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# Siege Fatigue and the Flotilla Mistake

*'It makes no difference what we do,' I was told by a very senior military source two days before the operation.*

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By RONEN BERGMAN

Tel Aviv

Monday's botched commando raid on the Gaza-bound flotilla has proven disastrous for Israel. World public opinion has united in condemning the Jewish state and the U.N. Security Council has already demanded an inquiry. Closer to home, the strategic alliance that Israel had painstakingly forged with Turkey is in tatters.

The horrific outcome—so far nine killed and dozens wounded—has caused irreparable damage to Israel's image. Even if the video evidence proves beyond doubt that the activists on board the ships were armed and that they were the first to attack, the battle for public opinion (which, after all, is what the flotilla exercise was really about) was lost the moment the first Israeli soldier set foot on the deck of the Mavi Marmara—the Turkish ferry that served as the flagship.

What makes the flotilla fiasco all the more astounding is that Israel has been preparing for this confrontation for months. It has had time to run various scenarios, and even to review strategies it has previously employed for similar events.

In 1988, 131 members of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) who had been deported from the Palestinian Territories following the outbreak of the first intifada intended to set sail to Gaza from Limassol, Cyprus. Their boat, called Al Awda or the Ship of the Return, was accompanied by 200 journalists.



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Publicly, Israel announced that it would use any force necessary to prevent the vessel from reaching Gaza. But behind the scenes the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) general staff, including then Deputy Chief of Staff Ehud Barak, recognized that while seizing control of the ship or blowing it out of the water were not operationally complicated, the international repercussions of such plans would be grim if the Israelis were met with

Associated Press

The Mavi Marmara, lead boat of a flotilla headed to the Gaza Strip, which was stormed by Israeli naval commandos.

would be grim if the Israelis were met with resistance and a battle ensued.

For this reason, the idea of a direct confrontation was abandoned, and the IDF

decided to implement a covert operation instead. On Feb. 15, hours before it was due to set sail, the empty ship was blown up in Limassol harbor by a team of Mossad agents and frogmen from Flotilla 13 (the Israeli equivalent of Navy Seals). The team was led by Yoav Galant, then a young officer and today a major general in the IDF. The operation was a success. There were no casualties on either side and the PLO gave up on the idea of sailing to Gaza.

More recently, in August 2006 two ships carrying peace activists and food aid set out to Gaza, again from Cyprus. Under instructions from then Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, the vessels were boarded at sea without resistance. After a search uncovered no weapons, the ships were permitted to continue on toward the Strip. The Israeli naval forces went home, Hamas declared victory, and that was that.

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But unlike 2006, the rhetoric from both sides—as well as the fact that the Insani Yardim Vakfi, a front group for the Turkish Muslim Brotherhood, organized the flotilla—made it clear that any attempt to take control of the vessels would almost certainly result in

violent confrontation. This is what makes inexplicable the IDF's decision to have members of the Flotilla 13 commando unit board the Marmara. These men are not trained to deal with civilian protestors. And there were other options available to the IDF, such as disabling the ships at sea and towing them to an Israeli port.

While the instinct of many is no doubt to lay the blame at Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's door, it should not be forgotten that the current minister of defense is Ehud Barak, a calmer head whose wealth of military experience includes, as mentioned above, firsthand familiarity with the arguments for and against employing potentially violent methods in similar situations.

What, then, are we to make of the decision-making that led to this tragedy?

Many observers, myself included, often resort to the concept of siege mentality when attempting to make sense of Jerusalem's approach to international relations. It is also true that the memory of the Holocaust still looms large in Israel, especially when existential threats—in which category I emphatically do not include a grab-bag collection of Turkish boats—emerge on Israel's horizon. But until recently, even with its siege mentality, the Israeli government always made an attempt—half-hearted, or ill-conceived, or badly executed, but an attempt nonetheless—to act in a way that would minimize possible harm to the state's international image.

What we witnessed in the early hours of Monday morning was symptomatic of a new degree of fatigue in Israeli governing circles. The fact that both the political and the military authorities could sign off on such an irresponsible operation suggests that the leadership of the country has given up what it has concluded is ultimately a Sisyphean attempt to accommodate world opinion. Isolation is no longer a threat to be fought, their thinking seems to go, because Israel is terminally isolated. What remains is to concentrate exclusively on what is best for Israel's survival, shedding any regard for the opinion of others.

"It makes no difference what we do, or how careful we are, or how we tackle the matter of the flotilla," I was told by a very senior military source two days before the operation. "Whatever we do, they'll all be against us, they'll condemn us at the U.N., and we'll be scolded. We might as well at least preserve our national dignity and maintain the blockade of Gaza." In other words, the war over world opinion is over—and Israel has lost.

Everything that has happened in the past year—the Goldstone Report condemning Israel's war in Gaza, the international furor after the assassination of a Hamas leader in Dubai, even the statement singling out Israel at the recent Nuclear Nonproliferation Conference—is taken

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as an indication that any attempt to do the "right thing" is pointless and perhaps counterproductive. One might as well simply give up.

This feeling is shared by a large section of the Israeli population—not merely the right wing of Israeli society. While many are condemning the IDF's operation on Monday, it is probably fair to say that the majority of the country instinctively understands why these events were permitted to occur.

Israel's fatigue and deep sense of ostracism is, to say the least, unhealthy. It would be unhealthy for any country at the best of times. But it is particularly troubling when the country in question is at perpetual war, and when it is repeatedly threatened with annihilation by the leader of a country who is actively pursuing nuclear weapons. And, of course, it is profoundly disturbing when the fatigued and isolated country itself has the means to strike pre-emptively and punishingly at its enemies, including in ways from which, realistically, there may be no return.

*Mr. Bergman, a senior military and political analyst for the Israeli daily Yedioth Ahronoth, is the author of "The Secret War With Iran" (Free Press, 2008).*

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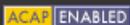
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