

A deadly raid

ISRAEL is trying to fend off a wave of international condemnation following its raid before dawn on Monday May 31st on a flotilla trying to break the siege of Gaza. Some nine campaigners—the figure is still uncertain—aboard a Turkish steamer were shot dead when Israeli commandos descending from helicopters boarded the ship in international waters. Dozens more were wounded. Five smaller craft were boarded and commandeered without violence. All six vessels were taken to the Israeli port of Ashdod where those on board were to be arrested pending their deportation.

After months of seeking to draw international attention Gaza's way, the attack helped Hamas catapult the siege on Gaza to the top of international bulletins and western policy assessments. Hamas leaders pointed out that though Europe and America may claim to be opposed to the boycott, this is undermined by their strong backing for the Palestinian Authority's rival leadership in the West Bank and the continued isolation of Hamas and its Gaza rule.

Turkey, with hundreds of its nationals on board the boats, quickly announced the recall of its ambassador in Tel Aviv. Israeli officials were straining to persuade the Turkish government not to sever diplomatic relations entirely. Relations between the two countries, for long close allies, have worsened sharply over recent months.

In Ramallah, Palestinian Authority officials highlighted what they said were a series of recent security bunglings and called on Israel to consider political options before military ones in its handling of the Israeli-Arab conflict. These ranged, they said, from its slipshod military performance in the 2006 Lebanon war, the fallout from its assault on Gaza between December 2008 and January 2009 and the subsequent Goldstone inquiry into alleged war crimes, to the more recent outcry over the alleged involvement of its spy agency, Mossad, in the assassination of a Hamas operative in Dubai in January this year.

Ban Ki-moon, secretary-general of the UN, called for "a full investigation to determine exactly how this bloodshed took place. I believe Israel must urgently provide a full explanation." European countries—many of the 800-odd campaigners are European nationals—also issued stern public reprimands. President Nicolas Sarkozy of France condemned Israel's disproportionate use of force.

The initial reaction from Washington was more cautious. A spokesman at the White House said America was "working to understand the circumstances surrounding this tragedy." Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu had been scheduled to meet President Obama in Washington on Tuesday June 1st but cancelled the visit and flew home from Canada to take control of the welling diplomatic crisis.

In brief comments from Ottawa, Mr Netanyahu gave his full backing to the commandos. This was the position taken by other ministers, too, and articulated with increasing forcefulness as the day wore on and evidence from the night's events became available. Israeli spokesmen spoke of an "ambush" laid by the campaigners on the ship, who, they said, had purported to come in peace with humanitarian aid for Gaza but in fact, according to Israel, had been spoiling for a fight and had effectively provoked the bloodshed. Israel claims that they were a Muslim Brotherhood vanguard which had carefully rehearsed scenarios for an armed attack on their convoy. Video clips taken from the helicopter showed the individual commandos set upon by men with iron bars and wooden poles as they landed on deck. Several of the soldiers were hurt badly, two of them shot apparently from pistols grabbed from them, and one stabbed.

Hamas leaders called for its followers to demonstrate in Gaza, and the Palestinian Authority followed suit in Ramallah, apparently to defuse any outpouring of sympathy for Hamas. But dogged by continuing division, both authorities discouraged their political rivals from joining their protests, diminishing the turnout: protests in Turkey and elsewhere in the Muslim world equalled or exceeded their number.

Beneath Israel's outward façade of support for the troops, questions are already being asked. On the Israeli left, the Gaza siege has long been seen both as impolitic and morally indefensible. But even among mainstream politicians who defend the siege and the commandos' mission, criticism is being voiced over why they were not sent aboard in far larger numbers, equipped with non-lethal means for confronting angry protesters and taking over the vessels without loss of life.

In Gaza, Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas's head of government in Gaza, heralded "a turning point in the battle to end the siege of Gaza", and fellow Hamas leaders looked to the attack to quicken the erosion of a siege whose intensity Israel and Egypt had already been struggling to retain. Undermined by a labyrinth of tunnels, the supply of goods into Gaza had increased due to Israel relaxing its ban on the entry of raw materials vital for the 60 40-kilometre strip's reconstruction, as well as medical aid. Indeed, Israel says it had repeatedly offered to transfer the flotilla's cargo once it docked in the Israeli port of Ashdod.

But in addition to facilitating the supply of goods into Gaza, the ships had aimed to breach an effective four-year bar on travel outside a territory which since classical times has served as a crossroads between Asia and Africa. For now, and despite the international condemnation, that land, air and naval blockade remains in place. But Turkish diplomats, among others, are asking whether Israel could respond in a similar manner were a second flotilla to set sail for Gaza's shores.

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