

US Stands, and Lies, With Israel

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by: Ira Chernus, t r u t h o u t | Op-Ed

"We stand by Israel," State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley declared, as he voiced the State Department's **support** for Israel's internal investigation of the attack on the flotilla bound for Gaza. Israel "has the institutions and certainly the capability to conduct a credible, impartial and transparent investigation," Crowley said.

Over at the White House they stand by Israel, too. Though the White House **press release** forgot to use that exact phrase, the rest of the words of praise from the highest level of the US government were much the same as the State Department's: Israel "is capable of conducting a serious and credible investigation and the structure and terms of reference of Israel's proposed independent public commission can meet the standard of a prompt, impartial, credible and transparent investigation."

At the highest level of Israel's government, though, things look a bit different. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had to persuade his cabinet to approve the commission he appointed to investigate the killings at sea. On the Israeli right, any kind of investigation looks like capitulation to hostile world opinion.

To blunt charges of weakness, Netanyahu started off the cabinet meeting **insisting** that the whole purpose of the investigation is to prove that the Israel Navy operation and the ensuing investigations were appropriate and met international standards: "The government decision will make it clear to the world that Israel is acting legally, responsibly and with complete transparency."

"Two principles guided us," Netanyahu **said**. His first principle was "maintaining the freedom of IDF [Israel Defense Forces] soldiers to act and the credibility of the IDF investigation." To that end, Netanyahu told the **cabinet** that the committee he is appointing will not be able to talk with IDF soldiers, as any international investigating body no doubt would. The Israeli panel will have to rely on summaries of the IDF's own investigations and an interview with IDF Chief of Staff (and one of Israel's most powerful political figures) Lt. Gen. Gaby Ashkenazi.

Israel's civilian politicians are typically afraid of the political power of the military. So, their first rule is never to limit or impinge on the freedom of the IDF. That means letting the IDF investigate itself and then rubber-stamping the results.

The second principle, Netanyahu told his cabinet, "giving a credible and convincing response to the responsible states in the international community." Before meeting with his cabinet, Netanyahu addressed a gathering of his Likud Party and decoded those words. He **assured** his followers bluntly that he was appointing the committee only to appease the international community.

The editors of Israel's most respected newspaper, Ha'aretz, **got it right** : The panel is "aimed at appeasing the world, in particular the United States. Its authority is too limited to conduct a real investigation and its makeup raises the suspicion that it is designed more as a public-relations tool than to properly examine the events and reveal the responsible parties." It offers only "the deceptive appearance of a real investigation."

Another Ha'aretz editorial, denouncing the charade as "a farce" and "a whitewash," **pointed out** that the panel will have no real powers, not even those of a government probe, and that the head of the panel, retired Israeli Supreme Court Justice Yaakov Tirkel, "does not believe in such a panel." In an interview, he "made clear that he is not a devotee of drawing conclusions about individuals and dismissing those responsible for failures." Tirkel also opposed having foreigners on the panel. But to give the appearance of transparency, there will be two. One of them, David Trimble, a Northern Irish Nobel Peace Prize laureate, is a co-founder of a **new initiative** called "Friends of Israel" - along with neocon John Bolton and an eminent Likudnik, Dore Gold.

For all these reasons, as Ha'aretz concluded, the panel is bound to fail both at finding the truth and at appeasing the international community. It will be obvious to anyone watching closely that the investigation is intended to substitute appearance for truth, that the results of the investigation have already been determined in advance.

When truth disappears, all that's left is lies. So, if the US stands with Israel on this matter, as the State Department says, it stands with an Israeli government that seems ready to lie.

There's a similar move **brewing** in Congress, this one aimed at discrediting the flotilla movement by keeping all its participants out of the US because they are "terrorists." Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell are circulating a bipartisan **letter** calling on Obama to put the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH) on the US "terrorist" list.

At a press conference pushing this effort, Rep. Eliot Engel justified Israel's blockade of Gaza and its attacks on ships trying to break the blockade, using the familiar mantra: "The United States must stand with Israel as it seeks to carry out legitimate acts of self-defense." "Legitimate acts of self-defense" will surely be the conclusion of the Israeli probe, too.

But defense against what? What is it, exactly, that the US is standing with? Netanyahu has an answer, one that wraps all the particular distortions of truth inside one big overarching lie. To his cabinet, he **said** that the flotilla "was not a one-time thing. We find ourselves in the midst of a difficult and continuous battle against the State of Israel. The flood of hate is being led by Israel's enemies all over the world. They are trying to pinch us with the metal pinchers of missiles and terror and revoke Israel's right to defend itself."

In his talk to Likud, Netanyahu put it in a broader and more dramatic historical frame. "There is a difficult and continuing struggle against Israel being led by the country's enemies.... Dark forces from the Middle Ages are raging against us," he **warned ominously**.

Netanyahu is usually content to equate all critics of Israel with Nazis and charge that another Holocaust is in the making. Now, though, he conjures up a much larger history of oppression going back to the Middle Ages, identifying Israel's critics not merely with Hitler, but with ten centuries or more of anti-Semitic persecution, violence and rage.

It might be tempting to dismiss such florid rhetoric as mere window dressing. But it would be a mistake. Because when a lie is repeated often enough, it becomes the big lie. And when so many people believe the big lie, it takes on a life of its own. Ignoring it means letting it go on doing its destructive work.

The popular picture of Israel as a defenseless ghetto, packed with innocent, vulnerable Jews surrounded by raging anti-Semites, is the big lie that lets all the little falsehoods about Israeli policy flourish.

Apparently, it's increasingly popular in Israel. Reporting on a poll that shows Netanyahu's popularity growing (though still at only 52 percent approval), Ha'aretz **commented**: "The [Israeli] public apparently buys Netanyahu's narrative, which seems to suggest that the world is hypocritical, that we are the only just people and that whoever is not with him - with Netanyahu - is against Israel."

Israeli columnist Doron Rosenblum agrees that Netanyahu **gets political mileage** out of this narrative of victimization: "The National PR man has once again succeeded in explaining to the domestic consumer, who is wallowing in his fears and hatreds, that there really is a reason for the sense of siege, isolation and persecution: The world is hypocritical, the wave is getting stronger, the vise is closing in." And Rosenblum points out the tragic irony: the more Israelis base their policies on their fear of being ostracized by the world, the more they take actions that insure they'll be ostracized.

Unfortunately, we don't have polls that ask the public here in the US about that narrative. If we did, I'd bet the farm that it would be accepted by a sizable majority, in one form or another. There are many versions, some more subtle than others. But they all reflect the basic image of

the Jews as victims of an unbroken chain of oppression and victimization, leading right up to the present-day woes of "poor little Israel."

There would be many Americans who would know the facts that disprove this narrative: Israel's immense military power, which it does not hesitate to use, and Israel's obvious position as dominator, not dominated. Some would know that the history of the Jews is hardly one of unrelieved persecution. Jews have often lived amicably with Christians and Muslims in many places around the world. Certainly, today, most Jews in the US and many other lands live freely, with virtually full acceptance and no discrimination.

Yet, even those who consciously know these facts are unconsciously affected by the story of endless suffering, which Netanyahu and so many other Israeli leaders have relied on to justify Israel's violence. That's how the big lie works, spreading its tentacles beneath the surface of consciousness as well as above it.

And I suspect that it reaches up to the highest levels of power, in Washington as well as Jerusalem. There's no hard proof; the evidence is anecdotal. But when you grow up in a culture suffused with the big lie, it is very difficult to escape. With a public so primed to see Jews as defenseless victims, policymakers who are on the fence find it politically safer to "stand with Israel." And if they still aren't sure which way to go, the emotional tug of the Israeli narrative, no matter how slight, can be enough to tilt them to the Israelis' side.

That's not to say Washington always takes the Israelis' side. In the wake of international outrage over the flotilla attack, President Obama called on the Israelis to ease the Gaza blockade. Though they'd previously refused, the Israelis are now taking steps, albeit **slowly and ambiguously**, to comply. As **one Israeli analyst** put it: "The right flank of Netanyahu's cabinet is far from thrilled with these steps, and the same goes for senior defense establishment officials, But when the Obama administration insists, the Netanyahu government gives in.

This was the price Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak paid for Obama's stamp of approval on an internal investigation that would save those leaders' political skin, according to

Israeli journalist **Amos Harel**: "Netanyahu and Barak fought like lions over the status and powers of the committee that has been appointed to examine the naval raid. The narrow mandate accorded the committee, with U.S. agreement, ensures that no harm will befall the two leaders."

It also insures that little or no harm will befall the big lie with which all Israeli governments have justified their violence against Palestinians and the ensuing cover-ups. And it encourages the Israelis to count on the big lie to justify future violence against the **many flotillas yet to come**.

The same big lie is part of the reason the U.S. government so often stands, and lies, with Israel - even when that policy obviously runs counter to U.S. interests and alienates the U.S. from the international community, as in the current case of the flotilla investigation. How big a part the lie plays is anyone's guess. There's no way to prove it. But it would be dangerous to underestimate it.

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