

Behind the USS Liberty Cover-up

For decades, Israel has exercised strong influence over U.S. policies in the Mideast via its highly effective Washington lobby, but that power was tested in 1967 when Israeli warplanes strafed the USS Liberty killing 34 American crewmen, an incident revisited in a new documentary reviewed by Maidhc Ó Cathail.

By Maidhc Ó Cathail

"The Day Israel Attacked America," an investigation into Israel's deadly June 8, 1967 attack on the USS Liberty at the height of the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War, was aired recently on Al Jazeera America.

Directed by British filmmaker Richard Belfield, the documentary confirms not only that the attack on the U.S. Navy spy ship was deliberate, an undisputed fact long accepted by all but the most shameless Israeli apologists, but reveals, perhaps for the first time, how Tel Aviv was able to induce the U.S. government to cover up an attack that killed 34 and injured 171 of its own seamen by a supposed "ally."

"It was especially tough for Lyndon Johnson, to date the most pro-Israeli American president in history," the film's narrator observed. According to Tom Hughes, the State Department's director of intelligence and research at the time of the Liberty attack, "Johnson was in a very tough mood."

As an indication of Johnson's initial firm stance, Hughes recalled that Johnson briefed Newsweek magazine off the record that the Israelis had attacked the Liberty, suggesting that they may have done so because they believed that the naval intelligence-gathering ship had been intercepting Israeli as well as Egyptian communications.

A post-interview leak revealing that it was the President himself who had briefed the media about the attack on the Liberty alarmed the Israeli embassy in Washington and its friends in the major Jewish organizations, who intimated that Johnson's Newsweek briefing "practically amounted to blood libel."

The documentary's narrator said declassified Israeli documents now show that "they were going to threaten President Johnson with 'blood libel', gross anti-Semitism, and that would end his political career."

"Blackmail!" retired U.S. Navy admiral Bobby Ray Inman frankly summed up Israel's strategy to deal with Johnson. "[T]hey know if he is thinking about running again he's going to need money for his campaign," said Inman, who from 1977 to 1981 directed the National Security Agency, the U.S. intelligence agency

under whose aegis the USS Liberty had been dispatched to the eastern Mediterranean. "So alleging that he's blood-libeling is going to arouse the Jewish donors."

The Israeli government hired teams of lawyers, including close friends of Johnson, the narrator added, and began an "all-out offensive" to influence media coverage of the attack, leaning on them "to kill critical stories" and slant others in Israel's favor.

"There was a campaign mounted to see what could be done about returning Johnson to his normal, predictable pro-Israeli position," Hughes said. "Efforts were to be made to remind the President of the delicacy of his own position, that he personally might lose support for his run for reelection in 1968."

Israelis Bearing Gifts

Noting the cleverness of Israel's tactics, the documentary revealed that after having identified the Vietnam War as Johnson's "soft spot" it quietly provided him with "two extraordinary gifts."

The first addressed the President's bitterness toward many American Jewish organizations and community leaders over their opposition to his Vietnam policy. But as the Liberty crisis unfolded, Hughes said, "they were suddenly becoming more silent on Vietnam." Johnson was made to understand that taking a more "moderate" position toward Israel over the attack would benefit him politically.

The second gift was a vital military one. The U.S. military attaché in Tel Aviv received a surprise visit. "I think I have something you might be interested in," a senior Israeli intelligence officer told him. The Israelis had just crossed the Red Sea to capture the Egyptian military's Soviet-supplied surface-to-air missiles, the same ones the North Vietnamese were using to bring down American aircraft on a daily basis.

As a show of gratitude, the U.S. government gave the Israelis two gifts in return. The Johnson administration resupplied them with the weapons they had used in their six-day land grab of territory from Egypt, Jordan and Syria. The White House also decided to water down the Defense Department's inquiry into the attack on the Liberty.

As Hughes explained, "Soon Johnson did respond, and took a much more lenient line and wished that the whole incident could be put behind us as soon as possible."

Johnson's "softer approach" to Israel was reflected in the U.S. Navy inquiry then underway onboard the Liberty. As one of the survivors recalled, the

Liberty's crew began to realize that "a cover-up was descending" upon them. Among key testimony ignored was the strafing of the Liberty's deck with napalm and the machine-gunning of the sinking ship's lifeboats.

Without interviewing any Israelis involved in the attack, the U.S. court of inquiry rushed out a report, hurriedly completed in a mere 20 days, exonerating Israel from blame. Tel Aviv quickly followed up with its own report that concluded that the whole incident was "a series of mistakes, and that no one was to blame."

Ignoring a secret telegram from its ambassador in Washington advising that Tel Aviv admit its guilt in light of America's possession of an incriminating audio tape of the attack, Israel instead shifted its focus to repairing the damage to its relationship with the U.S.

"The Israelis have always been very skillful at tracking what the U.S. government is doing, saying, thinking, and effort[s] to influence it," Inman pointed out. "And the great advantage they have as compared to other countries is their influence on the Congress."

A timely Washington Post report noted that "the Jewish lobby could help determine the outcome of 169 of the 270 electoral votes needed to win the White House."

As Johnson considered his re-election prospects, Hughes said the "emotive" language used in earlier Pentagon press releases disappeared and was replaced by "a much more bland and neutral-sounding discourse."

"But whatever was said to journalists," the narrator added, "every U.S. intelligence head believed that the attack was intentional." As one of them colorfully wrote at the time, "a nice whitewash for a group of ignorant, stupid and inept xxxxxxxx." Though shown but not mentioned in the film, the next sentence of the intelligence chief's letter stated the obvious: "If the attackers had not been Hebrew there would have been quite a commotion."

"The Jewish community has always been more generous than many of their other counterparts in supporting financially elections, political causes," Inman observed. "In the process, that does translate into influence."

Israel's White House Friends

Israel's influence inside the White House was even more significant. "Many of Johnson's closest friends and advisors were pro-Israeli, and they reported back to Tel Aviv on his every move," the film asserted.

If anything, this understated Israeli influence. As Grace Halsell, a staff writer for Johnson, later wrote, "Everyone around me, without exception, was pro-Israel."

Thanks to its supporters surrounding Johnson, the narrator claimed that the Israeli government was able to constantly shift its story "to counter whatever new intelligence the White House received."

To protect their contacts' identity, the Israelis used codenames in their communications with them. "The Day Israel Attacked America," however, revealed for the first time the identities of four of these pro-Israeli eyes and ears inside the Johnson administration.

"Hamlet" was Abe Feinberg, one of the most influential fundraisers ever in Democratic Party politics, whose phone calls Johnson couldn't afford to ignore; "Menashe" was Arthur Goldberg, the U.S ambassador to the United Nations; "Harari" was David Ginsberg, a prominent Washington lawyer who represented the Israeli embassy; and "Ilan" was Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas, a longtime Johnson confidant who had dined with the President on the eve of the Six-Day War.

It would hardly be an overstatement to say that the President owed his political career to "Ilan"/Fortas. As biographer Robert A. Caro has written, Johnson "largely through the legal genius of his ally Abe Fortas, managed, by a hairbreadth, to halt a federal court's investigation into the stealing of the 1948 election," in a reference to LBJ's first Senate race.

According to the documentary, it was "Menashe"/Goldberg who supplied Israel with the key intelligence. Goldberg warned the Israelis that the U.S. had an audio tape that confirmed the Israeli pilots knew the Liberty was an American ship before they attacked.

"The strategy worked," concluded Belfield's documentary. "The U.S.-Israeli relationship proved to be stronger than the killing and injuring of more than 200 Americans."

But it wasn't always a foregone conclusion. As Hughes put it, "The American-Israeli relationship was very much at stake, and it was brought back from the precipice."

"The Day Israel Attacked America" ends with a scene of surviving veterans of the USS Liberty laying a wreath on their murdered comrades' memorial headstone and a prescient observation by the U.S. undersecretary of state at the time of the attack.

“It seemed clear to the Israelis that as American leaders did not have the courage to punish them for the blatant murder of American citizens,” George Ball noted, “they would let them get away with anything.”

Maidhc Ó Cathail is a widely published writer and political analyst. He is also the creator and editor of The Passionate Attachment blog, which focuses primarily on the U.S.-Israeli relationship.
