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## Israel's Latest Violation

The nonviolent activists aboard the flotilla hoping to break the blockade of Gaza were not terrorists, and their provoking of confrontation follows in a long tradition of peace and justice activism.

Every time Israel's right-wing government engages in yet another outrageous violation of international legal norms, it is easy to think, "No way are they going to get away with it this time!" And yet, thanks to the White House, Congress and leading American pundits, somehow, they do.

Israel's attack on an unarmed flotilla of humanitarian aid vessels in the eastern Mediterranean — resulting in more than a dozen fatalities, the wounding of scores of passengers and crew, and the kidnapping of 750 others — has so far not proven any different.

### **Violation of Maritime Law**

The bottom line is that under no circumstances does Israel, or any other country, have the right to board humanitarian aid vessels, guns blazing, in international waters. By most definitions, this is piracy, pure and simple. International maritime law gives the crew of ships attacked in international waters the right to defend themselves. Certainly it would have been better if the largely Turkish crew of the ship where most of the fatalities took place had not fought back. But it was well within their legal right to do so.

Israel's actions raise a number of questions. Why didn't the Israelis simply disable the rudders and guide the ships to port? Why did they have to board the ships with the guns blazing — according to eyewitnesses, before some members of the crew picked up their "weapons" of wrenches and poles — unless they intended to kill people?

In any case, now that Israel is finally releasing the first few humanitarian aid volunteers that they captured, the Israeli version that the commandoes acted in self-defense — repeatedly cited without question in the mainstream U.S. media — turns out to be false. "No one in the world will believe the lies and excuses which the government and army spokesmen come up with," [observed](#) Uri Avnery, journalist and former Israeli Knesset member.

However, apologists in Washington for Israel's right-wing government are already repeating the Israeli line that the nonviolent activists were "terrorists" and that they had "weapons" they found on board, such as a wrench, a come-along winch, and other items commonly found on ships. The Israeli government has withdrawn their earlier claims that they had found pistols and other guns on board, but its U.S. supporters are still repeating this lie. In reality, the "Freedom Flotilla" — a convoy of six ships organized by a coalition of human rights activists from Europe, North America, the Middle East, and elsewhere — allowed people to take part in the "Freedom Flotilla," [only on the grounds](#) that they "agree to adhere to the principles of non-violence and non-violent resistance in word and deed at all times."

Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-NY), whom the Democrats have chosen to lead the House Subcommittee on the Middle East, claimed that the killings were "wholly the fault and responsibility of the organizers of the effort to break through Israel and Egypt's legitimate closure of terrorist-controlled Gaza." Insisting that Israel's act of piracy on the high seas was "a legal mission," he claimed the humanitarian relief effort was actually "for the benefit of Hamas and as part of the international effort to delegitimize Israel's existence."

Critics of the flotilla are partially correct in observing that the purpose of the voyage was not just to deliver badly needed aid, but to “provoke a confrontation.” This, however, is part of the great tradition of nonviolent direct action. For example, civil rights activists in the 1960s were similarly criticized for provoking confrontation by sitting in at lunch counters, marching across Selma’s Edmund Pettus Bridge, and demonstrating in downtown Birmingham. It was only through such confrontations, revealing the brutality of the oppressor, that change was made.

## Washington’s Tepid Response

The Obama administration does not appear to be very interested in making change when it comes to its policies toward Israel. Indeed, the U.S. response to this tragedy is very reminiscent of the U.S.-backed Salvadoran junta’s atrocities in the 1980s. For example, when the U.S.-backed Salvadoran military murdered three American nuns and a Catholic lay worker involved in humanitarian relief efforts, the Reagan administration claimed that they were actually “political activists” who may have engaged in “an exchange of fire” with the Salvadoran soldiers, resulting in their deaths. Similarly, when the junta arrested 60 humanitarian aid workers, the Reagan administration defended the mass kidnapping on the grounds that the army had found such “weapons” as sharp sticks and gasoline, in the church basement where some of these aid workers had created a sanctuary for peasants seeking refuge from government-backed death squads. That such objects might have civilian uses was deemed irrelevant in an effort to depict the church workers as supporters of terrorism.

The Israelis confiscated all of the passengers’ cameras, laptops, cell phones, and other personal devices. The world, therefore, can only see some carefully edited versions from cameramen that accompanied the Israeli commandos. What won’t be seen, for example, will be the accounts of eyewitnesses of commandos with stun guns assaulting passengers who nonviolently formed a ring around the ship’s bridge, the savage beatings of elderly pacifists as they lay on the ground, and other acts of excessive violence.

Russia, Turkey, India, China, Brazil, France, Spain, and many other countries quickly and categorically condemned the attack on the humanitarian convoy. By stark contrast, the White House issued a [statement](#) that simply “expressed deep regret at the loss of life in today’s incident, and concern for the wounded.” The White House did not criticize Israel’s actions. Meanwhile, the State Department [appeared to condemn](#) the multinational effort to deliver medical supplies and other humanitarian aid, saying that “expanding the flow of goods to the people of Gaza...must be done in a spirit of cooperation, not confrontation.”

Similarly, Obama’s ambassador to the United Nations insisted that those wishing to aid the people of Gaza [should use](#) “non-provocative and non-confrontational mechanisms” and that “direct delivery by sea is neither appropriate nor responsible.” Given that Israel has steadfastly refused efforts by the international community to provide aid through “non-provocative and non-confrontational mechanisms,” it is unclear what the Obama administration suggests doing instead.

Had Barack Obama been in office at the time of the 1948 Soviet blockade of Berlin instead of Harry Truman, would he have rejected launching the airlift because he felt that addressing the humanitarian crisis in West Berlin “must be done in a spirit of cooperation, not confrontation,” and that the West should use “non-provocative and non-confrontational mechanisms?”

Perhaps a more revealing analogy would be this: Imagine how the Obama administration would have reacted if the attack on the vessels had been done by Iranians instead of the Israelis. Imagine if the Iranians had killed the passengers and crew, kidnapped hundreds of people on the ships, brought them to Iran, and held them incommunicado. It’s not likely that the White House would give the Iranians a free ride for such a blatant violation of international law. Nor would the media and Washington pundits be spewing out the Iranian account of events before the hostages even had a chance to tell their side of the story.

At the United Nations, the United States successfully blocked the Security Council from passing a resolution on the issue, accepting only an endorsement of a statement by the Security Council president, and then only after watering the statement down significantly. The original draft statement condemned Israel for violating international law, demanded an investigation by the United Nations, and insisted that Israel prosecute those responsible for the raid and pay compensation to the victims. However, the Obama administration refused to accept such wording. Instead, the statement simply condemned “those acts” that resulted in deaths, without naming Israel, implying that the victims on board the ships shared responsibility for getting killed when the Israelis engaged in an unprovoked attack on their ships in international waters. Indeed, when White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs was specifically asked whether the United States condemned Israeli conduct, he said that there was not enough information to make such a determination.

The Security Council president’s statement also called for “a credible, impartial, and transparent investigation.” The United States, however, insisted that such an investigation should only be done by the Israeli government itself. [According to Deputy Permanent Representative Alejandro Wolff](#), “We are convinced and support an Israeli investigation...and have every confidence that Israel can conduct a credible and impartial and transparent, prompt investigation internally.” However, according to recent reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, the Netanyahu government has failed miserably at conducting such credible investigations regarding violations of human rights and international legal norms by their forces. Surely, the Obama administration is aware of this. As a result, this raises questions as to whether the Obama administration even wants the truth to be known.

Indeed, Obama’s response to this tragedy underscores the phoniness of ‘his advocacy for human rights elsewhere in the Middle East. He is quite willing to criticize the Iranian regime for killing nonviolent activists on the streets of Tehran. But he excuses Israel for killing nonviolent activists on the high seas.

## **Continued Siege of Gaza**

In the meantime, Israel’s siege on the Gaza Strip continues to take its toll. Maintaining a strict embargo on arms and related materiel, which could be used by Hamas against Israeli civilians, is quite reasonable. But Israel’s severe restriction on medicines, food, and construction material needed to rebuild the thousands of homes — as well as schools and medical facilities — destroyed in Israel’s three-week military offensive two and a half years ago is not.

The results have been tragic. For example, a report by more than 80 UN and aid agencies [notes](#) how “the formal economy in Gaza has collapsed.” The UN Food and Agricultural Organization [reported](#) that “61 percent of people in the Gaza Strip are...food insecure,” of which “65 percent are children under 18 years.” The UN Relief Works Agency [reports](#) that “the number of Palestine refugees unable to access food and lacking the means to purchase even the most basic items, such as soap, school stationery and safe drinking water, has tripled” in the past three years, and the level of anemia in babies (9-12 months) was as high as 65.5 percent.”

The flotilla activists wanted to help relieve this suffering through providing humanitarian aid. Instead of responding to the crisis in Gaza, the Obama administration is shielding those responsible for the murder, beatings, and kidnapping of the humanitarian activists.

The very people defending Israel’s right to intercept these vessels are the same ones who have been insisting that Israel no longer occupies the Gaza Strip since the withdrawal of its colonists and occupation forces from the territory in 2005. If that were really the case, however, Israel would have no legal right to prevent ships entering Gaza’s waters. They can’t have it both ways. They can either acknowledge that the Gaza Strip remains occupied territory since Israel has it under a sea blockade, or they can acknowledge that the ships have a right to enter Gaza’s port unimpeded.

Sunday’s tragic incident is beginning to mobilize an outpouring of opposition to continued U.S. support for Israel’s right-wing government. Polls show a majority of registered Democrats opposing such unconditional support for Netanyahu’s rightist government. We must make clear to Democratic congressional candidates that we will not support them in November unless they insist that Israeli government — no more or less than any other government — be held responsible for such egregious violence against civilians.