

Ireland's Bloody Sunday: Why the Israeli State Must Not be Allowed to Hold its Own Inquiry into Bloody Monday

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The long-awaited British public inquiry into Bloody Sunday is expected to be published later this month. [1]

This is the inquiry into the events of 30 January, 1972, in which members of the British Parachute Regiment opened fire on Irish civilians protesting for civil rights in the city of Derry. On that day, 13 civilians were shot dead and a fourteenth would later die from his wounds. Scores were also injured from gunshots in the bloodbath that shocked the world.





The British inquiry into Bloody Sunday should serve as a salutary lesson as to why such probes controlled by the state are inadequate to establish truth and justice. The lesson is particularly apposite in the light of events of Bloody Monday on 31 May, 2010, when Israeli commandos opened fire on humanitarian aid workers onboard the Gaza Freedom Flotilla, killing at least nine civilians and wounding several dozen.

Israeli leaders have rejected widespread international calls for an independent inquiry into the bloodshed, asserting that Israel has the “right and the ability” to conduct its own investigation. Israel’s snub to world opinion is being facilitated by the US government, which has not condemned the killings and is endorsing an Israeli-led inquiry.

US secretary of state Hillary Clinton is doing her best to afford a veneer of credibility to the proposed Israeli investigation by unctuously urging it to be “transparent”.

This is an insult to ordinary intelligence, legal standard and morality. How can a state conduct a transparent investigation into actions by its military forces, when that state has already declared such actions as “justified self-defence against terrorists”?

Adding further insult to the victims of this atrocity on the high seas and to the opinion of the world community are the weasel words of Tony Blair, the special envoy of the Quartet on the Middle East – comprising the EU, Russia, the UN and US.

The former British prime minister – and in some circles a wanted war criminal – has also backed an Israeli-led inquiry. Perhaps with a little more sophistry than Clinton, he added that the inquiry “may have some sort of international element that could be part of it”. When you strip out the vacuity and conditional verb tenses, Blair’s seeming concession to the international community over an Israeli investigation boils down to simply just this – endorsement of a state-controlled probe.

Of all people, Blair is probably the most qualified in understanding the benefits (meaning the inadequacy) of state-controlled public inquiries. The recent British Iraq Inquiry – supposedly called to examine the rationale of why Blair’s government launched the ongoing war on Iraq along with the US – achieved nothing in the way of impugning Blair for what has

subsequently been clearly proven in the eyes of the world to be an illegal, criminal war in which over one million Iraqis have lost their lives.

On the contrary, by testifying to the inquiry, Blair was afforded the opportunity to burnish his smug and sanctimonious reasons for ordering this slaughter. And the British establishment gets to earn a bit of international kudos for seeming to hold its government to account.

The Bloody Sunday Inquiry provides further insights into the cynicism and inadequacy of state-controlled investigation into cases of grave misconduct by the state.

To recap, the events of Bloody Sunday occurred during a swell of protest among the Catholic, mainly nationalist, community in British-controlled Northern Ireland. Since the inception of the state in 1920-21, that community endured a raft of discriminatory policies, ranging from unequal policing, housing, employment and voting rights. During the massive civil rights march in Derry City in 1972, British soldiers from the Parachute Regiment, armed with automatic rifles, opened fire indiscriminately on the crowds. No British soldier was injured that day.

The first state inquiry into the killings, led by Lord Widgery, was concluded 11 weeks later, but it was angrily condemned by the nationalist population as a whitewash. Widgery recycled British military claims that they had been fired upon first by republican activists and that some of the protesters that had been shot were armed and attacking the troops, who acted in self-defence. The similarity is striking to Israeli claims over its murderous attack on aid workers onboard the Mavi Marmara, all the more so given that media footage of both events show the official justifications to be groundless.

Such was the crude untransparency of the Widgery Inquiry and the lingering international controversy, the British state finally moved to set up a second public investigation. This was established in 1998 by then prime minister Tony Blair. The second inquiry was presented as a major concession by the British government of finally coming clean to establish the truth of what happened on that horrific day.

Chaired by Lord Saville, the second inquiry began hearings in 2000 and wound up in late 2004. Since then, publication of its findings has been beset by inexplicable delays, which have caused huge consternation among relatives of the victims, who have waited nearly 40 years for justice and truth.

The last delay came in March of this year when the British government announced that its lawyers would review the inquiry's findings in private to curtail information that may compromise "national security". This once again raised fears that another whitewash of its soldiers' conduct is in the offing. Such concerns emerged at the opening of the second inquiry when the British government made the surprise announcement that members of the Parachute Regiment involved in Bloody Sunday would not be attending the hearings in Derry City and that they would remain anonymous, giving their accounts from behind screens via a video link from London.

The Saville Inquiry was a marginal advance on the Widgery report insofar that it allowed testimonies from those who were wounded on Bloody Sunday, eyewitnesses and relatives of the victims. The proceedings heard some shocking accounts of unwarranted British army brutality. One priest told how he was prevented from attending to a dying man by a soldier

who held a gun to his head. Previous British claims of acting in self-defence were shown to be baseless and it was established that unarmed civilians were shot in cold blood.

But in the end, the Saville Inquiry will prove to be merely a more sophisticated whitewash than the original investigation. After four years and thousands of hours of hearings and a further six years of privy deliberation – all amounting to a cost of some £400 million to the British taxpayer – the fundamental conclusion will be missing: that the British military carried out a murderous act of state terror against civilians. Because of the anonymity ordained by the British government for its accused soldiers none of them will be prosecuted for murder.

From the tragedy of Bloody Sunday in Ireland 38 years ago and the long-overdue, but anodyne official British report only coming out this month, the salutary lesson is that the world community has to insist that the Israeli state must not be allowed to brush over the events on Bloody Monday with its own state-led inquiry. Such inquiries, as Tony Blair and others well know, only serve to allow the state to determine the parameters of investigation in such a way as to prevent justice and truth being obtained.

Such an injustice has profound consequences for the continuation of conflict and violence in the Middle East and elsewhere. After the horror of Bloody Sunday and the British cover-up of its gross violation of human rights, hundreds of young Irish men would subsequently join the then nascent Provisional Irish Republican Army and nearly 30 years of bloody conflict ensued.

Derry City's historic fortress walls from where some of the British Paratroopers opened fire on the crowds below on Bloody Sunday, there are these words of graffiti that proclaim this simple but profound truth: " WHEN THOSE WHO ARE SUPPOSED TO UPHOLD THE LAW BREAK THE LAW THEN THERE IS NO LAW".

With thanks to Paul Kane

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Note

[1] <http://uk.news.yahoo.com/22/20100526/tuk-uk-britain-bloodysunday-fa6b408.html>

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Finian Cunningham has written extensively on international affairs, with articles published in several languages. Many of his recent articles appear on the renowned Canadian-based news website Globalresearch.ca. He is a Master's graduate in Agricultural Chemistry and worked as a scientific editor for the Royal Society of Chemistry, Cambridge, England, before pursuing a career in journalism. He specialises in Middle East and East Africa issues and has also given several American radio interviews as well as TV interviews on Press TV and Russia Today. Previously, he was based in Bahrain and witnessed the political upheavals in the Persian Gulf kingdom during 2011 as well as the subsequent Saudi-led brutal crackdown against pro-democracy protests.

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