The Shift: Israel won't cooperate with Shireen Abu Akleh probe

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By Michael Arria November 17, 2022



After months of pressure from activists, human rights groups, progressive lawmakers, and members of her family the FBI is finally launching a probe into the killing of Shireen Abu Akleh. The fact that the announcement was made shortly after the Israeli and U.S. elections can hardly be a coincidence.

Israel has predictably declared that their closest ally will receive no cooperation from them. "The decision taken by the US Justice Department to conduct an investigation into the tragic passing of Shireen Abu Akleh, is a mistake," tweeted Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz. "The IDF has conducted a professional, independent investigation, which was presented to American officials with whom the details were shared. I have delivered a message to US representatives that we stand by the IDF's soldiers, that we will not cooperate with an external investigation, and will not enable intervention to internal investigations."

Outgoing Prime Minister <u>Yair Lapid</u> was just as blunt: "Israeli soldiers will not be investigated by the FBI or by any foreign country as friendly as it might be. We conveyed our strong protest to the Biden administration at the appropriate level."

It's hard to envision the FBI (who are still technically investigating the 1985 murder of Alex Odeh) actually delivering any kind of justice here, but it's definitely historic. At <u>Haaretz</u> Ben Samuels calls it a watershed moment.

"While it may remain a symbolic gesture, the decision itself is a milestone in a truly unprecedented pressure campaign from Democratic members of Congress pushing a Democratic administration to take a firm stance against Israel," writes Samuels. "Regardless of whether the investigation leads to criminal charges, the move is both a stark example and a harbinger of things to come concerning the Democratic Party's evolving relationship with Israel – particularly as it watches Prime Minister-in-waiting Benjamin Netanyahu begin to form an unprecedentedly right-wing coalition."

There's an interesting twist in all of this. The White House has <u>apparently</u> informed Israel that it wasn't aware of the investigation. Skeptics might see this as a political calculation. Maybe Biden is feigning ignorance to avoid tension with the Israeli government. However, it's worth remembering that Biden also said he was unaware of the Trump raid so it's not exactly unbelievable.

One thing that does seem clear: we are going to hear very little about the status of the probe from the administration in the coming days. Here was the AP's Matt Lee trying to get information from the State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel this week:

Lee: Well, what kind of conversations have you had with the Israelis about this?

Patel: As it relates to any potential law enforcement activity, that would be a matter for the Department of Justice, for them to raise.

Lee: So when the Israelis come to you and ask you what's going on, what do you tell them?

Patel: We would – it is for the Department of Justice to speak to law enforcement and any investigation.

Lee: Is there an investigation that – as far as you know – that the FBI is conducting into this?

Patel: That is for the Department of Justice to speak to. That – I'm not going to get into that from here.

Lee: Okay. You have gotten into previous investigations into the deaths of American citizens, though, so let me just make that point.

The fact that we're seeing any kind of investigation at all is a testament to the tireless work of activists and the Abu Akleh family, who have not stopped fighting for justice. The government has faced growing pressure from Democratic lawmakers, many of whom were responding to the demands of their communities.

"That kind of pressure from within the president's own party is difficult to ignore," writes Mitchell Plitnick at the <u>site</u>. "It is standard for the FBI to investigate the death of any American citizen abroad, as even staunch AIPAC supporter Sen. Bob Menendez (D-NJ) was <u>forced to admit</u>, although he also stated that he believed Israel had credibly investigated the incident."

"But while that pressure was significant, it would not have existed without the <u>relentless work of Shireen Abu Akleh's family</u> and the tireless <u>activism</u> from the <u>Palestine</u> <u>advocacy</u> community," Plitnick continues. "That work came together with a political moment where Israel is less popular than ever among Democratic voters to open the door for this unprecedented move by the DOJ."

IHRA and Twitter

This week 180 pro-Israel organizations (including The Lawfare Project, the Zionist Organization of America, StopAntisemitism, and B'nai B'rith International) sent an open <u>letter</u> to Twitter asking the platform to adopt the controversial IHRA working definition of antisemitism.

Critics of the definition point out that the definition can easily be used to stifle criticism of Israel and this letter is yet another example proving that they're right. With their letter the groups provide a "data sample of more than 1,000 recent antisemitic tweets, all satisfying the IHRA Working Definition, collected and vetted in an interactive database."

Some of these tweets are legitimately antisemitic, but some of them are simply denunciations of the Israeli government or Zionism made by Palestine advocates like Ali Abunimah and Lamis Deek. There's even a tweet on there from the official *Mondoweiss* Twitter account referring to Zionism as racism.

The organizations aren't exactly concealing their true intent either. "Every day on social media we witness antisemitism, masked as anti-Zionism, being used to vilify the Jewish people and nation without repercussion," StopAntisemitism executive director Liora Rez told *JNS*.

Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East's Michael Bueckert has a good thread about the letter on Twitter. "A lot of organizations have put their names on this letter, and in doing so have admitted that IHRA is substantially about protecting Israel from Palestinian speech," he writes.

Odds & Ends

Statement from Ben & Jerry's Independent Board:

Without the consent of Ben & Jerry's Independent Board, Unilever has sold trademark rights to the Hebrew and Arabic language versions of the Ben & Jerry's name to Blue & White Ice Cream Ltd.

Blue & White Ice-Cream Ltd. is a completely separate and distinct entity from Ben & Jerry's Homemade Inc. Any products sold by Blue & White Ice Cream Ltd. are uniquely its own and should not be confused with products produced and distributed by Ben & Jerry's Homemade Inc. Ben & Jerry's has no ownership of, affiliation with, or economic interest in Blue & White Ice-Cream Ltd.

Ben & Jerry's position is clear: the sale of products bearing any Ben & Jerry's insignia in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is against our values. Such sales are inconsistent with international law, fundamental human rights, and Ben & Jerry's social mission.

Donald Trump, the former U.S. president who attempted to overthrow the results of the 2020 election, is running again. Days before his big announcement Trump, who is under active criminal investigation, accepted the Theodor Herzl Medallion from the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA).

At the group's <u>annual gala</u> he chided Jewish Americans for failing to support Israel enough. "You do have people in this country that happen to be Jewish that are not doing the right thing for Israel – too many," he told the audience. "The Democrats get 75 percent of the vote, which is hard to believe. We can't let that continue."

At one point Trump turned to ZOA President Morton Klein and exclaimed, "What the hell is going on here, Mort?"

In the *Washington Post* John Hudson reports on a classified intelligence report that details efforts by the UAE government to influence U.S. policy. "The activities covered in the report, described to The Washington Post by three people who have read it, include illegal and legal attempts to steer U.S. foreign policy in ways favorable to the Arab autocracy," writes Hudson. "It reveals the UAE's bid, spanning multiple U.S. administrations, to exploit the vulnerabilities in American governance, including its reliance on campaign contributions, susceptibility to powerful lobbying firms and lax enforcement of disclosure laws intended to guard against interference by foreign governments, these people said."

Seventeen Democrats on the House Foreign Affairs Committee put out a statement calling on Biden to "maintain pressure" on Iran.

Adalah and the Center for Constitutional Rights sent a letter to Secretary of State Blinken and US Ambassador to Israel Nides urging the Biden administration to halt its plans to build a new Israeli embassy in Jerusalem. The letter was sent on behalf of Palestinian families

whose ancestors had the land stolen from them after the Nakba. "We write on behalf of several Palestinian heirs to this land to formally bring this information to the State Department's attention, and to demand an immediate cessation of this plan," it reads. "We request a meeting with the State Department and the U.S. Embassy to clarify the U.S. Government's position on Israel's authority to extinguish property rights under the Absentees' Property Law, and to ensure that the Biden Administration takes no further steps to entrench the unlawful dispossession of Palestinian refugee property and, more fundamentally, the decision to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem contrary to international consensus."

Some findings from documents released by the Committee on Oversight and Reform:

Saudi, U.A.E., and Qatar Spending During the Qatar Crisis: In June 2017, Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E., along with other Gulf neighbors, severed diplomatic ties and imposed a blockade on its neighbor and U.S. ally Qatar, igniting a regional crisis. Trump Hotel records obtained by the Committee show that while the governments of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the U.A.E. publicly lobbied for President Trump's support during the blockade, those same governments also privately spent hundreds of thousands of dollars at the Trump Hotel.

Qatar: In early April 2018, President Trump welcomed the ruler of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, to the White House where he praised Qatar's record on combatting terrorism and referred to Al Thani as a "great gentleman." Records obtained by the Committee show that in the three months leading up to that meeting, the Qatari government and associated entities spent more than \$300,000 at the Trump Hotel. Between January and early March 2018, the Sheikh Al Thani Family, the ruling family of Qatar, booked an extended stay at the Trump Hotel, spending at least \$282,037. On several occasions during this period, for example on February 11, 2018 and 12, 2018, a room under "Ivanka & Jared Kushner" was booked on the same nights of the Sheikh Al Thani room block.

The site Phil Weiss reports from Israel:

Here is a simple proof of the unfairness. Every day Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories use money on which is imprinted the portraits of men who directed their ethnic cleansing and massacres. They travel inside Israel on roads named after these men too. I found this unsettling and embarrassing, being a witness to such humiliation. In talking to Palestinians in Haifa, I caught the name Ben-Gurion Avenue in my throat — I was afraid the mere utterance would damage their dignity.

I often thought about the promotion back in the U.S. of the "startup nation," with its biotech and cyber industries that are said to help the world. The miraculous startup nation justifies its presence with its material advantages and Nobel Prizes (one Nobelist came to a shiva I attended in Jerusalem) as if that makes its rule acceptable to Palestinians. But of course it doesn't. They have fewer or no rights, and it is rubbed in their faces all the time. There is something crude and dispiriting about this; you don't perpetuate apartheid without consequences to all concerned. The journalist Tom Dallal shared with me this photo of riding a train with a soldier who pointed his gun between his legs the whole time without regarding it as rude or unusual.

Jon Stewart on the <u>The Late Show With Stephen Colbert:</u> "I'm called antisemitic because I'm against Israel's treatment of Palestinians. I'm called other things from other people based on other opinions that I have, but those shut down debate. They're used as a cudgel and whether it be comedy or discussion or anything else, if we don't have the wherewithal to meet each other with what's reality then how do we move forward?"

Texas Senator Ted Cruz wants Attorney General Merrick Garland to be <u>impeached</u> over the FBI's Shireen Abu Akleh investigation. Cruz's statement on the probe does not mention Abu Akleh, a U.S. citizen who was shot in the head by a foreign government in broad daylight, once.

Back in July Rep. Andre Carson (D-IN) <u>announced</u> that he had developed a House bill calling for a report on Shireen Abu Akleh's death. That <u>legislation</u> was formally introduced this week, presumably lined up with the FBI news in some capacity. So far it has 18 cosponsors: Reps Beyer, Bush, Desaulnier, Dingell, Grijalva, Garcia, Jacobs, Jayapal, Johnson, McCollum, McGovern, Newman, Norton, Pocan, Ocasio-Cortez, Omar, Tlaib, and Welch.

Stay safe out there,

Michael

BEFORE YOU GO: The Israeli government and its economic, cultural, and political backers here in the U.S. have made a decades-long investment in silencing and delegitimizing Palestinian voices and those who dare to call out Israel's apartheid.

The movement needs independent media outlets that amplify Palestinian stories and hold space for those censored for voicing dissent.

We have revolutionized *Mondoweiss*' coverage of Palestine and Israel by building a Palestine newsroom, thus helping to shape the American understanding of the Palestinian struggle.

Become a donor today and support our critical work.