

PolicyWatch #1672 : Special Forum Report

The Gaza Flotilla Incident: Implications for Middle East Politics and U.S. Policy

Featuring [Michael Eisenstadt](#), [Soner Cagaptay](#), [David Makovsky](#), and [Robert Satloff](#)
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On June 18, 2010, Michael Eisenstadt, Soner Cagaptay, David Makovsky, and Robert Satloff addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute. Mr. Eisenstadt is director of the Institute's Military and Security Studies Program. Dr. Cagaptay is director of the Institute's Turkish Research Program. Mr. Makovsky is the Institute's Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of its Project on the Middle East Peace Process. During the forum, they discussed the flotilla incident's regional repercussions as well as its implications for many critical aspects of U.S. Middle East policy. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks. Dr. Satloff's prepared remarks were published separately as PolicyWatches [1670](#) and [1671](#).

Michael Eisenstadt

Although a full narrative will have to wait until the ongoing Israeli inquiry is complete, it is possible to sketch the outlines of what happened on the Turkish ferry *Mavi Marmara*. The six boats of the "Free Gaza Flotilla" departed Turkey on May 28, and Israeli naval vessels began shadowing them two days later, around 11:00 p.m. on May 30. At that time, Israel requested that the boats divert to Ashdod to allow inspection of their cargo for contraband, but they refused to comply.

A few hours later -- around 4:00 a.m. on May 31 -- Israeli naval commandos boarded five of the boats without major incident. Meanwhile, naval commandos in several small boats, firing paint guns and throwing stun grenades, were violently repelled by activists on the *Mavi Marmara*. Shortly thereafter, heliborne commandos fast-roped onto the upper deck of the *Mavi Marmara* and were set upon by activists with improvised weapons, including metal rods and knives. In the resulting melee, several naval commandos were severely injured, and nine Turkish activists were killed. Additional commandos were then brought in by helicopter and small boats, augmented by Border Guard crowd-control specialists. These forces subdued the activists, took control of the bridge, and diverted the ship to Ashdod.

The decision to board in international waters was probably dictated by the desire to act under cover of darkness, in order to maximize surprise and minimize the number of passengers on deck. As it turned out, many passengers were awake for dawn prayers. The commandos boarded about thirty minutes before twilight, likely assuming that would allow enough time to take control of the ship in darkness and secure it at first light.

This decision was also based on a reading of international law that permits the boarding of blockade-runners in international waters. For example, the U.S. and its allies routinely conduct maritime interdiction operations in international waters. Had Israel permitted the flotilla to enter Gaza's coastal waters before boarding, the operation would have occurred in broad daylight, raising the risk of even more casualties and of potential interference by Hamas sympathizers.

Other options carried risks as well. Immobilizing the ship could have produced a humanitarian crisis at sea and negative publicity for Israel, while towing the disabled ship to shore would have required Israeli sailors to

secure towlines in the face of violent resistance. And once the ship docked in Ashdod, a clash with the violent activists would have almost certainly ensued.

Although there were no good options for dealing with violent activists intent on risking their lives in order to draw attention to their cause and discredit Israel, the Israeli military could have and should have been better prepared for such an eventuality.

Soner Cagaptay

The incident aboard the *Mavi Marmara* was indeed a tragedy, and its aftermath holds critical implications for U.S.-Turkish relations as well as Turkey's foreign and domestic policy. Some view both the flotilla and Turkey's subsequent decision to vote against the UN Security Council's Iran sanctions resolution as glitches. Yet both developments appear to be part of a larger trend in which Turkish and American foreign policy are increasingly diverging, with Ankara demonstrating less and less commitment to the transatlantic community.

From 1946 to the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003, Turkey and the United States agreed on most foreign policy issues. Despite various ups and downs, bilateral relations were generally marked by solidarity. Public disagreements between Ankara and Washington increased following the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2003, but the two governments still privately maintained solid relations on many pragmatic matters.

Since the flotilla incident and the Iran vote, however, relations have entered a new phase. Turkey and the United States disagree both publicly and privately, and pragmatic cooperation is seemingly defunct. Turkey's ever-weakening commitment to NATO and cold relations with the European Union have only strained U.S.-Turkish relations further.

Turkey's decades-long relationship with Israel is weakening as well. On the diplomatic front, the AKP has withdrawn its ambassador from Israel and is refusing to send him back, despite Israeli attempts to salvage the relationship. At best, relations will remain where they are for the foreseeable future: at rock bottom.

The flotilla incident has also had implications for Turkish domestic politics. Prior to the raid, polls indicated that the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) was gaining popularity and would be able to compete somewhat in the upcoming 2011 parliamentary elections. In the aftermath of the incident, however, the AKP's popularity has grown, leading some to suggest that the flotilla was a ploy by the party to boost support for its policies. And the AKP may well engage in further populist foreign policy maneuvers in the near future for similar reasons.

Although it has become nearly impossible to question the AKP's foreign policy and national security interests domestically, the ultraconservative Fethullah Gulen Movement was able to break away from the ruling party's rhetoric in the aftermath of the flotilla incident, arguing that the vessels should not have been sent from Turkish ports without first obtaining Israel's permission. This is a laudable stance by the Gulen Movement for freedom of speech in Turkey and should be publicly recognized by the United States and the international community.

Overall, Turkey is moving away from the transatlantic community and, as a result, will cooperate with the United States only when it is in its own interest to do so. This pattern is clear in Turkey's refusal to prevent the flotilla's launch despite Israeli and U.S. requests, and in its refusal to support the United States in the Iran sanctions vote. The AKP evidently does not consider Turkey to be part of the transatlantic community, despite U.S. efforts to extend a welcoming arm. Instead, the party appears to be implementing a new foreign policy that is steadily weakening Turkish ties to the United States and the West.

David Makovsky

The White House has handled the bilateral U.S.-Israeli aspect of the flotilla incident differently than previous crises. Past incidents have produced public displays of tension between the two governments, but in this case, key discussions regarding an international inquiry into the incident and easing of the Gaza blockade have occurred behind closed doors. Washington has sought to coordinate its position with Israel out of the public eye, in an effort to keep the international community's focus on European Union summit meetings regarding Iran.

At the UN, the United States has resisted an explicit condemnation of Israel and sought to prevent a repeat of the very controversial Goldstone report. Moreover, the White House has already vetted every element of Israel's announced inquiry so that the United States can publicly embrace it as a credible, impartial, and transparent process. Headed by a retired Israeli supreme court justice and including two prominent international observers, the inquiry will focus on whether Israeli actions were carried out in accordance with international law. Yet it remains unclear whether UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon will issue an inquiry of his own despite repeated private requests by the United States that he not do so. At the same time, the United States has not said publicly whether it would oppose such a move.

Another area of close behind-the-scenes U.S.-Israeli cooperation has been restructuring the Gaza blockade. The embargo will now refocus on its original mission of preventing the entry of weapons and militarily useful material, given that Israel was the target of some 3,300 rockets between the time that it departed Gaza in August 2005 and the large-scale hostilities there in December 2008. The streamlined blockade will no longer have the tacit function of overthrowing Hamas, given the fact that this approach has failed over the past three years -- an outcome largely attributable to the lack of pressure on Hamas to hold an election and test its relative unpopularity. The blockade's failure can also be traced to the porous border with Egypt, where tunnels have played a significant role.

Given these problems and mounting international pressure, Israel has chosen to change its policy from a "white list" to a "black list." That is, prior to the flotilla incident, everything entering Gaza was forbidden except that which was permitted -- now, everything entering Gaza will be permitted except that which is forbidden.

Despite pledging to ease the blockade, Israel remains extremely concerned about security matters. As such, the reconsidered blockade will focus on end-user agreements, which the UN will presumably issue. The UN Development Program or equivalent agencies will then ensure that items such as cement and steel are used for legitimate purposes such as building schools and hospitals, rather than being diverted to Hamas for bunkers or other military purposes. Before broadening the end-user approach any further, Israel will likely seek mechanisms to ensure that it is effective and not exploited by Hamas. Quartet representative Tony Blair, who has also been involved in blockade modification negotiations with Israel, has endorsed the streamlined approach. In his view, the new rules would render the flotilla tactic futile.

It remains unclear whether others in the international community will support a streamlined blockade. Doing so would imply recognition that Israel has legitimate security concerns given Hamas's proven importation of missiles from Iran. Failure to back new blockade rules would no doubt play into the hands of those who argue that Israel will never obtain international support regardless of its actions.

Finally, although many assumed that the flotilla incident would have stark implications for the peace process, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian proximity talks seem to have been insulated from the controversy. Whereas direct talks would undoubtedly have been suspended by now, the proximity process is unscathed.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Allison LeBlanc.

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