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POLITICO

'We're the only ones who believe them'

By: Ben Smith

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A delicate diplomatic maneuver by President Barack Obama to smooth frayed relations with Israel without alienating America's Arab allies may have been blown out of the water Monday morning by Israel's botched attempt to enforce the Gaza blockade – and by the lack of condemnation from Washington that followed it.

For while much about the incident remains unclear, a day of carefully parsed statements from the White House and State Department left at least one irrefutable aftershock: With much of the world expressing fury over the raid, the contrast with Washington's muted response could not have been more striking.

"The situation is that they're so isolated right now that it's not only that we're the only ones who will stick up for them," said an American official. "We're the only ones who believe them – and what they're saying is true."

The official was referring to Israeli protestations – backed by Israeli Defense Forces video – that their soldiers were attacked by passengers on a ship headed for Gaza with humanitarian aid, when they boarded the ship in what the Israelis concede were international waters.

Organizers of the flotilla, meanwhile, insisted that participants were unarmed and that Israeli forces used excessive force.

The timing of the incident had to be viewed with rueful irony among the administration's Middle East hands. Obama spent this spring damping down concern among American friends of Israel that his seeming feud with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had brought the administration to the verge of fundamentally altering the historic U.S. alliance with the Jewish state. Obama met personally with Jewish members of Congress and dispatched top officials to Jewish groups to stress the point, as the "anti-Bibi" rhetoric was simultaneously dialed back precipitously.

The charm offensive appears to have worked. But now an administration that itself has expressed its own fury toward Netanyahu and his government in the past now finds itself close to sharing Israel's isolation at the moment – a dynamic that could complicate Obama's outreach to the rest of the region.

Israel's traditional critics denounced the raid – the chief Palestinian peace negotiator, Saeb Erakat, called it a “war crime” – but so did some of the countries Jerusalem counts as friendly. Turkey's Prime Minister described the incident as an act of “inhuman state terror” and Ankara withdrew its ambassador to Israel while the Conservative British Foreign Secretary took the occasion to call the Gaza blockade “unacceptable and counter-productive.”

The White House, in sharp contrast, avoided any hint of criticism of the Israeli action in its public statements, and American officials appeared sympathetic to Israeli explanations that their soldiers were attacked by flotilla participants.

The U.S. “deeply regrets the loss of life and injuries sustained” in the Israeli raid, deputy White House press secretary Bill Burton said in the first of three carefully-modulated statements Monday. The administration, he said, is “working to understand the circumstances surrounding this tragedy.”

The White House rendition of a call between Obama and Netanyahu also strained to avoid condemnation, and went out of the way to note that many of those wounded in the incident “are being treated in Israeli hospitals.”

Six hours later, State Department spokesman PJ Crowley issued a third statement, adding that the U.S. expects that the Israeli government – the unstated emphasis was not the United Nations – “will conduct a free and credible investigation.”

Crowley added an evenhanded paragraph calling on the Israelis to open Gaza to humanitarian aid, while simultaneously condemning the militant group Hamas, whose political control of Gaza prompted the blockade.

“Hamas' interference with international assistance shipments and work of nongovernmental organizations, and its use and endorsement of violence, complicates efforts in Gaza,” Crowley said.

The immediate upshot of the statements from the United States and other countries is that Obama, perhaps surprisingly, finds himself in the same posture as his predecessors over the past 60 years – one that holds that the U.S. is far more willing to give the Israelis the benefit of the doubt on matters of security.

Washington “is always going to be the most reluctant major global actor to condemn Israeli excesses, and that is the position President Obama finds himself in right now,” said Hussein Ibish, a Senior Fellow at The American Task Force on Palestine.

That position squares with the administration's apparent, reluctant rapprochement with Israeli's rightist leader – even if that burying of grudges had deep reverberations for the peace process.

"After wandering around for 15 months, vacillating between pandering to the Israelis and trying to punish them, they have decided they have to work out some kind of relationship with Netanyahu that allows them to do something serious," said Aaron David Miller, a former American peace negotiator. "They need to weather this crisis with the relationship with the Israelis north of where it is now."

The most immediate challenge, Miller said, will be steering a special session of the UN Security Council – called by Arab members – away from forcing the U.S. either to vote on condemning Israel's actions or to veto a resolution condemning them.

Observers of the process expect the U.S. to attempt to craft a resolution that doesn't condemn Israeli directly and doesn't establish any international investigation, like an earlier inquiry into Israel's actions in Gaza led by the former South African Judge Richard Goldstone.

Obama and other American officials stressed the need to study the details of the incident, as the Israeli government pointed to video of passengers on the ship – which was boarded in international waters – attacking Israeli commandos with what appeared to be chairs and metal poles.

"At this point, it is unclear what happened and there must be a thorough investigation," Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry said in a statement.

Others suggested that further probes may not change the initial reactions. "You can have an independent commission spend 3 or 4 months studying this thing and come out with something that is stunningly clear and factual, but it doesn't matter," said Miller. "People knew where they were before this episode started."



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