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Israel Picks Michael Oren as Ambassador to U.S.

Turkey Ends War Crimes Probe of Israel

Turkey has ended a probe into IDF counterterrorism operations in Gaza, Turkish news agencies reported.

The Turkish Justice Ministry reportedly declined to grant prosecutors permission to file an indictment. The probe, initiated by the Islamist organization Mazlum-Der, a human rights group, accused Israel of deliberately attacking Gaza civilians "with the aim of annihilating them" during fighting earlier this year.

Prosecutors wished to charge several Israeli officials, among them President Shimon Peres, with genocide and war crimes. According to Turkish law, cases involving genocide or crimes against humanity may be tried in Turkey even if the crimes were committed abroad, but only if the Justice Ministry grants its approval.

Relations between Israel and Turkey were strained following the Gaza operation. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused Israel of committing war crimes, and stormed angrily out of the World Economic Forum's Davos conference after confronting President Shimon Peres.

Israelis responded by changing their Passover travel habits. Roughly 10,000 Israeli tourists chose to travel to Crete or Bulgaria rather than Turkey.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has confirmed the appointment of Michael Oren, a New York-born and Princeton-educated historian and commentator on Middle East affairs, as the country's new ambassador to the US.

Oren, the preferred candidate of Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, replaced Sallai Meridor, who asked to be relieved of his duties.



Michael Oren, newly appointed Israeli ambassador to the United States

Oren's commentaries have appeared in leading U.S. newspapers and on CBS-TV. He is a senior fellow at the Shalem Centre, a Jerusalem think-tank with a reputation for relatively hawkish views on the Middle East conflict.

Oren is the author of several bestsellers, including "Six Days

of War: June 1967" and the "Making of the Modern Middle East," which won the L.A. Times Book Prize for history in 2003. His writings have appeared in The Times' Opinion and Book Review sections.

Oren, who was born in 1955 in upstate New York and raised in New Jersey, emigrated to Israel in 1979. He served as a wartime paratroop officer in Lebanon. Oren received a Ph.D. in Near East studies from Princeton University in 1986. He has lectured as a visiting professor at several leading American universities, including Harvard, Yale, and Georgetown.

During Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip last winter, he volunteered as a military liaison officer, briefing reporters outside the coastal territory. He holds American and Israeli citizenship and is well connected in U.S. political circles, making him a potentially effective advocate for the policies of the new conservative government.

Oren has expressed some views as a commentator that conflict with those of Netanyahu. In a speech at Georgetown University in March, Oren called for a unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank, similar to Israel's 2005 pullout from Gaza, contending that such a move would relieve tensions until a stronger, more reliable Palestinian peace partner came to power.

Netanyahu has warned that a pullout from the West Bank would enable extremists to take over and threaten Israel.

British Airline Apologizes for Deleting Israel from Map

The British airline, BMI, has apologized for deleting Israel from an electronic map that appears on its flights. Israel Army Radio reported that on BMI's London-Tel Aviv flights, Israel and most of its cities weren't marked to avoid angering Muslim passengers. Only Haifa was identified - by its Arab name, Khafa.

In its apology, BMI said the plane bearing the map was acquired from a now-defunct airline, British Mediterranean Airways, that flew to several Arab countries in the Middle East, and the map highlighted locations including the Muslim holy city of Mecca. BMI says the airline asked for the map to be removed once it took over the planes, but there had been a technical mistake. The airline will provide new maps and BMI will use different aircraft in the meantime for its twice-daily flights to Israel. BMI also said it was making every effort not to hurt passengers' feelings by adopting a nonpolitical position.

BMI operates flights from England to many popular Muslim destinations, including Syria, Lebanon and Iran, but has also recently launched an agreement with the Israel Tourism Ministry to add Israel to its roster.

London Hall Cancels Israeli Event

The Bloomsbury Theatre in central London canceled an event to celebrate Israel's Independence Day following pressure from pro-Palestinian groups. The event, sponsored by the Zionist Federation of Britain was to have an Israel Defense Forces choir, invited to Britain by the Israeli Embassy in London, to perform at the main memorial event to Israeli soldiers who died in Israel's wars.

The theater's managers decided to cancel the event as a result of protests by pro-Palestinian groups that linked their appeals to the Israeli offensive in Gaza in January. "A number of groups had contacted the Bloomsbury to protest the show," said a spokeswoman for the theater. "Obviously, we couldn't have them perform here," she added.

The director of the Council for Arab-British Understanding, was reported to have said that holding the show "is akin to singing and dancing on the graves of the 400 Palestinian children that the IDF was responsible for killing in January. We should not be permitting a dance troupe from an army currently under a U.N. investigation for possible war crimes to be coming to the United Kingdom. It is sick."

Some of those objecting to the performance announced that they would demonstrate at the new venue once they found out the details. Ticket sales for the event picked up as a result of the controversy.

Peres Tells Obama: Israel Ready for Peace with Palestinian Authority

President Barack Obama met Israel's President Shimon Peres at the White House amid signs of divisions between the two allies on Middle East peace talks and how to deal with Iran.

Peres, whose post is mostly ceremonial and who is the top Israeli to meet Obama since his inauguration in January, visited at the White House several weeks before new Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is due in Washington.



Israeli President Shimon Peres speaks outside the White House after meeting with President Barack Obama

He said Netanyahu had endorsed the commitments of the US-backed "road-map" when asked by reporters about the new Israeli administration's failure to so far endorse a two-state solution with the Palestinians.

The veteran statesman also said that it would be the "best thing" if Obama's attempt to engage Iran yielded results, despite suspicion in the new government over the approach. "Mr Netanyahu said he will abide by the commitments of the previous government," Peres told reporters after he emerged from the closed-door meeting with Obama. "The previous government accepted the road map -- in the roadmap you will find the attitude to the two state solution."

Peres noted that Netanyahu had said he was ready "to negotiate right away, then he said he didn't intend to govern the Palestinian people."

On Iran, Peres said "if one of the options of the president is to try engagement, we shall be ... supporters. If it will succeed, it can be the best thing."

Obama has invited Netanyahu as well as the Palestinian and Egyptian leaders to Washington in the coming weeks. Netanyahu has so far refused to publicly endorse the creation of a Palestinian state, and has insisted on centering efforts on strengthening the West Bank economy before engaging in final status negotiations. The Obama administration remains focused on a two-state solution and continuing the peace talks.

President Obama gave his guest a silver mezzuzah case adorned with turquoise gems and in return received a peace statue of a woman holding 20 doves. An engraving on the statue read, "To President Barack Obama - a great leader who carries a great hope for the world."

IDF Releases Results of Probes Following “Operation Cast Lead”

Hamas PM Haniyeh Hid in Hospital During Gaza Operation— Hamas Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh, operated a command and control center inside Shifa Hospital in downtown Gaza City throughout Operation Cast Lead in January, the IDF revealed. Probes opened by the IDF following the offensive discovered that Haniyeh and other senior Hamas commanders took over a ward of the hospital, Gaza's largest, and set up a command center for the duration of the campaign. Hamas believed that Israel would not target the hospital due to the high risk of collateral damage.

Guards were posted at the entrance to the ward and field commanders took advantage of the humanitarian corridor and cessation of action that the IDF instituted every day for several hours, to enter the hospital and meet with senior Hamas officials to receive instructions. Senior Hamas commanders also set up a command center in a Red Crescent Society clinic in Khan Yunis and used it as a detention center.

An IDF investigation focused on the alleged targeting of health facilities, vehicles and medical teams. The probe revealed that out of seven medical personnel claimed to have been killed by the IDF, five were Hamas operatives, including a nephew of the Hamas health minister. Two were civilians.

The probe also uncovered a number of cases during which Hamas used ambulances to transport operatives. Testimony by a Gazan medical worker and obtained by the IDF revealed how Hamas forced the Red Crescent to hand over medic and nurse uniforms for its operatives.

During the probe, the army also looked into a complaint filed by the United Nations that the air force had bombed an UNRWA vehicle in the Tel al-Hawa neighborhood in southern Gaza City. The probe revealed that the vehicle was bombed since it did not have markings and was driving at night in an area off limits to civilian vehicles. Furthermore, the UN vehicle was used to transport a Palestinian anti-tank squad and was bombed after it unloaded the squad. The driver was wounded; he was later identified as the former driver of Hamas co-founder Ahmed Yassin, who was killed by Israel in 2004.

Other Investigations— The IDF operated in the Gaza Strip in accordance with international law and succeeded in maintaining a high level of professionalism and morals even though it fought against an enemy that used civilians as human shields, Deputy Chief of General Staff Maj.-Gen. Dan Harel said as the IDF publicized findings from five different probes into accusations that were raised during January's Operation Cast Lead. Following the 22-day operation, Chief of General Staff Lt.-Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi appointed five colonels to lead probes into a number of issues that came up during the operation against Hamas.

One probe focused on claims that the IDF targeted United Nations facilities and vehicles; another probe focused on alleged attacks against Palestinian medical facilities, teams and vehicles; another probe focused on several alleged attacks against innocent Palestinians; another probe was launched into the IDF's use of white phosphorus weaponry and the last probe was launched into the damage caused to infrastructure and Palestinian homes by ground forces during the operation.

The general conclusion from the probes, Harel said, was that the IDF operated in accordance with international laws and made great efforts to minimize civilian casualties. The probes also uncovered IDF “intelligence and operational mistakes” in the midst of the fighting that led to the death of several dozen innocent people. “These are unfortunate but inevitable cases that happen in a conflict,” Harel said. “Especially in the type of fighting that Hamas forced upon the IDF when it chose to take shelter and fight in the midst of a civilian population.”

In total, Harel said the IDF had identified 1,166 Palestinians killed during the Gaza operation of which 709 were identified as Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists. Harel said that the military had not found a single incident during the operation in which an Israeli soldier purposely aimed and fired at innocent civilians. “We have not found even one case of a soldier purposely targeting innocent civilians during the operation,” Harel said. “The investigations continue and if we will find a case it will be dealt with harshly.”

Regarding the IDF's use of white phosphorus during the operation, which drew international condemnations and accusations that Israel was perpetrating war crimes, the probe into the use of the weaponry revealed that in all cases it was used in accordance with international law. The IDF fired some 3,000 155 mm artillery shells - which looked like exploding octopuses in the air - that are not white-phosphorus weapons and are used strictly in order to create smokescreens for troop movements on the ground. The probe found that white phosphorus weapons were used strictly in open fields and not in urban centers for marking and ranging when the forces tried to target Kas-sam rocket cells operating in the open fields.