

Israel threatens violence against Gaza aid convoy

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Israel has threatened violent repression against the Freedom Flotilla II aid convoy, due to sail this week for Gaza. On Monday Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet ordered the Israeli Defence Force to "act resolutely" to stop the flotilla. The order called on the armed forces to "avoid friction" with the passengers "as far as is possible."

According to the organisers, the flotilla "will carry nearly 3,000 tonnes of aid and hundreds of civilians from dozens of countries, including members of parliaments, politicians, writers, artists, journalists and sports figures as well as representatives of indigenous peoples and various faith groups."

Among the 350 participants on the planned convoy are Pulitzer prize-winning American writer Alice Walker and an 87-year-old Holocaust survivor.

The navy has been ordered to prevent the convoy from entering Gaza's territorial waters. Defence Minister Ehud Barak has proposed setting up a special naval court empowered to confiscate ships attempting to reach Gaza, whose 1.5 million poverty-stricken residents are being subjected to an illegal land and sea blockade.

The threats of violence come little more than a year after the massacre of nine people, carried out by the IDF, onboard the *Mavi Marmara* humanitarian convoy vessel. Several dozen other activists on board were injured. The Turkish-registered ship was in international waters before it was illegally seized by Israeli navy commandos.

A concerted campaign of disinformation and lies has been mounted to portray the aid flotilla as an armed invading force. *Haaretz* said senior Israeli defence officials told a press briefing Monday that two activists linked to Hamas are on-board the convoy. Hamas, an Islamist group, has been classified as a terrorist organisation by Israel.

Major Avital Leibovich told the media that, according to "intelligence", there are "extremists" aboard the flotilla with supplies of "dangerous incendiary chemicals".

Reporters were told that the "extremists" had been heard threatening "to spill the blood" of Israel Defence Forces soldiers. Defence sources said, "This is a dramatic development. The picture emerging here is that some of the flotilla participants clearly intend a violent clash."

The government press office threatened to deport foreign journalists and ban them from Israel for 10 years if they took part in the flotilla. On Monday, Prime Minister Netanyahu retracted this threat, but insisted that participation would be unlawful. A statement from Netanyahu instructed "the responsible authorities to formulate a special procedure regarding foreign journalists that participate in the flotilla and arrive in contravention to the Entry into Israel law."

The *Jerusalem Post* noted, "One of the questions the government will need to decide in the days before the arrival of the vessels is who is a journalist, since there are expected to be among the passengers activists who also blog and will call themselves journalists."

On Tuesday Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman claimed that those on board the flotilla "are clearly there to create a provocation, looking for confrontation and blood and for many pictures on television screens."

The purpose of such bellicose language is to lay the basis for another murderous assault by the IDF. A *Haaretz* editorial Monday commented, "The term 'flotilla' is understood in Israel as a declaration of war. This is the case with respect to the latest Gaza-bound flotilla, just as it was with the one that set off from Turkey in May 2010."

On Monday the Freedom Flotilla web site announced that a French boat, *Dignity/Karama*, left the port of l'Ile Rousse in Corsica on Saturday and was scheduled to meet up with at least nine other vessels sailing to Gaza. An Irish ship *Saoirse* was also able to leave port and sail, according to the British *Independent*.

The web site reported, "Israel's best efforts to stop our

boats at port, including pressure on governments, threats against insurance and communications companies, intimidation of human rights defenders, frivolous lawsuits and other underhanded tactics, have thus far failed. The Freedom Flotilla has set sail.

“In the coming days the rest of the vessels in the flotilla, two cargo ships and seven other passenger boats, will leave from various ports to a meeting point in international waters from which the boats will sail all together towards Gaza.”

The scale of the offensive Israel has mounted was revealed by Lieberman, who said Tuesday that Israeli leaders and officials had held “hundreds, perhaps thousands of discussions at various levels with foreign governments to persuade them to urge their citizens not to join the flotilla.”

The United States has refused to condemn the threats of violence by Israel, warning its citizens not to take part in the convoy. France has also declared its opposition to the flotilla, with Foreign Ministry spokesman Bernard Valero stating that the aid convoy was a “bad idea that can only exacerbate tensions and we don’t need more reasons for conflict at the moment... We don’t have the legal recourse to stop boats leaving, but with others including the UN secretary general we have made clear we are against this.”

Despite some ships sailing, Israel seems to have succeeded in securing the compliance of Greece and Turkey to prevent most ships from leaving their ports. The Israeli news site *Ynet* said that the Greek authorities had delayed the departure of five or six boats. Last week one of the vessels, the *Audacity of Hope*, a US-owned ship, was prevented from leaving Athens for a Greek island after it was declared not seaworthy. The *Independent* reported that the Israeli legal group, Shurat HaDin, “had submitted a complaint stating that the ship was not fit to sail, obliging the Greek authorities to inspect the ship before allowing it to leave.”

Indications of direct sabotage of the flotilla were reported by Freedom Flotilla activists. The *Juliano*, a boat set to leave the Greek port Piraeus, has had its propeller shaft cut off. The ship is shared by Swedish, Norwegian and Greek activists. Stating that the damage could be repaired, the organisers said it had been caused by “hostile divers”.

The actions taken by Greece follow the withdrawal from the convoy of the *Mavi Marmara*. The ship travelled under the auspices of the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), the pro-Palestinian Turkish Islamic organization. There is no doubt that the decision to withdraw the vessel,

illegally captured last year, was due to pressure on Turkey from both the US and Israel.

Last month the European Union and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urged that the flotilla be cancelled, but at that point Turkey refused to accede. On May 30, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu called on Israel to end its blockade of Gaza. Referring to the IHH’s lead role in the aid flotilla, he said: “No democratic country can think that they have full control over these NGOs (non-governmental organizations).”

The reversal by Turkey is bound up with its on-going manoeuvres, aimed at securing its influence in the Middle East. At an earlier point this was facilitated by posing as a defender of the Palestinians—but not at the risk of a direct conflict with Israel, with which it has long sought a rapprochement, let alone with the US. In the aftermath of the “Arab Spring”, Turkey also shares Israel’s fears of igniting a broad-based popular movement.

On June 21, *Haaretz* reported that leading Israeli and Turkish officials, with US support, held secret talks prior to the IHH withdrawing. “The talks are being held between an Israeli official on behalf of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Turkish Foreign Ministry Undersecretary Feridun Sinirlioglu, a firm supporter of rehabilitating ties with Israel,” it stated.

“In addition”, said *Haaretz*, “the US administration has held talks with senior Turkish officials, mainly to foil the flotilla to Gaza due later this month, but also in a bid to improve relations with Israel.”

Following the withdrawal of the IHH and the *Mavi Marmara*, an Israeli Foreign Ministry source said, “We hope that this move will provide a new opening to resume the reconciliation between Israel and Turkey.”



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