

Israeli academic says flotilla crisis could have been prevented

Yehezkel Dror, who served on a commission that investigated the 2006 Lebanon war, says the government has not implemented the panel's recommendations.

By Edmund Sanders, Los Angeles Times - Reporting from Jerusalem

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Calls for an international probe into Israel's deadly raid of a Gaza-bound protest flotilla have put the nation's military on the defense amid allegations of excessive use of force.

Hebrew University Professor Yehezkel Dror, who served on the Israeli government-appointed panel that investigated the military's performance in the 2006 Lebanon war, told the Los Angeles Times in an interview Wednesday that Monday's raid, in which nine people were killed, could have been avoided with faster implementation of changes that had been recommended in 2008 by the panel, known as the Winograd Commission.

Many see Monday's raid as failure at every level. Was it a botched operation?

Yes. It seems they had no awareness of what might happen in a bad scenario. The people on the ship declared they would not resist actively. So what was expected was civilian resistance, such as lying down and not cooperating. They didn't expect violence. So it was a trap.

But falling into that trap should have never happened. The Israeli mistake was to believe it. You should always take into account that there are fanatics who will do things that you don't expect. The mistake was to not think more skeptically. Israel fell into a trap set by a minority of persons on the ship.

Who's to blame? Should someone resign or be fired?

No. First there has to be an internal investigation to make sure this doesn't happen again.... In these kinds of confrontations there are no agreed or understood rules of engagement. Consider the U.S. experience in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq. These are explanations. But they don't justify. It was a failure. It should not have happened.

Was it appropriate to use elite combat commandos for this kind of operation?

The commando forces fell into an unexpected situation for which they were not prepared mentally and not equipped physically. If one knew what was going to happen, one would have used totally different tactics, maybe overwhelming force or nonlethal weapons in large quantities. There are many ways to handle it. But they were not prepared for a scenario that I think should have been foreseen as having some probability.

So it was an error in planning?

A serious planning error. It's a sign of a deeper weakness in strategic thinking and it has to be corrected.

What about how the operation was conducted? People were killed; soldiers were overcome, thrown off the deck, disarmed by the activists. Is that a reflection of training?

It raises questions. First let me remind you that there have been many successful operations too. Think about what was regarded as a Syrian nuclear reactor in the making [destroyed by Israel in 2007]. It's hard to train for every possibility.

Has Israel learned lessons from the 2006 Lebanon war? Have the commission's recommendations been implemented?

Half of them. Half is a lot and not enough. The national security staff has been completely rebuilt. Preparations for protecting the zone of the interior are going well. Training in the army has been multiplied. But the basic decision-making culture has not undergone the necessary radical transformation.

Should the government create an independent commission to investigate the raid?

There are two questions. One is the need for some kind of investigation because of the international pressure, the diplomatic need to do something. This depends on President Obama or Europe. That's not a question of substantive learning but of diplomatic utility.

A different question is how to draw lessons. There has to be a process of systematic learning that involves not only those in charge of the operation. Operations [leaders] must participate, but you can't leave it to them.

So can the military investigate itself?

Certainly, but it should be reinforced by someone [who was] not responsible for the operation. There have to be outsiders involved. That doesn't mean private persons. It can be people from other ministries.

After Israel's Gaza offensive ended in 2009, it resisted calls for that kind of an independent commission.

That was because of political reasons. They felt a commission would have harsh findings against the senior politicians as the Winograd Commission had. The committee accused the prime minister, the minister of defense and chief of staff of very serious failures.

Israel ended up instead with an international U.N. inquiry led by Richard Goldstone, which turned out to be very damaging to Israel's reputation and traumatic for the country. Can Israel withstand another Goldstone?

If the [raid occurred] as presented by Israel — which I personally believe it did, that it was a trap — this shows that Israel acted bona fide. Not wisely, maybe, but there certainly was no intent by Israel to have bloodshed. Therefore any objective public investigation will reach the finding that mistakes were made, but Israel's intent was OK.

Israel often takes a very defiant and defensive stance when accused of heavy-handedness or using excessive force. Why not apologize for the civilian deaths and be the first one to call for an investigation, rather than wait for the international community to demand it?

I personally agree. But to understand the difficulty, look at the U.N. decisions and the automatic majority against Israel. Look at the decision after the recent conference to reduce nuclear proliferation. Israel is singled out and not Iran. [It's part] of the long history of the Jewish people. This has a deep impact on the collective memory. It results in a defensive attitude and a feeling that others, not the U.S., but many others are against us. This is bad in terms of [shaping] strategy. But I understand the psychology.

The government is calling this self-defense. Do you see this as self-defense?

It's very hard to define self-defense. If Syria or Iraq is building a nuclear reactor, is attacking it self-defense? Israel is the only democratic country facing an existential threat. As long as you have enemies who regard Israel's existence as unacceptable and arm themselves with effective weapons, you need the freedom to act. This is not the same situation as Europe or the U.S. It requires a different kind of strategic thinking.

Another protest ship is expected to try to break the Gaza blockade. How will the military handle it?

I hope and I'm sure it will be handled much better. For sure, the same errors will not be repeated. Other errors might be made, but I hope not.