In 2010, a convoy of six ships – the Freedom Flotilla - set out to challenge the Israeli blockade of the Gaza strip, posing a dilemma for the offending Israeli government. On board the ships were around 700 unarmed civilians from around the world, including some well known personalities, like the Swedish crime novelist Henning Mankell, and parliamentarians from a number of countries. In addition to the passengers and representatives from the media, the ships also carried 10,000 tons of humanitarian aid, such as building materials and medical equipment like X-ray machines and ultrasound scanners. The long journey meant that the pressure built as the ships approached Gaza, making this a drama for the world to watch.

The Israeli government had two main options. The first was to let the ships arrive in Gaza with their passengers and cargo, which in the eyes of many Israeli citizens would mean giving in to pressure. The other option was to stop the vessels. Neither of these options was desirable for the Israeli government, which would have preferred that everything remained quiet about Gaza. Dilemma actions are a type of action in which opponents have to make a choice between two or more responses, each of which has significant negative aspects; the responses are not readily comparable, which is the nub of the dilemma. When the Israeli authorities decided to stop the flotilla their next dilemma arose: what means should be used, and when?

The Israeli government's response

Commando soldiers from the Israeli Defense Force attacked early in the morning on 31 May, while the ships were still in international waters. On board the Mavi Marmara, nine Turkish citizens were killed, some of them shot dead at close range. The killings created an enormous public relations disaster for the Israeli government, and were condemned around the world: the use of force backfired on the Israeli government despite its efforts to inhibit public outrage.

Many governments summoned the Israeli ambassadors or recalled their own. The relationship with the Turkish government, for decades one of the Israeli government's few allies in the Middle East, was damaged for more than a year. Although the Obama administration in the United States was very restrained in its reactions, it expressed criticism of the Israeli government. A UN commission was established to investigate the attacks, and in August 2011 reached the controversial conclusion that the blockade of Gaza was not illegal, but that the use of force had been excessive and unreasonable.

The Freedom Flotilla was not the first attempt to break the blockade of Gaza. On New Year's Eve 2009, 1300 activists from 43 different countries tried to break the blockade by marching into Gaza. This initiative was just as international as the flotilla, and was stopped by Israeli authorities. Since 2008, the Free Gaza Movement has sent several passenger boats to Gaza, some of which arrived successfully. However, both of these initiatives could only carry a small amount of humanitarian aid, making it less threatening than the Freedom Flotilla – these actions did not impose a dilemma.

Increasing the dilemma

Within the Freedom Flotilla movement there was discussion about how to make the dilemma for the Israeli authorities even more difficult. The following year, 2011, the campaign planned to repeat the journey, and 12 ships were ready to travel towards Gaza, 10 of them from Greek waters. More ships, with passengers from even more countries, were chosen as a means for raising the pressure.

However, the Israeli government avoided a repeat of the 2010 scenario by using more subtle ways of stopping the ships. They cultivated relationships with the Greek government, and launched a successful diplomatic offensive that resulted in UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon calling on all governments to urge their citizens not to participate in a second flotilla. The Greek authorities banned the ships from leaving their ports; those that attempted to leave anyway were intercepted by the Greek coast guard. Two of the ships had

similar propeller damage, leading to suspicion that they had been sabotaged by the Israeli secret service. The Turkish authorities also prevented the Mavi Mamara from leaving Turkey—in spite of the Turkish government's criticism of the blockade of Gaza. Only one ship, leaving from France, was boarded by Israeli commando soldiers. These events prevented a potential public relations disaster for the Israeli government. The Israeli authorities managed to keep the issue in the arena of permissions to leave ports, thus preventing the activists from reaching their preferred arena, international waters. Bureaucratic obstacles are less newsworthy than a military attack in international waters.

The activists had prepared for many different Israeli government reactions, but had not foreseen the possibility of bureaucratic obstacles of this kind. One way to surmount such obstacles would have been for the ships to start from different ports in different countries. However, this would have increased the organisational challenge of arriving in Gaza at the same time. It could have been a way of establishing the dilemma over a longer period of time, thereby increasing the pressure; however, it might have been easier to stop them separately using force, without the media drama of the first journey.

In the section about strategy you can read more about dilemma actions. Although not all dilemma actions involve a constructive element like bringing humanitarian aid, this is one way to make the dilemma more complicated for the opponent. Similarly, surprises and unpredictability can increase pressure. The Freedom Flotilla lost a lot of momentum in 2011 when it was not a surprise as it had been the year before, and the Israeli authorities had learned from their mistakes.

Activists seldom can be certain that their actions will have the intended effect. The Freedom Flotilla did not succeed in breaking the blockade of Gaza. But the fact that the Israeli government worked so hard to defuse a potential repetition of the 2010 experience provides evidence that it had been an effective action.

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