

Fallout from the Gaza Flotilla Tragedy

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](#), [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](#), [Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](#)

Matthew Levitt is the Promer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](#)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



[Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](#)

Jeffrey White is an adjunct defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of the Levant and Iran.



Brief Analysis

The Gaza flotilla tragedy has given Hamas at least a short-term political boost while undercutting the sea blockade of Gaza, fitting well with the agenda of the flotilla's organizers, Turkey's Humanitarian Relief Fund. At the same time, the incident -- to the extent that the details are known -- has shown that U.S.-Israel relations have proven resilient in the face of the first major international incident since the two parties worked to mend relations following the Jerusalem building-permit crisis in March.

Impact on Hamas

In the short term, Hamas will benefit politically from its role as a supporter of the flotilla, its public calls for Israel to not interfere with the effort to break the blockade, and the burnishing of its fading "resistance" credentials. Ismail Haniyeh set up the situation as a win-win for Hamas in his May 29 speech declaring that it was a victory if the flotilla got through or if Israel stopped it. The bloody outcome only increased the size of the victory for Hamas. Previously, Hamas had launched a broad media campaign to focus attention on the flotilla and warn of the possibility of an Israeli action against it. Since the incident, Hamas media organs have given extensive coverage to it, prominently depicting the role and actions of Hamas officials. Hamas's public role in the events makes the Palestinian Authority (PA) look bad by comparison. For the most part, Hamas has considerably trailed the PA in support among Palestinians, so Hamas is hoping the incident will give it at least a temporary boost. It should be pointed out that even the sympathy boost that Hamas garnered after the 2008-2009 Gaza war evaporated in just two months.

The Gaza flotilla interdiction incident cannot be seen as other than a major victory for Hamas. The outcome, the images, and the reflexive condemnation of the action by much of the world are all of direct benefit to Hamas and to the detriment of its opponents -- especially Israel, but the PA as well. Hamas will see immediate political gains as well as potential long-term practical benefits for its rule in Gaza.

Future of the Sea Blockade

Although the incident did not affect Israel's military capability to maintain the blockade, it is going to be much more difficult for Israel to enforce controls at sea. Additional attempts to break the sea blockade are likely, and they may include increased foreign support -- more ships, more people -- and the potential for more violence and more embarrassment for Israel. Hamas-associated sources report that an effort to send another flotilla is already underway. In effect, this would amount to the creation of a "maritime front" against Israel.

According to the Financial Times, Gaza supermarkets are so well stocked that merchants are complaining that prices of consumer goods are being forced down. Nevertheless, the flotilla tragedy will reinforce calls to lift Israel's sea blockade and its strict controls on land shipments to Gaza. Israel is likely to oppose humanitarian exceptions to the sea blockade, however. In the 1990s, what started out as symbolic shipments organized by politically motivated groups claiming a humanitarian agenda turned into a significant weakening of international sanctions against Libya and Iraq; in the latter case, that sanctions weakening led to significant smuggling of militarily useful items. Were uninspected ships able to unload in Gaza, it would be difficult to prevent large amounts of heavy weaponry from being imported by Hamas, which does not recognize Israel's right to exist and has more than amply demonstrated that it will use any weapons that come into its possession.

To be sure, Hamas can already smuggle some powerful weapons through tunnels; for example, its operatives have fired a Fajr rocket with a twenty-seven-mile radius. But Israel's ally in supporting the boycott of weapons to Hamas has been Egypt, which has done much better recently at impeding the smuggling of weapons through tunnels into Gaza. Cairo was willing to withstand protests at its embassies in other Arab countries during the 2008-2009 Gaza war, refusing to open its Rafah border crossing to Hamas. (Egypt opened the Rafah crossing today, but this might be as short-lived as the other occasions Cairo has opened it for humanitarian reasons.) Critics have yet to come forward with an alternative to the Israeli sea blockade and the strict land controls imposed by both Egypt and Israel.

If the blockade seriously erodes, Hamas's political position in Gaza will be enhanced, its ability to rule improved, and its ability to acquire heavy arms in large quantities greatly increased. The group will have reversed the dynamic of the increasingly difficult situation it has found itself in since the December 2008-January 2009 Operation Cast Lead.

The Flotilla Organizers

Among the groups that organized the aid flotilla to Gaza is a charity headquartered in Turkey called the Humanitarian Relief Fund ("Insani Yardim Vakfi" in Turkish, or IHH). IHH was established in 1992 and officially registered in Istanbul in 1995. A French intelligence report concluded that in the mid-1990s, IHH president Bulent Yildirim was directly involved in "recruit[ing] veteran soldiers in anticipation of the coming holy war [jihad]. In particular, some men were sent into war zones in Muslim countries in order to acquire combat experience." Foreshadowing IHH's role in this weekend's aid flotilla to Gaza, the French report noted that IHH provided financial support "as well as caches of firearms, knives, and pre-fabricated explosives" in an effort to obtain "political support from these countries." IHH phone records in Istanbul reportedly included repeated telephone calls in 1996 to an al-Qaeda guesthouse in Italy and to North African terrorists active in Europe.

In addition, a 1996 CIA report on terrorist abuse of charities, declassified after the September 11 attacks, documented IHH as a charity with ties to "Iran and Algerian groups." According to the report, the director of the IHH office in Sarajevo "has been linked to Iranian operatives." The report described "the terrorist-related activities and linkages" of fifteen selected "Islamic NGOs," noting that "individuals connected to some of these NGOs have plotted to kidnap or kill U.S. personnel." And according to French court documents, IHH was the subject of a Turkish

criminal investigation in late 1997 when sources revealed that leaders of the group were purchasing automatic weapons from other regional Islamist militant groups. Based on an analysis of seized IHH documents, Turkish authorities concluded that "detained members of IHH were going to fight in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya."

IHH is a member of the "Union of Good" (Itelaf al-Khair, also known as the "Charity Coalition"). According to Palestinian intelligence, this organization "is considered -- with regard to material support -- one of the biggest Hamas supporters." Israel outlawed the Union of Good in February 2002, and the United States named it a specially designated global terrorist entity in November 2008. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, the Union of Good was created by the Hamas leadership "in order to facilitate the transfer of funds to Hamas." Intelligence underpinning the U.S. designation noted that the group "facilitates the transfer of tens of millions of dollars a year to Hamas-managed associations." It also "acts as a broker for Hamas by facilitating financial transfers between a web of charitable organizations...and Hamas-controlled organizations in the West Bank and Gaza."

The involvement of a Union of Good member in the aid flotilla should not come as a surprise. According to statements issued by the U.S. government, the primary purpose behind the founding of the Union of Good by Hamas leaders was "to strengthen Hamas' political and military position in the West Bank and Gaza, including by: (i) diverting charitable donations to support Hamas members and the families of terrorist operatives; and (ii) dispensing social welfare and other charitable services on behalf of Hamas."

This episode has severely damaged ties between Turkey and Israel for the foreseeable future. Turkish-Israeli ties have been on a downhill trajectory since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) acquired power in 2002. While some dismissed the AKP's sharp criticism of Israeli policies as domestic politicking, its rhetoric served as the litmus test of what lay ahead. AKP officials have dubbed Israel a "pirate state," and a "terrorist state," adding that Turkish-Israeli relations will not be revived unless Israel recognizes Hamas and lifts the sanctions on Gaza. This means that Turkey cannot be expected to act as a mediator between Israel and its neighbors, a role some had suggested Ankara could play under the AKP.

U.S.-Israel Relations

The Obama administration's efforts during the past couple months to reach out to the Netanyahu government were derided by many as a "charm offensive" or public relations move. Yet there is nothing like a crisis to put the U.S.-Israeli relationship to a genuine test. The fact is the administration did not rush to judgment on the flotilla tragedy, seeing it as a security-related issue. A White House statement yesterday made clear that the United States would not jump on a bandwagon condemning Israel. It called for all the facts to be known before forming any judgment. And a subsequent State Department release made clear that Israel -- not, implicitly, the international community -- needed to launch an investigation. The statements by both the Obama administration and the president of the UN Security Council fell short of what was wanted by Turkey and Arab states. An international investigation was not mentioned, so avoiding a repeat of the controversial Goldstone Commission. By diluting the UN statement, the Obama administration was trying to protect the current proximity talks of Middle East peace envoy George Mitchell.

The United States seems to understand the double standard at work in the UN Security Council. During the three years between Israel's August 2005 withdrawal from Gaza and Operation Cast Lead, Hamas fired 3,335 rockets at Israeli towns and cities, but the Security Council never met once to discuss these attacks. When an international team concluded that North Korea sank a South Korean ship, the Security Council members consulted at great length about how to evaluate the reports and what response would be appropriate. Yet when Israel is accused, the Security Council rushes into action even before full information is available.

Matthew Levitt is director of The Washington Institute's [Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11&newActiveSubNav=Stein%20Program%20on%20Counterterrorism%20and%20Intelligence&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D11&newActiveNav=researchPr) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11&newActiveSubNav=Stein%20Program%20on%20Counterterrorism%20and%20Intelligence&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D11&newActiveNav=researchPr>). David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of the [Project on the Middle East Peace Process](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=16&newActiveSubNav=Project%20on%20the%20Middle%20East%20Peace%20Process&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D16&newActiveNav=researchPrograms) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=16&newActiveSubNav=Project%20on%20the%20Middle%20East%20Peace%20Process&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D16&newActiveNav=researchPrograms>) at the Institute. Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at the Institute. ❖

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