



**Intelligence and Terrorism
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Portrait of Bülent Yildirim, leader of the radical Islamic Turkish IHH and his central role in preparing the aid convoy and violent confrontation with the IDF



IHH head Bülent Yildirim
(Habername newspaper, May 23, 2010).

Overview

1. **Bülent Fahmi Yildirim**, 44, was born in Erzurum, Turkey, and studied law at Istanbul University. Today he lives in Istanbul and practices law. He is married and has four children. In 1995 the events in Bosnia and Herzegovina prompted him to **help found IHH** with the primary intention of providing humanitarian assistance to the battle zones.¹ He eventually came to lead the organization. In the past IHH has been involved in providing logistic support

¹ The organization was actually founded in 1992 but was officially registered in 1995.

for global jihad and terrorist networks in the Middle East and beyond. Bülent Yildirim's name was also mentioned in the past as providing support for the global jihad.

2. A study carried out by an American expert named Evan Kohlman examined the links between IHH and the global jihad. **It indicated, among other things, that in the mid-90s Bülent Yildirim was involved in recruiting ex-military personnel and sending them to battle zones in Muslim countries to gain experience** (Page 11 of the study). Between 2002 and 2004 Bülent Yildirim played a key role in **inciting Turkish Muslims to anti-Americanism in the issue of the war in Iraq** (Page 12 of the study).²

3. **Bülent Yildirim is firmly attached to the Islamic regime of Erdogan, who was involved in IHH preparations for the flotilla. During the voyage Bülent Yildirim was on board the Mavi Marmara and played a key role in directing the IHH operatives' preparations for a violent confrontation with the IDF and in inciting them to violence with fiery speeches. He also ordered the operatives not to allow IDF soldiers on board the ship and to throw those who managed to board into the sea.**

Yildirim's role in organizing the flotilla

4. **Bülent Yildirim was the moving spirit behind the last flotilla and the most senior figure to accompany it on its journey.** It began with purchasing the ship, organizing contributions and drawing up a list of passengers. Organizing the flotilla necessitated a long series of preparations and a vast organizational system which maintained contact with hundreds of organizations and operatives around the globe, most of them affiliated with radical Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood, and some of them pro-Palestinian from Western relief organizations.

5. It was not the first time Yildirim was involved in support for the Gaza Strip. In January 2010 he was responsible for organizing the Turkish section of the Viva Palestina convoy organized in London by a former British MP, the pro-Palestinian George Galloway. The Egyptians stopped the convoy and did not let most of its participants enter the Gaza Strip, and only some of them succeeded in reaching it.

6. **Yildirim has very close ties with the highest echelons of the Turkish government, especially Tayyip Erdogan, who gave the government's blessing to the flotilla and according to all accounts helped organize it.** Additional evidence for the ties were found in a letter in one of the lap top computers on board the Mavi Marmara. It

² See <http://www.diis.dk/graphics/Publications/WP2006/DIIS%20WP%202006-7.web.pdf>.

was written by Bülent Yildirim to Turkish President **Abdullah Gül** and requested the release of IHH operative Izzam Shahin from an Israeli jail.³

Yildirim's ties with Hamas

7. IHH, headed by Bülent Yildirim, has close ties with Hamas and also provides it with funding. To further its activity with Hamas it established a branch in the Gaza Strip headed by IHH operative Muhammad Kaya. **In January 2009 Bülent Yildirim met with Khaled Mashaal, head of the Hamas political bureau in Damascus.** Mashaal thanked him for his organization's support for Hamas.



Bülent Yildirim (left) and Khaled Mashaal
(www.spittoon.org, January 2009).

8. In February 2009, after Operation Cast Lead, Yildirim visited the Gaza Strip and met with Ismail Haniya, head of the de facto Hamas administration. During his visit he attended a rally in the Gaza Strip in support of Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan, who criticized Operation Cast Lead at the Davos Convention.

9. Yildirim visited the Gaza Strip again in January 2010 as part of the Viva Palestina convoy. During his visit he met with Ismail Haniya. Haniya gave Yildirim a letter for Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, inviting him to visit the Gaza Strip. At the meeting Yildirim stated that **he intended to visit the Gaza Strip again with ships to render the "siege" superfluous** (www.worldbulletin.net, January 7, 2010). At the end of January 2010 Muhammad Sawalha, a senior Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood activist in Britain, announced his intention to send another aid convoy to the Gaza Strip by sea to confront Israel and not Egypt (having learned the lesson of the Viva Palestina affair).

³Izat Shahin is an IHH operative who was sent to establish an IHH branch in Judea and Samaria. His main activity was transferring funds to Hamas "charitable societies." He was detained for questioning in April 2010 and later deported at an official Turkish request.



Bülent Yıldırım meets Ismail Haniya and other public figures in the Gaza Strip (www.velfecr.com, January 7, 2010).



Bülent Yıldırım and de facto Hamas administration head Ismail Haniya (hurrypharry.org website, January 7, 2010).

Preparations for the flotilla

10. **Senior IHH personnel dealt with the practical preparations for the flotilla, in our assessment with the coordination and collaboration of senior figures in the Turkish government.** Apparently most of the practical coordination and logistical preparations were carried out by Yavuz Dede, Yıldırım's deputy, and not by Yıldırım himself. The preparations included **purchasing the passenger ship Mavi Marmara and two cargo ships, in our assessment with the support and funding of the Turkish government.**

11. **On the eve of the flotilla's sailing, Bülent Yıldırım often delivered fiery speeches about the activists' determination to reach the Gaza Strip,** which included propaganda attacks on Israel (See Appendix). **At the same time IHH operatives made practical preparations for the violent confrontation with the IDF which were kept secret from the other participants in the flotilla's "coalition."** On May 16, 2010, about two weeks before the ships set sail, a meeting was held in Istanbul attended by representatives of the "coalition" of the six groups and organizations which had organized the flotilla. At that meeting IHH was represented by Yıldırım's deputy, Yavuz Dede, not Yıldırım himself.

12. As opposed to the hard core of IHH operatives who boarded the ship in Istanbul, **Yıldırım boarded in Antalya with other senior IHH figures and most of the flotilla's activists.**

Briefing the operatives and fiery speeches made by Bülent Yildirim during the voyage

13. **During the voyage itself Bülent Yildirim had practical control of the Mavi Marmara and in fact of the entire flotilla.** He prepared the operatives for battle, briefed them before the confrontation and ordered them to fight the IDF soldiers. In our assessment he was in continuous contact with the organization's land command, where his deputy was in charge (and possibly with representatives of other organizations).

14. Evidence photographed aboard the Mavi Marmara documenting the voyage shows that **a group of IHH operatives headed by Bülent Yildirim was the dominant factor controlling everything that occurred on board.** The operatives all wore vests with stickers identifying them as "crew," which apparently enabled them to pass freely throughout the ship (while the movements of the ordinary passengers were limited). Most of the time the operatives were on the upper deck.

15. **Bülent Yildirim and other senior IHH figures apparently kept to a designated area guarded by two IHH operatives in the media situation room on the lower deck. The area contained an editing room and the ship's computer security cameras. When the IDF soldiers entered the area they found large sums of money scattered around.**

16. During the voyage the activists aboard the Mavi Marmara, especially the hard core of IHH operatives, received ideological and religious indoctrination from **Bülent Yildirim and other Islamists, such as Arab Israeli sheikh Ra'ed Salah and Egyptian Dr. al-Baltagi, a Muslim Brotherhood representative in the Egyptian Parliament.**

17. A video found on board, apparently taken by one of the photographers documenting the events on the upper deck, shows a meeting of operatives (most likely the IHH hard core operatives). **The meeting was held during the day, apparently close to the time of the confrontation. The main speaker was Bülent Yildirim, who incited his audience and encouraged them for a possible confrontation with IDF forces.** He stated that **if Israel lowered commandos onto the ship the operatives should throw them down and humiliate Israel before the eyes of the entire world.**⁴

18. **During the voyage Bülent Yildirim was frequently interviewed by the media.** In one interview he was photographed holding a small child. When asked about possible violence with Israel he said that the youngest passenger aboard the ship was one year old

⁴ For further information see the June 10, 2010 bulletin, "IHH Leader and Other Islamist Activists Incite Passengers to Violence Aboard the Mavi Marmara" at http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/ipc_e097.pdf.

and that there were people in their 80s. He added that although their resistance would be non-violent, they would not allow Israeli soldiers to board the ship (IHH official website, May 29, 2010). The flotilla's organizers wanted the confrontation with the Israeli Navy to take place during the day so that the media could document it and transmit it to the international media (Al-Jazeera TV, May 29; interview with the IHH's open channel, May 30, 2010).



IHH head Bülent Yildirim aboard the Mavi Marmara, holding a small child (IHH website, May 30, 2010).

The last briefing before the confrontation with IDF forces

19. **In the hours before the IDF takeover of the ship Yildirim conducted preparations for the confrontation. Two hours before it** (and after the Israeli Navy had hailed the ships) a kind of media situation room was set up. **In addition, Bülent Yildirim briefed the hard core operatives who were supposed to confront the IDF on the upper deck.** He instructed them **to make a human chain and throw the soldiers back into the sea with chairs and iron bars.** According to statements from IDF soldiers and visual material seized on board the Mavi Marmara, in practice the instructions were followed.

Yildirim questioned in Israel

20. During the takeover of the ship Bülent Yildirim was detained by IDF forces, brought to Israel, questioned, released (along with the other passengers) and sent back to Turkey. Under questioning he denied that the operatives had been organized for violence and that weapons had been prepared. He said that if there had been violence on the part of the passengers it was spontaneous and made use only of "available objects" (the vast amount of evidence in Israeli possession unequivocally proves that the version provided by Yildirim is not true).

Yildirim's statements after returning to Istanbul

21. As opposed to what he said during questioning, interviewed after his return to Turkey **he did not contradict the fact that he and his men had used violence in dealing with the IDF soldiers and he even had a "legal" explanation.** On June 4, 2010, the Turkish newspaper *Zaman* wrote that when Yildirim returned to Turkey he told newspapermen at the Ataturk airport in Istanbul that the Israeli investigators had asked him if he and his men had attacked the soldiers with iron bars and axes. He said that "we did what we did in self-defense," adding that **"first our comrades neutralized ten soldiers. Yes, we took their guns away from them. You are considered legally innocent if you take a weapon away from someone who attacks you."** He also said that they threw the guns they took from the soldiers into the sea (Todayzaman.com, June 4, 2010).



Bülent Yildirim holds a press conference after returning to Turkey (Zaman website, June 4, 2010).

Appendix

Selected remarks by Bülent Yildirim (to the media and to IHH operatives aboard the Mavi Marmara)

1. The flotilla would be a “test” for Israel. He said that if Israel opposed it, it would be considered “a declaration of war” on the countries to which the activists on board belonged (Press conference in Istanbul, April 7, 2010).
2. He advised Israel to take care in conducting the crisis. If Israel prevented the activity of the ship, it would remain isolated in the world and harm itself (Yildirim to Israel at the sailing of the Mavi Marmara from Antalya, May 23, 2010).
3. “We are determined to enter Gaza, regardless of what happens” (During a press conference in Antalya before the ships set sail).
4. He said that children were brought aboard to prevent Israel from attacking the ship. He added that the organizers of the flotilla were in no hurry to set sail and were waiting for the right time, and perhaps in the meantime Israel “would begin thinking logically” (Interview aboard the ship, May 30, 2010).
5. “Form a human chain and throw the IDF soldiers back into the sea using chairs and iron bars” (Briefing the operatives on the upper deck before the IDF took control of the ship).
6. “The time before morning,” he said, “will be a war of nerves. There are passengers from more than 50 countries aboard, and if we are stopped the honor of 50 countries will be sullied. We want the entrance of the Israeli embassies in Istanbul and Ankara locked, and we will protect ourselves on board the ship. We know there is a price and we are willing to pay it. We will not retreat one step. Israel is acting like a pirate in international waters. **Will the world look on from the side?**” (Press conference held during preparations for the confrontation with the IDF).
7. In a speech held during the voyage he said the following about Israel: “They are so weak that for the past four or five days they have been making propaganda against us and our flotilla. They see themselves as governing, but in reality they do not. Now they say that they will send the fleet [against us], that they will send in their commando and **we tell them, if you send in the commando, we will throw you down from here and you will be humiliated before the whole world...**” (From a video found aboard the Mavi Marmara).