

The Second Battle of Trafalgar

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A MIGHTY NAVAL battle took place this week on the waves of the Mediterranean. It will go down in history as the equal of Salamis or Trafalgar.

In a daring move, the navy of the State of Israel intercepted the enemy, consisting of the trawler *Marianne* and the 18 people aboard. Israel naval commandos captured the ship and towed it to the harbor of Ashdod.

The admiral who commanded this glorious action has so far modestly remained anonymous. Therefore we cannot honor him with a column in the center of Tel Aviv, like Admiral Horatio Nelson's column in London's Trafalgar Square. Pity.

However, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu lauded the courage of the victors in glowing terms, expressing the gratitude and admiration of the nation for their gallant deed.

I WOULD continue in this vein, but even sarcasm has its limits.

The whole affair was a masterpiece of stupidity.

Five years ago, several boats tried to reach Gaza, as a symbolic act of support for the beleaguered enclave, and were let through by the Israeli navy. No one mentioned them again.

Then there came the "Turkish flotilla". Several boats were led by the larger Turkish vessel *Mavi Marmara*, with hundreds of Turkish and international peace activists on board. This time, Netanyahu and his minions were determined to show the world that Israel rules the waves. He ordered an attack on the flotilla.

Israeli naval commandos were lowered onto the deck of the *Marmara* from a helicopter, and in the ensuing mêlée nine Turks (one of them also an American citizen) were killed. A tenth died later from his wounds. All of them were unarmed but resisted violently.

The other boats were captured without violent resistance. All were brought to Ashdod harbor.

The international reaction was immense. For many, the *Marmara* became a symbol of Israeli brutality. The propaganda catastrophe compelled Netanyahu to release all the imprisoned activists and crew and send them on their way home.

Altogether, what could have been a negligible incident,

soon forgotten, turned into a great victory for the activists. The entire world paid attention. The Gaza blockade became the center of international interest.

EVEN WORSE were the political consequences. Turkey became an enemy.

For many years, Turkey—and especially the Turkish armed forces—had been a staunch ally of Israel. Secret relations between the two non-Arab Middle Eastern powers were woven. During the reign of David Ben-Gurion, a "peripheral theory" became the cornerstone of Israel's regional policy. Accordingly, Israel established an unofficial alliance with the non-Arab states that surround the Arab world: Kemalist Turkey, the Shah's Iran, Ethiopia, Chad and so on.

Israel sold arms to the Turks. Joint army maneuvers were held. Eventually open diplomatic relations were established.

All this came to an end with the Marmara affair (except the military part, which continues in secret). Emotions were aroused. Turkish public opinion reacted with fury. Israel refused to pay the high indemnities demanded for the bereaved families. (Negotiations about them are still going on.)

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, an adroit politician, exploited the incident in order to change fronts and reestablish Turkish influence in the Arab countries which had belonged to the late Ottoman Empire.

What did Israel gain from this incident? Nothing.

DID THE Israeli government draw any conclusions from this debacle?

How could they? For them it was not a debacle at all, but rather an admirable demonstration of Israeli prowess and determination. This week's incident was the inevitable outcome. More will follow.

In order to weigh up the results of a hostile encounter, one has to ask what each side wanted to achieve.

The organizers of the flotillas wanted to stage a provocation, in order to draw the world's attention to the pernicious blockade. From their point of view, the Israeli reaction serves their purpose admirably.

Netanyahu wants to keep the blockade going, drawing as little attention to it as possible. From this point of view, the attacks are counterproductive. In short, they are stupid.

THE MAIN question is, of course: Why, for God's sake, is there a blockade at all? What purpose does it serve?

Officially, the purpose is to prevent weapons reaching the Gaza strip, so as to prevent Hamas from attacking Israel.

If so, why cause the whole drama? Boats sailing to Gaza, purportedly to supply it with medicines and food, can be searched by mutual agreement in their harbors of departure. The organizers cannot object to this without arousing suspicion.

Alternatively, the boats can be stopped on the high seas, searched and released. Such a procedure is quite usual.

The Israeli government has rejected these possibilities, thereby raising the suspicion that the purpose of the blockade is quite different. It is to prevent any supplies from reaching Gaza in order to keep the overcrowded territory totally dependent on supplies coming from Israel, which lets through only the bare necessities of life.

The hidden purpose is to let the 1.8 million inhabitants, the majority descendants of refugees from Israel, vegetate on the brink of starvation, in order to induce them to rise up and overthrow the Hamas authorities. If so, it has been a miserable failure. On the contrary, under the cruel pressure, the inhabitants seem to draw ever closer to Hamas. After all, Hamas is not a foreign invader, but the brothers and sons of the inhabitants.

Leaving aside the question whether the blockade is legal under international law, it certainly has not fulfilled its promise. The rule of Hamas in Gaza seems to be as solid as ever.

THIS BEING so, one might raise the opposite option. Why not lift the blockade altogether? (Gasp!)

I can imagine a situation of open borders and open sea. Food, medicines, building materials and everything else, except arms, flowing into the Strip from all directions—by sea and by land from Egypt and Israel.

Why not let the Gazans build a harbor or obtain a floating harbor? Why not let them reactivate their airport? The beautiful building they once built near Dahaniya was destroyed by our armed forces. Why not build it again?

Simple logic dictates that the more the people of Gaza have to lose, the less will they be inclined to provoke another war. If we really want quiet and tranquility, that is the way.

Yes, but what about arms? Establish strict supervision by international inspectors. That has been done before in history. No problem.

BEHIND THE tactical stupidity of this whole affair there lurks a much larger strategic stupidity.

The air of the Middle East is full of rumors about an ongoing secret effort to forge an Israel-Hamas armistice, even a kind of alliance.

This is based on the disinclination of the Israeli government to re-conquer the Gaza strip, with its 1.8 million Palestinian Arabs. It's not only a problem of security—a guerrilla war by Hamas would be certain—but something much worse. What really frightens all Israeli governments, right and left, is demography. 1.8 million more Arabs, multiplying all the time? A nightmare for Zionists!

In all the dreams about the annexation of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip is always left outside. True, it is geographically and historically part of “Eretz Israel”, but who wants it? To hell with it!

Our present government, composed of extreme right-wingers, wants to eventually annex the West Bank, with as few Arab Palestinians as possible. Because of this, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) is a far more dangerous enemy of Netanyahu and his ilk than Hamas. Abbas attracts international recognition. He enjoys growing UN and US support.

By this logic, Netanyahu could be expected to fight Abbas and support Hamas in creating a separate mini-state in Gaza. But he behaves like a child who has to choose between two sweets: he wants both.

So he tries to undermine Abbas while at the same time fighting his glorious battles on the high seas against Hamas. But he is also engaged in secret negotiations with his new friends, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, in order to forge a long-term armistice (“hudna”) with Hamas.

Complicated? Indeed.

SOMETHING PERSONAL: I have been asked why I was not on the boat that tried to run the blockade this week.

Frankly, I would have loved to go. I love the sea. I love boats. I would have enjoyed the company of the former Tunisian prime minister and the Arab member of the Knesset who were on the boat. Breaking the blockade would have appealed to me very much.

The trouble is that the organizers of these flotillas insist on a political program that negates the existence of the State of Israel. Much like the organizers of the BDS, they insist on the One-State chimera.

I believe in peace. Peace means peace between the two states: Israel and Palestine. I support the Palestinian struggle for independence as part of my struggle for a peaceful, democratic Israel.

So I missed the Second Battle of Trafalgar.