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Israel's Voyage into Isolation

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In the port of Gaza City, Hamas had set up a tent, brightly adorned with Turkish flags. The intention was to welcome the roughly 700 foreign peace activists on board six ships who had planned on breaking through Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip for the first time since the war one-and-a-half years ago. But now it was just the senior leadership of Hamas waiting at the site, gazing out at the horizon.

Somewhere out there, elite forces of the Israeli navy boarded the *Mavi Marmara*, a ship flying under the flag of the Comoros, shortly after 4 a.m. last Monday morning.

According to the Israelis, passengers on the upper deck wielding sticks and knives attacked the soldiers in the "Shayetet 13" unit, who had rappelled onto the decks of the ships from helicopters hovering overhead. The Palestinians, however, say that the soldiers shot without warning at peaceful activists. The only aspect of the case that is undisputed is that nine activists were killed.

But the men from Hamas standing at the port of Gaza weren't looking particularly mournful. In fact, the incident couldn't have been more advantageous for the rulers of the 1.5 million Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip. More ships, they said, will soon begin testing the blockade, a threat which appeared all the more credible over the weekend after Israeli troops boarded the *Rachel Corrie*, a freighter which was originally intended to have been part of last week's convoy, on Saturday afternoon. Like the first raid, the boarding of the *Rachel Corrie* took place in international waters, but this time, no one was hurt.

Hamas says more ships are on their way, from Turkey, Ireland, Bahrain, Kuwait and Algeria -- altogether two or even three times as many ships as participated in last Monday's effort.

Victims in the Gaza Strip

"After the attack on the *Mavi Marmara*, we are now trying to fight Israel with the media instead missiles," says Mohammed Abu Ensura, whose nom de guerre is Abu Radwan, of the Popular Resistance Committees, an institution which has frequently been associated with armed attacks on Israel in the past. Hamas has decided to hold back, he says. "We want the world to perceive the people of Gaza as victims."

With each passing day last week, it became increasingly clear that the plan was working. Rarely has there been so much international outrage over Israel. Tehran and Damascus, as expected, voiced their typical outrage, but this time Israel's allies in the Middle East also took their distance. Turkey, which lost the largest number of citizens on the *Mavi Marmara*, accused Israel of "piracy" and "banditry." Egypt opened its border to the Gaza Strip, thereby abandoning the blockade policy it had pursued together with Israel.

At the summit between Russia and the European Union, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and EU Foreign Minister Catherine Ashton called for an immediate end to the Gaza blockade, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon called Israel's policy "unjust," and even the Chinese leadership, which normally keeps itself out of the Middle East conflict, said it was "shocked by Israel's attack."

The strike, in short, was a disaster, irrespective of exactly how it played out. While some critics remained relatively diplomatic, merely ruffling the Israelis for their "immoderate" approach, others were more direct. The influential German weekly *Die Zeit* described Israel as a "country that is increasingly acting as if it were in a separate moral world, pressured by the feeling of being alone and, as a result, believing itself to be empowered to commit arbitrary attacks."

Last Monday's tragedy demonstrated two things: that Israel is becoming increasingly isolated politically; and that sealing off the Gaza Strip is as inefficient as it is pointless.

'Unpredictable Dimensions'

The question remains as to where the commotion over the Gaza flotilla will lead. No one is sure whether Israel may now review the efficacy of the blockade, though the weekend boarding of the *Rachel Corrie* seems to indicate otherwise. So too does the Monday report that Israel had shot and killed four Palestinians in diving equipment off the coast of the Gaza Strip. Hamas, too, seems unlikely to back down, now that it has the ear of the world. "The mechanism of violence and retaliation, the cycle of hate and revenge," says author David Grossman, has "entered a new round of unpredictable dimensions."

Even those who have long exercised patience in the face of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's unilateralism are beginning to show signs of exasperation. US President Barack Obama has called for a thorough investigation, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, speaking in an unusually harsh tone, demanded international participation in the investigations.

The diplomatic damage is immense. The world had just breathed a sigh of relief after the Palestinians had finally agreed to indirect peace talks, but now the prospects of success are slim once again. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas must now take a tough approach toward Israel to avoid losing face in the eyes of his people.

The attack off the Israeli coast also diminishes the prospects of sharper sanctions against Iran. The United States, which had hoped to achieve a unanimous resolution by all 15 members of the UN Security Council, had to postpone the debate when Ankara announced its opposition to new sanctions.

'Nothing Is as it Was'

The fury of an entire region is now being concentrated in Turkey. With rare unanimity, Turkish politicians from the left and right joined the country's Islamist party in calling for retaliation. "From this day forward, nothing is as it was," Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in a speech to members of his party.

A look back at history underscores the adverse diplomatic consequences of the incident. Turkey was the first majority Muslim nation to recognize Israel after its independence in 1948. What began as a partnership of convenience in the Cold War became a strategic alliance in the mid-1990s. Israeli fighter pilots trained over Anatolia and the Turks received Israeli military technology.

However, Prime Minister Erdogan was finding it increasingly difficult to justify Ankara's closeness to the "Zionist state" to his conservative Muslim voters, particularly as the Israelis repeatedly provoked their ally. Ankara hasn't forgotten that Israeli soldiers marched into the Gaza Strip at the end of 2008, even as Turkey was still brokering peace talks between Israel and Syria. Since then, Erdogan hasn't missed an opportunity to sharply criticize the Israelis.

"Turkey's hostility is as strong as its friendship is valuable," Erdogan said last week in an unmistakably threatening tone.

Jerusalem, however, blames Turkey for the escalation off the Gaza coast. After all, it says, the Turkish charity IHH, which organized the flotilla, has ties to global jihad. If Israel had allowed the flotilla to pass through the blockade, says Netanyahu, Gaza would have been turned into an "Iranian port" for "hundreds of ships carrying missiles."

Netanyahu's words were as exaggerated as they were incorrect. The activists had no weapons on board, and allowing them to reach Gaza would not have posed a threat to

Israel. Netanyahu's predecessor, Ehud Olmert, allowed such ships to pass through the blockade several times. And there were also alternatives. For example, the Israeli navy could have destroyed the ships' propellers, says Swedish author Henning Mankell, who was on board the pro-Gaza flotilla.