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CounterPunch

Pariah Nation

By ALEXANDER COCKBURN

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As the tv networks here give unlimited airtime to its apologists, the message rolls out that Israel is permitted every illegal act in the lexicon of international law, from acts of violence against a civilian population (the people of Gaza, starved under permanent blockade) to piracy on the high seas and the lethal attacks by Israeli commandos on the relief flotilla. The guiding purpose in this tsunami of drivel is that the viewers should be brainwashed into thinking Israel somehow has the right and the duty to act at will as the mad-dog of the planet.

Israel regrets... But no! Israel doesn't regret. It preens and boasts and demands approval – which it duly gets from its prime sponsor, the United States government, and most of the press. As former US senator Jim Abourezk [remarked](#) on this site last week "It's very much like the bully who, after punching someone smaller in the jaw, requires the victim to apologize for getting his face in the way of the bully's fist."

Two points need stressing. Some of the critical commentary suggests that Israel's murderous onslaught on the Mavi Marmara represents a qualitative escalation in that nation's brazen criminality. Scarcely. Brazen criminality coincided with the establishment of the state in 1948. Only last week I [reminded](#) CounterPunchers of the lethal onslaught on the USS Liberty in 1967 which killed 34 and wounded 173.

The attack on the Mavi Marmara was carefully planned. As Max Blumenthal reports on his website,

Tel Aviv-Israeli Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his senior ministers have attempted to blame army commanders for “the bungled raid on a Gaza-bound flotilla,” according to the UK’s Daily Telegraph. ...

But was the raid really bungled? Did the Israeli military command and Netanyahu government have no clear strategy going in? Or was the violence they meted out against the flotilla activists deliberate and methodically planned?

Statements by senior Israeli military commanders made in the Hebrew media days before the massacre revealed that the raid was planned over a week in advance by the Israeli military and was personally approved by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Minister of Defense Ehud Barak. ... Details of the plan show that the use of deadly force was authorized and calculated.

The massacre of activists should not have been unexpected.

On May 28, three days before the raid, top Israeli military officials revealed details of their strategy to Maariv, Israel’s most widely circulated paper. The caption of the Maariv article reflected the military command’s plan to use force: “On the way to violence; one of the boats is on its way.”

In the opinion of much of the world, Israel is descending to the status of South Africa in the final years of apartheid (in which period, it has just emerged, Israel was trying to sell South Africa nuclear weapons) – a pariah nation.

In February the Tel Aviv-based Reut Institute presented a big report to the Israeli cabinet, long in the making, called “The Delegitimization Challenge: Creating a Political Firewall.” It has sinister recommendations for a strategy of “offense.” Israel’s government is embarking on a methodical assault on human rights groups and kindred NGOs seen as delegitimizers. It’s not paranoid to expect COINTELPRO-type black-bag jobs sponsored by Israel on solidarity groups here and around the world.

Israel is plunging into deeper darkness. As the Israeli journalist Gideon Levy recently told one interviewer: “In the last year there have been real cracks in the democratic system of Israel.... It’s systematic—it’s not here and there. Things are becoming much harder.” And Levy also wrote in *Ha’aretz*, “When Israel closes its gates to anyone who doesn’t fall in line with our official positions, we are quickly becoming similar to North Korea. When right-wing parties increase their number of anti-democratic bills, and from all sides there are calls to make certain groups illegal, we must worry, of course. But when all this is engulfed in silence, and when even academia is increasingly falling in line with dangerous and dark views...the situation is apparently far beyond desperate.”

Who’s In Charge Here?

Americans don’t care to have a wimp in the White House. They’ll take almost any outlandish vulgarity from their commander in chief and give him a positive job-rating.

But wimpishness? No. Until Obama, the last president to earn wimp ranking was Jimmy Carter whose chances of reelection thirty years ago expired when he gave wimpish speeches about America's "malaise" and was photographed beating off a rabbit that swam up to his canoe and tried to board it.

Obama isn't in that sort of trouble yet, but he's drifting close.

The fates soon sniff out wimps and deal them bad cards. Obama was all set to make a big speech in Chicago on Memorial Day. Not only was the speech rained out but he started quavering to the crowd about the danger of lightning before scuttling off with his Secret Service guards and getting bogged down in a traffic jam.

One of America's greatest heroes is Ben Franklin – featured on that symbol of optimism, the hundred dollar bill -- who made a sporting effort to fry himself, courting a lightening bolt with his kite.

Wimps can't emote convincingly because they're worried about going too far.

The White House press corps – until recently without a presidential press conference for ten months – quizzes Obama's press secretary about Obama's evident inability to project anger about BP's oil spill, now bidding to be the greatest environmental disaster in the nation's history. Obama's flack claimed his boss was "enraged" at BP. "Can you describe it?" asked Chip Reid of CBS. "Does he yell and scream? What does he do?" The best Gibbs could offer was evocation of Obama's "clenched jaw".

At least half of any US president's job is play-acting, pretending to be in charge, on behalf of We the People. Most of what actually happens in America is beyond any president's ability or political inclination to control.

The banks run the finances. The oil companies and Israel vie for control of US foreign policy. The arms companies arrange the wars. The insurance companies figure out who should live or die.

Bill Clinton was so servile to big business that he took a phone call from a Florida sugar baron, even though Monica Lewinsky was giving him a blow-job when the call came in. He surely shocked the feisty intern with his obsequious manner as the baron issued a crisp command to kill off Al Gore's impertinent talk about environmental clean-up of the Everglades. But Clinton could still scream and throw his weight around in the manner expected of a president.

The all-time presidential champ at bullying was Lyndon Johnson who once lifted up the Greek ambassador by his lapels and snarled at him, "'Fuck your Parliament and your Constitution. America is an elephant. Cyprus is a flea. Greece is a flea. If those two fleas continue itching the elephant they may just get whacked by the elephant's trunk. Whacked good...."

But Johnson was as servile to the Texas oil kings – most notably the Murchisons – as Clinton was to the sugar baron Alfonso Fanjul. LBJ would delightedly unwrap the bundles of cash Murchison regularly sent up to him.

Obama isn't into lifting anyone up by the lapels. It's the other way round. Week after week he's being hoist off the floor of the Oval Office and thrown against the wall, by everyone from Jamie Dimon of JPMorgan to Benjamin Netanyahu. When Obama tries to bark, it comes out as a yip, like a Chihuahua aping a pit bull.

A year ago Obama gave his famous speech in Cairo, addressing the Muslim World in a constructive manner. He vowed “to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world”, declaring, “Islam is a part of America” and “is an important part of promoting peace.”

It was a great act, but one utterly disconnected from the realities of American politics. Wimps love to be crowd-pleasers. But a year later the crowd – world opinion, in this instance – is remembering the speech as one betrayed commitment after another.

It's clear enough the White House knew of the impending Israeli attack on the relief flotilla and contented itself with a private, purely *pro forma* call for restraint. In other words, a green light. It may even encouraged the lethal violence, as its own signal to Turkey that its initiative with Brazil to defuse the Iran crisis had not found favor with the US government.

The public White House response to Israel's international piracy was comical in its wimpishness. “The United States deeply regrets the loss of life and injuries sustained and is currently working to understand the circumstances surrounding this tragedy,” deputy White House press secretary Bill Burton demurely declared in Chicago.

A friend of mine gave a good parody of the servile posture of the US government and press: “I think,” he wrote to me, “that matters are close to the point where if Hillary Clinton and a group of senior American officials were meeting the Israeli leaders for negotiations, and Netanyahu expressed his displeasure at the American positions by pulling out a gun and shooting her dead, then having the entire American delegation beaten to death by his security guards, there would probably be a small item buried in the next days' American newspapers that due to conflict with the Israelis, Obama had decided to nominate a new Secretary of State.”

There's a political price to be paid for manifest wimpiness. Obama is running up a hefty bill.

A Deadly 9/11 Cover-Up

In our latest newsletter, hot off the press - What do the W.R. Grace Company, the Trade Towers, Libby Montana and asbestos have in common? Andrea Peacock weaves the fatal threads together in a brilliant investigation. The terrible bottom line:

“If asbestos-related diseases begin showing up in rescue workers and others exposed at Ground Zero in the next few years, there’s little doctors can do about it. There’s medication to ease the symptoms of asbestosis – in which scar tissue caused by asbestos fibers gradually suffocates victims – but no cure. Those with lung disease can forestall the inevitable decline by taking care of themselves: quit smoking, get plenty of exercise to keep their lung capacity as high as possible. It could take another 30 years for mesothelioma cases to manifest – an asbestos-related lung cancer that kills fast once it hits. The full legacy of that day, for which W.R. Grace now bears some responsibility, will be unfolding for decades. “

Also in this powerful edition: After a mine disaster in western Siberia Russian workers rise up. Boris Kagarlitsky describes the social explosion. Jeffrey Blankfort reviews *Quicksand*, the book the Israel lobby doesn’t want you to read.