

ISRAEL AND THE FREE GAZA FLOTILLA: A CATALOGUE OF MISTAKES



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One of the ships making up the 'Free Gaza' flotilla, decked out in flags of Turkey and Palestine as it set sail from Turkey on 22 May 2010.

Looking at the events surrounding the 'Free Gaza' flotilla and the violence that took place on its flagship, the *Marmara*, it is fair to say that Israel made every mistake that it was possible to make. At every turn Israeli decision-makers allowed themselves to fall into a politically-orchestrated ambush. However, for an Israeli, other emotions come into play: Israel was lynched by international public opinion – Arab as well as European – using allegations of a so-called 'massacre' perpetrated on the high seas. Whatever happened there, it certainly was not a massacre. It was an operation aimed at taking over the ships, an operation during which Israeli commandos encountered violent resistance, three of them even being captured and briefly being taken prisoner. One can only guess how other armies – American, French, Russian or

Arab – would have reacted in such circumstances and what would have been the result. Dozens of casualties would be a reasonable estimation. Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that other armies would have sent their men on such a mission armed with paint-guns as their primary weapon.

The first and foremost of Israel's mistakes – and one which the Israeli government seems at last to be realising – is the siege on Gaza. Contrary to what most people think, Israel has not enforced a total blockade on Gaza but rather severe economic pressure, although these restrictions seem arbitrary and purposeless. It is legitimate to ask why, for more than two years, Israel has prevented sweets, schoolbooks and notebooks being imported into Gaza for there is no obvious security interest being served by these measures. Someone in Israel must have believed that putting pressure on the 1.5 million Palestinians living in Gaza would push them to overthrow Hamas. As soon as it became clear that the efficient network of tunnels used for smuggling prevented any real shortages in Gaza (with the exception of construction materials), Israeli decision-makers should have understood that the siege costs them more than it yields. While Israel's image was deteriorating daily, no real political pressure was being exercised on Hamas. Furthermore, even those who still hold the abducted Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit (taken prisoner by Hamas four years ago) do not seem to be influenced as it is apparent that the siege clearly has failed to yield the hoped-for results in terms of facilitating Shalit's release.

***Avi Issacharoff is the Palestinian and Arab Affairs correspondent of the Israeli Daily newspaper Haaretz.**

The EUISS is grateful to Gil Mihaely who translated this article from the original Hebrew.



The second mistake, in a clear demonstration of Israel's inability to understand its Palestinian, Arab and Turkish opponents, was the decision to stop the ships whatever the cost. When the organisers of the flotilla rejected the Israeli proposal to unload their cargo in the port of Ashdod, it was obvious that they were looking for a provocation and hoping for a violent confrontation in front of TV cameras. And indeed, there were those in Israel who suggested at that point that the ships should be allowed to continue, thus keeping Hamas, the Turks and the Israeli Arabs' Islamic movement from achieving their strategic goal. Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defence Minister Barak thought differently, arguing that other ships would soon follow. Allowing the ships to sail to Gaza would mean an end of the maritime blockade and thus an end of the siege of Gaza. There was a definite will to draw a clear red line to demonstrate to Hamas and the Turkish government that Israel would not be bullied and this determination was in all likelihood not unconnected to the decision finally taken: that of stopping the ships and setting an example that would serve as a warning to those who plan the next flotillas. Apparently, the idea that by stopping the flotilla they were playing into Hamas' hands did not cross their minds.

The third mistake was the *modus operandi* chosen. The Israeli army, following Navy chief Admiral Marom's advice, decided to take control of all the ships at the same time, using a small number of men. It was supposed to be a noisy, aggressive operation aimed at deterring the passengers from any resistance. The commandos were to board the ships simultaneously from the sea, using small boats, and from the air, descending from helicopters onto the bridge. Other methods, such as immobilising the vessels or slowing them down, were excluded by navy planners. The Israeli army went for the heroic commando operation option without seriously considering the possibility of something going wrong.

The fourth mistake was the lack of intelligence. Days before the ships took to sea some passengers boasted of their desire to become martyrs while breaking the blockade on Gaza. Al-Jazeera aired images of central activists from IHH, the Turkish ONG and one of the flotilla's organisers, shouting slogans calling for the slaughter of Jews. The same channel showed a member of the Yemenite parliament waving a big knife in front of the camera while announcing his intention to fight the Israelis if they tried to take over the ship. Furthermore, French, Turkish and Palestinian intelligence reports had already mentioned IHH's support

of Hamas and cited some of its activists as tied to International jihad. How can it then be possible that not one Israeli intelligence agency (neither military intelligence nor Mossad) drew army planners' attention to the fact that some of the passengers were not peace activists but rather looking for a violent confrontation that would be relayed around the world and ignite international public opinion? The first commandos to board the *Marmara*, armed with paint-guns, were surprised to find IHH activists waiting for them with knives and iron bars. From that point on the situation could only deteriorate quickly, and it did. A group of 40-50 well-organised activists easily captured three soldiers armed with paint-guns, and took them prisoner. Those who boarded minutes later had no options left. They drew their hand guns and fired at the violently-resisting activists. Considering the extremely complicated situation, it is remarkable that the number of dead was limited to nine.

The big winner of this event is undoubtedly Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan. Before the incident his domestic popularity was in decline, a major concern for a political leader facing general elections in July next year. In these circumstances, not only did he fail to stop the flotilla but, fully aware of the *Marmara*'s passengers' real objectives, he quietly waited his hour. As soon as news of the incident's death toll was made known, he launched a diplomatic campaign of unprecedented harshness against the Israeli government. Credited for his heroic struggle on behalf of Gazans, he became the new hero of the Muslim world overnight. Some newspapers went as far as to declare him the Muslim leader the faithful had long been waiting for and a newborn baby in Gaza was named after him. His popularity skyrocketed not only abroad but also at home, in Turkey. It is thus more than probable that he will continue to seek media-covered confrontations with Israel in order to maintain his current poll rating, at least until the next elections.

Nevertheless, in spite of the numerous mistakes committed by Netanyahu's government, the one-sided position taken by most countries and media in the world immediately after the event raises serious questions. World leaders condemned the 'Israeli massacre' and the 'barbarian' behaviour of the Israeli soldiers, completely overlooking the violence of some IHH activists. Yet this is not how peace activists behave, nor those who genuinely wish to relieve the suffering of Gaza's inhabitants (for the record, the flotilla's cargo was rejected by Hamas and blocked at the entry to Gaza). Because of the settlements

question, the international community regards the motives of Netanyahu and his coalition with suspicion which in turn makes it easier to 'put the blame' on Israel. Yet those who were at the heart of organising the provocation of the flotilla must also bear a large part of the responsibility for the bloodshed, a responsibility which the international community has apparently chosen to ignore.

As for the Israelis, a recent poll published by Haaretz shows that there is a feeling that they are being lynched by the international community and, consequently, they tend to close ranks behind Netanyahu. The time has come for decision-makers around the world – and particularly in Europe – to understand that their automatic 'Bibi bashing', rather than marking him as a blundering politician, only serves to make him a martyr in the eyes of the Israeli public.

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