

Gaza Aid Convoy Attack: Israel's Murderous Sea Piracy a Horrendous Moment of Truth for US Policy

By [Finian Cunningham](#)

Global Research, May 31, 2010

31 May 2010

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

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This time, the Israeli war machine may have gone too far for international public opinion to stomach. In the early hours of 31 May, before daybreak, Israeli commandos stormed the international civilian aid convoy heading for Gaza. Between 20-24 volunteers onboard have been killed and at least 50 injured, according to various reports, but the number of casualties has risen rapidly from the initial reports of two dead. The final death toll could be greater.

The actions by Israeli forces have been condemned by governments around the world. European governments, including those of Belgium, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Norway and Sweden have summoned their respective Israeli envoys over the incident. Turkish prime minister Recep Erdogan is reported to have cut short a trip to South America and his country is said to have recalled its ambassador to Israel in protest.

In a tired-sounding script, Israeli government spokespeople claimed that its forces were acting in self-defence after they were attacked by aid workers wielding knives when they boarded the main ship – a Turkish vessel – in the six-ship convoy. One Israeli commando was stabbed, Israeli TV reported.

Within minutes of the interception, Israeli forces blacked out all communications from the flotilla, which is carrying 700 civilians from 50 countries, including Britain, Ireland, Turkey and the US. The aid convoy – dubbed the Gaza Freedom Flotilla – had a high-profile assembly in Turkey last week before departing from Cyprus for the Palestinian coast on Sunday. Backed by several governments, including that of Turkey, and counting among its numbers at least four European MPs, a Nobel laureate and journalists from various news media, the aid convoy had declared itself to be a civilian, humanitarian relief operation.

The flotilla was attempting to ferry some 10,000 tonnes of aid material, ranging from medicines, building materials to school equipment, for the 1.5 million Gazans who have been besieged by Israeli military for three years, ever since they democratically elected the Hamas government. After the Israeli onslaught on Gaza during December 2008 and January 2009, in which more than 1,400 people – mainly civilians – were killed, the Palestinian territory remains a disaster zone, with its population living under tents and having to resort to smuggling vital materials via underground tunnels, which the Israeli air force frequently bombard. The Gazans' only other lifeline is via tunnels into Egypt on their southwestern border, but these, too, are routinely attacked by Egyptian forces.

The Israeli government had denounced the Freedom Flotilla as “provocative” even before it

departed and warned that it would be intercepted – despite the fact that the convoy had declared that it would be entering Palestine from international waters in the Mediterranean, well away from Israeli territory.

While the Israeli naval interception was clearly well planned, its accompanying blackout of communications was evidently not swift enough, failing to prevent Turkish satellite TV footage broadcasting for several minutes what was taking place. Those images relayed by international media nail the lie in the Israeli version of events. (Whether the US media do so will be telling.)

Taken from different angles on various positions of the vessel, the TV images show the following:

The convoy was intercepted at around 5am local time, some 150 kilometres (90 miles) off the coast of Gaza in international waters.

Israeli commandos are seen hauling themselves on to the aid ship. The commandos were armed with assault rifles and handguns, wearing helmets and full body armour. It appears that the passengers and crew are unaware of the intrusion. The Israeli personnel were able to assemble without any opposition; they seemed casual in their movements, then raising their guns in assault mode, covering each other with pointed weapons before filing off to their intended target area on the ship. Other images show an Israeli military helicopter hovering over the convoy and high-speed marine dinghies approaching.

Chaotic scenes ensue. Aid workers are seen lying on decks wounded with what appear to be gunshots. Some of the injured – all clearly civilian in appearance – are lying motionless and unconscious, presumably dead. Other aid workers are shown trying to assist the wounded. One woman is seen carrying a blood-soaked stretcher amid the mayhem.

Some of the footage shows a melee of aid workers scuffling with Israeli commandos. None of the civilians are shown to be carrying knives.

Of course, there is hardly anything new here – Israeli forces using disproportionate violence, killing civilians with impunity. But on this occasion, the murderous incident is not in some poor ghetto in the Gaza Strip hidden from the full view of the world. Up to now, Israeli disinformation could afford just enough wriggle room to sow doubts over such events. The cynical phrases of “terror suspects” and “self defence” parroted by the western mainstream media served to give the Israeli government and its backers in Washington a degree of political cover for otherwise heinous conduct.

Hence, the United Nations’ Goldstone report on human rights violations by Israel during the Gaza offensive could be rebuffed by Tel Aviv and Washington because Israel was responding “in self defence to rocket attacks”. The crushing to death of American peace activist Rachel Corrie in 2003 by an Israeli military bulldozer was “a tragic accident”. The assassination of Mahmoud al Mabhouh by Mossad agents in a Dubai hotel in January of this year could be brazened out because, well, the victim was an official of Hamas – the government of Gaza whom the Israelis and the Americans refuse to legitimise and treat as “terrorists”.

Nevertheless, all of these crimes – in addition to the warmongering towards Iran over trumped allegations of nuclear ambitions from the only state in the Middle East to possess nuclear weapons and possess them illegally – has seen the political and moral position of

Israel and its US patron gradually diminish to the point of contempt in the eyes of the world.

In attacking the Freedom Flotilla, Israel and the US are now in danger of losing whatever shred of credibility or pretence they may have had with regard to the roots of conflict in the Middle East.

What the world has witnessed is an outrageous act of sea piracy bordering on an act of war that transgresses the diplomatic rights of 50 countries and the premeditated, cold-blooded murder of civilians.

At the same time that world powers are demanding a tough response to the alleged attack by North Korea on a South Korean warship in which 46 seamen died, public opinion will likewise see the appropriate demand for the same legal standard applied to Israel.

The US government stands to be severely exposed by this latest, most glaring crime against humanity. No mealy-mouthed US censure of its client will placate world anger that is inevitably pushing governments, especially the increasingly critical governments of the non-aligned movement, including Turkey and Brazil, to apply international law on the US-Israeli war machine.

Washington is so bound up by mendacious contradictions in its support for the Israeli war machine while at the same time posturing for international standards to be imposed on others such as Iran and North Korea - this latest outrage by its favourite criminal client will surely impose a diplomatic manoeuvre on Washington that even the great escape artist Houdini could not defy.

Finian Cunningham is a journalist and musician www.myspace.com/finiancunninghammusic

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About the author:

Finian Cunningham has written extensively on international affairs, with articles published in several languages. Many of his recent articles appear on the renowned Canadian-based news website Globalresearch.ca. He is a Master's graduate in Agricultural Chemistry and worked as a scientific editor for the Royal Society of Chemistry, Cambridge, England, before pursuing a career in journalism. He specialises in Middle East and East Africa issues and

has also given several American radio interviews as well as TV interviews on Press TV and Russia Today. Previously, he was based in Bahrain and witnessed the political upheavals in the Persian Gulf kingdom during 2011 as well as the subsequent Saudi-led brutal crackdown against pro-democracy protests.

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