

Extra Feature Story

Deadly Israeli Raid on Pro-Palestinian Aid Ships Tests U.S. Loyalties

June 2, 2010

A deadly encounter between pro-Palestinian peace activists and Israeli commandos in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of the Gaza Strip is threatening the delicate relationship between Israel and its strongest Arab ally, Turkey.

Details of what happened on the ships are still murky, and the event is complicated by the passionate politics of the Middle East. Nine people on a Turkish ship were killed and at least 30 were injured, according to news reports.

The boats in the flotilla carried 600-700 activists and supply items such as cancer medicine, wheel chairs, milk powder and building materials, which included cement, tiles and steel -- materials that Israel bans because they can be used for military purposes.

Flotillas challenge Israeli blockade

Israel has maintained a blockade around Gaza since 2007, when Hamas, which had won the general election, pushed out the more moderate political party, Fatah. Israel and the United States classify Hamas, which has said it considers it a religious duty to eliminate Israel, as a terrorist organization.

According to Israeli officials, activists on the boats refused to turn around or land in an Israeli port. Videos on YouTube show soldiers being hit with sticks. Israel says it was forced to protect itself.

The activists, who came from more than 30 countries, tell a different story; they say Israeli soldiers shot first. Former U.S. ambassador Edward Peck was on board a Greek-flagged ship in the flotilla. He told NPR that Israeli commandos approached before dawn on inflatable boats and were armed with paint guns "as well as pistols, automatic rifles, stun grenades and pepper spray."

United Nations calls for a full investigation

The United Nations has called for a "full investigation into the matter" and "a prompt, impartial, credible and transparent investigation conforming to international standards."

While stronger language was vetoed by the United States, the United Nations did stress that the situation in Gaza is unsustainable and again called for the end of the blockade.

Countries around the world have condemned the military action on civilians. French President Nicolas Sarkozy condemned the "disproportionate use of force" and sent condolences to the injured and other activists.

Egypt, which sealed its border with Gaza when Hamas took power three years ago, opened it for a short time to allow people and goods to flow in and out of Gaza.

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu of Turkey, one of the only countries in the region with diplomatic relations with Israel, called the attack "tantamount to banditry and piracy; it is murder conducted by a state."

Who were on the boats?

While it was not the first boat convoy to attempt to break the blockade of Gaza, it was the largest and most ambitious to date and was done with financing from a Turkish organization called the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief. The group has a history of providing humanitarian relief into areas of conflict and disaster. Israel accuses the organization of being connected to the terrorist group al-Qaeda.

The Free Gaza Movement has already attempted five other shipments, some successful, to break the blockade.

Civilians of over 32 nations were aboard the three passenger ships, including many writers and artists, and Nobel peace laureate Mairead Corrigan-Maguire, co-founder of Northern Ireland's Peace People.

United States torn between allies

Turkey is one of Israel's strongest allies in the region and has been a historically strong backer of the Jewish state, recognizing Israel quickly in 1950.

Both Israel and Turkey are Western-style, pluralist democracies, and Turkey is Israel's biggest trading partner in the Muslim world with \$2.5 billion dollars worth of trade in 2009.

The Turkish Parliament held a heated debate Wednesday on whether to impose military and economic sanctions on Israel. Lawmakers said Israel must formally apologize for the raid, pay compensation to the victims and bring those responsible to justice.

In a meeting with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Davutoglu said, "As allies, we have to be honest and sincere to each other, and of course we expect full solidarity with us. It should not be seen like a choice between Turkey and Israel. No. It should be a choice between right and wrong, between legal and illegal."

"Turkey and Israel are both good friends of the United States, and we are working with both to deal with the aftermath of the tragic incident," Clinton told reporters after the meeting.

Clinton said that although the blockade is unsustainable, Israel should be able to take part in the investigation.

-- compiled by Lizzy Berryman

© 2010 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions