

# Israeli Officials Defend Flotilla Action to Christian Supporters

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During conference calls Thursday with Christian groups, Israeli officials defended the Jewish nation's action against a flotilla of aid ships that left nine pro-Palestinian activists dead.

On a call with more than 3,000 participants affiliated with Christians United for Israel (CUFI), Deputy Foreign Minister Daniel Ayalon (pictured) said the flotilla's sponsor, a Turkey-based charity known as IHH, has ties to al-Qaida and is an ally of Hamas, a militant Palestinian organization that controls the Gaza Strip. Rather than delivering humanitarian supplies, Ayalon said the activists wanted to end the blockade, which Israel insists is needed to prevent groups from smuggling weapons to Hamas.

"We have it on tape, although supposedly their mission was humanitarian," even though there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza "they said actually their mission is to break the blockade on Gaza," Ayalon said. "Why do they want to break the blockade on Gaza? Because the blockade works."

He said Israeli officials tried to divert the six Turkish ships so their contents could be inspected and all but one cooperated. When Israeli soldiers boarded that ship, the Mavia Marmara, early Monday morning, they were met by 75 to 80 "mercenaries" carrying axes, iron pipes, knives and machetes, he said. Nine pro-Palestinian activists were killed, including one American of Turkish origin, and seven Israeli soldiers

were injured.

"This was not a mission of peace," Ayalon said. "On the contrary, this was a clear provocation trying again to condemn, to delegitimize Israel ... to make it an embarrassment for Israel."

"But this is just the fluffy stuff," he added. "The real threat here is that they wanted to strengthen Hamas and with Hamas the entire axis of evil in the Middle East."

He said Hamas is an organ of Iran and represents its interests rather than Palestinians'.

"We have to keep our eye on the ball, and the ball is Iran," Ayalon said. "Because Iran is behind this terror wing that we saw through Hezbollah and ... the Muslim Brotherhood. They are trying to change the world order as we know it. To get the nuclear bomb is not just an end in itself, it's only a means to reach hegemony over the entire Middle East and much, much, much beyond."

In a separate call Thursday hosted by Eagles' Wings, Member of Knesset Yuli-Yoel Edelstein, Israel's minister of Public Affairs and the Diaspora (Likud), said Israel would respond again to other ships attempting to break the blockade. An Irish aid ship is currently en route to the Gaza Strip and is scheduled to arrive later this to media reports, there are 15 pro-Palestinian activists on board, including Irish Nobel Laureate Mairead Corrigan-Maguire.

"The prime minister said yesterday loud and clear and I am saying to you loud and clear, if there will be another attempt this week, next week, in two weeks from now, we will have to act," Edelstein said. "We will do everything in our power to avoid casualties but we will nevertheless prevent the influx of uninspected goods into the Gaza Strip."

Edelstein and Ayalon also defended Israel's decision to board

the aid ships in international waters. Edelstein said the nation was within the boundaries of international law, citing section 67A of the San Remo Manual on International Law, which states that vessels can be attacked if they are believed "on reasonable grounds to be carrying contraband or breaching a blockade, and after prior warning they intentionally and clearly refuse to stop."

Edelstein said boarding the ship instead of waiting for it to get closer to Gaza was an attempt to avoid a sneak attack from Hamas, which he said could have resulted in more casualties. "The decision was a calculated decision to intercept the ships farther away from the coast of Gaza," he said.

The flotilla incident has brought international outcry against Israel and strained the nation's relationship with Turkey, which has been a key ally in the Middle East. After the flotilla incident, Turkey withdrew its ambassador to Israel and demanded a U.N. Security Council session on the clash, the Associated Press reported.

British Prime Minister David Cameron said the flotilla incident was "completely unacceptable" and called on Israel to lift the blockade, which he said "just strengthens Hamas's grip on Gaza," BBC News reported.

The Obama administration did not condemn Israel's handling of the flotilla but expressed regret for the loss of life and called for an investigation into the events. In an interview with PBS' Charlie Rose Wednesday, Vice President Joe Biden defended Israel, saying it had an "absolute right" to protect itself.

"It's legitimate for Israel to say: 'I don't know what's on that ship. These guys are dropping ... 3,000 rockets on my people,'" Biden said. "Israel has a right to know they're at war with Hamas. has a right to know whether or not arms are being smuggled in."

Edelstein said Israel sends 15,000 tons of humanitarian supplies to the Gaza Strip each week. He said "there are no real shortages" and accused Hamas of preferring to procure weapons than food, medicine and building materials for its citizens.

Several international groups, including some Christian organizations, dispute Israel's claim that there is no humanitarian crisis in the region and say Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip has failed to prevent an influx of weapons.

While calling for participation in the World Week of Peace in Palestine Israel, which ends Friday, World Council of Churches General Secretary Olav Fykse Tveit denounced Israel's actions and said Monday's events were a reminder "of the pressing need for an end to the Israeli military occupation of the Palestinian territories."

The Action by Churches Together Alliance, a network of 100 humanitarian and development organizations, also condemned Israel's handling of the flotilla, calling it a "crime." But several other Christian groups were quick to defend the nation. In an e-mail to supporters, American Family Association President President Tim Wildmon said Israel was "clearly in the right."

"Israel has every moral right in the world to make sure that humanitarian cargoes aren't used to ship weapons into the Gaza Strip that will almost immediately be used to attack innocent Israeli families," Wildmon said.

"We call on President Obama to take a firm and unapologetic stand for Israel," he added. "Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East and our only reliable ally in the region. Today is the day for America to stand with our friends and allies in Israel."

Eagles' Wings founder Robert Stearns and CUFI founder John Hagee echoed that sentiment during Thursday's conference

calls. Both men said Israel needs its Christian allies more than ever and encouraged their supporters to contact their elected officials and urge them to stand with the Jewish nation.