

Questions Worthy of Investigation

Written by Dr. Michael Berenbaum
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There were rallies for Israel in several cities yesterday, not because the events of last week merited support – how do you rally around a public relations fiasco—but because Israel felt isolated and attacked in the aftermath of the botched effort to halt the flotilla of ships that sought to challenge the Gaza blockade, the instinct of solidarity among friends of Israel is warranted.

Supporters of Israel want its action to be understood in context. Context is important but not all important.

Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005. It dismantled settlements and evacuated settlers unilaterally. Its calculus was demographic; it acted as it should have acted, in its national interest: 8,000 settlers were uprooted and 1.5 million Palestinians were removed from Israeli control and from the ticking time bomb of demography. One cannot have a democratic and Jewish state if Jews are in a minority within its borders.

In the aftermath of Israeli withdrawal, Hamas came to power democratically as a result of an election imposed by the United States despite the opposition of both Palestinian and Israeli leadership. Bombs continued to reign on southern Israeli, most especially on Shederot and though the damage was comparatively slight, there was loss of life and Israelis rightfully felt under siege. No country would tolerate its cities being bombed by its neighbors. Americans are hearing chants of secure the borders in Arizona; imagine what would happen if rockets were being fired from Mexico. People are sneaking across the border to work in the United States, not to bomb it.

There was a war in Gaza in 2008 that concluded but hours before President Obama was sworn but its political results 17 months later are still unclear. Israelis feel it imperative to blockade Gaza to protect its own civilian population. Egypt has also blockaded Gaza, not halting the smuggling of arms and rockets into Gaza, but at least hampering Hamas' efforts to arm.

The situation is ugly; the ugliness did not begin with Israeli occupation – it has been ugly since 1948 with Gazans living in squalor and confined to refugee camps under Egyptian rule until 1967, under Israeli rule from 1967 to 2005 – 38 long years—and under self rule since then. The blockade is legitimate. The question is whether it is effective. Are there other tactics that might be employed, other strategies. I am not certain that the question is being asked.

There have been calls for an international investigation, calls that Israel has rejected. Given its

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perception of the state of international opinion, an international investigation seems like a lynching party. So Israel is seeking to work out the terms of an investigation with the American administration hoping that the United States will once again prove to be an honest broker.

But even without the results of a necessary investigation whether self investigated or under some international umbrella, two things are clear.

The Israeli action resulted in the loss of life because Israel lacked the intelligence necessary to act effectively. It did not understand the nature of the challenge that it would face, the vehemence of the opposition and the determination of some of the so called peace flotilla to provoke violence. It fell into a trap. The result was serious injuries to its own soldiers, loss of life, and near universal international condemnation.

Secondly, the actions undertaken by Israel appear to have been militarily amateurish.

This combination should frighten Israelis and even Israel's most ardent supporters abroad, most especially because it creates a climate which makes any action against Iran more difficult to mount and even more impossible to defend.

Were Israel to have to act unilaterally against Iran, with or without American approval or support, it would need absolute confidence in its intelligence gathering, and the precision of its military capacity. It would also have to anticipate the military and political fallout that would result from such actions. These were not qualities that were manifest in the botched raid on the flotilla and in its aftermath.

Furthermore, Israel would require confidence in the ability of its government to defend such actions and to handle the diplomatic and public relations aftermath.; such abilities seem beyond the capacity of this government even under the leadership of the media savvy of its Prime Ministers, who does far better defending policies that others have set than defending his own decisions. Even with the strength of Israel's Ambassador to the United States, Netanyahu himself seems isolated, a lone voice.

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This isolation is only intensified by Israel's withdrawal from the human rights discussions and its inability to engage the human rights issues involved in asymmetrical warfare in a compelling way.

If Iran is truly an existential challenge to Israel's existence, Israel requires a leadership that seems up to the task. So let us rally round but not confuse our rallies for acceptance of the unacceptable, tolerating the intolerable, defending, accepting and thus enabling failure.