Introduction

On May 30th, 2010, six ships left Turkey and approached the coast of Israel/Palestine to deliver supplies to the coastal enclave of Gaza. Most of the ships were owned by a Turkish NGO called the IHH (İnsani Yardım Vakfi, or Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms).[1] On board were over 600 peace, humanitarian, and pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel activists determined to break the blockade with which, since 2007, Israel had been strangling the economy of Gaza. Approaching the coast, the flotilla was attacked from sea and air by an Israeli commando squadron. When the attack ended, nine activists lay dead or dying, and a number of Israeli commandos were wounded, some of them seriously.

How did this happen, and what does it have to do with "contentious politics"? In 2007, the Gaza Strip, a detached part of the Palestinian territories, was taken over from the more moderate Palestinian governmental party, Fatah, in a bloody coup by the radical Hamas group. From that point on, the Israeli army began to limit access to Gaza, both for fear of arms getting into the hands of Hamas militants, who had been attacking Israeli settlements, and to isolate Hamas, an Islamist group that continued to call for Israel's destruction. Those measures were not sufficient to prevent home-made missiles from killing Israelis living in towns near the border. Under pressure from public opinion and with an election approaching, in January 2009, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) launched a massive land and air attack on the population of Gaza, destroying thousands of buildings, damaging a UN humanitarian center, and killing over a thousand people.

[1] The IHH describes itself as an Islamic charity that was formed to provide aid to Bosnia in the mid-1990s. It has been involved in aid missions in Africa and Asia and in the Palestinian territories, and it played an important role in provisioning Gaza after the Israeli blockade began in 2007. The IHH is technically an NGO, but it maintains ties with the ruling Islamist Justice and Development Party in Turkey. Its top fundraisers are Turkey's Islamist merchant class. The organization is banned in Israel. For more information, go to www.ihh.org.tr/Haber_Manset_Ayrintilar.160±M5563920baaa.0.html (in Turkish).

After the January 2009 "operation," Israeli pressure became even greater, turning Gaza into a virtual prison for the million-and-a-half Palestinians living there. While Israel allowed in food and medicine, it controlled water and electricity supplies and blocked the entry of anything that could conceivably be used to construct weapons – including fertilizer, metal, and computer chips, as well as a list of nuisance items that included, at one time or another, light bulbs, candles, matches, books, musical instruments, crayons, clothing, coffee, tea, cookies, and shampoo.

The blockade had three major defects: First, it increased the influence of foreign humanitarian groups, including the IHH. Second, it had a devastating impact on Gaza's economy, increasing the power of Hamas through which almost all foreign aid was distributed. And third, it created a flourishing underground economy and a class of smugglers bringing in supplies through tunnels from Egypt. This led to constant Israeli attacks on the smugglers' tunnels and to rising tensions between Israel and Egypt. Cut off from the world, unable to get the supplies needed to rebuild their homes, the Gazans relied on the sympathy of fellow Arabs, the United Nations, various humanitarian groups, mainly from Western Europe, and Turkey, since 2002 under the leadership of a moderately Islamist party attempting to better its relations with fellow Muslims in the Middle East.

In January 2010, planning began for the flotilla that would leave Turkey in May to try to challenge the blockade. The IHH "brought large boats and millions of dollars of donations to a cause that had struggled to gain attention and aid the Palestinians. Particularly galling to Israel," the *New York Times* noted, "is the fact that the group comes from Turkey, an ally, but one whose relations with Israel have become increasingly strained."[2] Both directly and through its ties with the Turkish government, the Israeli government gave warnings to turn back, but the flotilla's leaders refused, and on the 31st, a squadron of Israeli warships and helicopter gunships attacked.

The flotilla was not unprepared: When Israeli commandos were lowered onto the ships on ropes from their helicopters, they were at first overwhelmed by well-trained Islamist militants. Several of the Israeli soldiers lost their weapons, which were turned on the attackers. But the numbers and the firepower of the IDF proved too much for the defenders. When the melee ended, nine militants had been killed and a number of Israeli attackers wounded, two of them seriously.

Although the IHH action was deliberately provocative,[3] seldom was there so stark a contrast between the peaceful tactics of a movement and the violent response of its target. Though an Israeli government spokesman painted the activists as "an armada of hate and violence in support of the Hamas terror

[2] *New York Times*, June 1, 2010.

[3] As a board member of the group said, "We became famous; we are very thankful to the Israeli authorities." *New York Times*, June 1, 2010.

organisation . . . ,"[4] the international press and progressive groups responded with outrage. Predictably, the Arab and Palestinian press were the most violent in their denunciations, but the European press was almost as vehement; the usually conservative *Economist* editorialized, "A policy of trying to imprison the Palestinians has left their jailer strangely besieged."[5] More surprising, the normally pro-Israeli *New York Times* pronounced that the Israeli blockade must end.[6]

Governments around the world were quick to respond. Denmark, France, Greece, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Egypt, and South Africa all summoned Israeli ambassadors to condemn the attack. Greece suspended joint military exercises, and Turkey withdrew its ambassador and cancelled military cooperation and joint water projects. Leftwing governments, such as Nicaragua's, suspended diplomatic relations, but even more friendly governments, such as Ireland's, cancelled an appearance of Israel's ambassador before a parliamentary committee.[7] Most important, Israel's only ally, the United States, condemned the violence and called for an end to the boycott of Gaza.

But more striking than the reactions of the press or the politicians was the overwhelming reaction of nonstate actors around the world. Civil society groups, social movements, unions, and religious groups (including some Jewish ones) condemned the attack on the flotilla and organized protests in dozens of cities. In the Arab world, 285 civil society groups signed a statement against the Israeli action; in South Africa, unions called for making every municipality an "Apartheid Israel Free Zone"; in Britain, UNITE called for a policy of divestment in Israeli companies; in Norway, the chair of the largest Norwegian union federation called for divestment by the state's pension fund; and in Sweden, the port workers' union called for a boycott of Israeli ships.[8] A number of other groups – including a coalition of European Jews – either immediately launched ships in the direction of Gaza or planned to do so in the near future.

The most widespread response was a call for a boycott.[9] And in the days after the attack, a number of well-known performance artists cancelled their

[4] Statement of Danny Ayalon, Deputy Foreign Minister, on May 31, 2010, quoted in www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/may/31/q-a-gaza-freedom-flotilla. Visited on June 8, 2010.

[5] *The Economist* went on to point out that the attack on a Turkish ship and the killing of nine Turkish citizens (one of them with a U.S. passport as well) "is depriving Israel of a rare Muslim ally and mediator." *The Economist*, June 5th–11th, 2010, pp. 13–14.

[6] *The Times* criticized the Obama Administration's tepid response to the attack, urging the government to join other major powers in calling for an end of the blockade. *New York Times,* June 1, 2010. President Obama satisfied himself by characterizing the blockade as "unsustainable." Visited at www.nytimes.com/2010/06/02/opinion/02wed1.html, June 10, 2010.

[7] These selected reactions are reported in "Activism News" on its Web site at electronicintifada.net/v2/article11318.shtml. Visited June 7, 2010.

[8] These reports also come from "Activism News," cited in note no. 7.

[9] The diffusion of the boycott call was remarkable. A simple Google search for "Gaza & boycott" came up with more than one million five hundred thousand "hits." A narrower search for "Gaza & boycott & unions" produced 568,000. And what I thought would produce only a few "hits" – a search for "Gaza & boycott & *artists*" – led to 182,000 hits!

appearances in Israel. What had begun as an effort by a radical Islamist group to break a blockade ended in a global wave of negative publicity and a widespread call to boycott Israel, whose leaders refused to cooperate with an international investigation of the killings. But the combination of the brazen attempt to break the blockade, the killing of nine civilians in international waters, and the widespread condemnation of Israel's behavior did have consequences. In the United States, it began to dawn on foreign policy elites that the Israeli alliance was becoming a liability.[10] In the World Zionist Congress, a split occurred between a liberal majority that urged the Israeli government to soften its stand and a vocal minority that attempted to block the majority resolution.[11] And in Israel itself, in late June, the government bowed to international pressure and agreed to soften the blockade.[12]

WHAT WAS HAPPENING HERE?

What does the story of the Israeli attack on the Turkish-led "flotilla" tell us? We could interpret it in moral terms, either as the attempt of an intrepid band of missionaries to help their desperate co-religionists, or as the justified attempt of a besieged nation to protect its security. We could see it as an example of how small-power politics can threaten to up-end big-power relationships. We could also see it as an example of what I call "contentious politics" – what happens when collective actors join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities, and opponents around their claims or the claims of those they claim to represent.

From a contentious politics perspective, we can take away seven important lessons from the Israeli attack on the flotilla and the response to it:

First, the range of actors in the story goes well beyond the traditional subject of "social movements." Two major states, Israel and Turkey, the Islamist movement Hamas, a flotilla packed with humanitarian, peace, and pro-Palestinian NGOs, Israeli voters, European unions and governments, and global public opinion all came together in the conflict over Gaza. If we were to focus only on social movements, we would have told a rather truncated story. In this book, I will develop a relational approach to contentious politics, which focuses more

[10] As the usually conservative American security commentator Anthony Cordesman wrote,

> "... the depth of America's moral commitment does not justify or excuse actions by an Israeli government that unnecessarily make Israel a strategic liability when it should remain an asset."

Go to www.normanfinkelstein.com/anthony-cordesman-is-whistling-a-new-tune/. Visited June 8, 2010.

[11] For a report from a surprised liberal group that was involved in passing the resolution, go to www.jstreet.org/blog/?p-1110. Visited June 18, 2010.

[12] The Security Cabinet's decision can be found at http://www.pmo.gov.il/PMOEng/Communication/Spokesman/2010/06/spokemediniyut170610.htm. Visited June 18, 2010.

on the interactions among divergent actors than on the classical subject of social movements.

Second, the story shows how, under certain conditions, even small and temporary groups of collective actors can have explosive effects on powerful states. Without the provocation of the "freedom flotilla," it is doubtful that the world's attention would have focused on the festering sore of Gaza, or that Israel would have softened its blockade.

Third, the story illustrates the importance of spirals of *political opportunities and threats* in opening windows for contentious politics. Even in Israel, Leftist opposition groups gathered to protest the Israeli raid and were met with hostility by rightwing opponents.[13] We will give great attention to such spirals and to the "cycles of contention" that they constitute.

Fourth, the story tells us that we cannot understand episodes of contention without examining how contentious and institutional politics – including electoral politics – intersect. In the spring of 2010, Israel was governed by a weak and divided center-right coalition under a leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, who had already shown his willingness to bow to extreme xenophobic opinion. The threats to his government from the Right were important factors in the decision to attack the flotilla – an action that produced an opportunity for movement actors to mobilize. In this book, I will give particular attention to the interaction among contentious and institutional politics.

Fifth, the story shows the importance of what I will call "modular performances and repertoires" of collective action. The boycott is by now a familiar form of contention, instantly recognizable around the world. But it wasn't always so; contentious politics has to be *learned,* and once forms of contention are seen to be viable, they diffuse rapidly and become modular. So common is the boycott form that pro-Israeli groups responded to the Swedish boycott threat with a boycott threat of their own![14] An important theme of this book is the modularity of forms of contention and their diffusion.

Sixth, the story demonstrates the growing importance of transnational networking and mobilization, including mobilization through the Internet. Not only did the activists on the flotilla come from across the sea and represent several nations; an almost instant and overwhelming response to their actions came from around the world – including from the international Zionist community. We will investigate this growth of transnational contention and ask whether it is giving rise to a "global civil society."

Finally, the story shows how widespread what we will call the "social movement repertoire" has become. Some scholars have wondered whether the world is becoming "a social movement society" (Meyer and Tarrow, eds. 1998). But that term first surfaced in the 1990s, when it seemed that peaceful forms of contentious action were spreading among ordinary people. With the turn of

[13] Go to http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/leftist-and-rightist-israelis-clash-at-gaza-flotilla-protest-in-tel-aviv-1.294359 for a report on this clash. Visited June 8, 2010.
[14] Go to www.israelforum.com/board/showthread.php?t=10127. Visited June 7, 2010.

the new century, and especially after September 11, 2001, the phrase "social movement society" has taken on a new and more forbidding meaning. We will ask whether transgressive politics is beginning to overwhelm contained politics, and, if so, what are its implications for civil politics. But first we must clarify two key terms that will be employed in this book and their relationship to one another: social movements and contentious politics.

Social Movements in Contentious Politics

Ordinary people often try to exert power by contentious means against national states or opponents. In the last fifty years alone, the American Civil Rights movement, the peace, environmental and feminist movements, revolts against authoritarianism in both Europe and the Third World, and the rise of new Islamist movements have brought masses of people into the streets demanding change. They often succeeded, but even when they failed, their actions set in motion important political, cultural, and international changes.

Contentious politics occurs when ordinary people – often in alliance with more influential citizens and with changes in public mood – join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities, and opponents. Such confrontations go back to the dawn of history. But mounting, coordinating, and sustaining them against powerful opponents is the unique contribution of the social movement – an invention of the modern age and an accompaniment of the rise of the modern state. Contentious politics is triggered when changing political opportunities and constraints create incentives to take action for actors who lack resources on their own. People contend through known repertoires of contention and expand them by creating innovations at their margins. When backed by well-structured social networks and galvanized by culturally resonant, action-oriented symbols, contentious politics leads to sustained interaction with opponents – to social movements.

How ordinary people take advantage of incentives created by shifting opportunities and constraints; how they combine conventional and challenging repertoires of action; how they transform social networks and cultural frameworks into action – and with what outcomes; how these and other factors combine in major cycles of protest and sometimes in revolutions; how the Internet and other forms of electronic communication are changing the nature of mobilization; and how the social movement is changing in the twenty-first century – these are the main themes of this book.

These themes take on special moment given the vast spread and growing diversity of contentious politics today. Just think of the variety of social movements since the 1960s: first civil rights and student movements; ecology, feminism, and peace movements; struggles for human rights in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian systems; Islamic and Jewish religious extremism in the Middle East and Hindu militantism in India; anti-immigrant violence in Western Europe and Christian fundamentalism in the United States; ethnic nationalism in the Balkans and the former Soviet Union; and suicide bombings in Iraq,

Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Over the past five decades, a wave of new forms of contention has spread from one region of the world to another, and among different social and political actors.

Not all these events warrant the term "social movement," a term I will reserve for sequences of contentious politics based on underlying social networks, on resonant collective action frames, and on the capacity to maintain sustained challenges against powerful opponents (see Chapter 1). But all are part of the broader universe of contentious politics, which emerges, on the one hand, from within institutional politics, and can expand, on the other, into revolution. Placing the social movement and its particular dynamics historically and analytically within this universe of contentious politics is a central goal of this study.

The Approach of the Study

In this book, I will not attempt to write a history of social movements or the broader field of contentious politics. Nor will I press a particular theoretical perspective on my readers or attack others – a practice that has added more heat than light to the subject. Instead, I will offer a broad theoretical framework for understanding the place of social movements, cycles of contention, and revolutions within the more general category of contentious politics. Too often, scholars have focused on particular theories or aspects of movements to the detriment of others. One example is how the subject of revolution has been treated. It is mainly seen in comparison with other revolutions, but in isolation from ordinary politics and almost never compared with the cycles of protest that it in some ways resembles (but see Goldstone 1998). We need a broader framework with which to connect social movements to contentious politics and to politics in general.[15] This book takes up this challenge.

CONTENTIOUS COLLECTIVE ACTION

The irreducible act that lies at the base of all social movements, protests, rebellions, riots, strike waves, and revolutions is *contentious collective action*. Collective action can take many forms – brief or sustained, institutionalized or disruptive, humdrum or dramatic. Most of it occurs routinely within institutions, on the part of constituted groups acting in the name of goals that would hardly raise an eyebrow. Collective action becomes contentious when it is used by people who lack regular access to representative institutions, who act in the name of new or unaccepted claims, and who behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others or authorities.

Contentious collective action serves as the basis of social movements, not because movements are always violent or extreme, but because it is the main and often the only recourse that most ordinary people possess to demonstrate

[15] For this argument with illustrative syntheses, see McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001.

their claims against better-equipped opponents or powerful states. This does not mean that movements do nothing else but contend: they build organizations, elaborate ideologies, and socialize and mobilize constituencies, and their members engage in self-development and the construction of collective identities. Moreover, some movements are largely a-political, and focus on their internal lives or those of their members. But even such movements, as sociologist Craig Calhoun reminds us, encounter authorities in conflictual ways, because it is these authorities who are responsible for law and order and for setting the norms for society (1994b: 21). Organizers exploit political opportunities, respond to threats, create collective identities, and bring people together to mobilize them against more powerful opponents. Much of the history of movement/state interaction can be read as a duet of strategy and counterstrategy between movement activists and power holders.

"Collective action" is not an abstract category that is outside of history and stands apart from politics (Hardin, 1982; 1995). Contentious forms of collective action are different from market relations, lobbying, or representative politics because they bring ordinary people into confrontation with opponents, elites, or authorities. This means that the particular historical, cultural, and power conditions of their society in part determine and in part are determined by contentious politics. Ordinary people have power because they challenge power holders, produce solidarities, and have meaning to particular population groups, situations, and national cultures.

This means that we will have to embed the general formulations of collective action theory into history with the insights of sociology and political science and anthropology. In particular, we will see that bringing people together in sustained interaction with opponents requires a *social* solution – aggregating people with different demands and identities and in different locations in concerted campaigns of collective action. This involves, first, mounting collective challenges, second, drawing on social networks, common purposes, and cultural frameworks, and third, building solidarity through connective structures and collective identities to sustain collective action. These are the basic properties of social movements.

The Basic Properties of Movements

With the emergence of the social movement in the eighteenth century, as I will show in Part I, early theorists focused on the three facets of movements that they feared the most: extremism, deprivation, and violence. Both the French Revolution and early nineteenth century industrialism lent strength to this negative reaction. Led by sociologist Emile Durkheim (1951), nineteenth century observers saw social movements as the result of anomie and social disorganization – an image well captured in the phrase "the madding crowd" (see the review in McPhail 1991).

While the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the normalization of movement activism into Social Democratic and Labor Parties, the

movements of the interwar period – in the form of Italian fascism, German Nazism, and Soviet Stalinism – fit the image of violence and extremism fostered earlier by the French and Industrial Revolutions. With the exacerbation of ethnic and nationalist tensions after the fall of communism in 1989–1992 and the terrorist outrages of the first decade of the twenty-first century, this negative view of social movements has been reinforced. We saw this view reemerge in the "ancestral hatred" views of the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, most of them uninformed by social movement theory. We saw it again in the anti-immigrant violence in Europe, which evoked the horrors of the interwar years. And we see it most dramatically in the reactions to the militantism of Al Queda and other Islamist movements since the turn of the century.

But these are extreme versions of more fundamental characteristics of social movements. Extremism is an exaggerated form of the dramatization of meaning that is found in all social movements – what I will call in Chapter 7 "movement framing"; deprivation is a particular form of the common purposes that all movements express; and violence is an exacerbation of collective challenges, often the product of public clashes with police, rather than the intention of activists. Rather than defining social movements as expressions of extremism, violence, and deprivation, they are better defined as *collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities.*[16] This definition has four empirical properties: collective challenge, common purpose, social solidarity, and sustained interaction. (For a similar definition, see Tilly and Wood 2009.) Let us examine each of these briefly before turning to an outline of the book.

COLLECTIVE CHALLENGES

Collective action has many forms – from voting and interest group affiliation to bingo tournaments and football matches. But these are not the forms of action most characteristic of social movements. Movements characteristically mount *contentious* challenges through disruptive direct action against elites, authorities, other groups, or cultural codes. Most often public in nature, disruption can also take the form of coordinated personal resistance or the collective affirmation of new values (Melucci 1996).

Contentious collective challenges most often are marked by interrupting, obstructing, or rendering uncertain the activities of others. But particularly in

[16] Charles Tilly writes:

> Authorities and thoughtless historians commonly describe popular contention as disorderly. . . . But the more closely we look at that same contention, the more we discover order. We discover order created by the rooting of collective action in the routines and organization of everyday social life, and by its involvement in a continuous process of signaling, negotiation, and struggle with other parties whose interests the collective action touches.

See his *The Contentious French* (1986: 4).

authoritarian systems, where overt protest is likely to be repressed, they can also be symbolized by slogans, forms of dress or music, graffiti, or renaming of familiar objects with new or different symbols. Even in democratic states, people identify with movements by words, forms of dress or address, and private behavior that signify their collective purpose.[17]

Contention is not limited to social movements, though contention is their most characteristic way of interacting with other actors. Interest groups sometimes engage in direct challenges, as do political parties, voluntary associations, and groups of ordinary citizens who have nothing in common but a temporary coincidence of claims against others (Burstein 1998). Nor are contentious challenges the only form of action we see in movements. Movements – especially organized ones – engage in a variety of actions ranging from providing "selective incentives" to members, to building consensus among current or prospective supporters, to lobbying and negotiating with authorities, to challenging cultural codes through new religious or personal practices.

In recent decades, just as interest groups and others have increasingly engaged in contentious politics, movement leaders have become skilled at combining contention with participation in institutions. Think of the healthcare debate that roiled American politics in 2009–2010. Although it was dominated rhetorically by the debate in Congress and financially by well-heeled Washington lobbies, much of the public saw it through the lens of the so-called "Tea Parties" – in imitation of the Boston Tea Party, which helped to touch off the American Revolution – and the "town meetings" at which well-orchestrated challenges were organized against members of Congress who supported reform (see Chapter 5).

Despite their growing expertise in lobbying, legal challenges, and public relations, the most characteristic actions of social movements continue to be contentious challenges. This is not because movement leaders are psychologically prone to violence, but because they lack the stable resources – money, organization, access to the state – that interest groups and parties control. In appealing to new constituencies and asserting claims, contention may be the only resource that movements control. Movements use collective challenge to become the focal points of supporters, gain the attention of opponents and third parties, and create constituencies to represent.

COMMON PURPOSES

Many reasons have been proposed for why people affiliate with social movements, ranging from the desire of young people to flaunt authority all the way to the vicious instincts of the mob. While it is true that some movements are marked by a spirit of play and carnival and others reveal the grim frenzy of the mob, there is a more common – if more prosaic – reason why people band

[17] Such movements have been characterized as "discursive" by political scientist Mary Katzenstein, who studied the movement of radical Catholic women in America in her *Faithful and Fearless* (1998). I will return to the relations between discourse and collective action in Chapter 7.