



# WASHINGTON REPORT ON MIDDLE EAST AFFAIRS

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Special Report

## Four Decades of Twisting Facts About Israel's Attack on the USS Liberty

By James Ennes

SINCE JUNE 8, 1967, when Israeli air and naval forces deliberately attacked the American intelligence ship USS *Liberty*, Israel and its American supporters have lied about what happened.

The facts are simple and straightforward. Israeli forces reconnoitered the ship for hours in daylight with unlimited visibility, correctly reported the ship's identity to their headquarters, then attacked the clearly marked and defenseless American ship by air and sea for more than 75 minutes, killing 34 men and wounding more than two-thirds of the 297-man crew.



The USS Liberty the day after Israel's June 8, 1967 attack (Courtesy [ussliberty.org](http://ussliberty.org)).

After disabling the ship with a 40-foot torpedo hole and hundreds of canon and missile hits, Israeli torpedomen continued to fire from as little as 50 feet away. They ignored the oversize American flag that flew in plain sight from the mast while firing on medical personnel and firefighters nearby. Finally, as preparations were being made to abandon ship, they machinegunned the ship's empty life rafts which had been lowered into the water awaiting survivors—a clear violation of Geneva conventions.

The lies started almost immediately. Even before crewmen could give their eyewitness accounts, the Israeli government concocted a preposterous "tragic accident" story, claiming that the *Liberty* had been mistaken for an out-of-service Egyptian horse carrier designed to carry 40 horses and their riders for the Egyptian cavalry of the 1920s. According to this story, the *Liberty* was recognized as American only after torpedoes were launched. Since torpedoes can't be recalled or redirected, however, Americans died. According to the Israeli story, the attackers immediately ceased fire and apologized for their "mistake."

But this was not true. The torpedomen continued to fire long after they claim the last shot was fired. In fact, they continued to fire until they heard that air support from the Sixth Fleet was on the way.

Survivors of the attack fully expected to refute the Israeli lie during one of the investigations that would be sure to follow, and show that the attack was no accident. That, however, was not to be.

Despite the presence of more than 200 men eager to testify, the Navy Court of Inquiry inexplicably did not ask about deliberateness, and did not allow survivors to testify freely—nor did Congress or anyone else. Israel's "Big Lie" was accepted at face value, and no questions were ever asked about whether the attack was deliberate or whether the Israeli story was true.

According to a sworn affidavit by the Court's own legal officer, the official Navy transcript was fraudulently changed and rewritten in Washington after it was signed by members of the Court. The official record, therefore, is a forgery. Yet despite several appeals to the secretary of the Navy and others, the Navy refuses to investigate or even to contact the senior legal officer making these very serious charges (see <[www.ussliberty.org/bostondeclaration.pdf](http://www.ussliberty.org/bostondeclaration.pdf)>).

Survivors of the Israeli attack have spent most of the ensuing 40 years trying in vain to right these wrongs, but have been frustrated at every turn. Israel's attack on the USS *Liberty* remains the only major maritime incident in American history not investigated by Congress. Queries to Congress bring boilerplate replies and no serious attention. Why? Because the attack by Israel on the USS *Liberty* is simply too politically sensitive.

Individually, nearly everyone in government with knowledge of the attack agrees that it was deliberate. Dozens of senior officials, including White House advisers and most senior intelligence agency leaders, agree that Israel deliberately attacked a ship it knew to be American (see

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A Machiavellian Perspective on the Middle East Conflict. Shoher's blog [www.israelforum.com](http://www.israelforum.com)

### The Middle East

Holds the center of the Worlds' Attention. Why? [TheRCG.org/Plain Answer](http://TheRCG.org/Plain Answer)

<[www.ussliberty.org/supporters.htm](http://www.ussliberty.org/supporters.htm)>). A diplomatic note sent by Secretary of State Dean Rusk to Israel asserted our government's disbelief in the Israeli story. Yet such notes were withheld from the public until years later, and the private views remained mostly private. Even today, 40 years later, former Sen. Adlai Stevenson III (D-IL) is one of the few elected officials who had the courage to tell the truth about this attack while still in office.

Survivors' frustration is made worse by various spokesmen for the attackers such as Florida Bankruptcy Magistrate Ahron Jay Cristol and FLAME president Gerardo Joffe.

Cristol first gave serious currency to "The Big Lie" when his book, *The Liberty Incident*, falsely claimed that up to 15 investigations "including five congressional investigations" had all inquired into the attack and exonerated Israel of any wrongdoing.

As we have demonstrated previously in these pages and elsewhere, that is totally untrue. No American investigation has ever inquired as to whether the attack was deliberate. Certainly no congressional inquiry has done so. Cristol's dishonest tactic is to find a mention of the attack in some official record and call this an "investigation that exonerated Israel."

For instance, Cristol cites a 1968 remark by then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in an unrelated hearing asserting that the attack was not deliberate, while ignoring the conclusion of the hearing chairman Bourke Hickenlooper that "I have read [the reports] and I cannot agree that it was accidental." Yet Cristol ignores Hickenlooper's opinion and reports the hearing as supporting the "tragic accident" position.

Similarly, none of the "five congressional investigations" so often cited by Cristol were in fact investigations at all. None established or asserted Israeli innocence. But that does not stop Cristol from endlessly claiming that it does, and citing these and other fictitious sources as proof of Israeli innocence.

Sadly, other sycophants pick up Cristol's ball and run with it. Perhaps most persistent is one Gerardo Joffe, president and chief cheerleader for the pro-Israel propaganda group FLAME—an acronym its critics maintain stands for "Fallacies and Lies About the Middle East." In kneejerk letters to the *Washington Report* and in his FLAME Web site Joffe consistently parrots Cristol's line that the *Liberty* attack has long been proven accidental and that it has been given too much attention, while other incidents are given too little.

Similarly, the Anti-Defamation League, whose stated mission is to stop defamation of the Jewish people and "to secure justice and fair treatment to all," has no problem supporting the Cristol/FLAME fiction by pretending, according to its Web site, that "Several government investigations have concluded that the attack...was carried out in error" and that "every piece of information declassified to date...has supported this conclusion."

Survivors repeatedly have asked Cristol and others to provide copies or other evidence of these so-called "investigations." None has done so. They cannot. There are no such investigations. Similarly, we have asked them to remove their false statements. They refuse. These lies serve their purpose.

In fact, when survivors have sought details of such investigations from their congressmen, from the Navy Judge Advocate General, from the Library of Congress, from the Congressional Research Service, or from any other government agency, we have repeatedly been advised that there has never been any congressional investigation of Israel's attack on the USS *Liberty*.

Most recently, on July 25, 2006, in response to a query from *Liberty* survivors, the Librarian of Congress wrote:

"After checking numerous resources, including the CIS (Congressional Information Service) Indexes to Congressional Hearings (both published and unpublished), and the Public Documents Masterfile, I could find no evidence that the Congress ever held hearings or launched an investigation into the June 8, 1967 incident with the USS *Liberty*. LC Control Number: 98135843."

That should settle the issue for all time and bring Cristol, Joffe, ADL and other myopic Israel-can-do-no-wrongers to cease their never-ending claim that Israel has been exonerated by numerous investigations. That simply is not true, never has been true and never will be true, despite their blind determination to deny reality.

*James Ennes was a lieutenant on the bridge of the USS Liberty when the Israeli attack started and retired from the Navy after 27 years' service. He is author of Assault on the Liberty (available from the AET Book Club).*

## **SIDEBAR**

### **Behold: an Uproar (But Not in the U.S.)**

June 8 marks 40 years since Israeli air and naval forces attacked the USS *Liberty*, killed 34 men, wounded 174 more, disabled the ship and lied about it. Israel is still lying and survivors still work tirelessly to tell the story, but remain powerless, frustrated and ineffective.

One can liken the Israeli government to the spoiled child of an unscrupulous dictator. Uday or Qusay Hussain, sons of Saddam, come to mind—cruel, unscrupulous, ruthless, and free to commit every conceivable outrage with impunity because they were protected by their all-powerful father.

Similarly, the government of Israel can with impunity abuse Palestinians or other neighbors, and even attack Americans, confident that the U.S.

government will protect them. After all, most Israeli crimes, no matter how outrageous, go unreported in the American press, including the attack on the Liberty; repeated bombings of refugee camps, U.N. forces, ambulances, and news reporters; the killing of Rachel Corrie; the violation of U.N. accords; the shooting of children; the murders of innocent civilians, and other heinous crimes. Never are they discussed in the sacred halls of Congress, and never are the criminals sanctioned in any way, or even called to explain. Nothing has changed in more than 40 years.

USS Liberty survivors will gather in Washington, DC this year for a 40th anniversary reunion to honor our lost shipmates and discuss tactics and progress. Two years ago we filed with the Department of Defense a detailed Report of War Crimes committed against us by the armed forces of Israel (see <[www.usliberty.org/report/report.htm](http://www.usliberty.org/report/report.htm)>). Despite the fact that the United States is required by international law and treaty to investigate any such charge, when the government of Israel is involved these rules are routinely ignored, as they have been in this case. To no surprise, our fully documented and detailed report has never been investigated as required—or even acknowledged.

This year Liberty survivors asked the Navy Judge Advocate General to send a representative to the reunion to explain the Navy's position. He declined. Again, no surprise.

Even though unanswered and ignored, however, our report remains active.

More than a decade ago we wrote in these pages that Israeli forces shot and killed 150 or more Egyptian prisoners of war at the town of El Arish while the USS Liberty passed just 12 miles off shore (see "Did Israel's Armed Forces Commit One War Crime to Hide Another?" in the May/June 1996 Washington Report, p. 28).

The story of the massacre originally came from Israeli eyewitnesses, was reported in Israel's Yediot Ahronot and again, recently, by Israeli journalist Ran Adelist on Israeli television. Yet, then and now, it has largely been ignored in the American press and by the American government, despite the fact that this massacre was a serious war crime and could well have been the reason for the attack on the Liberty.

Indeed, according to Israeli historian Michael Oren, "Ennes's report cannot be true"—for if it were there would be an international uproar and it would disrupt relations between Israel and Egypt.

Behold: There is now an uproar, and it is in full steam. A recent Reuters report indicates that an account of the massacre has reached Egypt, and that the Egyptian public is outraged. Cairo has recalled its ambassador to Israel, and there are calls to sever relations and terminate the Camp David accords.

Like the Liberty story, however, this report of Israeli criminal activity, so closely connected to the Liberty attack, gets almost no press attention in this country.

—J.E.