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US Foreign Policy Invigorated at the Expense of Gaza

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US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has made a series of stern and fiery statements recently, giving the impression that war is somehow upon us once again. Oddly, Clinton's sudden reappearance into the Middle East diplomacy scene was triggered by the brave attempts of peace activists to break the siege on Gaza.

In recent months, as Arab nations settled old scores with their insufferable dictators, US foreign policy started taking a backseat. Attempts at swaying Arab revolts teetered between bashful diplomatic efforts to sustain US interests – as was the case with Yemen – and military intervention, as in Libya, which is still being marketed to the US public as a humanitarian intervention, as opposed to the war it actually is.

The indecisiveness and double-standards on display are hardly new.

The US' stance during the Tunisian popular revolution ranged between complete lack of interest (when the protests began brewing in December 2010), to sudden enthusiasm for freedom and democracy (when the revolts led to the ousting of longtime President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011).

The same foreign policy pendulum repeatedly swung both ways during the Egyptian Revolution. The US political definitions of Hosni Mubarak shifted from that of a friendly leader to that of a loathsome dictator who had to go for the sake of Egyptian democracy.

It took Tunisians 28 days to overthrow their leader, and Egyptians 18 days to outset Mubarak. During these periods, US foreign policy in the two countries – and the Middle East as a whole – seemed impossible to delineate in any concrete statements. Hillary Clinton was an emblematic figure in this diplomatic discrepancy.

Now Clinton is back, speaking in a lucid language which leaves no room for misinterpretation. When it comes to the security and interests of Israel – as opposed to those of the entire Middle East region and all its nations – Clinton, like other top American officials, leaves no room for error. Israel will always come first.

Clinton's forceful language was triggered by the decision of humanitarian activists from over 20 countries to travel to Gaza in a symbolic gesture to challenge the Israeli blockade of one of the poorest regions on earth. The 500 peace activists on board ten boats will include musicians, writers, Nobel Laureates, Holocaust survivors, and members of parliament.

"We think that it's not helpful for there to be flotillas that try to provoke action by entering

into Israeli waters and creating a situation in which the Israelis have the right to defend themselves," Clinton told reporters on June 23. Of course, the foreboding language offers another blank check to Israel, giving it permission to do as it pleases. If Israel repeated the same scenario it used to intercept and punish activists abroad the first flotilla on May 31, 2010 – killing nine activists in the Mavi Marmara – then it would constitute another act of 'self-defense', according to Clinton's avant-garde rationale.

Responding to Clinton's comments, Irish MEP Paul Murphy told the Irish Examiner on June 24: "It is not true that we will be entering Israeli waters. We will be sailing through Gaza waters." He added, "Ms Clinton's comments are disgraceful. She has essentially given the green light to Israeli Defence Forces to use violence against participants in the flotilla." Indeed, Israeli diplomats will be utilizing Clinton's advanced verbal and political support for the Israeli action in every platform available to them.

According to Clinton, the entire business with the flotillas is unnecessary. "We don't think it's useful or helpful or productive to the people of Gaza," she told reporters in Washington, adding that, "a far better approach is to support the work that's being done through the United Nations."

The United Nations had already declared the Gaza siege illegal. Various top UN officials have stated this fact repeatedly, and the international body had called on Israel to end the siege. Notable among the many statements was a 34-page report by UN human rights chief Navi Pillay. Published on August 14, 2009, the report "accused Israel of violating the rules of warfare with its blockade stopping people and goods from moving in or out of the Gaza Strip," according to the Associated Press. The Gaza blockade," Pillay stated, "amounts to collective punishment of civilians, which is prohibited under the Geneva Conventions on the conduct of warfare and occupation." Before the 34 pages could be thoroughly examined, both the US and Israel dismissed the findings. Now Clinton is suddenly urging all interested parties to work through the same institution that her department has repeatedly undermined.

Pillay's report was issued nearly two years ago. Since then, little has been done to remedy the situation and to bring to an end the protracted Palestinian tragedy in Gaza. In fact, UNRWA has recently put Gaza's unemployment at 45.2 percent, allegedly amongst the worst in the world. The UN report, released on June 14, claimed that unemployment in the first half of 2011 had increased by 3 percent. Monthly wages were also shown to have declined significantly. It seems the humanitarian crisis in Gaza is not only bad, it is progressively worsening.

This time, Clinton is speaking from a power position. As diplomatic pressure from Israel finally dissuaded Turkey from allowing the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (İHH) from joining the flotilla, it seems the Mavi Marmara won't be setting sail to Gaza anytime soon. As if to confirm that the IHH decision was motivated by political pressure, Clinton "spoke to her Turkish counterpart, Ahmet Davutoglu to express her happiness at the announcement" (according to Turkey's Hurriyet Daily News, June 21).

With political victory in mind, the State Department travel warning of June 22 read like a legal disclaimer issued by the Israeli foreign ministry. It warned US citizens to avoid any attempt to reach Gaza by sea. Those who participate in a flotilla risk arrest, prosecution, deportation and a possible 10-year travel ban by Israel.

In a region that is rife with opportunities for political stances – or at least a measureable shift in policy – the US State Department and its chief diplomat have offered nothing but inconsistency and contradiction. Now, thanks to a group of peaceful civil society activists, including many pacifists and elders, the State Department is getting its decisive voice back. And the voice is as atrocious and unprincipled as ever.

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