

Israel prepares brutal response to Gaza flotilla ship

Robert Stevens
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Israeli government officials have said plans are in place to prevent by force a French ship carrying humanitarian aid from reaching the Gaza Strip.

The vessel Dignity is in international waters, after having left Greece last week. It is part of the planned 10 ships in the Freedom Flotilla II. The flotilla aims to deliver tonnes of humanitarian aid to Gaza, which is subject to an illegal land, air and sea blockade.

According to the AFP agency, the Juliano, a vessel manned by Greek, Norwegian and Swedish activists, was also attempting to leave the port of Perama, near Athens, on Wednesday.

As well as planning to stop the ships by force, Israel has mobilised around 100 armed police, including members of the anti-terrorist squad, at Tel Aviv airport. Police have been instructed to await the incoming flights containing activists from the “Welcome to Palestine” campaign. Hundred of the activists, including 350 from France, are to arrive Friday. They are to visit the West Bank to protest Israeli restrictions on the Palestinians’ freedom of movement.

An Israeli public radio reporter said, “It’s an unusual sight to see so many police from so many different units at Ben Gurion airport. They are spread out in positions from the runway to the baggage retrieval area, and in the arrivals area at Terminal 3, there are dozens of uniformed police”.

Before departing for Romania, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met at the airport with his internal security minister and the national police chief. Netanyahu said, “I have ordered our forces to enforce international law. Every state has the right to protect itself from those seeking to disturb order in its territory”.

These orders follow moves by the Greek government to prevent the movement of other ships in the flotilla from any of its ports. Last Friday, Greece announced that it had banned any of the flotilla’s ships from setting sail. The same day, the Audacity of Hope, a US-owned vessel, attempted to leave the port of Perama. It was intercepted after around 10 minutes by a coast guard patrol vessel. After a stand-off lasting several hours, CNN reported, “the ordeal took a turn,

however, when an inflatable boat carrying an armed Greek military commando team told the activists to follow them back to port or face being boarded”.

The boat was taken back to Greece where it was impounded in a naval base. The captain of the ship, John Klusmire, a 60-year-old US citizen, was arrested and asked to report to a police station on Saturday. He was charged with “disturbing sea traffic and endangering passengers” and held until Tuesday before being released. According to a report, he was detained in “shocking conditions” with no bed or toilet facilities in his cell. One of the US organisers of the flotilla, Jane Hirshmann, said, “They’re not giving him water or food. This is disgraceful. And what’s more disgraceful is that the US embassy has not paid him a visit”.

Among the ship’s other passengers were scores of US citizens, including Alice Walker, a 67-year-old Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Hedy Epstein, an 85-year-old Holocaust survivor, and several journalists, including CNN reporter Phil Black.

Although carried out by the Greek authorities, the threats of violence to force the ship back to shore underscore the pivotal role that the United States is playing in support of the Israeli regime. It is inconceivable that such threats of violence against a US-owned vessel and the arrest of an US citizen were not given the green light by the Obama administration.

On Monday, armed Greek coast guards boarded another ship, the Tahrir, with a reported 30 Canadians on board, 15 minutes after it had set sail from a port in Crete. Also on board were several Australian citizens, including former New South Wales Upper House Green Party Member of Parliament Sylvia Hale. The guards forced it back to shore. According to eyewitnesses, the ship was deliberately smashed into a cement pier, causing severe damage to its body and the leaking of diesel.

One of those on board, Dylan Penner, said eight to 10 armed coast guard officers boarded the ship, and that soldiers were in command of its bridge. They were armed with handguns and assault rifles, said Penner. No shots were

fired, but the coast guard did blast water cannon at the ship as it left port. The Greek authorities arrested and charged two Canadian citizens, Soha Kneen and Sandra Ruch, and an Australian citizen, Michael Coleman.

Further evidence of direct Greek collusion with Israel to sabotage and prevent the flotilla was revealed on Tuesday, when a Greek cement company informed flotilla activists that it will not provide them with cement to bring to Gaza as previously agreed. An Israel Radio report stated that the firm returned €25,000 to the activists, cancelling their order of 600 tonnes of cement.

The Canadian government has refused to mount any defence of its own citizens. On May 28, Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird stated, “Canada recognizes Israel’s legitimate security concerns and its right to protect itself and its residents from attacks by Hamas and other terrorist groups, including by preventing the smuggling of weapons”.

Such a pronouncement gives carte blanche for Israel to mount a brutal assault against the flotilla. They come just over a year after the Israeli Defence Force stormed the Turkish-owned humanitarian vessel, the Mavi Marmara. Terrorising those on board, the attack resulted in the bloody murder of nine innocent and defenceless people and serious injury to scores of others.

On Saturday, the Middle East Quartet (the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia) issued a joint statement calling on “all governments concerned to use their influence to discourage additional flotillas, which risk the safety of their participants and carry the potential for escalation”.

Again citing Israel’s “legitimate security concerns”, the statement “strongly urges all those wishing to deliver goods to the people of Gaza to do so through established channels, so that their cargo can be inspected and transferred via established land crossings”.

Israel’s cultivation of Greece as a contractor for its dirty operations in enforcing its siege of the Gaza Strip has involved protracted efforts by the Netanyahu government. An important factor in this is Greece’s status as a bankrupt state, under the control of the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Commenting on the developing ties between Israel and Greece, Alon Liel, a former Israeli diplomat, said, “There’s been intensive investment in ties with Greece since Israeli Turkey ties declined—especially in military ties”.

According to Liel, Israel has offered Greece military supply deals on favourable terms. “Greece is a very vulnerable country now, with needs.... They need everything at the moment”, he said.

Israeli and Greek air forces now train together regularly.

Following the Mavi Marmara slaughter, relations between Turkey and Israel were strained, threatening to derail their previous close political and military cooperation.

Tel Aviv has also sought to cultivate relations with Cyprus, the launching base for 2008 humanitarian voyages to Palestinian territory. Under Israeli pressure, all such missions were banned last year. Israel is also developing closer economic ties with Cyprus, including its current joint endeavour to source potentially lucrative hydrocarbon wealth from the seabed between the two countries.

Turkey has done a great deal to secure reconciliation with Israel. The Mavi Marmara was due to take part in the Freedom Flotilla II. Last year it sailed under the auspices of the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), the pro-Palestinian Turkish Islamic organisation. After secret talks between the US, Israel and Turkey, the IHH withdrew from the present flotilla.

Israel and Turkey have been involved in ongoing talks in New York over the contents of the planned publication on July 7 of the United Nations “Palmer Report” into the massacre aboard the Mavi Marmara. According to a report Monday in the Israeli daily *Ha’aretz*, the draft document, seen by both Israeli and Turkish officials, concludes “that the blockade of Gaza was legal, but that the naval commandos who seized the Mavi Marmara had used undue force”.

Turkey has raised concerns that it is criticised in the document for its leading role in the previous flotilla via the IHH, and has demanded Israel “agree to have the report toned down”.

For its part, Israel is refusing to issue the apology that is being demanded by the Turkish government. The Turkish newspaper *Hurriyet* reported Monday, “Diplomats are working like linguists to find a word that will sound like an apology in Turkish, but won’t sound like an apology in Hebrew”.



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