

Israel apologizes, but Congress defends raid

Stephen Zunes | Jun. 20, 2013
Perspective

Thanks to strong pressure from President Barack Obama during his visit to Israel in March, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu finally apologized to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan for an attack on an unarmed humanitarian aid flotilla in international waters. The attack on May 31, 2010, killed eight Turks, along with an American of Turkish origin. Meanwhile, the International Criminal Court has opened a preliminary investigation of the incident at the request of island nation of Comoros, where one of the vessels is registered.

The attack ruptured relations between Israel and Turkey, both of which are close U.S. allies. The Obama administration, concerned with the worsening violence in Syria -- which borders Turkey and Israel -- and other issues, made it a high priority to mend fences between the two nations, which had been on good relations with each other prior to the incident. Indeed, facilitating the rapprochement was the one concrete accomplishment of the U.S. president's Middle East trip, which failed to make progress on ending the Israeli occupation and colonization of the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

The flotilla of six ships was part of an effort by pro-Palestinian groups, peace organizations, churches, Nobel Peace Prize laureates, human rights groups and others to relieve critical shortages of food and medicine in the besieged Gaza Strip. The Israeli government had acknowledged that the extensive blockade of humanitarian goods was not necessary for their security. Israel instead implemented the blockade in the hopes of pressuring the Palestinians to end their support for Hamas, which rules the crowded impoverished enclave. Indeed, the Israeli government announced a significant relaxation of the embargo within weeks of the attack.

Despite the relaxation of the siege and the belated Israeli apology, a bipartisan majority of both houses of Congress remain on record unconditionally supporting Israel's original draconian blockade and defending the attack on the flotilla. In the U.S. House of Representatives, 329 out of 435 members signed a letter that called the raid an act of "self-defense" that they "strongly support." Similarly, a Senate letter -- signed by 87 of 100 senators -- "fully" support what it called "Israel's right to self-defense."

The House letter insisted that Obama "remain steadfast in defense of Israel" in the face of the near-universal international condemnation of this blatant violation of international maritime law and other legal statutes.

The nine people killed were all on the largest of the Turkish ships, the Mavi Marmara, where some crew members tried to fight off the illegal boarding of their vessel with poles and other objects available on the deck. According to eyewitness accounts, autopsy reports, and an investigation by the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner on Human Rights, several of those killed were fatally shot at point-blank range from behind. Among the victims was 19-year-old U.S. citizen Furkan Dogan, who was initially shot while capturing the assault on video and then shot execution-style as he lay wounded. Despite this, the House letter said, "Israeli forces used necessary force as an act of self-defense and of last resort."

Given that the majority of House members believe that it is "necessary ... self-defense" for foreign security

forces to kill an American teenager on the high seas for recording a confrontation with protesters, they presumably would also argue that it is legitimate for U.S. authorities to kill Americans for making videos of confrontations between protesters and police here in the United States. As the father of a 19-year-old who, like Dogan, has never engaged in violent protests but has recorded confrontations with police on his smartphone, I am outraged that so many members of Congress would apparently rush to defend the killing of this young man.

The House letter also claimed that the five other ships were "commandeered peacefully and without incident," even though -- despite completely nonviolent resistance -- passengers on the other ships were immobilized with stun guns, brutally beaten, and attacked with tear gas and rubber bullets. Among the victims was a sexagenarian Quaker from California who was hospitalized for a week with serious injuries.

The Senate letter insisted that, in spite of these potentially fatal beatings and other assaults, Israeli forces were able to divert the other ships "safely." Again, the implication of this attitude in relation to domestic protests is chilling.

A number of self-described "progressive" groups like Democracy for America, MoveOn and Progressive Democrats of America, have endorsed the re-election of House members who signed the letter defending the attacks. Quite a few members of these organizations presumably engaged in Occupy protests and some of them probably captured on video incidents in which a small minority of demonstrators confronted police. Despite this, their organizations are working to elect people who are cavalier about protesters' rights.

Given that the besieged residents of the Gaza Strip were Arabs, there may also be an undercurrent of racism at work. It is unlikely, for example, that Democracy for America, MoveOn or Progressive Democrats of America would support candidates who would defend the killing of activists seeking to bring aid to white Europeans, such as those under siege in Sarajevo in the early 1990s or in West Berlin in the late 1940s.

It is important to remember that the majority of Democrats joined Republicans in supporting the Salvadoran junta in the early 1980s and Indonesia's Suharto regime in the 1990s until enough voters made clear they would withdraw their support if they did not change their policy. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee, self-identified as "America's pro-Israel lobby," and other such groups are only as powerful as the absence of counter pressure from the peace and human rights community. As long as liberal groups endorse members of Congress who take positions even more extreme than right-wing Middle Eastern governments, there will be little hope for change.

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