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## **Analysis: A race to contain the damage**

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### **Worsening fallout, and an uphill struggle.**

Talkbacks (71)

It is the IDF Spokesman's firm contention that Israeli troops were premeditatedly attacked as they attempted to intercept the flotilla en route to the Gaza Strip overnight. "It was a lynch," said spokesman Avi Benayahu. "An ambush."

Benayahu said soldiers, who had been dispatched to block the flotilla because of fears that it was carrying weaponry and other highly dangerous cargo into the Hamas-controlled Strip, were attacked with knives and bars and sharpened metal implements.

Benayahu said two pistols that had been fired were subsequently found aboard the one ship, the Marmara, on which the violence erupted. And, most dramatically, he said that one IDF soldier had his weapon snatched away by one of the "peace activists" on board, that this weapon was then turned against the IDF soldiers, who came under fire, and that they had no choice but to shoot back in self-defense.

Benayahu's chilling description was [echoed by Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon](#) at a late-morning briefing that was delivered, with typical misdirected focus, overwhelmingly in Hebrew. This had been a deliberate provocation, charged Ayalon. At least some of those aboard the Marmara had been hell-bent on violence, he said.

Alongside those credible characterizations are the facts, the distortions and the rumors. As of this writing, it is reported that 14 or 15 people were killed aboard the Marmara, that dozens more were injured, and that several soldiers were hurt, including two who were badly injured.

There have been [furious diplomatic protests](#) from the Arab world. The Arab League is readying to meet in emergency session. The Palestinian Authority, according to its former foreign minister Nabil Sha'ath, is planning to push for sanctions against Israel at the UN Security Council. Jordan has summoned the Israeli ambassador in Amman.

Protests and condemnations are coming from [Europe as well](#). Greece has cut short military exercises with Israel. Spain, the current EU president, has summoned the Israeli ambassador and branded the IDF's storming of the flotilla "unacceptable."

Demonstrators have gathered in Istanbul, in parts of Syria, and beyond.

It has been falsely rumored that Sheikh Raed Salah, leader of the northern branch of Israel's Islamic Movement, was hurt in the on-board conflict, an erroneous claim that is fueling extraordinary tensions in the Israeli Arab community.

Israel may have felt it had no choice but to intercept a flotilla carrying it knew not what to the terror state of Gaza. It may well have assumed that its soldiers would come under attack. Apparently, it underestimated the hostility it would encounter.

At an early afternoon press conference, Defense Minister Ehud Barak and IDF Chief of the General Staff Gabi Ashkenazi stressed that the IDF takeover of five of the flotilla vessels was met without violence. But on the Marmara - which was in the control of the Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation (the IHH), described by Barak as "a violent, extremist organization that supports terrorism" - things were very different. Ashkenazi said the soldiers were attacked with metal bars, knives and live fire, and noted that some of the wounded soldiers suffered gunshot wounds.

Barak also noted that "there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza" – the alleviation of which ostensibly motivated the organizers of this flotilla. This was, rather, a "political provocation" organized by the IHH and coordinated with Hamas.

What seems urgent now is to make publicly available footage that shows exactly what did unfold. In early afternoon, video footage screened on Israel's Channel 2 appeared to show one of those aboard the Marmara stabbing an IDF soldier. Any such footage should have been made available hours earlier. Critically, if footage showing a soldier's weapon being snatched and turned on the IDF troops exists, it should be broadcast, and the sooner the better.

What would also have helped would have been for Israel to try to utilize six decades of unbroken diplomatic relations with Turkey – whose government essentially sponsored this flotilla, and whose nationals are among the dead – to try to resolve this ongoing crisis. The former Israeli ambassador to Turkey, Alon Liel, has been urging that Israel ask Turkey to send escort vessels to accompany the flotilla back home, rather than holding them and their incendiary human cargo at Ashdod.

But that boat has evidently sailed. Turkey has recalled its ambassador to Israel, is initiating appeals to the United Nations, and appears to be at the forefront of the efforts to harm Israel over this affair.

The “humanitarian aid” flotilla was clearly a perniciously well-conceived initiative, for which Israel prepared inadequately. Hampered by a prime minister who is overseas, a foreign minister widely perceived overseas as hawkish and even intemperate, and most importantly an ongoing strategic refusal to direct appropriate resources to the legal, diplomatic and media battlefields, the race is now on for Israel to contain the damage.

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