

By Matthew Smith

The Israeli raid on the Gaza Aid Flotilla has once more brought Israel into the world headlines for all the wrong reasons. Events rapidly spiralled out of control when protestors aboard the Turkish owned MV Mavi Marmara attacked and disarmed a number of Israeli commandos who had been sent to commandeer the vessel. Whether through panic or being fired upon themselves, Israeli forces opened fire on protestors, resulting in nine dead. Footage of the boarding can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2duPV9MQIc&feature=related> The intelligence failure that underestimated the severity of protestors' reaction will have major consequences. Had such a welcome been envisaged for the Israeli commandos, alternative means of subduing the protestors could have been used, avoiding this whole affair.

As it stands, the raid has been incredibly counter-productive for Israel. Due to mounting international pressure and increasingly vocal condemnation from other Arab states, Egypt opened its border with Gaza on Tuesday for an indefinite period of time. This comes at an ill-opportune time for Israel, as many Israeli officials felt the pressure from the blockade was beginning to strain Hamas, who since Operation Cast Lead have been forced to spend more and more of their time fighting internal descent. The opening of the Egyptian border alleviates this pressure and will provide Hamas with breathing space it previously lacked.

Despite this, in a speech to the Knesset late on Tuesday the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that no amount of international condemnation would force Israel to backtrack on its policy of isolating Gaza. This could cause further tensions between Israel and the international community, especially as more aid vessels approach Gazan waters. To this end, the Republic of Ireland has made a direct plea to the Knesset to allow an Irish aid ship to proceed into Gaza unhindered. Given the stubborn stance of Netanyahu, this seems unlikely.

The timing of the event also comes as a blow to US-Israeli relations; Netanyahu was scheduled to meet US President Barak Obama on Tuesday the 1st of June to patch up relations from the settlement expansion debacle and begin thinking once again about the Israel-Palestine peace process. These talks have been delayed for the time being, once more putting peace talks on the back burner.

The raid also leaves the United States in an awkward position vis-à-vis its public response to the whole affair. Both Israel and Turkey (the boarded vessel was owned and manned by a Turkish charity) are firm US allies, both of which house US military bases and provide permission to use their air space. Consequently the US cannot defend Israeli actions, but nor can it condemn them, as it does not want to risk alienating either party. Instead it must tread a fine line, calling for an investigation into the incident and stating regret at the loss of life.

Whilst the US has been slow to criticize Israel's actions, Europe has had no problem voicing its dismay over the event. Support for Israel amongst European nations has never been as strong

as in the United States, and over the past few years has fallen considerably. The combined effect of the 2006 offensive into Lebanon, Operation Cast Lead in 2009/10 and now the killing of civilian protestors have all caused public support to wane in the face of what appears to be continual Israeli violence. Attitudes were soured further when 650 protestors aboard the flotilla were detained in Israeli prisons whilst Israel decided whether or not to press charges. These prisoners have subsequently been released without charge as an act of goodwill by Israel, but this comes as too little too late.

Most seriously of all, however, is the response Israel has received from neighbouring Arab states. Both the Lebanese and Syrian Prime Ministers have stated that Israel's actions could lead to the outbreak of war. Iran has similarly, though more cautiously, suggested that it might be forced to take actions if such Israeli "crimes" continue to go unpunished. Hezbollah has also called for international punishment to avenge those killed and injured during the raid. In response to these announcements, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) along the Lebanese and Syrian borders, as well as those in the Occupied Territories, have been put on high alert.

Whilst violence is to be expected in the coming weeks, it will most likely come from "unofficial" sources – that is individuals or small groups operating without the consent of their organisation. Hezbollah is unlikely to take any concerted action by itself after the events of 2006 and seeing how the IDF handled itself during Operation Cast Lead. Likewise, Hamas will likely opt out of a violent reaction for the time being, instead utilizing the international community's hostility to Israel to play up its civilian-victim narrative. Both groups may be willing to take action if either Syria or Iran were to become involved, but for the time being this is unlikely. Whilst grievous, Israel's bungled raid will not be enough for Syria to risk open war. Instead, the hostile stance taken by Syria will likely be used to raise its standing amongst other Arab states. To this end, Syria has called for a meeting of the Arab League to discuss Israel's actions. Given Syria's traditional hostility towards Israel and its ongoing attempts to improve its relations with Turkey, Syria is likely to push the league towards demanding the international community takes severe action against Israel. The exact nature of their demands remains to be seen.

Whilst the botched raid has come as a severe blow to Israel, much still depends on how it handles the remaining aid vessels bound for Gaza. Israel is unlikely to backtrack on its policy of isolation, for fear of appearing "weak" in the face of international condemnation. However if Israel insists on diverting further flotillas more bloodshed must be avoided at all costs. Should it fail to do so, it runs the risk of international isolation and sparking violent clashes with its neighbours.

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