

# An Ambush at Sea: Understanding the Gaza Flotilla Operation

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

Something has been lost in the heated discussion surrounding the Gaza "freedom flotilla" incident -- namely, an assessment of what actually happened before and during the Israeli operation. Dissecting the incident's serious consequences is important, as is debating alternative Israeli options or questions of international law. But responding intelligently to the event requires a better understanding of the operational details -- that is, how the Israel Defense Forces Navy (IDFN) and its violent opponents conducted themselves.

Two dramatically different narratives of the May 31 operation have already emerged. One is that of an Israeli "assault" on the flotilla and the "massacre" of "peace activists." This narrative has been adopted wholesale by much of the world without critical scrutiny, let alone analysis. The other narrative, put forth by the Israelis, is of a naval operation that went bad when the boarding parties were violently attacked on one of the six ships.

This story is far from over. However, video footage provided by the Arab media and the IDF, as well as accounts by Israeli commando personnel and non-Israeli reporters and activists on the ships, have provided greater clarity on what happened on the Mavi Marmara, and why it happened the way it did.

## The Challenge

In the lead-up to the violent incident, six ships carrying a collection of European leftists, humanitarians, radical Palestinians, and Turkish Islamists attempted to run the Israeli blockade. This coalition of "peaceful activists" had definite goals in mind. If they failed to run the blockade, they intended to create an incident that would embarrass the Israelis. Some of the Islamists expressed a desire or willingness to become martyrs. It now seems clear that within the overall group of activists, and concentrated on one ship, was a sub-element that hoped to spark a very public and violent clash with the IDFN.

Israel faced the dilemma of properly responding to this challenge. On one hand, if the IDFN did nothing, the blockade would be breached, massively and publicly. This would have been a substantial victory for Hamas, no doubt to be followed by additional attempts. On the other hand, launching a naval action to stop, board, and divert the flotilla ran the risk of potential violence. This risk would have been real even if the Israelis had waited until the ships were no longer in international waters, as some have suggested they might have done. Reportedly, other

options were considered, including disabling the ships, but these, too, posed diplomatic risks and dangers for the ships and passengers. In the end the decision was to stop, board, and divert in international waters.

### The Assessment

Judging from the available evidence, both the activists and the IDFN had clear conceptions about how this event would unfold, and they prepared accordingly. First, it is important to distinguish between the activists. The primary concern for the purposes of this discussion is the radical activists -- a sizable minority who were prepared to fight the IDFN. This element was prepared to carry out a quasi military-style ambush of the boarding forces. They were organized, armed, and equipped for fighting. They exhibited purposeful behavior, and they executed their violent actions under direction.

The Israelis seemed to define the situation as one of crowd or riot control, believing that any violence would be similar to that seen in West Bank demonstrations (e.g., stone throwing, spitting, shoving). This does not mean that they thought the mission would be an easy one.

### The Forces

The radical activists on the Mavi Marmara reportedly numbered between 60 and 100. Prior to the boarding operation, they appeared to organize themselves into cells stationed primarily on the upper deck. The cells were to be employed against Israeli forces boarding from helicopters and speedboats.

These forces had equipment appropriate to their missions. Envisioning a close battle, many had handheld weapons such as knives, metal rods, clubs, firebombs, steel chains, and slingshots. Others had anti-boarding equipment, including hooks, saws, and poles, to fend off Israeli forces. It is unclear whether they initially had any firearms, although during the postincident search of the ship the Israelis found some evidence of this.

Videos from Arab media, taken while the flotilla was preparing to sail, indicate that some passengers were in a combative state of mind, singing jihadist songs, proclaiming readiness for martyrdom, and voicing Islamist slogans. And the ferocity of the attack on the Israeli naval commandos shows that the radical activists were ready to act on this sentiment.

On the Israeli side, the IDFN deployed a small flotilla of missile craft and patrol boats, with naval commandos of Shayetet 13 serving as the primary boarding force. The navy had time to prepare for the action -- intelligence assets had been monitoring the "peace flotilla" for days, and boarding rehearsals were conducted. The IDFN reportedly knew that the Mavi Marmara had a radical element on board and concentrated its attention on that ship.

Based on comments by Israeli participants in the action, the rules of engagement (ROE) apparently focused on minimal use of force, not overreacting to provocation and not shooting unless facing an immediate deadly threat. At least some of the boarding forces were equipped with riot-control weapons (paintball guns, stun/tear gas grenades) and carried semiautomatic pistols. Again, the state of mind among IDFN forces apparently was that this was not a combat action. This is clearly evident in how the boarding forces and those watching from other ships reacted with surprise and shock to the radical activists' assault.

### The Fight

The IDFN had good military reasons for conducting the operation when and where it did. First, Israeli forces had the advantage of good night-vision capabilities. Boarding at night also increased the probability that most of the passengers would be asleep in their cabins and away from the immediate action. That seems to have been the case on some of the ships.

As for location, the operation was carried out some eighty miles off the coast, far enough away to reduce the chances of observation or interference by other parties. In addition, as the flotilla approached Gaza, tension and alertness

among the participants would likely have increased. Moreover, waiting until the flotilla was within the twenty-mile blockade zone might not have given the navy enough time to complete the process of warning, boarding, and taking control of the ships.

The actual fighting involved only the Mavi Marmara, the largest of the group with as many as 700 passengers. The boarding was carried out from both helicopters and speedboats.

There is clear evidence from the available videos that the commandos took a noncombat approach. Although some activists claim the ship was fired on from the sea or from helicopters, there was no visible preparatory fire by lethal weapons to clear the decks. It is very unlikely that those activists seen waiting for the Israelis to board would have been exposed in the open if they had been under fire.

The fighting can be separated into two actions: the main one on the upper deck against the commandos landing from helicopters, and one against forces boarding from speedboats. In both cases, the evidence indicates that the radical activists initiated the fighting.

Some forty or more activists reportedly engaged the heliborne commandos. According to Israeli participants in the fight, these activists were organized into cells. IDF video footage shows commandos fast-roping to the upper deck via helicopter with their weapons stowed. They continued to come down one by one, even in the face of assaults. Further footage and firsthand accounts from commandos depict an organized effort to seize the boarders and beat them with clubs, steel rods, knives, and other weapons. The activists also used at least one Molotov-cocktail-type device and a stun grenade. Throughout the available footage, Israeli commandos are clearly seen simply trying to stay alive. Three or four of the commandos were seized and taken below decks, according to IDF reports and news reporters' accounts, but were reunited with their comrades as the commandos took control of the ship.

IDF video also shows significant violent resistance by activists to the boarding from speedboats, including the use of a stun grenade, employment of fire hoses, and the wielding of clubs and chains. Video from a ship security camera supports this assessment. For example, one can see an organized cell with a leader giving direction; preparation for combat, including the issuing of weapons and donning of gas masks; employment of slingshots and other weapons before any Israeli soldiers can be seen on deck; no evidence of any live fire by Israelis before the activists take action; and no women, children, or elderly individuals present.

The commandos initially seemed to use minimal force. Arab media video footage shows some of them carrying riot-control weapons, and various personnel reported shooting paintballs at activists' legs. In a postincident interview, one of the Mavi Marmara passengers stated: "At first they used stun grenades, tear gas grenades, and rubber bullets." What reportedly triggered the use of lethal force was the activists' gunfire, with weapons either taken from seized commandos or already in their possession. Israeli fire killed nine -- by Israeli accounts all of them radical activists involved in the assault -- and wounded thirty or more. Most of the deaths reportedly occurred during one violent assault on the commandos, during which six of the nine were killed by close-range pistol shots. According to the Turkish autopsy report, all of the activists were killed by 9 mm ammunition, indicating that the commandos did not employ assault rifles or machineguns. The close-range nature of the wounds to the nine killed also suggests that there was no fire from Israeli helicopters or ships. Seven Israelis were wounded, two seriously. Israeli commando injuries included gunshot and knife wounds, and blunt force trauma from clubs.

## Conclusions

The IDFN did not set out for a bloody confrontation, but it ended up in one. For their part, a core group of radical activists clearly appear to have planned on a bloody incident and got what they wanted. Yet much of the world has uncritically accepted the narrative of Israeli "assault" and "massacre."

The IDFN did not "assault" the ship -- they attempted to board a noncompliant vessel and to take control of it, if need

be, using crowd- and riot-control tactics. They had not planned on engaging in close combat, and they acted accordingly until attacked. No one can look at the video of Israeli forces reacting to the first violent acts without noting their surprise and shock. And no one can look at this footage and reasonably label the resistance passive or peaceful. This was a well-planned ambush, another case of extremists hiding behind civilians to conduct an attack, and completely in keeping with the asymmetric way in which groups like Hamas wage war. Israel's opponents will likely attempt to employ such tactics again in the hope of breaking the Gaza blockade.

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