

Fallout from the Gaza Interdiction

May 31, 2010



Articles & Testimony

On Monday morning, May 31, the most recent convoy organized by the "Free Gaza" movement came to a violent end. With scores of dead and wounded after Israeli naval commandos took over the largest ship in the convoy, the repercussions of this deadly event will be felt on several levels in the coming months.

For Israel, the damage the failed operation has caused the country can hardly be overestimated. Whatever the case -- and regardless of whether the violence was instigated by some of the crew or activists (which, it turned out, was clearly the case), the world already regards this as an excessive use of force. Turkey -- whose Islamist government supported the flotilla and made it possible -- has recalled its ambassador to Israel and worldwide condemnation of Israel has been pouring out.

It seems clear that the operation was not properly thought through, even though the IDF had indications that this time the organizers were clearly aiming for a confrontation. The basic assumption of the IDF was that the activists were looking for a clash, and perhaps even a little bloodshed, which would be captured by the media. The naval commandos (elite troops from the Shayetet 13 naval commando unit) who were tasked with commandeering the ships and escort them to Ashdod, however, were clearly not prepared to be met by the violence they encountered when boarding the ships. The troops were told they'd encounter resistance, but more likely of the passive nonviolent kind rather than the deadly sort they actually met. The troops were equipped with paintball rifles (used for crowd control) and handguns that they were to use only in unanticipated life-threatening situations. Using bats, knives, slingshots, and, in the end, rifles, (according to Israeli naval sources) the activists were clearly anticipating a clash with the sailors.

But being forced to use deadly violence in an operation intended to be conducted with a minimum of violence, and on a convoy trumpeted by some of the European activists as nothing but a completely nonaggressive and peaceful demonstration with humanitarian aims, is a sure sign that not enough preparation had gone into the mission's planning. This is also shown by the fact that Israel highlighted the setup of a detention center in Ashdod in preparation for the activists and bent over backward to say that any humanitarian goods could enter into Gaza through regulated crossings after inspection. Furthermore, the fact that the operation took place in international waters will raise even more questions about the liberal interpretation of the law of the sea that Israel used when confronting the convoy.

The flotilla was not expected to alter in any substantial way the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip. It was mostly a battle of public relations meant to strike a blow at Israel. It's hard to see if anything short of letting the flotilla through to Gaza could have avoided the bloodshed that ensued. But that fact alone should have played a much greater role in the planning of the operation than it did. Avoiding civilian casualties, especially fatal ones, was part of the officially stated Israeli policy, and the fact that the operation became such a disaster says a lot about the failures in the planning process. The domestic Israeli fallout will definitely lead to tough internal investigations into how this could have happened. As a result, an independent Israeli committee of inquiry is sure to be formed in the not-so-distant future.

For the activists, the whole affair can and will be used differently depending on who is doing the analysis. It seems obvious that some of the Europeans actually did not know very much about the main organizer -- the Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) -- and never intended to forcefully resist the Israelis, should it come to a clash. There is no reason to suspect the many activists who sincerely went on the mission to help alleviate a situation deemed dire from a purely humanitarian perspective.

As for the IHH, however, it is closely connected with Hamas and has long history of advocating armed struggle, including terrorism, against Israel. Furthermore, the organization has close ties with other militant Islamic organizations, including al-Qaeda. The current president of IHH, Bulent Yildirim, was already in the 1990s involved in recruiting members and sending them to war zones such as Bosnia to gain combat experience. The IHH also has a history of fighting the Turkish government, and several of its leaders and members have been arrested for illegal arms procurement and purchasing bombmaking material from Turkish terror groups. That criminal investigation, however, was axed by the Erdogan government. Most damning for the IHH, perhaps, was testimony to a U.S. court in 2003 by the French Judge Jean-Louis Bruguiere that the IHH played a "central role" in the attempted al-Qaeda millennium bomb plot targeting Los Angeles International Airport. Bruguiere added that the IHH was a so-called "cover-up" NGO that had served to recruit activists and forge documents as well as traffic weapons for the terrorists involved in the terror attempt. None of this, obviously, should be taken as an excuse for the Israeli responsibility in causing the deaths of some of the participants in the convoy.

Regardless of whether they knew about IHH or not, the overall feeling among participants in the convoy must surely be one of having their preconceived views of Israel as an aggressor confirmed. The fact that the military operation went so disastrously wrong is reason enough for the political heat to be concentrated on Israel for a long time. And another immediate effect will be heightened pressure on Israel (and perhaps Egypt) to lift, or at the very least ease, the blockade. The EU, which has demanded this for some time, will have a top-level meeting shortly where the issue is sure to come up. Even sanctions against Israel cannot be ruled out. Taking military action against a civilian convoy -- regardless of justification -- can hardly be condoned by the EU.

The country most immediately standing to gain from this whole affair is Turkey. It has reconfirmed its ability to stand firm behind the Palestinians (as opposed to other Arab countries whose rhetoric doesn't match their actions) and made it possible to enhance its standing as a bulwark against Israeli aggression and excessive use of force. Following on the heels of the nuclear deal with Iran, Turkey is clearly gearing up for a larger role in the region.

It is highly unlikely that the facts about the real intentions and actions of the IHH will stand in the way of this. On the contrary: the continuous radicalization of the Erdogan administration goes some way in explaining the Turkish leniency towards the IHH and the about-face with which the present Turkish government views an organization that has used deadly violence against previous Turkish governments.

For the United States, this couldn't have come at a worse time. With Turkey on the UN Security Council and the vote on new sanctions against Iran coming up, the ruckus with Turkey over the nuclear deal is already causing the Obama administration a headache. A more-nuanced official U.S. response is to be expected in time, but right now this can only draw attention away for what in Washington is regarded as the main issue in the Middle East: the Iranian nuclear crisis.

This brings us over to another "winner" in this sad event: the Islamists in Hamas (and other militant organizations among the Palestinians) and Hizballah and their backers in Iran. For Hamas, this is God sent, deflecting attention from their troubles in Gaza and from Iran and Hizballah and helping Hamas to portray Israel as the aggressive bully in the neighborhood. Another casualty of this is, of course, the Palestinian Authority. It is very unlikely that President Mahmoud Abbas and his premier, Salam Fayyad, will be able to withstand domestic pressure. They will likely feel forced to cancel the ongoing indirect peace talks with Israel. So, in the end, the real casualty of all this is the

Palestinian community, whose situation triggered the string of events that led to the new dead and wounded in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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