Death at Sea

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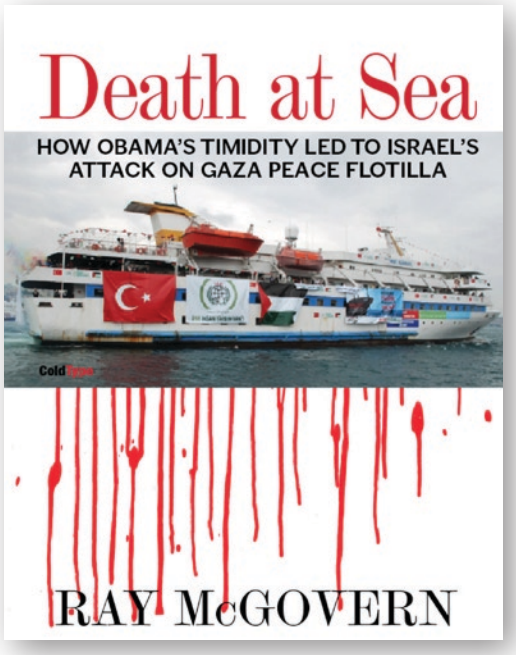
RAY McGOVERN



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This essay originally appeared at www.consortiumnews.org

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HOW OBAMA'S TIMIDITY LED TO ISRAEL'S ATTACK ON GAZA PEACE FLOTILLA

A chief lesson to learn from President Barack Obama's recent unwillingness to stand up to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Likud Lobby is that such timidity can get people killed.

As I write this, casualty figures are still arriving in the wake of Israel's May 31st commando attack on an unarmed flotilla trying to bring relief supplies to the 1.5 million Palestinians crowded into Gaza. Already, at least nine civilian passengers aboard the ships are reported killed, and dozens wounded.

Yet, seldom has an act of aggression been so well advertised in advance. Israel had made clear that it would use force to prevent the ships from reaching Gaza and heard no stern protest from President Obama, who apparently could not overcome his fear of Israel's legendary political clout.

Earlier this year, Obama did criticize Israel's continued settlement of Palestinian areas and Netanyahu's resistance to hold meaningful peace talks, but the President has failed to follow up his words with firm action or resolve. For that reason, Netanyahu was left convinced that Israel could do what it wished, including dropping commandos by helicopters onto crowded ships and after an apparent clash with civilians on one of the ships, ordering the use of lethal force.

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Then, Netanyahu could expect that America's Fawning Corporate Media (FCM) – with leading figures like Wolf Blitzer who built his journalistic career by working for the *Jerusalem Post* – would finesse the murderous assault into something reasonable and possibly even tilted sympathetically toward the Israeli troops.

Early on, CNN began repeating the Israeli "explanation" for its attack on the high seas, parroting the *Jerusalem Post* which reported that "militants were killed" after they set upon Israeli naval commandos who boarded one of the six ships at two o'clock on the morning of may 31.

The commandos "were met with strong resistance from men armed with bladed weapons and the situation degenerated into a massacre when one of them grabbed the weapon of a soldier and opened fire," said the *Jerusalem Post,*

quoting Israeli military sources.

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) claimed that the relief convoy organizers had a "radical Islamic anti-Western orientation," and that Israeli "naval forces were attacked with metal clubs and knives, as well as live fire," though there were no reports of Israeli deaths. The IDF statement continued: "The demonstrators had clearly prepared their weapons in advance for this specific purpose," adding that the Navy then used riot dispersal methods, which include live fire, according to JTA, the global news service of the Jewish people.

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak blamed the organizers of the convoy for the violent outcome, and Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon told a news conference why that was so: "The organizers' intent was violent, their method was violent, and unfortunately, the results were violent."

So, you see, the Israeli military resorted to violence only in self-defense. Right.

Quiet Conversation

President Obama spoke to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by phone about the incident. Afterwards, the White House said Obama had expressed "deep regret" over the deaths, but declined further comment, citing "the importance of learning all the facts and circumstances" as quickly as possible.

However, don't count on the timid Obama or his Likud-leaning advisers – much less the FCM – to question the Israeli version. We are likely to get an "explanation" worthy of the late Alexander Haig as to why the slaughter may well have been "justified." Haig's death in February brought to mind comments he made about a brutal incident on the night of Dec. 2, 1980, shortly after Ronald Reagan's election victory.

> **So, you see, the Israeli military resorted to violence only in self-defense. Right**

In rightist-ruled El Salvador, government security forces stopped four American churchwomen in their mini-van and were ordered to kill them. The soldiers first raped the women and then executed them with high-powered rifles.

Reagan's foreign policy team decided to treat the rape-murder as a public relations problem, best handled by shifting blame onto the victims. And so, the women were deemed not nuns, but "political activists."

After becoming Reagan's first Secretary of State, Haig told Congress that "the nuns may have run through a roadblock or may have accidentally been perceived to have been doing so, and there may have been an exchange of fire."

In just a few weeks, the American women had gone from being innocent victims to "political activists" to armed insurgents – although knowledgeable U.S. government officials conceded there was no evidence to support Haig's shoot-out speculation. As an intelligence analyst at the time, I knew of Haig's inclination to make up stuff.

Watch for the same thing to happen to the international "activists" who were killed and wounded in the incident off Gaza. I don't watch the FCM anymore (it's just too much for my Irish temper), but I'm told that Israel-friendly pundits are already spinning faster than the famous centrifuges in Iran.

Uncle Remus's Wisdom

"He Don't Say Nothin'," as Uncle Remus put it, with improper grammar but with an accurate understanding that by not saying anything you can often convey a powerful or dangerous message.

As a presidential candidate, Obama was careful to say nothing about the bru-

tal Israeli blockade against the 1.5 million people in Gaza, about to enter its fourth year. As president-elect he stayed mum as the Israelis attacked densely populated Gaza, killing some 1,400 Gazans.

As President, he has backed down at every significant moment when Netanyahu thumbed his nose at Obama or at Vice President Joe Biden. Obama knew about the "Freedom Flotilla" and its plan to bring supplies to Gaza. And he had to be aware of Israel's threats to attack the relief ships. But, like Uncle Remus's B'rer Fox, Obama "don't say nothin.'"

Quite the contrary, Obama's pro-Zionist White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel, who recently vacationed in Israel and met with Netanyahu five days before attack, extended an invitation for a working visit at the White House. Netanyahu was to visit Obama on June 1 after a four-day visit to Canada.

On May 31, Netanyahu canceled out of a gala dinner to be held in his honor in Ottawa and nixed the visit to Washington. He said he hoped that both Prime Minister Stephen Harper and President Obama "understand that Israel has a great security problem."

Getting Away With Murder

The fatal incident off the Gaza coast was not the first time Israel had used lethal force against a nearly defenseless ship at sea. The attack on the "Freedom Flotilla" was reminiscent of the attack on the USS Liberty during Israel's Six-Day War against three of its Arab neighbors.

The war started on June 5, 1967, when Israel carried out an unprovoked Blitzkrieg attack. What is my source for "unprovoked?" Former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, who 15 years later admitted publicly: "In June 1967, we had a choice. The Egyptian army concentrations in the Sinai approaches do not prove that [Egyptian President] Nasser was really about to attack us. We must be honest with ourselves. We decided to attack him."

> **"The attack on the "Freedom Flotilla" was reminiscent of the attack on the USS Liberty during Israel's Six-Day War against three of its Arab neighbors**

Three days into the war, Israeli aircraft and torpedo boats turned their firepower on the intelligence collection ship USS Liberty in international waters after the Israelis had identified it as a U.S. Navy ship. The Israelis later insisted they had lost track of the ship and that the strafing was an accident in the fog of war. However, U.S. intelligence intercepted Israeli conversations at the time, indicating that the Israeli mission was to sink the ship and leave no survivors.

Israeli commandos clad in black were about to land from helicopters and finish off what remained of the Liberty crew when Seaman Terry Halbardier (later awarded the Silver Star) slid over the Liberty's napalm-laden deck to jury-rig an antenna and get an SOS off to the Sixth Fleet.

Israeli forces intercepted the SOS and quickly broke off the attack. But 34 of the Liberty crew were killed and more than 170 wounded. To avoid exacerbating bilateral tensions, the U.S. Navy was ordered to cover up the deliberate nature of the attack, and the surviving crew was threatened with imprisonment, if they so much as told their wives. When some of the crew later called for an independent investigation, they were hit with charges of anti-Semitism.

One of the surviving crew of the USS Liberty, decorated Navy veteran Joe Meadors, was with the "Freedom Flotilla" when it was attacked. Meadors is past president of the USS Liberty Veterans Association.

The State Department tells us that Joe Meadors survived this latest Israeli

attack. At last word, he sits in an Israeli jail.

Rachel Corrie

Another incident occurred on March 16, 2003, when 23-year-old Rachel Corrie, an American volunteer serving in Gaza with the International Solidarity Movement was run over by an Israeli Army bulldozer after a prolonged face-off in full view of several of her volunteer colleagues.

Rachel was trying to prevent the bulldozing of a Palestinian home where she had been staying.

The apparent message the Israelis wanted to convey in killing Rachel Corrie was that international volunteers would no longer be exempt from the brutal treatment accorded young Israeli volunteers who tried to stand up, as Rachel did, for decent treatment of Palestinians in Gaza.

The FCM's excitement over President George W. Bush's eagerly anticipated "shock-and-awe" bombing of Iraq three days later pushed what limited coverage there was about Rachel's murder to the back pages. The Israelis claimed the killing was an inadvertent mistake, like the shoot-up of the Liberty.

The courageous Rachel was very much with the Freedom Flotilla in spirit. One of the ships in the convoy bore her name, "Rachel Corrie."

Israel cannot hide behind "inadvertence" this time, although its spin-masters are already doing their best to smear the civilians on the ships with buzzwords, calling them "terrorists" who "ambushed" and tried to "lynch" the Israeli commandos. These P.R. tactics may work with the American FCM and neocons in Washington – and by extension the TV-watchers in the United States – but patience with Israel in the international community is

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wearing paper-thin.

Much of this has to do with Gaza, including the Israeli attack from Dec. 17, 2008, to Jan. 18, 2009, as well as the three-year blockade that began when Hamas won Palestinian elections and became the governing party in Gaza. Israel and the U.S. government deem Hamas to be a terrorist organization, though some other countries regard it more as a resistance movement fighting against Israeli occupation.

Yet, regardless of how one feels about Hamas, Israel's harsh blockade of Gaza and last year's military assault are widely seen as inflicting a humanitarian disaster on the Palestinian people.

Has Netanyahu Gone Too Far?

Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan has reacted strongly to the Israeli attack on the relief ships, the largest of which sailed from Turkey. According to one report, Turkey has served warning that Turkish Navy ships will escort future relief convoys to Gaza. Erdogan has had it with Israeli mistreatment of Muslims in his eastern Mediterranean neighborhood. On Jan. 29, 2009, at the economic summit in Davos, he leveled harsh criticism to Israeli President Shimon Peres's face, labeling Gaza "an open-air prison."

Erdogan angrily cited "the sixth commandment – Thou Shalt Not Kill," adding, "We are talking about killing" in Gaza. Erdogan's one-and-a-half-minute tirade was captured on camera by the BBC. Five days before that outburst, the Brazilian government also condemned Israel's bombing of Gaza and its effect on the civilian population as a "disproportionate response."

It seems to have been the atrocity in Gaza that galvanized the successful joint effort by Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan

and Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to defy Israel by getting Iran to agree to transfer fully half of its low-enriched uranium to Turkey for further processing, rendering it unusable for a nuclear weapon.

Defy Israel? you ask. If Israel believes that low-enriched uranium is an essential part of an "existential threat" to Israel from eventual nuclear weapons in Iran, would the Israelis not be delighted at Iran's agreement to send half to Turkey? Good question. If the truth be told, Israel cares a lot less about Iran's uranium that it does about forcing "regime change" in Tehran. Netanyahu does not want any agreement with Iran; he wants sanctions against Iran, and eventually a military conflict.

And this twin wish is shared by American neocons who remain influential in the Obama administration and in the FCM. The pro-Israeli hardliners appear to be the ones running U.S. policy on the Middle East, not Obama, who appears only nominally in charge. Unusually clear proof of this came when the Brazilians released a letter revealing that Obama had personally encouraged the Brazilian and Turkish leaders to pursue the kind of deal they were able to work out with the Iranians.

Thus, the leaders of Brazil and Turkey were surprised when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other administration spokespeople trashed the tripartite Iran-Turkey-Brazil deal and pressed ahead with a new round of sanctions. And the President? Did he step and acknowledge encouraging Brazil and Turkey to seek the uranium deal? Well, he don't say nothin'.

Israeli Influence

While Americans continue to be starved of real information from the FCM, people around the world are able to view with disdain the degree to which Washington dogs are wagged by Israeli tails.

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When I suggested five years ago before a Capitol Hill hearing chaired by Rep. John Conyers that Israel was right up there, together with oil and military bases, as comprising the real rationale for war on Iraq, I, too, was called anti-Semitic. But the evidence has always been as clear as it is abundant.

An inadvertent remark by former British Prime Minister Blair has provided insight – straight from the horse's ass, I mean, mouth.

In early February 2010, the British press revealed that Blair, testifying to the Iraq war commission in the U.K., offered the following account of his discussions with Bush in Crawford, Texas, in April 2002. That's when Bush said war was the only way to deal with Saddam Hussein, and Blair acquiesced.

But Blair's remarks revealed that Israeli concerns were a major part of the equation and that Israeli officials were involved in the discussions. Thus, Blair: "As I recall that discussion, it was less to do with specifics about what we were going to do on Iraq or, indeed, the Middle East, because the Israel issue was a big, big issue at the time. I think, in fact, I remember, actually, there may have been conversations that we had even with Israelis, the two of us, whilst we were there. So that was a major part of all this."

It is a safe bet that Hillary Clinton's Likud-friendly lieutenants and their new junior partners in London are busy conferring with Tel Aviv right now about how to handle the PR challenge caused by the upstart leaders of Turkey and Brazil with the temerity to work out a deal with Tehran. (Never mind that Obama

personally asked them to do it.)

How does one make into a bad thing Iran's agreement to ship half its uranium out of the country, even if additional steps might still be needed to assure the world that Iran is telling the truth when it says it isn't building a nuclear bomb?

More and more people around the globe are seeing Obama as subservient to the Likud Lobby, perhaps not as enthusiastically as Bush was, but still unwilling to put action behind his occasional words of dissatisfaction.

Important players in the Middle East, as well as increasingly assertive countries like Turkey and Brazil, conclude that the policies and behavior of Tel Aviv and Washington are virtually identical.

And then there is the $3 billion or so that the United States gives Israel each year that enables the Israelis to arm themselves to the teeth. It is understandable, then, that many will blame Washington for what happened in the dark of night, on the eve of Memorial Day, on the high seas.

Hard Lessons

The likely results are three-fold:

1. On Memorial Day next year, there may well be hundreds more "fallen heroes" to honor, killed by Muslim and other "militants" who make no distinction between what the U.S. had done in Iraq and Afghanistan and what Israel does in Gaza and the occupied West Bank – and add Lebanon and Syria, for good measure.

As Gen. David Petraeus pointed out earlier this year, the unresolved Arab-Israeli "conflict foments anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel" and thus puts U.S. troops at greater risk. "Arab anger over the Palestinian question limits the strength and depth of U.S. partnerships with governments and peoples in the [region] and weakens the legitimacy of moderate regimes in the Arab world," Petraeus said. "Meanwhile, al-Qaeda and other militant groups exploit that anger to mobilize support."

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2. The linking of U.S. support with Israeli actions enhances the incentive of terrorists to ply their dark arts in the United States. While it is difficult to find a measure of objectivity in official U.S. government documents on this topic, every so often there is a slip between cup and lip. There was such a slip on Sept. 23, 2004, for example, when the Pentagon-sponsored U.S. Defense Science Board issued a formal report concluding: "Muslims do not 'hate our freedom,' but rather, they hate our policies. The overwhelming majority voice their objections to what they see as one-sided support in favor of Israel and against Palestinian rights."

You will not be surprised to find out that the board's report was generally suppressed in the FCM, as were the following, more specific, examples: "By his own account, KSM's [9/11 "mastermind" Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's] animus toward the United States stemmed not from his experience there as a student, but rather from his violent disagreement with U.S. foreign policy favoring Israel." [9/11 Commission Report, July 22, 2004, page 147]

And what motivated Dr. Humam Khalil Abu Mulal al-Balawi, the 32-year-old Jordanian physician of Palestinian origin, who on Dec. 30, 2009, detonated a suicide bomb at a CIA site in eastern Afghanistan, killing seven American CIA operatives? According to his brother, al-Balawi "changed" during the three-week-long Israeli offensive in Gaza, which killed some 1,400 Gazans.

When al-Balawi volunteered to treat

injured Palestinians in Gaza, he was arrested by Jordanian authorities, his brother said. It was after that arrest that al-Balawi allowed himself to be "recruited" to spy on al-Qaeda for the CIA.

Quickly, it became payback time for Americans and Jordanians whom he associated with Israel.

Christmas underpants bomber Abdulmuttallab, also is reported to have been particularly outraged by Israel's slaughter of the 1,400 Gazans at the turn of 2008-09 and Washington's defense of Israel's action.

That Israeli actions in Gaza acted as catalysts to al-Balawi's and Abdulmuttallab's determination to exact revenge on the U.S. is hardly surprising – the more so in view of Washington's efforts to suppress the findings of the UN-commissioned Gaza investigation by Justice Richard Goldstone. His report concluded that: "The blockade policies implemented by Israel against the Gaza Strip, in particular the closure of or restrictions imposed on border crossings in the immediate period before the military operations, subjected the local population to extreme hardship and deprivations that amounted to a violation of Israel's obligations as an Occupying Power under the Fourth Geneva Convention. …

"Israel has essentially violated its obligation to allow free passage of all consignments of medical and hospital objects, food, and clothing that were needed to meet the urgent humanitarian needs of the civilian population …

"The Mission concludes that the conditions resulting from deliberate actions of the Israeli forces and the declared policies of the Government with regard to the Gaza Strip before, during, and after the military operation cumulatively indicate the intention to inflict collective punishment on the people of the Gaza Strip.

"The Mission, therefore, finds a violation of the provisions of Articles 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention."

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3. Attacking Iran? It is no secret that this goal enjoys high priority on Netanyahu's agenda. It could be stopped in its tracks by a public warning from President Obama – but all signs point to his bending to neocon advice to shy away from a showdown.

The fact that world leaders consider Netanyahu a clear and present danger to peace in the region is showed by the way the leaders of Turkey and Brazil moved at an accelerated pace to bend the Iranians to the kind of deal that Obama personally had advocated, before being overruled by Clinton and Democratic neocons.

The urgency of the Turkey-Brazil initiative came through in the words of Brazilian President Lula da Silva, who could hardly have been more explicit: "We can't allow to happen in Iran what happened in Iraq. Before any sanctions, we must undertake all possible efforts to try and build peace in the Middle East."

A Green Light

Netanyahu listens only to Washington, when he listens at all. Following the bloody attack on the Freedom Flotilla, I imagine he will now get at most a mealy-mouthed "please-don't-do-this-again" from the White House, together with an Al-Haig made-up excuse about an "exchange" of fire.

If that proves to be the case, Netanyahu is altogether likely to consider that Israel has a green light to provoke hostilities with Iran, with the full expectation that the United States will jump right in to help the non-ally ally finish the job.

Non-ally ally? Sorry, despite what you hear from Obama, Congress and the whole Washington Establishment, Israel is not an ally of the United States. Webster's (and international law) define ally as "a state associated with another by treaty."

There is no mutual defense treaty between the U.S. and Israel. (Washington has broached the idea to Israel from time to time, but Israel has said no thanks. Treaties, you see, require internationally recognized borders, and Israeli leaders avoid that subject like the plague.)

NATO member Turkey, on the other hand, is a U.S. ally. This could make things very awkward if Turkey sends its warships to accompany the next convoy trying to lift the siege of Gaza. It is possible that Washington may have to choose between a real ally and a synthetic one, if shots are fired.

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