

June 2, 2010

An Assault, Cloaked in Peace

By **MICHAEL B. OREN**

Washington

PEACE activists are people who demonstrate nonviolently for peaceful co-existence and human rights. The mob that assaulted Israeli special forces on the deck of the Turkish ship Mavi Marmara on Monday was not motivated by peace. On the contrary, the religious extremists embedded among those on board were paid and equipped to attack Israelis — both by their own hands as well as by aiding Hamas — and to destroy any hope of peace.

Millions have already seen the Al Jazeera broadcast showing these “activists” chanting “Khaibar! Khaibar!”— a reference to a Muslim massacre of Jews in the Arabian peninsula in the seventh century. YouTube viewers saw Israeli troops, armed with crowd-dispersing paintball guns and side arms for emergency protection, being beaten and hurled over the railings of the ship by attackers wielding iron bars.

What the videos don’t show, however, are several curious aspects Israeli authorities are now investigating. First, about 100 of those detained from the boats were carrying immense sums in their pockets — nearly a million euros in total. Second, Israel discovered spent bullet cartridges on the Mavi Marmara that are of a caliber not used by the Israeli commandos, some of whom suffered gunshot wounds. Also found on the boat were propaganda clips showing passengers “injured” by Israeli forces; these videos, however, were filmed during daylight, hours before the nighttime operation occurred.

The investigations of all this evidence will be transparent, in accordance with Israel’s security needs.

There is little doubt as to the real purpose of the Mavi Marmara’s voyage — not to deliver humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza, but to create a provocation that would put international pressure on Israel to drop the Gaza embargo, and thus allow the flow of seaborne military supplies to Hamas. Just as Hamas gunmen hide behind civilians in Gaza, so, too, do their sponsors cower behind shipments of seemingly innocent aid.

This is why the organizers of the flotilla repeatedly rejected Israeli offers to transfer its cargo to Gaza once it was inspected for military contraband. They also rebuffed an Israeli request to earmark some aid packages for Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier held hostage by Hamas for four years.

In the recent past, Israeli forces have diverted nine such flotillas, all without incident, and peacefully boarded five of the ships in this week's convoy. Their cargoes, after proper inspection, were delivered to non-Hamas institutions in Gaza. Only the Marmara, a vessel too large to be neutralized by technical means such as fouling the propeller, violently resisted. It is no coincidence that the ship was dispatched by İnsani Yardım Vakfı (also called the I.H.H.), a supposed charity that Israeli and other intelligence services have linked to Islamic extremists.

The real intent of breaking the embargo is to allow rockets to be transported to Gaza from Hamas's suppliers in Syria and Iran. Israel has already intercepted several such ships laden with munitions. Since Israel's disengagement from Gaza in 2005, Hamas has fired more than 10,000 rockets and mortars at our civilian population. This week, two Hamas rockets exploded near Ashkelon, one of Israel's largest cities.

Israel has a right and a duty to defend itself from Hamas and its backers. Our struggle is not with the people of Gaza but only with the radical regime that overthrew the legitimate Palestinian Authority and has pledged to seek Israel's destruction. Each day, Israel facilitates the passage into Gaza of more than 100 truckloads of food and medicine — there is no shortage of either. We, too, want a free Gaza — a Gaza liberated from brutal Hamas rule — as well as an Israel freed from terrorist threats.

Israel will scrupulously review the events surrounding the Marmara's interception. But Israel will also persist in denying advanced weaponry to Hamas. At the same time, the Israeli government will vigorously pursue peace with the Palestinian Authority, which shares our need for defense against armed extremists. The real peace activists are those who support our vision of a two-state solution, not those supporting the terrorists bent on destroying it.

Michael B. Oren is Israel's ambassador to the United States.