

Furore in Israel

Suspicion and defensiveness after the 'Freedom Flotilla'

by Jonathan Pearlman

As with so many of the events that mark Israel's history, the deadly attack on the Gaza flotilla in late May seemed frustratingly – and tragically – to encapsulate many of the arguments, insecurities, defences and emotions that swirl around the enduring conflict in the Middle East.

At first, the result and immediate consequences of the confrontation aboard the *Mavi Marmara* appeared relatively straightforward. Israeli troops had killed nine pro-Palestinian activists, leading to a further decline in its reputation and to deeper international isolation, and relations with its closest ally in the Middle East, Turkey, were damaged beyond any foreseeable repair. But the event quickly became mired in the seemingly inevitable tug-of-war over facts, causes, perceptions and the competing claims to morality and justice in the Middle East.

In the frenzied aftermath of the attack, a volley of allegations and arguments began to cycle and recycle across headlines, airwaves, opinion pages, tweets, blogs, banners, press conferences and parliaments. Were the killings deliberate? Were the protesters armed? Was the use of force justified? Was it proportionate? Was Israel being unfairly condemned? Was the plight of the Palestinians being unfairly neglected? Was the world's anger towards Israel caused by Israeli intransigence or was it merely a failure of public relations? Was Israel becoming a pariah state or was it merely responding as any democracy would to ongoing security threats and radical, anti-democratic opponents?

A further volley erupted over the proper context for explaining the attack. For many, the raid was yet another instance of Israel's apparent propensity to use excessive force – the next link in a chain that joins the attack on Gaza to the second Lebanon war. Or it was seen as the latest in a series of Israeli intelligence bungles and diplomatic gaffes – a sequence of events that links Mossad's closed-circuit television assassination in Dubai to the offence to US Vice President Joe Biden during his visit and to the snub to the Turkish ambassador. For others, the proper context involved a hard-headed, think-tank description of realpolitik, pragmatism and geopolitics. In this light, the flotilla was just a sideshow, a symptom of ongoing regional tussling and position-

ing, as Turkey seeks to champion the Palestinian cause and shift away from Europe towards the East.

All of these questions and suppositions instantly engulfed – fairly or not, rationally or not – any attempt to assess Israel's actions and the impact of the attack. For every contention, there came a rebuttal; for every video clip of the raid, a counter-clip; for every image, a counter-image. As the last of the boats were led by the Israeli navy into Ashdod port, pro-Palestinian supporters were readying their next flotillas, while a group of patriotic Israeli students announced they would send counter-flotillas to demand the return of Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier who has been held in Gaza since 2006.

This is not to say that all of the facts and arguments surrounding the attack should be regarded with equal weight; but that sifting through events here – and trying to determine causes and consequences – inevitably involves the troublesome and often impossible task of navigating through haze and chaff.

In trying to assess the Israeli public's response to the attack and to understand the subsequent mood in Israel, it is worth returning to the days before the fateful confrontation aboard the *Mavi Marmara*. The first thing to note is that the flotilla had received relatively little media coverage, in or outside Israel. There were few reporters aboard from mainstream Western media outlets. While the flotilla was the largest and most ambitious of its kind to try to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza, it was not the first. The blockade began in 2005 after Israel removed its troops and settlements from the strip, and was expanded after Hamas seized control of the territory in 2007. On several occasions Ehud Olmert, a former prime minister, quietly allowed several ships filled with protesters and supplies to enter Gaza. The aid was disbursed with little fanfare and the crews were deported.

In the lead-up to the so-called 'Freedom Flotilla', the main focus of the Israeli media was on the debate about how to deal with the boats. The family of Gilad Shalit offered to support the flotilla if the protesters agreed to urge Hamas to let him receive letters and official visits (the flotilla organisers apparently refused). Meanwhile, a right-wing Israeli group announced that

it would sail out to greet the flotilla with a 'counter-flotilla' wearing blood-stained clothes and calling for the Palestinians to 'Free Gaza from Hamas'.

As the boats set out for Gaza, a forum of seven senior Israeli ministers met to determine Israel's response. According to media reports later that day, the forum considered the possibility of greeting the flotilla with counter-stunts. The defence minister, Ehud Barak, apparently relayed a proposal he had heard from a journalist to bring the demonstrators to the Israeli port of Ashdod and to greet them with women dressed in white who would pass on letters to Gilad Shalit, and then allow the ships to continue to Gaza (such a protest was designed as a twist on the 'women in black', an anti-war protest movement which originated in Israel). Another minister suggested an alternative greeting for the protesters – assembling a collection of remnants of rockets fired at Israel from Gaza. Whether these proposals were taken seriously or in jest is unclear; in the end, the group of ministers decided to avoid stunts and to deploy an élite commando unit to intercept the flotilla. Reportedly, only one member of the group dissented: the cabinet secretary, Zvi Hauser, who, perhaps tellingly, was formerly a public relations adviser to Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu.

The day after the ministerial meeting, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* published a detailed report on the plans to confront the flotilla. It now makes for fateful reading:

Israel announced that it will prevent the ships from reaching their destination, and warned that it will not hesitate to make use of limited force if it becomes necessary. Israel considers the effort by international left-wing elements and Islamic organisations as intentional provocation under the guise of humanitarian aid. The Israeli message has been that the activists are welcome to bring the humanitarian aid to the port of Ashdod, where it will be examined and if found suitable will be permitted to enter the Gaza Strip through the land crossings. If the activists try to break the siege, they will be arrested. IDF sources say that a clash with the activists on the ships will produce bad press from Israel's point of view – but they believe that this is inevitable in any eventuality.

The precise details of the attack – and what exactly happened aboard the *Mavi Marmara* – are likely to remain murky. This is in large part because Israel was determined to minimise coverage of the interception, which was conducted at night, far from land and after communication equipment aboard the flotilla ships had been shut down. The method chosen by Israeli authorities to intercept the boats seems, in almost any context, reckless, ludicrous and self-defeating; but, putting aside the decision to use teams of masked commandoes who rappelled onto the ship armed with paint guns after approaching on zodiacs and firing sound grenades,

the actual conduct of the troops and the protesters during the battle is difficult to judge. Everybody aboard seems to have believed they were acting in self-defence and were being ambushed by deranged killers.

The protesters, after they were deported to Turkey, told countless stories of trigger-happy Israelis; the Israeli commandoes were allowed to give brief anonymous interviews in which they decried the protesters, who, they said, had death wishes. The Israeli military is conducting an investigation into the operation, which is unlikely to provide a satisfying or impartial account. Meanwhile, a separate investigation of the entire affair, ordered by the Israeli government amid much international pressure, is likely to have limited or no access to operational details or to the soldiers involved in the raid.

All that can be said with certainty is that the raid triggered a panicked and frightened response among both the protesters and the Israeli commandoes, and that both sides seemed unprepared for the extent of their opponent's willingness to use force.

The immediate consequences of the deadly attack, however, were far easier to gauge. Instantly, the flotilla – and the blockade of Gaza – was news around the world.

In Israel, with its long and contested history, every place and person seems to contain some additional historical resonance. On this occasion, the site from which the world media watched the arrival of the flotilla was named Jonah's Hill. The hilltop – overlooking the port at Ashdod – is believed to be the site of the tomb of the biblical prophet, who was forced to warn an ancient city that its sins would lead to its destruction. In modern times, before the establishment of Israel in 1948, the hill was used by the British occupying forces to spot boats carrying illegal Jewish immigrants from Europe.

At Jonah's Hill, on the morning after the attack, all of the elements of this seemingly endless, blood-soaked conflict were on display. The first to arrive – and the reason for all subsequent arrivals – were the reporters and their crews, who assumed positions at the lookout, lining up to file stories against the messy port and the glitter of the Mediterranean Sea. Soon after, two uniformed Israeli army spokespeople arrived: an Arabic-speaker and an English-speaker. They took their positions in front of the first of the cameras and went from one to the other, delivering the same lines, rebuttals and updates. A foreign ministry spokesman, in shirt and tie, arrived soon after and did the same, as did a spokesman for the Israeli police.

Then a handful of Israeli pro-Palestinian protesters arrived on the hill, with impromptu placards. They stood at the entrance to the hilltop's lookout. At first they were quiet, stubborn, ignored and largely irrelevant. But their protest soon provoked a response. A group of men who had come to inspect the media frenzy took umbrage at the placards. They denounced Hamas and

Palestinian terrorists and the world's double standards. Arguments erupted; some of the placards ended in pieces. But this small piece of violence on the hilltop's sidelines was noteworthy only for its smallness and irrelevance. Across the country, a handful of protests were held to denounce the violence, and several were held to denounce Turkey for supporting the flotilla. But the protests have been small in number and effect. Despite the deadly consequences of the attack and the widespread global condemnation of Israel, the raid has so far not generated any significant opposition to the government or its handling of the flotilla.

One of the main reasons for this is the two pieces of footage, released by the Israeli military, of protesters aboard the *Mavi Marmara* attacking Israeli soldiers and throwing one overboard. In Israel, where military service is compulsory, much of the population was quick to identify with the soldiers who came under attack. The footage was seen as confirmation of the initial claims by the commandoes that they had been 'lynched' by the protesters; it was also seen as confirmation of claims by the military and the government that a group of protesters with links to Hamas and Al Qaeda had sought to initiate a violent confrontation.

Israelis are accustomed to fighting wars and tend to view themselves as participants in an ongoing conflict; and so the confrontation aboard the *Mavi Marmara* was seen as a battle, in which the soldiers came under attack and fired back. There was little sympathy for the victims. The mass media and some Israeli politicians referred to the protesters as 'terrorists'. The label seemed to stick. This immediate branding of the protesters appeared to reflect a deepening sense among many Israelis that they are besieged and misunderstood and swamped by enemies intent on their destruction. It further discouraged any attempt to distinguish between types of opponents and criticism, and deferred any detached analysis of how the raid's method may have invoked the method of response.

But the most damaging outcome of the attack for Israel was the immediate impact on its reputation and the boost it gave to a growing international campaign to challenge Israel's legitimacy. The opposition leader, Tzipi Livni, broadly defended the raid (she was briefed immediately afterwards by Ehud Barak and on the day of the raid was more vocal than any government minister in defending Israel's actions). But she did raise dire warnings in the Knesset about the impact on Israel's global standing. 'Israel is facing a difficult time right now, perhaps the most difficult in our history,' Livni said. 'This is not just a temporary event that will pass. This is a continuous process under which Israel is becoming isolated from the world.'

Many Israelis seem increasingly aware of this threat, but few blame their government or their military. Instead, the consensus view seems to be that the world – unjustly – does not appreciate the nature of Israel's

security threats or its efforts to defend itself. This lack of understanding of Israel's plight is sometimes attributed to blissful ignorance on the part of those who live far from the troubles of the Middle East; it is sometimes attributed to wilful odium towards the Jewish state.

But the public's support for the deployment of military solutions to apparently diplomatic problems or political protests – such as the approach of an unfriendly flotilla – appears to have increased since the collapse of the Oslo accords and in the aftermath of Israel's unilateral withdrawals from occupied territory. According to this view, peaceful or diplomatic solutions have not merely failed but have encouraged further violence: the Oslo accords were followed by the second intifada, the withdrawal from Gaza was followed by rocket attacks on Israel and the kidnapping of Shalit and the withdrawal from southern Lebanon was followed by Hezbollah's cross-border raid in 2006 and its rocket attacks on northern Israel.

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It is a view of recent history that is flawed, simplistic and inaccurate, but it has been fostered by Israeli political leaders whose actions and failures it implicitly condones, and it is widely welcomed by the Israeli public, because it preserves an image of the nation as peace-loving, constantly misunderstood and surrounded by enemies who refuse to meet compromises with compromises. In this context, a heavy hand is not a fault but a necessity. And the moves to isolate Israel are regarded as symptoms of unfair and relentless criticism of Israel, which is in turn viewed as a part of a broader process of a demonisation that, eventually, has its roots in anti-Semitism.

Many Israelis feel their plight and their security concerns are ignored by the world, which focuses exclusively on Israel's misdeeds. For this reason, public criticism of the raid is likely to be limited because, in such light, the main source of the outrage against Israel is not the blockade or the raid but the pre-existing venom towards the Jewish state.

So, in Israel, as the din recedes, criticisms of the raid have tended to focus on the immediate circumstances that led to the use of deadly force: a failure of intelligence, a failure to prepare for the violence of the protesters and a failure to properly explain Israel's case. It remains to be seen whether the investigations and self-examination will lead to deeper changes or will affect the arsenal of ready-made questions, contexts and labels that mould public and political opinion. ■

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