



Organizing Aid Flotillas to the Gaza Strip A challenge for Israel in the regional and international arenas

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Overview¹

- ▶ Since the beginning of the Gaza Strip War, initiatives have been undertaken around the globe to organize boats and ships to bring aid to the Gaza Strip, leading to the establishment of the International Campaign to Save Gaza (ICSG), which was announced on November 23, 2023 during a conference held in Istanbul.² Recently the organization, behind which is the Freedom Flotilla Coalition (FFC), announced it would launch a ship from Libya to El Arish in the near future, and would launch another ship from Lebanon.
- ▶ Meanwhile, Zaher Birawi, the ICSG chairman, announced the launch of a flotilla to "break the blockade of the Gaza Strip," most likely four ships from European countries. The Turkish IHH announced it had purchased several ships for the flotilla, which is expected to set sail in mid-April (14th or 15th). Later, a Norwegian ship is supposed to set sail for the Gaza Strip, first passing among European ports in May.
- ▶ In addition to sending humanitarian aid to the Gazans, the flotilla organizers intend to turn them into anti-Israeli media campaigns. In addition to the aid ships there will be ships carrying "political activists," journalists and public opinion "influencers" from around the world, whose objective will be to "show solidarity" with the Gazans.
- ▶ Zaher Birawi claimed they had examined all possible scenarios, including one in which Israel attacked the ships and the "activists," and accordingly they were preparing the activists and committees of experts would train the participants to deal with violence from Israel.
- ▶ Regarding the ships from Turkey, apparently at the moment the Turkish authorities are in no hurry to provide them with the permits necessary to set sail from Turkish ports. Since the Mavi Marmara incident in May 2010, the organizations involved in sending flotillas

¹ Click <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en> to subscribe and receive the ITIC's daily updates as well as its other publications.

² For further information, see the ITIC November 2023 report, "Attempts to organize an aid flotilla to the Gaza Strip."

to the Gaza Strip have not been able to organize a flotilla of comparable size and all their efforts ended without the ships reaching the area.

► The arrival of aid ships, especially those with "activists" from around the world, could challenge the Israeli Navy. There is also a concern that aid arriving by sea will enter Gaza without Israeli supervision and the ships will be used to smuggle weapons. Should the ships also be carrying people with political influence and media personnel, they could complicate world public opinion for Israel. In the past Zaher Birawi stated that the main purpose of the flotillas was to raise awareness and discredit Israel, and to publicize the political and media campaigns accompanying the flotillas.³

The Ships

► Following the initiative to establish the ICSG, in which the FFC and the Turkish Mavi Marmara Association are partners, on November 23, 2023, a conference was held in Istanbul. **Zaher Birawi**, the general coordinator of the ICSG and the chairman of the **International Committee to Break the Siege of Gaza**, which is a founding member of the FFC, said the ICSG was an FFC initiative undertaken in light of the war in Gaza. He provided additional information about other FFC initiatives to send ships to the Gaza Strip carrying aid for the Gazans, as well as ships carrying political activists, journalists and public opinion "influencers."

Sending ships to Gaza from Libya and Lebanon

► On the evening of March 29, 2024, the ICGS announced the departure of a ship from the port of Misrata in Libya, with a cargo of approximately 1,600 tons of basic humanitarian aid, mainly medicine, tents, blankets, winter clothes and food, collected by civilian organizations in a number of cities in Libya during the last three months. The ship was expected to arrive at the port of El Arish in Egypt on April 3, 2024, but according to reports on shipping websites, as of April 5, it was still en route.

► According to the plan, the aid will enter the Gaza Strip through the Rafah Crossing. Reportedly the Libyan and Egyptian Red Crescents coordinated to facilitate the rapid unloading and transportation of the ship's cargo from El Arish to Rafah, and from there to

³ For further information, see the ITIC September 2017 report, "A Hamas-affiliated Palestinian in Britain admitted the flotilla project to the Gaza Strip was not intended to "break the siege" and bring humanitarian aid, but rather to promote the battle for hearts and minds against Israel.

the Gaza Strip. It was also reported that the Miles of Smiles organization,⁴ representing the ICGS, would deal with all the procedures in Cairo and El Arish necessary to ensure the aid be transferred as quickly as possible.



The Libyan ship Kevalay Queen

(Right: ICGS X account, March 30, 2024. Left: FFC X account, March 30, 2024)

► Zaher Birawi reported that a ship carrying a thousand tons of aid would soon sail to the Gaza Strip from Lebanon (ICGS website, March 30, 2024). On other occasions, he said the ship would leave before the end of Ramadan from the port of Tripoli. He denied sending aid through the pier established by the United States on the Gaza coast (aljazeera.net, March 29, 2024; Quds Press, March 31, 2024).

Other FFC initiatives

► Birawi said that the ship Handala, which sailed from Norway in 2023 and toured 12 European ports to present the "suffering" of the Gazans caused by the "siege," was expected to sail on May 1, 2024 from Norway. It will stop in several European ports for media and political events to protest the war in the Gaza Strip and the "blockade." Then, in July 2024, the ship, along with others, will depart for Palestinian territorial waters in the hope of reaching the Gaza Strip. It was later reported that Ship to Gaza – Sweden announced the ship would visit Swedish ports in May and arrive in Malmö on May 8, 2024, for a demonstration against Israel's participation in the Eurovision (Ship to Gaza – Sweden website, April 4, 2024).

► Another initiative, which according to Birawi was authorized in February 2024, was the renewal of the flotillas to break the [alleged] "siege" on Gaza. He said there would be four ships, one of which would carry about 5,000 tons of humanitarian aid be accompanied

⁴ For further information about Miles of Smiles, see the August 2011 ITIC report, "Seniors in Interpal, a British fund that supports Hamas, play a major role in sending aid convoys to Gaza. South African organizations belonging to the Union of Good are also involved."

by smaller ships with more than a thousand participants, activists and influential political figures. The ships will depart after Ramadan, most likely in the middle of April 2024, and from several ports, with over 1,200 people from more than 50 countries on board. According to Birawi, a large number of people have already registered for the voyage. A final list of the participants will be determined by a central committee on behalf of the FFC, which will verify the identity of the participants. Whoever is accepted will sign a document stating that the action is "legal, humanitarian, peaceful and non-violent" so that Israel will not have "an excuse to distort the goals of the campaign." Birawi claimed they had examined all possible scenarios, including one in which Israel attacks the ships as well as the "activists on board," and said they were preparing the passengers for all scenarios and possibilities. He claimed committees of "experts" would "train the participants" to deal with the scenario of Israeli violence (aljazeera.net, March 29, 2024; Quds Press, March 31, 2024).

► On April 4, 2024, the FFC issued a press release stating that the voyage was planned for mid-April 2024 and that several ships would sail with 5,500 tons of humanitarian aid and hundreds of "international human rights observers" (FFC website, April 4, 2024)



A FFC notice of the two ships purchased by the Turkish IHH (FFC website, April 4, 2024)

► According to the International Committee to Break the Siege of Gaza Facebook page on April 1, 2024, the preparations for the flotilla are progressing according to the plan and the ships are expected to sail after Eid al-Fitr (expected to begin on April 10, 2024)⁵ (International Committee Facebook page, April 1, 2024).

The Turkish IHH

► The IHH,⁶ designated by Israel as a terrorist organization, plays a central role in the FFC's Gaza flotilla initiative. On March 27, 2024, the organization displayed two ships it

⁵ It depends on the moon.

⁶ The Turkish organization which orchestrated the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla in May 2010.

purchased for the FFC. Bülent Yildirim, IHH chairman, who inspected them in the port of Istanbul, said they were making preparations to purchase more. He said that one of them, the Anadolu, was a cargo ship with a capacity of 5,500 tons, which would carry the aid and transfer it to the Gaza Strip. The other was the Vicdan and would carry "activists from around the world" and bring "the world's conscience" to the shores of Gaza (IHH website, March 27, 2024).



The ships purchased by the Turkish IHH (IHH website, March 27, 2024)

- ▶ On April 4, 2024, the third ship purchased by the organization, the Akdeniz/Prince, was displayed on the IHH Facebook page (IHH Facebook page, April 4, 2024).



The new ship (Right: IHH Facebook page, April 4, 2024. Left: vesselfinder website)

- ▶ On March 28, 2024, Mustafa Ozbek, IHH board member in charge of media information, told TASS that they planned to launch four ships carrying humanitarian aid and "activists" on April 14, 2024, to break the "siege" on the Gaza Strip. The Rai al-Youm (March 27, 2024) and Jordanian Saraya websites (March 28, 2024) also reported that the flotilla would set sail on April 14, 2024. Rai al-Youm also reported that according to correspondence from the relevant committees, the ships will not depart only from Turkey, but from shores and ports of several countries at the same time.

▶ According to Ozbek, it will be similar to the Mavi Marmara flotilla of 2010, and as of now, it can be said that at least 12 European countries will participate. One ship will sail from Italy to Istanbul with "activists" from European countries, artists, public figures and politicians. The ships will depart from Istanbul, sailing first to Cyprus, where they will stay for some time to assess the situation and develop another plan of action. He claimed they had received about 5,000 applications from "activists" interested in participating. He also did not dismiss the idea that celebrities, including relatives of Nelson Mandela, would join the flotilla. Regarding possible incidents off the coast of Gaza, he claimed there were [allegedly] no special "protective measures" on board and they would operate "according to the situation" (russia-islworld website, March 28, 2024).

▶ According to IHH chairman Bülent Yildirim, speaking at a Ramadan fast-breaking meal on April 6, 2024, held by the organization for media personnel in Istanbul, so far they had completed the purchase of three ships. He spoke about the two ships he had already displayed on March 27, 2024, the cargo ship Anadolu and the passenger ship Vicdan, whose original name was apparently The Majestic. He said the ships would probably set sail for the Gaza Strip on April 15, 2024. He added that because the FFC was a joint project of an international coalition, a ship would also sail from Europe. He claimed they would "do their best" to prevent a new Mavi Marmara "incident" (Turkish newspaper Milligazete website, April 6, 2024).

▶ However, Rai al-Youm quoting Turkish sources, reported that the IHH had informed the FFC organizations that it had not yet obtained a "cargo license" through the port.⁷ Apparently, the FFC, the IHH and the International Committee have not yet received a political green light from Turkey to launch the flotilla, whose sailing was announced three times in the past months, in vain. The "activists" complain about Turkish government excuses and bureaucratic reasons for blocking the project, in particular by the relevant government ministry. Turkish officials say the Ankara government is using the excuse of the lack of security guarantees to launch a flotilla against the blockade in light of the war. The report claimed that the activists received information from an advisor in the Turkish presidential palace that the authorities were considering escorting the flotilla using ships of the Turkish Navy under direct orders from President Erdogan (Rai al-Youm, March 26, 2024).

⁷ A document issued by the Turkish authorities authorizing vessels to move through ports in accordance with Turkish customs law.

