



**The Gaza Flotilla:  
The Collapse of Israel's Political Firewall  
Case Study**

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## Introduction

### **“The next confrontation in the efforts to break the siege on Gaza will be directly with the Zionist enemy on the high seas.”**

Mohammed Sawalha, interview on Hezbollah Web site Al-Intiqad, January 2010

This case-study deals with a strategic political strike against the State of Israel that was planned without interruption since February 2009 and materialized on May 31, 2010. Known as the Gaza Flotilla, this latest effort exceeded the expectations of its organizers in causing tangible and significant damage to Israel.

Planning of the Gaza Flotilla was carried out over the internet and in public conferences by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) primarily operating from major cities of countries friendly to Israel, including London, Dublin or San Francisco.

In the broader context, the Gaza Flotilla was just the tip of the iceberg. It is one incident out of many in a campaign entitled 'Lifeline to Gaza' designed to break the 'siege' of Gaza. The campaign itself is one of several being waged against Israel. Others include as the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Movement, the 'lawfare' strategy, and the Durban conferences.

Together, these campaigns and others form a global systematic and systemic attack against Israel and its political-economic model. Their form continually shifts and adapts and their momentum is gaining. Their ultimate aim is to delegitimize Israel in order to precipitate its implosion, inspired by the collapses of countries such as the Soviet Union and apartheid South Africa.

This attack is executed by two forces, acting in parallel and with cooperation. The first is the Resistance Network, led by Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah, that rejects Israel's right to exist based on Arab and Islamist nationalist-religious ideology. The second is the Delegitimization Network, which is concentrated in a few major cities such as London, Brussels or the San Francisco Bay Area, and denies Israel's right of existence based on political, philosophical or historical arguments.

Israel has been subject to evident strategic inferiority in facing this threat, experiencing recurring fundamental surprises and setbacks. While the challenge is global, systemic, systematic and predominantly political, Israel's response has been primarily local, situational, reactive, and often dominated by military thinking and practices.

It is indeed possible that the change in Israel's policy towards Gaza regarding the movement of civilian goods has taken the sting out of the 'Lifeline to Gaza' Campaign and, therefore, the flotilla strategy may have run its course. Focus on preventing the next flotilla may thus be tantamount to preparing for yesterday's wars.

Meanwhile, the delegitimization offensive against Israel is constantly adapting, and the network that produced the flotillas will find a new logic and battle cry. Thus, Israel's response to future flotillas, as well as to the entire campaign being waged against it, requires a comprehensive systemic treatment of the delegitimization challenge.

## Executive Summary

### Background and Introduction

1. **On the morning of Monday, May 31, 2010, Israeli naval commandos took over six ships en route to Gaza.** These ships comprised an international flotilla whose aim, according to its organizers, was to break the 'Israeli siege' of Gaza.
2. **This was the fourth flotilla in the framework of what is known as the 'Lifeline to Gaza' Campaign.** Israel had previously succeeded in preventing a military confrontation with ships attempting to dock in Gaza, either towing the vessels into the port of Ashdod, coordinating with Egypt to divert the ships to El-Arish, or allowing their entry into Gaza. Indeed, Israel managed to take over five of the six vessels in the aforementioned flotilla without incident.
3. **A grave incident developed during the takeover of the Mavi Marmara, the sixth vessel.** Members of the Turkish IHH organization attacked Israeli forces with knives and metal bars, and in some cases, with live fire. In the ensuing confrontation, nine Israeli soldiers were injured and nine Turkish activists killed.
4. **The Gaza Flotilla had tangible consequences in terms of Israel's security and foreign affairs.** These included: anti-Israel demonstrations across the world; a change in Israeli policies regarding Gaza, perceived to constitute a capitulation to violence; increased attempts to boycott Israel and a wave of cancellations by leading international artists; the establishment of a number of international investigation commissions challenging Israel's judicial system; and stronger perception of cooperation between Israel's Arab citizens and the Resistance and Delegitimization Networks. In addition, the event was exploited by the Turkish government in order to deepen the crisis with Israel.
5. **Following the Gaza Flotilla, the Government of Israel decided to establish two commissions of inquiry.** The first, under the leadership of Major General (res.) Giora Eiland, investigated the decisions taken by the military echelon, concluded its report and published some of its conclusions. The second, headed by retired Supreme Court Judge, Jacob Turkel, was designed to operate as a state commission of inquiry, and is due to investigate international legal aspects related to the flotilla, as well as to the legality of the Gaza blockade. The State Comptroller has also announced his intentions to investigate. **The mandates of both commissions reflect the mindset that mistakes surrounding the Gaza Flotilla were technical-operational or tactical-political in nature. The commissions are thus focused on the reasonableness of the actions taken by decision-makers based on existing laws, regulations, and accepted practices.**
6. **Following the publication of the commissions' mandates, the Reut Institute decided to conduct its own inquiry, based on a methodology of systemic policy analysis and on its conceptual framework for confronting the**

**delegitimization challenge**, entitled, '[Israel's Delegitimization Challenge: Creating a Political Firewall](#).' The aim of Reut's inquiry is to contribute to the understanding the strategic significance of the event and to suggest principles for preventing similar occurrences in the future.

7. **The Reut Institute views this document as a starting point of a longer 'open-source' process of knowledge development in partnership with the public**, regarding the significance of the Gaza Flotilla, as well as the relevant conclusions and recommendations. It is therefore our intention to invite additional bodies and the general public to offer their insights as well.

### The Delegitimization Challenge

8. In recent years, Israel has been facing a new challenge based on the ripening of two processes:

- **The increased sophistication and efficiency of Hamas and the Resistance Network's 'Logic of Implosion.'** This logic aims to precipitate Israel's internal collapse through 'overstretch,' by preventing an end to its control over the Palestinian population; by advancing its delegitimization; and by developing a doctrine for a-symmetric warfare on the battlefield and against Israel's civilian population. The inspiration for this logic lies in the collapse of the Soviet Union and apartheid South Africa.
- **The evolution of the Delegitimization Network.** This network aims to turn Israel into a pariah state so it will ultimately cease to exist. **It is based in a number of metropolitan cities, within which a relatively small number of individuals and organizations actually mobilize the assault on Israel's legitimacy. The Delegitimization Network's success lies in its ability to harness the Western liberal progressive elite.** It does so by employing a variety of means aimed at blurring its true intentions.

**Both sets of ideas are increasingly sophisticated, ripe and coherent**, even if there is not yet evidence that they represent an explicit strategy with operational objectives, timelines, or milestones.

9. **In recent years, the Resistance Network and the Delegitimization Network have begun to engage each other** and are creating connections that are amplified through a feedback loop that accelerates the following dynamics:
- **Promoting the one-state paradigm** – While the Resistance Network undermines any attempt to separate Israel and the Palestinians based on the Two-State Solution, the Delegitimization Network tarnishes Israel's reputation as 'occupier' and advances the One-State paradigm;
  - **Tying Israel's hands in contending with Hamas and Gaza (or Hezbollah in Lebanon)** – While the Resistance Network works towards strengthening the 'Hamastan' model as a front for its ideological and military struggle against Israel, the Delegitimization Network ties Israel's

hands by constraining its political and military maneuverability and by granting legitimacy to Hamas.

10. **These groups are leading a systemic and systematic attack against Israel's political and economic model, which has already had strategic consequences and may become existential if ignored or inadequately addressed.**
11. **Moreover, Israel suffers from strategic conceptual inferiority in contending with this threat.** In other words, Israel has no effective response to the challenge it faces. **This inferiority has caused Israel to repeatedly suffer from political and diplomatic disappointments, despite evident quantitative and qualitative military, technological, and economic superiority.** For example, Israel's ability to defend itself militarily has been compromised; its sovereignty has been challenged by increased international involvement in its domestic issues and the leveraging of universal jurisdiction against it; and it faces the risk of boycotts.

#### **Hamas' Agility; Israel's Rigidity**

12. **Following Hamas' victory in the Palestinian Authority (PA) elections (01/06), both the Delegitimization Network and Resistance Network mobilized implicitly or explicitly to legitimize and strengthen the government.** Hamas' declaration of the hitherto existing agreements between the PLO and Israel null and void was in line with their underlying ideology.
13. **Israel's policy during this period** – stopping the transfer of funds to the PA until the Quartet's three conditions were met – **was ineffective in changing Hamas positions or in precipitating its demise.**
14. **On the contrary, Hamas went from strength to strength, while Israel's logic persisted.** In June 2007 Hamas carried out a coup d'état in Gaza and seized full control from the PA and Fatah. Shortly thereafter Israel imposed a blockade on Gaza.
15. **Ever since, a range of issues have been on the agenda:** fixing a ceasefire across the Gaza-Israel border and the responsibility of the Hamas government for controlling armed groups; release of Palestinian prisoners and of Gilad Shalit; Gaza's access to Israel, Egypt and the world; Palestinian national unity; and the smuggling of weapons into Gaza from the sea or Egypt.
16. **Operation Cast Lead (01/09) epitomized Israel's conundrum in Gaza:** Israel has no wish to control Gaza and prefers the current Hamas government to chaos. In addition, it is more comfortable with the present split between the West Bank and Gaza than with a Hamas-Fatah national unity government.
17. **Nonetheless, Israel's policies did not significantly change,** in spite of the dramatic changes in the political-diplomatic reality since January 06', and despite the policy's failure to achieve expected results.
18. **Meanwhile, Hamas was able to continually adapt to the new reality,** demonstrating a relatively clear strategic logic in different phases of the

confrontation, while strengthening its domestic and international status, despite its clear economic, military, and political inferiority.

19. **Since Operation Cast Lead, the main change in Hamas' policy has been identifying the centrality of the international arena for the struggle against Israel, effectively leveraging the delegitimization campaign. Following this logic, Hamas transformed elements of its brand and policy, as well as diverting resources of its support networks in Europe to promote delegitimization.**

### Main Conclusions

20. **The Gaza Flotilla should be viewed as the latest manifestation of a systemic and systematic attack on Israel's political-economic model, rooted in undermining Israel's legitimacy.** Other prominent manifestations include, for example, the BDS campaign against Israel; the legal war against senior Israeli leaders ('lawfare'); or the use of the Goldstone Report to bash Israel.
21. **The Gaza Flotilla was a 'fundamental surprise' that exposed a relevancy gap in Israel's security and foreign affairs doctrine. It was not an outcome of a failure of intelligence-collection but a failure of mindset.** Therefore, notwithstanding the importance of investigating many technical aspects of the event by commissions of inquiry, Israel should establish strategic teams that can identify future relevancy gaps and provide a systemic response that will prevent additional fundamental surprises and restore a proactive edge to Israel.
22. **There were two groups on the flotilla: 'delegitimizers' and 'critics'.** The former, who seem to have been the minority, seek to delegitimize Israel's very existence in order to see it disappear. They were the organizers of the Gaza Flotilla, which represents one project in their campaign. The latter group, which appears to have been a large majority, was motivated by opposition to what they saw as Israel's unjust and inhumane policy in Gaza.
23. **The Gaza Flotilla represented a first-of-its-kind collaboration between Hamas and the Resistance Network, on the one hand, and the Western-based Delegitimization Network, on the other hand.** As mentioned, it was openly and uninterruptedly organized over a fourteen month period by NGOs in large cities – including London, Dublin, San Francisco, and Istanbul – primarily in countries friendly to Israel. Hamas viewed the flotilla as a strategic opportunity and effectively mobilized its network of supporters and activists in this direction.
24. **Turkish involvement was the 'difference that made the difference' –** Turkey acted as a 'meeting point' between the Resistance Network and the Delegitimization Network: the Turkish government adopted the position of the Resistance Network regarding the Hamas government in Gaza, endorsing it over the PA; Turkey turned the issue of Gaza and the blockade into a major flashpoint with Israel, and used it to challenge Egypt, its strategic rival. It also provided tacit and tangible support to the IHH.
25. **However it was the ability of its organizers to mobilize leading figures among the liberal progressive elite in the West that bolstered the Gaza Flotilla and**

turned it into a global and politically explosive event. The big-tent approach of 'everyone is invited' resulted in the participation of both extreme Islamists and European intellectuals; Jews, Christians, and Muslims; Arab citizens of Israel; and others. In all likelihood, the vast majority of those present *did not* aim to promote the delegitimization of the State of Israel.

26. **The violent confrontation on the high seas represented a 'clash of brands' in which Israel was defeated** – The ability to delegitimize Israel is rooted in successful efforts to brand it as an occupying and aggressive entity that ignores and undermines human rights and international law. Meanwhile, the flotillas were branded in the context of resistance to 'occupation' and 'oppression', the promotion of peace and human rights, a moral response to Gaza's 'humanitarian crisis', and in the spirit of international law. With the confrontation framed in such a context, Israel's public relations defeat was assured.
27. **The broader context of the Israel-Palestinian political process is critical as well.** For a variety of reasons – some of which it holds responsibility for – **Israel is not considered to be genuinely striving for peace, consistently and honestly committed to ending control over the Palestinians, or concerned with alleviating the humanitarian situation in Gaza.** This perception of Israel undermines erodes Israel's political firewall.
28. **In general, Israel has not understood the gravity of the threat posed by the campaign of delegitimization against it. Accordingly, Israel has failed to allocate sufficient resources to collecting relevant intelligence, designing an action plan, and working assiduously to implement it.**
29. Israel may have been able to undermine the flotilla at an early stage had it adopted a relevant strategic approach, which would entail:
  - **Formulating a clear policy towards Gaza** – Israel's policies towards Gaza lacked clarity and internal consistency. Therefore, effective communication of its policy proved an impossible task;
  - **Collecting intelligence on the organizers of the flotilla** who are well-known delegitimizers. In this context, IHH had a record of violence;
  - **Foiling the flotilla should have been primarily carried out by NGOs and individuals in the hubs of delegitimization,** and in this specific case in London, Ireland, Sweden, and the Bay Area. Israel and its local allies failed to comprehend the need to work in these places in this context;
  - **Carrying out a branding campaign against the flotilla organizers** may have driven a wedge between them and other left-wing European organizations that took part in it. Failure to do so enhanced the perception that all flotilla participants were 'peaceniks' merely opposed to Israeli policy towards Gaza and aiming to deliver humanitarian aid to Gazans.
  - **Managing Israel's brand in the lead-up to the Gaza Flotilla, primarily focusing on the Gaza situation.** While Israel neglected the issue of its

international image, the Delegitimization Network focused systematically on negatively branding it;

- **Engaging 'critical' flotilla participants** through personal relationships may have convinced them not to take part in the flotilla.

30. **Failure to undermine the flotilla practically and politically or to negatively brand its organizers before the event** significantly reduced Israel's room to maneuver once the flotilla set sail. Thus, Israel was left with a choice between taking over the vessel and towing it to the Ashdod port, or allowing it to break the blockade of Gaza.
31. **Following Israel's decision to eliminate all remaining restrictions on movement of civilian goods into Gaza, it is possible that the logic of the 'Lifeline to Gaza' Campaign has run its course.**
32. **While the focus of the next campaign against Israel is currently unknown, it is clear that its logic will continue to aim at attacking Israel's legitimacy. It will seize on a timely 'outstanding issue' and will be orchestrated by the same network that produced the Gaza Flotilla.**
33. **Hence, focusing on preventing future flotillas is akin to planning for yesterday's war. The challenge is to tackle the network that produced the Gaza Flotilla within the Lifeline to Gaza Campaign, as well as other campaigns, which will surely produce the next campaign as well.**

#### **Principles and Guidelines for Addressing Israel's Delegitimization**

34. **The delegitimization campaign has already become a strategic concern of potentially existential implications, and should be treated as such.** Israel should systematically collect intelligence on delegitimization activities and identify key catalysts promoting them. On that basis, Israel should formulate and implement an action plan to contend with catalysts of delegitimization.
35. **A consistent and honest Israeli commitment to end its control over the Palestinians, advance human rights, and promote greater integration and equality for its Arab citizens is essential in fighting the battle against delegitimization.** Such commitment must be reflected in a coherent and comprehensive strategy towards Gaza and the political process with the Palestinians.
36. **Israel should improve its ability to achieve 'synchronized victories' in the military, political, media, legal, and domestic arenas.** This will require a comprehensive overhaul of Israel security and foreign affairs doctrines and related action plans.
37. **Israel should consolidate a comprehensive strategy to contend with Turkey's evolving role,** exemplified in its serving as an axis between the Resistance Network and the Delegitimization Network in the context of the Gaza Flotilla. In addition, Turkey is continually strengthening its ties with Iran and Syria while

simultaneously enjoying close security and economic ties with Israel, and a strategic alliance with the U.S. and European Union.

38. **It takes a network to fight a network** – The delegitimization campaign against Israel is carried out by a network of NGOs based in a number of international metropolitan cities. Disrupting this network should become the main anti-delegitimization focus. This should be done by:
- **Training Israeli diplomats to work in hubs** – Israel should identify hubs of delegitimization around the world and divert significant resources to them. It should focus on undermining catalyst activities and splitting up the network's different components, primarily by making the essential distinction between critics of Israeli policy and delegitimizers.
  - **Cultivating Israel's own network** on the basis of the diplomatic establishment and a network of 'informal ambassadors' comprising of individuals and NGOs that should be mobilized against delegitimization.
39. **'Re-branding' Israel is critical for the battle against delegitimization** as well as for Israel's ability to communicate its messages effectively and disrupting the Delegitimization Network's ability to fulfill its goals.
40. **Engaging the liberal progressive elite** – Western forces promoting Israel's delegitimization possess only marginal political power. However, they are able to 'punch above their weight' due to their ability to mobilize an array of liberal and progressive elite groups and activists into adopting anti-Israel positions and lending their support to anti-Israel movements. Therefore, Israel and its allies should focus their efforts on engaging this key sector by:
- **Creating a set of personal relationships** with the local elite through official channels and through private organizations and individuals;
  - **Substantive engagement with criticism of Israeli policy, primarily by human-rights organizations** by ensuring accessibility and providing factual and relevant responses. Israel often gives critics the cold shoulder, thus pushing them into the outstretched arms of the delegitimizers;
  - **'Naming and shaming' delegitimizers** and exposing their activities in order to isolate and marginalize them;
  - **Delegitimizing the BDS Movement**, which is orchestrated by delegitimizers and stands behind many of the attempts to isolate Israel.