

The flotilla tragedy: A critical moment

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 29, 2010](#) issue

There is no excuse or justification for the flotilla incident in which Israeli commandos boarded six ships bearing humanitarian aid for the Palestinian people in Gaza, sparking a violent confrontation that resulted in the deaths of nine people. More details about the incident are bound to come out and ultimate responsibility for it will be fiercely debated. For now, the following observations are in order about this complex situation.

The authority that rules Gaza is Hamas, a movement devoted to the elimination of Israel and funded by assorted unsavory players, including Iran. Hamas regularly launches rockets into Israel and refuses to talk with Israel or cooperate with the Palestinian Authority.

Israel has imposed a blockade around Gaza, including its ocean border, to prevent the smuggling of military supplies and materials that could be used to produce weapons. Israel says it allows shipments of food and medicine, but neutral observers argue that the blockade causes unnecessary suffering—that the nutrition needs of Gazans are not being met and that the territory's infrastructure is being kept in ruins.

Whatever the rationale, the blockade is counterproductive. It not only causes suffering for the people of Gaza, but it strengthens Hamas's grip and increases Palestinians' hostility toward Israel and the U.S.

The organizers of the flotilla clearly understood the possibility of an Israeli interdiction. The *New York Times* reported that "the Gaza-bound flotilla had more than humanitarian intentions. The Gaza Freedom March made its motives clear [before the] deadly confrontation: 'A violent response by Israel will breathe new life into the Palestine solidarity movement, drawing attention to the blockade.'" It was not a bad idea to call attention to the suffering that the blockade causes. But the incident was at least in part a public relations stunt as well as a humanitarian deed.

That dynamic is regularly employed by Israel's enemies. Hamas knows that a few rockets lobbed over the border will cause little damage but may precipitate a violent Israeli response: rockets, mortars, tanks, bulldozers. Homes will be leveled and civilians, along with Hamas militia, will be killed. Israel will look bad and sympathy and support for the Palestinian cause—as interpreted by Hamas—will grow. So there is a constant punch and counterpunch—all of it predictable and counterproductive.

It is a critical moment for the Middle East, as U.S. special envoy George Mitchell seeks to bring Israelis and Palestinians back to the negotiating table. The flotilla of aid shipments and the Israeli response underscore that the blockade of Gaza is unsustainable. This is a moment to turn all parties' eyes toward the ultimate goal: the creation of two states, Israel and Palestine, living securely side by side, sharing Jerusalem as a capital.