

How Israel plays into Hamas's hands

A policy aimed at keeping Gaza isolated has allowed Hamas to tighten its grip on virtually everything in the strip.



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THE “lynch” is what the Israeli government, media and man-in-the-street are calling their navy’s interception on May 31st of the six-vessel multi-nation flotilla that was attempting to bring aid to Gaza. And, in Israeli eyes, the victims of the lynch mob were not the pro-Palestinian activists, perhaps nine of them Turkish, who were shot dead in the operation, nor the dozens of others who were injured, but the Israeli commandos who were set upon with clubs and staves when they shimmied down from helicopters onto the deck of the leading vessel, a Turkish pleasure steamer called Mavi Marmara.

One popular columnist extended the “lynch” metaphor to the United Nations Security Council where, on June 1st, member-states unanimously condemned “those acts which resulted in the loss of at least ten civilians” and called for a “prompt, impartial, credible and transparent investigation”. American diplomats had laboured to mitigate much tougher language proposed by Turkey and others. But the Obama administration’s failure to cast a blanket veto on any depreciation of Israel is depicted in Israel almost as a betrayal. The head of Mossad, Israel’s foreign intelligence service, warned a Knesset committee that Israel was becoming “less of a strategic asset” to the United States (for an American view see article).

The disconnect between the way Israel sees itself and its actions and the way they are viewed by the world outside has never, it seems, been so wide. Nor has it ever been so starkly highlighted as by the bungled operation in the Mediterranean, some 80km (50 miles) off Israel’s (and Gaza’s) coast. A wave of anti-Israel demonstrations swept through cities around the world and Turkey recalled its ambassador.

Inside Israel, too, the gulf is palpably deepening between leftish liberals and the rightist-religious government coalition that represents majority opinion. Writers, such as Amos Oz and David Grossman, and left-wing politicians voiced their criticism this week of the entire policy of blockade and boycott against Hamas-ruled Gaza. But their opinions were widely excoriated as treachery and defeatism.

Where cracks did appear in the broad front of righteous victimhood was over the actual execution of the naval operation. Even the politicians and generals who insisted that the activists were “al-Qaeda-linked mercenaries who laid an ambush for our soldiers” could not cogently explain why the naval commando unit had fallen straight into this ambush.

Within the army, there was finger-pointing at the intelligence branch, which had failed to predict the reception awaiting the troops. Within the cabinet, recriminations have begun. There were even brief mutterings among Binyamin Netanyahu’s aides about the impetuosity of Ehud Barak, the defence minister, who had decided on the operation. But these were quickly

squelched. Plainly the prime minister is not prepared to target, and risk losing, the leader of the Labour Party who has become his close political ally.

The prime minister was on a visit to Canada when things went horribly wrong. He was due to see Barack Obama in the White House the next day for what the Americans were billing as a fence-mending meeting after months of public tension. He hesitated, but eventually cancelled the meeting and flew home. The White House apparently was not offering the beleaguered prime minister a shoulder-to-shoulder public appearance alongside Mr Obama to help fend off the criticism. A spokesman said Mr Netanyahu had an open invitation to return.

Meanwhile, Mr Obama will be meeting the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, in Washington on June 9th in an effort to salvage the recently started "proximity" peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Hamas, triumphant at the turn of events, has urged the authority to break off the talks.

The immediate task for Israel is to enlist American help in order to preclude international demands for an external inquiry, which it fears would be weighted against it. According to Israeli sources, America is said to be urging Mr Netanyahu to appoint without delay an Israeli inquiry under a High Court judge. But, at the same time, Israeli officials fear that diplomatic help from Washington to ease the crisis will come with a "price tag" in the peace negotiations. In the Israeli peace camp, people positively hope that this will be the case.

Israeli diplomats and soldiers are working the phones to Istanbul to try to prevent a complete rupture of relations with Turkey. The two countries, and especially their military establishments, have developed over decades a strategic alliance that has been a discreet but important axis of power in the region. But relations have recently soured with Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, repeatedly and vehemently criticising Israel's policies towards Gaza (see article). A further deterioration would quickly follow if Turkey sent its own navy to escort future blockade-busting ships; Israel has said that it would stop any such attempt.

The Gazan pressure-cooker

Not only Israel but America and the other Western countries which helped to isolate Gaza as a means of combating Hamas are now under pressure to rethink the blockade's efficacy. Israel does not bear sole responsibility, the International Crisis Group, a think-tank, pointed out this week. "For years, many in the international community have been complicit in a policy that aimed at isolating Gaza in the hope of weakening Hamas. This policy is morally appalling and politically self-defeating. It has harmed the people of Gaza without loosening Hamas's control."

The policy began within weeks of Israel's pull-out from Gaza in 2005. At the start, America tried to keep the gates open, brokering an Agreement on Movement and Access with Israel to allow the export from Gaza of hundreds of trucks of produce a day, regular bus convoys to and from the West Bank and the opening of a Palestinian-controlled crossing at Rafah to Egypt. But the agreement was in ink only. After just one year Gaza's exports stood at a mere 8% of the agreed amount, Rafah was closed and the buses never came. Once the strip was under Hamas's total control, Israel declared it a hostile entity, and prevented movement to and from the territory.

Initially Hamas and other militant groups, drunk on their self-claimed success in forcing Israel's departure, sought to fight their way out with projectiles. The number of mostly home-made rockets hitting Israel rose from 281 in 2004 to 1,750 in 2008; and their range rose from a few kilometres to reach Tel Aviv's outskirts. But stung by the ferocity of Israel's reprisals, most lethally in the January 2009 war, Hamas reined in its fire and forced others to do

likewise. So far this year 34 rockets have landed in Israel, none launched by Hamas. "Hamas is defending Israel," chuckles an Israeli foreign ministry official.

Instead Hamas has turned its energies inward. With Gazans locked inside the 40km by 10km (154 square-mile) strip, the siege has given Hamas a free hand to mould the place. Its leaders liken Gaza to a ribat, a warrior monastery, and its inmates to murabitoun, or militant monks, recalling the 11th-century revivalist movement which withdrew to the Moroccan highlands before sweeping onto the Moroccan plains and Andalusia. They regale the struggle to survive with the same terminology they once used for fighting Israel. To ensure supplies they created a "resistance" economy, supervising the digging of an elaborate web of tunnels snaking under Gaza's border with Egypt.

At first the resistance economy failed to meet people's needs. But today, thanks to the tunnels, Gaza's shop shelves are brimming with goods that often arrive cheaper and faster than when Israel opened the gates. Winches hoist in aggregates, allowing a spate of road repairs and housing construction. The authorities have filled in the craters in the football stadia left by Israel's bombs and adorned the highways with cat's eyes. Unlike post-war repairs elsewhere, the reconstruction is home-grown. Hamstrung by their own restrictions which prevent them buying smuggled goods, the UN and other international agencies have written themselves out of the repair effort. Unable to bring in cement to repair its schools, UNRWA, the UN's Palestinian refugee agency which educates half of Gaza's children, arranged to teach children in shipping containers, before Israel banned those too.

Humanitarian agencies, with an eye on external financing, bewail the lack of development. But their indices miss the point. Gaza is redeveloping, and Hamas is making society in its own image. Huge amounts now pass through the tunnel shafts each year, creating a new economy from which Hamas creams a handsome share of the profits to finance its rule. "The siege is a gift," says a Hamas minister.

Co-ordinating the effort is a remarkably well-oiled bureaucracy. To finance its half-billion-dollar annual budget, the Hamas government has instituted an effective tax regime, raising duties on tunnel imports, including cigarettes, petrol, clothes and bread. Officials claim to have achieved self-sufficiency in melons (piled high on the roadsides) and onions; and the price of eggs has fallen to half what it is in the West Bank. With fishing in the seas restricted by Israel's navy, Hamas is opening fish-farms in former Israeli settlements. Its institutions publish online compendia of the government's directives, the results of civil service exams (based, they claim, on merit, not factional allegiance), and send text messages to the lucky few cleared for travel to Egypt to update them on bus and crossing times.

More damagingly for Gaza's people, the siege has also allowed for much greater control. Manned by militants from its Ezz al-Din al-Qassam brigades hitherto deployed against Israel, Hamas's internal security applies the brigades' blinkered codes to harness society. This has created stability but at the price of a reign of fear. When rival Islamists decried Hamas's rule in Rafah, the militants stormed the mosque and killed its worshippers. When leftists protested that the tax rises hit a people already burdened by siege, they were hauled to jail. The death penalty has been reinstated. And insensitive to comparisons with Israel, Hamas's forces have bulldozed the homes of Gazans who had moved onto former settlement land without authorisation. A thriving political culture has been culled to a one-faction state.

Manning the institutions is a new generation of highly motivated Hamas cadres who unlike their seniors have not studied abroad and who, with their narrow horizons and siege-mentality, view outsiders, Palestinians and foreigners, with suspicion. Tensions have emerged with an

older generation, including the prime minister, Ismail Haniyeh, who after an attack on UN summer camps pleaded for tolerance.

A few Hamas old-timers, educated in Moscow and Damascus, warned that in its hunger for power, the movement risks betraying its religious principles. Their pleas have fallen on deaf ears. Hamas's second generation—the 30-somethings who have lived their life under occupation—revel in the authority of office though lacking a clear vision of what they intend to do with their power.



End of some activists' adventure

Opening borders to allow Gazans to travel again and let other influences in could eat into that unfettered absolutism. But few international policymakers appear to know what to do or how. For three years the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank backed by Western paymasters has waged a beauty contest with its Hamas rivals; many there remain loth to improve Gaza's odds. Egypt remains wary of another Islamist neighbour (Sudan is headache enough). For Israel, the siege might not have freed the kidnapped Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, or squeezed Gazans' bellies to the point where they rise up against Hamas (both official justifications for the siege), but it has won the more valuable prize of a divided Palestinian polity. Much as Israel planted settlers to impede a two-state settlement, so, argue some, it has now successfully planted Hamas.

In the wake of the international outcry, Israel and Egypt have both taken temporary remedial measures to ease their respective closures. But a more formal safety-valve is required. There are many ways to do this but each has its drawbacks. The airport has been put out of action by Israeli bombing. Constructing a sea port remains on hold because of lack of materials. Reopening the crossings with Israel would re-establish Gaza's ties with the rest of Palestine. But Hamas—as happy to disengage from Israel as Israel is from it—prefers opening Rafah on the Egyptian border as a gate to the Islamic world.

Regional and Western policymakers have tentatively hoped that intra-Palestinian reconciliation would end the siege. But advisers of President Abbas in Ramallah are suggesting something else. They are calling on him to head to Gaza immediately to emphasise his support for his besieged people and promote a federal arrangement under which the two governments might continue to rule under his baton. A vanguard was due in Gaza later this week despite Israeli

and Hamas protests. If accompanied by the \$4 billion odd that Arab and Western donors promised Gaza after the January 2009 war, such an arrangement might yet curry favour. But the prospects for a Palestinian rapprochement still look far more remote than the launch of another flotilla.

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