the representative of the "Middle East Quartet" (the US, European Union, Russia, and United Nations), was widely hailed in the media.

In reality, allowing selected consumer goods into Gaza was accompanied by a tightening of the "security closure".

Israel is more than ready to assert its interests in the face of token protests by its sponsors. Even as the Amalthea sailed towards Gaza, its representatives used a hearing of the United Nations Human Rights Committee to defend its actions. Warning of further armed force being used against aid ships to Gaza, Israeli envoy Sari Rubenstein said, "No ship can breach this blockade, be they civil or military ships. Whoever violates the blockade is heading for retaliation". She added, "The blockade is legitimate, under international law...a blockade can be imposed on the sea".

Israeli ambassador Aharon Leshno Yaar then provocatively declared of the Mavi Marmara assault that "of the nine dead, seven had said they wished to die onboard these ships.... These are not activists for peace, but messengers of death".

The moves against the Amalthea began as an official report into the Mavi Marmara attack was handed on Monday to the military's chief of staff, Lieutenant General Gabi Ashkenazi. The 150-page report by retired Israeli General Giora Eiland was restricted to the military and intelligence planning of the Mavi Marmara operation, and only certain sections of it have been declassified and released to the media.

Eiland's findings are a whitewash of the Israeli military. Praising the Israeli Defence Force commandos involved in the operation, the report states that only the use of lethal force could halt the flotilla. It found that "there were no wrongdoings and no negligences in any fundamental areas during a complicated and complex operation". The troops had displayed "professionalism,

bravery and resourcefulness", it said.

The *Guardian* reported comments from a "senior source close to the inquiry", echoing the Israeli government's lies, that the commandos had used weapons only in self-defence. The source said there was a "high probability" that the first shot was fired by an activist on the Mavi Marmara and that, "There were at least four, maybe six, events in which soldiers were fired on by people on the ship, using live ammunition".

Eiland was formerly the head of Israel's National Security Council. In July 2008, a claim was filed against him in the High Court in Spain on suspicion that he was involved in war crimes and crimes against humanity. He allegedly ordered a one tonne bomb to be dropped on a house in Gaza in July 2002, causing the deaths of 15 people including nine children.

Ominously, General Ashkenazi said on receiving the report that he agreed with its conclusions stating, "An examination as thorough as this brings up mistakes which must be corrected *for future incidents*" (emphasis added).

The report will be submitted to the Turkel commission, the internal inquiry into the assault that will not report its conclusions for months. The head of the investigation, Senior Judge Jacob Turkel, has already stated that its remit is not to hold anyone to account, and that Israeli soldiers will not be asked to testify. This whitewash has been given the seal of approval by the Obama administration.

While the attention of the media has been focused on the events surrounding the Amalthea, the IDF has continued its offensive against the Palestinians. On Tuesday, a Palestinian was killed and four others wounded on the Gazan border when Israeli forces fired tank shells at them. Later that day Israeli bulldozers destroyed six buildings, including at least three Palestinians homes, in east Jerusalem.



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