

Israel's Insane Attack on the Freedom Flotilla By Avi Shlaim

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My heart sank when I heard the news of the IDF's insane attack on the unarmed boats carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza in which ten international volunteers were killed and many more were wounded.

It was with great patriotic pride that I served in the IDF in 1964-1966. In those days the IDF was true to its name: the Israel Defence Force. Sadly, over the last four decades, my army has been subverted into the brutal police force of a savage colonial power.

The Israeli army receives its orders from the democratically-elected government. The present government, however, is the most irresponsible, right-wing and racist in Israel's history. It seems to think that Israel is above the law and its behaviour is increasingly paranoid and irrational. Last night this government crossed yet another red line by ordering a totally unprovoked attack on innocent civilians carrying desperately needed humanitarian aid to the beleaguered people of Gaza. On the legality or morality of this attack there is no room for argument. Killing civilians is wrong. Period.

The brutality of the Israeli navy was fully matched by the mendacity of Israel's official spokesmen. The plain facts are as follows. The Freedom Flotilla sailed from Cyprus to Gaza in six ships with over 700 activists and politicians from 40 countries, carrying 10,000 tons of building materials, food, medical supplies, and stationary for schools. Most of the people on the boats were asleep and there were no firearms on any of them. Israeli commandos descending from helicopters stormed the boats in the early hours of Monday morning while it was in international waters, about 90 miles (150km) from Gaza, where Israel has no jurisdiction. Meeting mild resistance, the commandos responded with live ammunition, and ended up perpetrating a cold-blooded massacre of peace activists. Israel's official spokesmen claim that their soldiers acted in self-defence against terrorists wielding knives and clubs. Anyone who believes this will believe anything. The official version of this incident, as of most incidents involving the use of force, is a pile of garbage.

The backdrop to this act of piracy on the high is an unbroken record of Israeli brutality towards the 1.5 million inhabitants of Gaza going back to 1967. Although Israel withdrew unilaterally its settlers and soldiers from Gaza in August 2005, it continued to control access to the tiny territory by land, air and sea. Consequently, it is still the occupying power under international law, with responsibility for the welfare of the civilian population. In January 2006, Hamas won a fair and free all-Palestinian elections but Israel refused to recognize the Hamas-led government and did everything in its power to undermine it. In June 2007, Hamas seized power in Gaza to pre-empt a coup by its secular rival, Fatah. Following the seizure of power by Hamas, Israel imposed a blockade, severely restricting the flow of food, fuel and medical supplies to the Gaza Strip. The blockade is a form of collective punishment which is strictly forbidden by international law.

The Freedom Flotilla was a brave attempt by numerous human rights organizations not only to bring material relief to the long-suffering people of Gaza but to appeal to the conscience of mankind. For far too long the international community has watched passively the martyrdom of Gaza. The United States and European Union have compounded the problem by refusing to recognize Hamas and by joining the lawbreaker in applying economic sanctions to Gaza. As signatories to the Geneva Convention, all these countries have a duty to put pressure on Israel to lift the blockade. By failing to act, they have let down the people of Gaza. This lamentable inaction by the international community has enabled Israel to get away, literally, with murder.

The outgoing Labour government was both pusillanimous and feeble in its approach to the conflict. It was, indeed, complicit in Israel's continuing crimes against the Palestinian people. Tony Blair and Gordon Brown are both honorary patrons of the Jewish National Fund UK, an Israeli organization which caters only for Jews and not for Arabs.

So is David Cameron. Cameron has an opportunity now to free British foreign policy from the shameful legacy of his predecessors. He can begin by revoking his membership of an organisation which discriminates against Israel's Arab citizens. And he can follow up by imposing an embargo on the sale of British arms to Israel and by proposing EU trade sanctions to force Israel to end its occupation of the Palestinian territories – the most prolonged and brutal military occupation of modern times.

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