

REFLECTIONS ON THE FLOTILLA MASSACRE

by
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Israel's premeditated murder of the *Mavi Marmara's* peace activists could become the turning point for the Palestinian struggle. Or, if the wrong conclusions are deduced, there's a lot more misery ahead for the people of Gaza. A week after the event, it is time to ask some key questions and suggest answers.

Question: The decision to attack the 6-ship flotilla and stop it "at all cost" was a deliberate decision by the Israeli government. Given that international condemnation would surely follow, how can one understand Israel's decision to go ahead?

Answer: The attack had little to do with "restoring Israel's deterrence" or capping the peashooters in Gaza. To understand Israel's decision, one must hark back to Moshe Yaalon, then chief of staff of the Israeli Defence Forces, who in 2002 said that "*The Palestinians must be made to understand in the deepest recesses of their consciousness that they are a defeated people.*"

The flotilla attack was aimed to send a clear message: foreign nationals and peace activists will be treated just as violently as the inmates of the Israeli gulag. The Israeli bulldozer that crushed Rachel Corrie, the 23-year old American-Jewish pro-Palestinian activist, stands ever-ready to crush challenges to absolute Israeli supremacy. It scarcely mattered that the world was watching or that on board was a Holocaust survivor, white-as-lilies members of parliament from European countries, and even a six-month baby of unknown color and descent. Discounting those from Muslim countries, including three from Pakistan, the constellation of those calling for an end to Gaza's blockade was impressive. The hope of a violence-free ending was therefore reasonable. But that did not happen. Israel wanted Gazans to know that even the international community cannot save them. It reasons that a hopeless people would eventually give up fighting.

That the peace flotilla was attacked in international waters, and that a Hamas leader was murdered this year by the Mossad in Dubai, is also noteworthy. Israel, in effect, has declared that it knows no boundaries. It is truly a rogue nation.

Question: Why did the United States refuse to condemn the Israeli action, even though the cost it shall pay will be large?

The cost is indeed huge! Imagine that the US had allowed a meeting of the UN Security Council to criticize Israel, and had called for an open investigation by the International Court of Justice. In a jiffy, the key US interest across the world – that of fighting Al-Qaeda and Islamic extremism – would have been immensely strengthened. This one act may have bought more security for the US than increasing its defense budget by 100 billion dollars. The world would have felt so much better about America. The steam would have gone out of rabid jihadist organizations. Conversely, in refusing to condemn

the atrocity, the United States lost an opportunity to rescue its tarnished international image of being a slave of Israel.

It is unprecedented in history for one state to set aside its own security, and that of its allies, in pursuing the interests of another state. So what on earth makes the US behave in this way? This is a fascinating question. Most people think that this is because of shared US-Israeli strategic interests and/or some compelling moral imperative.

But John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, two leading American academics whose book caused a storm, argue that neither is true. Unqualified US support for Israel, they say, is unnatural and unnecessary. Far from being a loyal ally, Israel regularly spies on its principal patron. Moreover, Israel is racist while the US is democratic. Unlike the US, where people enjoy equal legal rights irrespective of race, religion or ethnicity, Israel was explicitly founded as a Jewish state where citizenship is based on the principle of blood kinship. Indeed, even Pakistan's America-hating ulema think this way – they line up to send their children to the US and pray for grant of their Green Cards.

But, say Mearsheimer and Walt, America's uncritical support for Israel actually owes to the Israeli lobby in the US. AIPAC (American Israel Public Action Committee) is a hugely influential organization that was ranked second behind the American Association of Retired People, but ahead of the AFL-CIO and the National Rifle Association. Thus, during the bombardment of Lebanon in the summer of 2006, the House of Representatives passed a resolution of total solidarity with Israel by 410 votes to eight. Today the Israeli tail wags the American dog. This is remarkable: Jews belonged to the oppressed people of America until a few decades ago, and only conditionally allowed to set foot on American soil although Hitler was sending them off to be gassed.

Noam Chomsky, my guru and friend, who was turned away from entering the West Bank some weeks ago, has long argued that Israel's time is running out. Decades ago he wrote that "Israel is deliberately turning itself into perhaps the most hated country in the world, and is also losing the allegiance of the population of the West, including younger American Jews, who are unlikely to tolerate its persistent shocking crimes for long."

Is Chomsky right? Maybe. America's formerly unqualified support for Israel is now qualified. Polls show that Democrat voters are unwilling to give Israel a blank check anymore. And, a glance at the Israeli press shows that while President Obama refused to condemn the massacre, his clear disapproval has made him Israel's enemy number-one. But Obama, like other US presidents, is helpless before a political establishment which has internalized a belief that Israel should never be criticized. The consensus on Israel-can-do-no-wrong is only just beginning to crack.

Question: why are the Palestinians losing so badly when others have won against larger, more powerful, enemies?

The fact is that Vietnam lost a million people but won; Timor finally achieved independence from Indonesia; Cuba has withstood siege for 50 years; and Venezuela under Chavez is resisting America.

The usual excuses for Palestinian failure can be trotted out: grand conspiracies, disunity, and lack of firepower. But surely it's time to get to the real reasons. The first is that of poor tactics: the weak cannot behave as the strong do. The leadership made disastrous decisions in Lebanon in 1982, then Lebanon again in 2006 (Hasan Nasrallah admitted his mistake), and Gaza in 2009. In arguing Palestine's case before the Western world, Palestinian leaders and diplomats have performed pathetically, and American Zionists readily shot holes into them. But they viewed men like Edward Said and Eqbal Ahmad with great alarm because, with passion and reason, these stalwarts of secular humanism refuted Israeli propaganda in an idiom that the world could understand. Alas, they are gone.

Human history is a long story of injustice and cruelty. In our times, nothing stands out more vividly than Palestine. But, tragically, this struggle for justice has been turned into a religious cause. When the secular PLO led the Palestinians, it commanded power and respect. After the 1982 debacle in Beirut, Hamas took over. Sending suicide bombers on to Israeli civilian targets decimated international support, heightened Israeli repression, and led to The Wall.

The tragic loss of life notwithstanding, the flotilla episode is a huge moral victory for Palestine and a defeat for Israel. Israel was shown up to be paranoid, dominated by fundamentalist nuclear-armed crazies, and trigger happy. The moral high ground has again turned out to be the Palestinian's principal weapon. It must not be wasted by firing off a few toy rockets from Gaza. Israelis love war and fear peace. This is why struggle for Palestine must be fought with different tactics.

Question: why are we Pakistanis so hyped-up about what Israel does but blind to what we do to our people and those in neighboring countries?

Let's face the truth: Israeli crimes are extremely serious but they pale in front of those committed almost daily by religious extremists in Pakistan. Israel murdered nine peace activists of the *Mavi Marmara*, but just hours earlier jihadists had killed over ninety Ahmadis peacefully praying in a mosque in Lahore. Israel starves Gaza, but the Taliban have imposed an even more brutal blockade of Shias in Parachinar and Kurram. Israel does not amputate the limbs of its enemies or decapitate them, but the Taliban do. Israel has destroyed schools for Palestinians in Gaza, but the Taliban have blown up nearly a thousand schools.

Of course, it is not just the religious extremists but also our state – the Pakistani state and army – that is guilty of atrocities. Israeli forces have never been accused of mass rape, but the Bengalis have never forgiven the Pakistani army for what it did in 1971. Israel is responsible for many abductions and disappearances, but does anyone have an estimate for the number of “disappeared persons” in Baluchistan? One could go on. So, instead of

riding the moral high horse and using different yardsticks here and there, it is time for us Pakistanis to also reflect upon the crimes of those from within us – and stop more wrongs from happening.

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