

Kill a Turk and Rest

By [Uri Avnery](#)

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ON THE high seas, outside territorial waters, the ship was stopped by the navy. The commandos stormed it. Hundreds of people on the deck resisted, the soldiers used force. Some of the passengers were killed, scores injured. The ship was brought into harbor, the passengers were taken off by force. The world saw them walking on the quay, men and women, young and old, all of them worn out, one after another, each being marched between two soldiers...

The ship was called "Exodus 1947". It left France in the hope of breaking the British blockade, which was imposed to prevent ships loaded with Holocaust survivors from reaching the shores of Palestine. If it had been allowed to reach the country, the illegal immigrants would have come ashore and the British would have sent them to detention camps in Cyprus, as they had done before. Nobody would have taken any notice of the episode for more than two days.

But the person in charge was Ernest Bevin, a Labour Party leader, an arrogant, rude and power-loving British minister. He was not about to let a bunch of Jews dictate to him. He decided to teach them a lesson the entire world would witness. "This is a provocation!" he exclaimed, and of course he was right. The main aim was indeed to create a provocation, in order to draw the eyes of the world to the British blockade.

What followed is well known: the episode dragged on and on, one stupidity led to another, the whole world sympathized with the passengers. But the British did not give in and paid the price. A heavy price.

Many believe that the "Exodus" incident was the turning point in the struggle for the creation of the State of Israel. Britain collapsed under the weight of international condemnation and decided to give up its mandate over Palestine. There were, of course, many more weighty reasons for this decision, but the "Exodus" proved to be the straw that broke the camel's back.

I AM not the only one who was reminded of this episode this week. Actually, it was almost impossible not to be reminded of it, especially for those of us who lived in Palestine at the time and witnessed it.

There are, of course, important differences. Then the passengers were Holocaust survivors, this time they were peace activists from all over the world. But then and now the world saw heavily armed soldiers brutally attack unarmed passengers, who resist with everything that comes to hand, sticks and bare hands. Then and now it happened on the high seas - 40 km from the shore then, 65 km now.

In retrospect, the British behavior throughout the affair seems incredibly stupid. But Bevin was no fool, and the British officers who commanded the action were not nincompoops. After all, they had just finished a World War on the winning side.

If they behaved with complete folly from beginning to end, it was the result of arrogance, insensitivity and boundless contempt for world public opinion.

Ehud Barak is the Israeli Bevin. He is not a fool, either, nor are our top brass. But they are responsible for a chain of acts of folly, the disastrous implications of which are hard to assess. Former minister and present commentator Yossi Sarid called the ministerial “committee of seven”, which decides on security matters, “seven idiots” – and I must protest. It is an insult to idiots.

THE PREPARATIONS for the flotilla went on for more than a year. Hundreds of e-mail messages went back and forth. I myself received many dozens. There was no secret. Everything was out in the open.

There was a lot of time for all our political and military institutions to prepare for the approach of the ships. The politician consulted. The soldiers trained. The diplomats reported. The intelligence people did their job.

Nothing helped. All the decisions were wrong from the first moment to this moment. And it’s not yet the end.

The idea of a flotilla as a means to break the blockade borders on genius. It placed the Israeli government on the horns of a dilemma – the choice between several alternatives, all of them bad. Every general hopes to get his opponent into such a situation.

The alternatives were:

To let the flotilla reach Gaza without hindrance. The cabinet secretary supported this option. That would have led to the end of the blockade, because after this flotilla more and larger ones would have come.

To stop the ships in territorial waters, inspect their cargo and make sure they were not carrying weapons or “terrorists”, then let them continue on their way. That would have aroused some vague protests in the world but upheld the principle of a blockade.

To capture them on the high seas and bring them to Ashdod, risking a face-to-face battle with activists on board.

As our governments have always done, when faced with the choice between several bad alternatives, the Netanyahu government chose the worst.

Anyone who followed the preparations as reported in the media could have foreseen that they would lead to people being killed and injured. One does not storm a Turkish ship and expect cute little girls to present one with flowers. The Turks are not known as people who give in easily.

The orders given to the forces and made public included the three fateful words: “at any cost”. Every soldier knows what these three terrible words mean. Moreover, on the list of

objectives, the consideration for the passengers appeared only in third place, after safeguarding the safety of the soldiers and fulfilling the task.

If Binyamin Netanyahu, Ehud Barak, the Chief of Staff and the commander of the navy did not understand that this would lead to killing and wounding people, then it must be concluded – even by those who were reluctant to consider this until now – that they are grossly incompetent. They must be told, in the immortal words of Oliver Cromwell to Parliament: “You have sat too long for any good you have been doing lately... Depart, I say; and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go!”

THIS EVENT points again to one of the most serious aspects of the situation: we live in a bubble, in a kind of mental ghetto, which cuts us off and prevents us from seeing another reality, the one perceived by the rest of the world. A psychiatrist might judge this to be the symptom of a severe mental problem.

The propaganda of the government and the army tells a simple story: our heroic soldiers, determined and sensitive, the elite of the elite, descended on the ship in order “to talk” and were attacked by a wild and violent crowd. Official spokesmen repeated again and again the word “lynching”.

On the first day, almost all the Israeli media accepted this. After all, it is clear that we, the Jews, are the victims. Always. That applies to Jewish soldiers, too. True, we storm a foreign ship at sea, but turn at once into victims who have no choice but to defend ourselves against violent and incited anti-Semites.

It is impossible not to be reminded of the classic Jewish joke about the Jewish mother in Russia taking leave of her son, who has been called up to serve the Czar in the war against Turkey. “Don’t overexert yourself” she implores him, “Kill a Turk and rest. Kill another Turk and rest again...”

“But mother,” the son interrupts, “What if the Turk kills me?”

“You?” exclaims the mother, “But why? What have you done to him?”

To any normal person, this may sound crazy. Heavily armed soldiers of an elite commando unit board a ship on the high seas in the middle of the night, from the sea and from the air – and they are the victims?

But there is a grain of truth there: they are the victims of arrogant and incompetent commanders, irresponsible politicians and the media fed by them. And, actually, of the Israeli public, since most of the people voted for this government or for the opposition, which is no different.

The “Exodus” affair was repeated, but with a change of roles. Now we are the British.

Somewhere, a new Leon Uris is planning to write his next book, “Exodus 2010”. A new Otto Preminger is planning a film that will become a blockbuster. A new Paul Newman will star in it – after all, there is no shortage of talented Turkish actors.

MORE THAN 200 years ago, Thomas Jefferson declared that every nation must act with a “decent respect to the opinions of mankind”. Israeli leaders have never accepted the wisdom of this maxim. They adhere to the dictum of David Ben-Gurion: “It is not important

what the Gentiles say, it is important what the Jews do.” Perhaps he assumed that the Jews would not act foolishly.

Making enemies of the Turks is more than foolish. For decades, Turkey has been our closest ally in the region, much more close than is generally known. Turkey could play, in the future, an important role as a mediator between Israel and the Arab-Muslim world, between Israel and Syria, and, yes, even between Israel and Iran. Perhaps we have succeeded now in uniting the Turkish people against us – and some say that this is the only matter on which the Turks are now united.

This is Chapter 2 of “Cast Lead”. Then we aroused most countries in the world against us, shocked our few friends and gladdened our enemies. Now we have done it again, and perhaps with even greater success. World public opinion is turning against us.

This is a slow process. It resembles the accumulation of water behind a dam. The water rises slowly, quietly, and the change is hardly noticeable. But when it reaches a critical level, the dam bursts and the disaster is upon us. We are steadily approaching this point.

“Kill a Turk and rest,” the mother says in the joke. Our government does not even rest. It seems that they will not stop until they have made enemies of the last of our friends.

(Parts of this article were published in Ma’ariv, Israel’s second largest newspaper.)

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