



June 2, 2010

Leon T. Hadar

Journalist and foreign affairs analyst

Posted: June 1, 2010 03:02 PM

The Raid on the Gaza Flotilla: "Worse Than a Crime, it's a Mistake"

The Israeli military's violent raid on the Free Gaza aid flotilla has been analyzed to death -- no pun intended! -- here and elsewhere. And while I'm not trying to pile on the Israeli government, I do think that the incident points out to issues that go beyond what was obviously a failed military operation based on faulty intelligence that has resulted in humanitarian tragedy and a diplomatic and public relations disaster for the Israelis.

First, we are reminded once again that military force should be used only as a last resort after all other non-violent options aimed at achieving a political goal were exhausted. Moreover, pursuing a military option should be considered only when core national interests are at stake, including the protection and the rescue of large number of civilians.

Being cautious about sending young men and women to kill and be killed has to do with more than just a commitment to high moral values. Such a behavior reflects very pragmatic concerns that are based on experience and that suggest that the costs involved in using military force -- ranging from human casualties to political consequences (including the unintended ones) could outweigh any potential benefits, especially in our current global 24/7 media environment.

Hence recall that even attempts to rescue Israeli civilian hostages taken over by terrorist groups - - a legitimate and proportionate response on the part of Israel to hostile action -- ended with large number of Israeli military and civilian casualties, raising questions about their cost effectiveness.

The aid flotilla that was on its way to Gaza did not pose any clear and present danger to Israeli security interests or to the lives of Israeli civilians. It was more of a diplomatic and PR nuisance

that even under the worst case scenario it would have produced nothing more than an embarrassing media circus for the Israelis. Trying to disrupt this mostly inconsequential humanitarian operation by launching a risky military operation does not make a lot of sense.

The Israelis were clearly aware that there were no firearms on the Turkish ship. But you do not have to be a great military strategist to figure out that trying to subdue members of an unfriendly group results more often than not in some sort of violent reactions. Have you watched a recent peaceful demonstration here or abroad? It almost never remains very "peaceful" with the demonstrators using force against the police. Hence the response of the activists aboard the Turkish ship should not have come as a surprise.

That the flotilla was sponsored by Turkish and western aid organizations and covered by numerous media outlets with access to the major news organizations as well as to the Internet should have led to even more caution on the part of the Israelis, especially at a time when their relationship with Turkey -- leading Muslim military partner -- have been deteriorating, when the ties with the Obama Administration have been under pressure, and when Israel has yet to recover from the devastating international condemnation of its earlier offensive in Gaza. And then someone should have also taken into consideration the half-dead Israeli-Palestinian "peace process" and the impact that Israeli conduct has on U.S. status in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

On all these and other diplomatic fronts Israel has suffered major losses and achieved nothing. From that perspective the Israeli decision to storm the Turkish ship was -- to quote what the French diplomat Talleyrand said about another politically destructive decision -- "It was worst than a crime; it was a blunder." Stupid is as stupid does.

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