

ARZA Statement on the Gaza Flotilla Incident

June 1, 2010

On May 31, the day when Americans paused to remember those who have fallen in battle, we woke to the difficult news that early that morning Israeli commandos had stopped six ships carrying hundreds of pro-Palestinian activists on an aid mission to Gaza. Five of the ships calmly complied with the stoppage. The sixth ship did not. It was on this sixth vessel, the Turkish registered Mavi Marmara, where nine people were killed and dozens were wounded after IDF forces encountered unexpected resistance from civilians wielding knives, crow bars and small arms. Turkey's NTV showed activists beating one Israeli soldier with sticks as he rappelled from a helicopter onto one of the boats. Another soldier was thrown from an upper deck of one of the ships and then stomped on by activists.

The Israeli military said troops only opened fire after the activists attacked them with knives and iron rods, and one activist wrested a serviceman's weapon. Two of the dead activists had fired at soldiers with pistols, the army said. Organizers included people affiliated with the International Solidarity Movement, a pro-Palestinian group that often sends international activists into battle zones, and the IHH, a Turkish aid group that Israel accuses of having terrorist links.

Though the flotilla was in international waters at the time of the attack, Israel has operated under an international law that allows a state, during a time of conflict, to enforce an embargo in international waters. Within this framework, it is legal for civilian ships to be stopped if they are trying to break the embargo.

It would appear that this entire enterprise was a cynical set-up designed to present Israel with an unnecessary Hobson's choice and to generate anti-Israel publicity.

As so often happens after incidents such as this one, foreign governments were quick to condemn Israel for excessive use of force without full facts. Editorials in Israel note a mixed reaction to the Government's action while still all affirming the right of sovereign self defense. The government of Israel has responded that Israel has the right to blockade Gaza ports to prevent weapons from entering that area and that Israeli Navy personnel were prepared to deal with protesters, not people armed with knives, crowbars and other weapons.

ARZA expresses its sorrow at the loss of life and expresses the hope that all those injured will soon recover from their wounds. ARZA further expresses the hope that governments and individuals will not rush to judgment but will wait for all the facts to emerge before coming to any conclusion. As is so often the case when dealing with incidents that occur in a very unsettled part of the world, it is often difficult to ascertain the facts but very easy to jump to conclusions.

Our sacred task is to build an ever stronger progressive religious presence in Israel. Even when Israel is experiencing difficult moments like these, we must remain focused on creating facts on the ground. To the extent that ARZA can support IMPJ and IRAC, their work will enlarge the societal conversation on Judaism and the creation of a just, democratic, and Jewish Israel.

While waiting for a full report on what happened today, there are some facts that are already clear:

- The flotilla was organized by an Islamist organization that has links to fundamentalist jihadi groups.
- Israel offered from the first announcement of the flotilla that it or the Red Cross would deliver any humanitarian aid to Gaza, as it does daily.
- The extremists brought small children on board by persons hoping to provoke what could be a violent confrontation,
- The activists were carrying 10,000 tons of what they said was aid. Israel transfers about 15,000 tons of supplies and humanitarian aid every week to the people of Gaza.

- "We fully intend to go to Gaza regardless of any intimidation or threats of violence against us, they are going to have to forcefully stop us," said one of the flotilla's organizers.
- Using the Arabic term 'intifada,' Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said "We call on all Arabs and Muslims to rise up in front of Zionist embassies across the whole world.
- Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh said this week: "If the ships reach Gaza it is a victory; if they are intercepted, it will be a victory too.
- Israel left Gaza in hopes of peace in 2005 and in return received more than 8,000 rockets and terrorist attacks.
- No country would allow illegal entry of any vessel into their waters without a security check.

Here are additional resources for further background on this issue:

Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Danny Ayalon's press conference on the flotilla incident:

<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/137785>

An excellent appraisal of the flotilla crisis from Rabbi Daniel Gordis:

<http://danielgordis.org/2010/05/31/facebook-meets-the-flotilla/>

Israel Goes on High Alert in the Wake of Flotilla Incident:

http://www.themedialine.org/news/news_detail.asp?NewsID=28979

MEMRI has posted clips of Gaza-Based Yemeni Professor Abd Al-Fatah Nu'man:

http://www.thememriblog.org/blog_personal/en/27418.htm

IDF Met with Pre-Planned Violence When Boarding Ship:

<http://dover.idf.il/IDF/English/News/today/10/05/3101.htm>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bU12KW-XyZE&playnext_from=TL&videos=KoyKrtEKHmY&feature=sub

Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon's Statement: Activists Had Weapons:

<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3896588,00.html>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement about the humanitarian situation in Gaza:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5wIWcNXzstI>

MFA legal expert Sarah Weiss Maudi explains why the flotilla was not allowed to dock at Gaza:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2W457Ot6qw&feature=channel>

Legal Backgrounder on maritime law and other related issues, from MFA:

<http://www.jewishfederations.org/page.aspx?id=221580>

A fascinating Al-Jazeera report on the flotilla before they left that offers insight into who was on board. One says: "We are now waiting for one of two good things -- either to achieve martyrdom or to reach Gaza:"

<http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/2489.htm>

Video of a "peace activist" stabbing an Israeli soldier as he boards the boat:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buzOWKxN2co>

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu Expresses Full Backing for the IDF:

The Daily Alert from the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

www.dailyalert.org