

IHH – A Terrorist Support Nexus

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The scene was set for the violent outcome of the Gaza flotilla's confrontation with Israeli security forces several days before its departure from Turkey.

At the Istanbul port, the Turkish radical Islamist relief organization IHH organized a militant send-off demonstration to support the flotilla, which was broadcast on the Turkish Islamist Israhaber TV station.¹ With one of the flotilla boats as a backdrop, thousands of supporters waved Palestinian, Turkish and IHH flags, and flags of two terrorist organizations, Hezbollah and İslami Büyükdoğu Akincilar Cephesi, or IBDA-C, the Great Eastern Islamic Raiders' Front, a Turkish terrorist organization trained and supported by Al-Qaida.

The demonstrators sang in unison, "Intifada! Intifada! Intifada! Intifada!" and then began the vehemently anti-Semitic chant, "Khaybar, Khaybar ya Yahud! Jaysh Muhammad sawfa ya'ud!" -- "Remember the battle of Khaybar, O Jews! The Army of Muhammad will return [for you]!"² The chant refers to the incident in the seventh century when the Prophet Muhammad attacked and conquered the Arabian Jewish tribe of Khaybar. The warriors of the tribe were executed and the women and children enslaved. These extremist sentiments expressed by the IHH demonstrators turned out to be only the tip of the iceberg.

The IHH is the İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri İnsani Yardım Vakfı, or Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief.³ It purchased three of the ships involved in the Gaza flotilla, including the Mavi Marmara, the lead ship.⁴ Its passengers were armed with daggers, iron bars, sledgehammers, guns and other weapons, and they attacked Israeli naval commandos who were attempting to enforce the blockade of Gaza.⁵

The IHH is the charitable arm of the radical Turkish Islamist organization Millî Görüş, or National View, founded by Necmettin Erbakan, a former prime minister whose Virtue Party was banned in 2000. Members of Erbakan's party subsequently established the currently ruling AKP, which draws backing from Millî Görüş supporters.⁶ IHH was

¹ "Gemiler İstanbul'dan Gazze'ye Uçuruldu 1," -- "With a ceremony, ships were sent to Gaza from Istanbul - 1," Israhaber Turkish Islamist TV clip of IHH demonstration on YouTube, May 22, 2010;

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJ6giFryCY0>

² Ibid.

³ "Vakif Kurulus Senedi," -- "Foundation Establishment," IHH website in Turkish, <http://www.ihh.org.tr/vakif-kurulus-senedi/>

⁴ "Aid Convoy Backed Up New Turkish Policy Of 'Bashing' Israel, Analysts Say," Radio Free Europe, June 2, 2010; http://www.rferl.org/content/Aid_Convoy_Backed_Up_New_Turkish_Policy_Of_Bashing_Israel_Analysts_Say/2060016.html

⁵ "Weaponry Overview and Footage of Mavi Marmara Passengers Preparing Weaponry," IDF Spokesperson's Unit video, June 3, 2010; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16sANhzjcC0&feature=related>

⁶ "Turkish aid group fields criticism for tactics," Financial Times website, June 6, 2010; <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/d9c75cb4-719b-11df-8eec-00144feabdc0.html>

established in 1992, and is led by Bulent Yildirim.⁷ Although the organization insists that it is simply an Islamic relief organization, its extremist and terrorist ties and activities indicate otherwise.

In February 2009, Hamas held a rally in support of Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan's public criticism of Israel over the Gaza war. IHH's Bulent Yildirim spoke to a rally of thousands of Hamas supporters in Gaza which was broadcast on Israhaber TV. Addressing the crowd who waved green Hamas flags, he declared, "Raise your fists to the skies and repeat after me: What can the enemy do to me? Paradise is in my heart. If they will deport me, it would be a trip. If they imprison me I will be able to spend some time alone. If they kill me, that is martyrdom for the sake of Allah. Allahu Akbar!"⁸

The Hamas audience responded with the chant, "With soul, with blood, we will support you, O Palestine!" Yildirim concluded his speech by declaring, "All Muslims stand ready to enter Gaza! Our children are with you! Our women are with you! Our sheikhs are with you! Our voices are with you!"⁹

Before the flotilla departed from Istanbul, Israhaber reported that Necmettin Erbakan called Yildirim and congratulated him, declaring, "May your holy war be auspicious!" And Yildirim told Erbakan, "As your students, we are going to fulfill our responsibilities, Allah willing!"¹⁰

Over the past three years Yildirim and other IHH officials have met and worked together with senior Hamas leaders in Gaza,¹¹ Syria¹² and Turkey.¹³ The IHH is a member organization of 'Ittilaf Al-Khayr, or the Union of Good (UOG),¹⁴ which was founded by leaders of Hamas in 2000, and is led by the radical Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi,¹⁵ who is infamous for issuing a fatwa legitimizing Hamas suicide attacks against Israeli civilians. The UOG acts as a global front organization to raise funds for Hamas and was designated a Hamas front organization by the Israel

⁷ "Mütevelli Heyeti," – "Board of Trustees," IHH website in Turkish, <http://www.ihh.org.tr/mutevelli-heyeti/>

⁸ "Organizer of 'Freedom Flotilla,' Bulent Yildirim, at a Hamas rally in Gaza: All the Muslims of the world will march to Gaza," Middle East Media Research Institute, February 2009, transcript of clip #2495, http://www.memritv.org/clip_transcript/en/2495.htm

⁹ "Bülent Yildirim Gazze'lilere seslendi: 'Yaninizdayiz,'" - "Bulent Yildirim addresses the people of Gaza: 'We are with you,'" Israhaber TV clip of Bulent Yildirim addressing Hamas demonstration in Gaza, YouTube, February 1, 2009; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLNwSDjFz8>

¹⁰ "IHH Baskani Bülent Yildirim, Mavi Marmara gemisinden Milli Görüs lideri Necmettin Erbakan'a Seslendi," Analiz Merkezi, Turkish Islamist website, May 30, 2010; <http://www.analizmerkezi.com/Haber/Gundem/30052010/BULENT-YILDIRIM-ERBAKANA-SESLENDI.php>

¹¹ See photo of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh embracing IHH's Bulent Yildirim in Gaza in January 2010, "Convoy given 24 hours to deliver aid and leave Gaza," Today's Zaman (Turkish daily in English), January 8, 2010; <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/news-197896-convoy-given-24-hours-to-deliver-aid-and-leave-gaza.html>

¹² See photo of Hamas leader Khalid Al-Mishal shaking hands with IHH's Bulent Yildirim in Damascus, "Bülent Yildirim HALID MESAL'i anlatti!" TimeTurk website, January 15, 2009; <http://habermerkezi.wordpress.com/2009/01/15/bulent-yildirim-halid-mesali-anlatti/>

¹³ "US concerned over IHH-Hamas ties," Jerusalem Post website, June 3, 2010; <http://www.jpost.com/International/Article.aspx?id=177328>

¹⁴ "The Union of Good – Analysis and Mapping of Terror Funds Network," Israel Security Agency, http://www.shabak.gov.il/SiteCollectionImages/english/TerrorInfo/coalition_en.pdf

¹⁵ "The Union Of Good," Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center Special Information Bulletin, February 2005; http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/html/final/eng/sib/2_05/funds.htm - contents

Ministry of Defense in 2002. The IHH was subsequently designated part of the UOG and banned in 2008.¹⁶ The United States Treasury designated the UOG a terrorist organization that same year.¹⁷

One of the top organizers and participants in the Gaza flotilla was Amin Abu Rashid, a Hamas supporter in Holland who heads the European Campaign to End the Siege on Gaza.¹⁸ According to the Netherlands newspaper Teltarif, the Dutch intelligence services identified Rashid as having previously headed the Al-Aqsa Foundation Netherlands,¹⁹ a Hamas fundraising front which was the Dutch representative of the UOG. The Dutch government froze AAFN's assets in April 2003, and it was designated as a terrorist organization by the United States Treasury in May 2003.²⁰

The IHH is also linked to Al-Qaida. Former French counterterrorism magistrate Jean-Louis Bruguiere has charged that IHH has "clear, longstanding ties to terrorism and jihad." He further explained that IHH was "basically helping Al-Qaida when Bin Ladin started to want to target U.S. soil."²¹

While serving as a counterterrorism official, Bruguiere wrote a report that detailed the terrorist-related activities carried out by IHH's Bulent Yildirim. During the mid-1990s Yildirim conspired to "recruit veteran soldiers in anticipation of the coming holy war [jihad]. In particular, some men were sent into war zones in Muslim countries in order to acquire combat experience." He was responsible for "obtaining political support from these countries, financial aid was transferred [on behalf of IHH], as well as caches of firearms, knives, and pre-fabricated explosives."²²

The IHH also has been tied to Al-Qaida's foiled Los Angeles airport millennium bomb plot in 1999, carried out by Ahmed Ressam. Bruguiere found that the plot was organized by a terrorist cell led by Fateh Kamel, who was linked to Al-Qaida. Bruguiere stated, "Several members of Fateh Kamel's network worked at the IHH as cover" for their terrorist activities. He asserted, "It was too systematic and too widespread for the NGO not to know" their real objective.²³

¹⁶ "Defense Minister signs order banning Hamas-affiliated charitable organizations," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, July 7, 2008;

<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Communiqués/2008/Defense+Minister+signs+order+banning+Hamas-affiliated+charitable+organizations+7-Jul-2008.htm>

¹⁷ "Treasury Designates the Union of Good," United States Treasury press release, November 12, 2008;

<http://www.ustreas.gov/press/releases/hp1267.htm>

¹⁸ "Hope for Gaza Convoy," European Campaign to End the Siege on Gaza website;

<http://savegaza.eu/eng/index.php?id=40>

¹⁹ "Three flotilla fatalities 'dreamt of martyrdom,'" Ynetnews.com, website of Israeli daily Yediot Aharonot, June 2, 2010; <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0.7340.L-3898109.00.html>

²⁰ "Al-Aqsa Foundation," United States Treasury Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, May 29, 2003;

http://www.ustreas.gov/offices/enforcement/key-issues/protecting/charities_execorder_13224-a.shtml

²¹ "Turkish aid group had terror ties," Associated Press, June 3, 2010;

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5iYybp27J-O2cobEG7eh2c-q3ORHAD9G3D4Q00>

²² Evan F. Kohlmann, "The Role of Islamic Charities in International Terrorist Recruitment and Financing," Danish Institute for International Studies, DIIS Working Paper #2006/7, 2006, p. 11;

http://www.diis.dk/graphics/Publications/WP2006/DIIS%20WP%202006-7_web.pdf

²³ "Turkish aid group had terror ties," Associated Press, June 3, 2010;

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5iYybp27J-O2cobEG7eh2c-q3ORHAD9G3D4Q00>

At Ressam's trial, Bruguiere testified that IHH played "an important role" in the plot: "The IHH is an NGO, but it was kind of a type of cover-up ... in order to obtain forged documents and also to obtain different forms of infiltration for Mujahideen [holy warriors] in combat. And also to go and gather [recruit] these Mujahideens. And finally, one of the last responsibilities that they had was also to be implicated or involved in weapons trafficking."²⁴

Bruguiere further stated that he was present at a joint raid of French and Turkish police at IHH headquarters in Istanbul in 1998. Weapons, false documents and other incriminating evidence were found. Bruguiere concluded, "It was clearly proven that some of the NGO's work was not charity, it was to provide a façade for moving funds, weapons and mujahedin [holy warriors] to and from Bosnia and Afghanistan."²⁵

IHH's Islamic extremist ties were reflected in the participation of Abdallah and Muhammad Anas, the son-in-law and grandson of the late jihadist preacher Sheikh Abdallah Azzam, on the lead flotilla ship Mavi Marmara. Azzam was the mentor and spiritual guide of Usama bin Ladin, and was responsible for bringing bin Laden to Afghanistan. Azzam's daughter spoke to her husband and son after the ship's confrontation with Israeli security forces and declared, "I had expected my husband and son to be either martyred or wounded." She asserted that she was prepared to "sacrifice myself and my five sons as martyrs for the sake of Allah. This is not much and we will give until the last drop of blood."²⁶

IHH's radical Islamist roots, its extremist statements, its ties to global fundraising on behalf of Hamas, and its involvement with Al-Qaida terror activities demonstrate that the passengers of the Mavi Marmara were far from nonviolent, defenseless peace activists. IHH and its followers carefully prepared and trained themselves for a confrontation that day on behalf of Hamas, and continue to work towards more terrorist confrontations in the guise of humanitarian aid.

²⁴ Kohlmann, p. 12.

²⁵ "Turkish aid group had terror ties," Associated Press, June 3, 2010; <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5iYybp27J-O2cobEG7eh2c-q3ORHAD9G3D4Q00>

²⁶ "Offspring of Bin Ladin mentor were on 'Mavi Marmara,'" Jerusalem Post website, June 4, 2010; <http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=177457>