



A Hamas-affiliated Palestinian in Britain admitted the flotilla project to the Gaza Strip was not intended to "break the siege" and bring humanitarian aid, but rather to promote the battle for hearts and minds against Israel.

September 17, 2017

Overview

- ▶ **Zaher Birawi** is a Palestinian activist who lives in Britain affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. **He has extensive experience in dispatching flotillas from Europe to the Gaza Strip with the stated aim of "breaking the siege" of the Gaza Strip.** Currently he is the chairman of the so-called International Committee for Breaking the Siege on Gaza, an umbrella organization established to send flotillas to the Gaza Strip. He is also involved in disseminating anti-Israeli propaganda in Britain and is apparently also involved in anti-Israeli lawfare.
- ▶ Birawi was recently interviewed by Felesteen, Hamas' daily newspaper. He discussed, among other things, the **many current difficulties** in dispatching flotillas to the Gaza Strip, **but tried to minimize their significance and importance.** He **said the flotillas' main goal is propaganda** aimed at keeping the Palestinians, the Gaza Strip and the "siege" as "live" topics in international public discourse. According to Birawi, the objectives of the flotillas are to **defame Israel, and to increase the effect of the political and media campaigns accompanying the flotillas.**

The interview made by Birawi clearly indicates **that the battle for hearts and minds was and is the main driving force behind the flotilla project**, including the dispatching of the *Mavi Marmara*. **It is not the alleged goals of "breaking the siege"** and bringing humanitarian aid to the Gazans, as reiterated by the flotillas' organizers. Thus, according to Birawi, **more attempts will be made to dispatch ships to the Gaza Strip**, despite the many hardships facing figures and organizations belonging to the international coalition. He said that in principle, **it had been decided to send one ship or more to the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2018**, and that the organizations involved are examining the possibilities.

- ▶ **It was not the first time** the aims of the flotillas have been presented as a propaganda project rather than a genuine effort to bring humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip. **Ismail**

Yilmaz,¹ apparently affiliated with the IHH (the Turkish organization that led the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla), said in an announcement issued for the seventh anniversary of the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla, that "The impression was that all the people who sailed with the [*Mavi Marmara*] flotilla were trying to bring two cans of food to the Gaza Strip. [In reality], **the goal of those who participated in the flotilla was not to sate the hunger of the Gazans but rather to present to the nations of the world the drama of Palestine**, the siege imposed on it..." (al-Anadolu News in Turkish, May 31, 2017).

► The statements made by Ismail Yilmaz are consistent with ITIC information, which is that the real aim of the *Mavi Marmara* **was not to bring humanitarian aid** to the Gaza Strip, but rather **for propaganda and political capital**: to demonstrate support for Hamas, to exert pressure on Israel to unilaterally change its policy of closure on the Gaza Strip; **to create sympathy in the media** for the suffering of the Palestinians resulting from the "siege" and to **deepen Israel's isolation**. Hamas also admitted that the goals of the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla were not humanitarian. **Senior Hamas figure Isma'il Haniyeh** said that "the basic problem is not the aid itself, despite its importance and the Palestinians' need for it, but the siege we demand be completely lifted. **We refuse to divide the problem and turn it into a purely humanitarian issue**" (interview with the al-Islam al-Yawm website, June 26, 2010).²

¹ Ismail Yilmaz heads an NGO called "*Mavi Marmara* for Freedom and Solidarity" (al-Anadolu News in Turkish, May 31, 2017). He gave a speech at an event organized by the IHH to mark the seventh anniversary of the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla. The Turkish media reported it was held at the **IHH's Zongulbak branch** (a city west of the Black Sea). He said that the *Mavi Marmara* struggle continued in international courts and that his organization would continue to fight "to the end" (Milliyet, May 19, 2017).

² See the September 16, 2010 bulletin, "Conspicuous among the passengers and organizations aboard the *Mavi Marmara* were Turkish and Arab Islamic extremists led by IHH. They were joined by extremist European left activists and volunteers who answered the call to help the Palestinians in the Gaza."

Main points of the interview with Zaher Birawi



The interview with Zaher Birawi as it appeared in Hamas' newspaper Flesteen. The headline reads, "Intensive movement of ships will go to break the siege of the Gaza Strip next summer" (Flesteen, September 5, 2017).

Overview

On September 5, 2017, **Zaher Birawi, chairman of the International Committee for Breaking the Siege on Gaza**, was interviewed by Hamas' daily newspaper Flesteen. He related to the difficulties in dispatching flotillas to the Gaza Strip, and the difficulties facing lawfare aimed at bringing senior Israeli public figures to trial in European courts. Despite the obstacles he tries to remain optimistic, claiming that **the success of the flotillas is not to be judged by whether or not they reach the shores of the Gaza Strip, but how much media coverage they generate.**

The flotillas to the Gaza Strip

- ▶ **Birawi described the obstacles facing the flotillas' organizers. They include:**
 - ◆ **Israel keeps ships from reaching the Gaza Strip by using its navy**, and thus receives international, political and media support.
 - ◆ **The Arab states do not permit the ships to set sail for the Gaza Strip from their ports.** That forces the ships to travel long distances from European ports to the Gaza Strip.
 - ◆ **European countries do not cooperate with the flotillas and their organizations.** Not only that, but **Western governments try to keep their citizens from joining the**

flotillas, using the excuse that they are sailing to conflict areas that might be dangerous. However, he said, there are no problems with insuring the ships.

◆ **The Western media's minimum coverage of the flotillas, and the difficulty in financing the purchase and dispatch of the ships.** According to Birawi, the organizers of the flotillas try to cover the costs with **contributions from activists**, but it takes a long time to collect donations to finance even one ship.

Birawi added that despite the difficulties, **the main objective of dispatching ships to the Gaza Strip is for their propaganda value, to keep the issues of the Palestinians In the Gaza Strip and breaking the "siege" alive in public discourse, and to continue to defame Israel (the "occupying entity," according to Birawi).** He claimed that the true test of the success of the flotillas is not whether or not they reach the Gaza Strip, **but the coverage of the political and media campaigns accompanying them.**

► Asked whether ships would sail to the Gaza Strip in the near future, he answered **it had been decided in principle to continue to try to break the "siege" by sea.** He said the **Freedom flotilla coalition was examining a plan to send one or more ships during the summer of 2018.** They were currently discussing details and how to ensure success. He also said **other NGOs, working in solidarity for the Palestinians, that participated in the Freedom flotilla coalition, were also examining the possibility of sending their own ships.**

Lawfare against Israel: bringing Israeli public figures to trial

► Asked whether steps were being taken **to bring Israeli leaders to trial, Birawi complained that governments around the globe did not cooperate.** Because of pressure from the "Jewish lobby" in Europe, groups within the European governments were trying to protect "Israeli war criminals." He claimed that in the Arab world as well there was not much support for their [anti-Israeli] efforts.

► However, Birawi added, legal steps were being taken against Israel, **particularly the suit brought by the IHH [which led the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla] regarding everything connected to the rights of the Turkish activists.** He added **there were also suits against Israel pending in France, Spain and Belgium demanding reparations for the price of the ships. In addition, there were other suits against Israeli leaders who were involved in the clashes aboard the ships.** He claimed a number of NGOs in European countries

working in solidarity with the Palestinians, were trying the suits in local courts (Felesteen, September 5, 2017).

Appendix

Portrait of Zaher Birawi



Zaher Birawi (Dunia al-Watan, January 28, 2017).

Overview

- ▶ **Zaher Birawi**, who today lives in Britain, is a Palestinian activist, one of the founders of the Freedom Flotilla Coalition, **today calling himself the Coordinator of the International Committee for Breaking the Siege on the Gaza Strip** (Samaa News, September 14, 2017). In the past he was involved in dispatching flotillas to the Gaza Strip and holding protest marches to Israel's borders. At the end of January 2017 **he called on Palestinians living abroad to participate in a popular conference held in Istanbul on February 25, 2017** (Dunia al-Watan, January 28, 2017). **Hamas praised the conference, while Fatah and the Palestinian Authority (PA) strongly opposed it.**³ On his Twitter account Zaher Birawi represents himself as a media person and **chairman of the European-Palestinian Forum** (Twitter account of Zaher Birawi September 7, 2017)
- ▶ Like other Palestinian activists living in Britain, **Birawi exploits its lack of political restrictions and freedom of speech to carry out intensive propaganda and anti-Israel activities.** He works through a wide range of organizations and institutions to promote a **Palestinian political agenda consistent with the ideology with the Muslim Brotherhood**

³ It was a Palestinian conference called the **Conference for Palestinians Abroad**, held in Istanbul on February 25, 2017. According to a conference spokesman more than 6,000 people attended. Fatah and the PA strongly opposed the conference and denounced its decisions. On the other hand, Hamas spokesman Husam Badran praised the conference, calling it "a strategic step that could advance the Palestinian cause."

and Hamas.⁴ Like other Palestinian activists who found a haven in Britain, **he is careful not to identify himself publicly with either Hamas or the Muslim Brotherhood**, to keep from getting in trouble with the authorities and Britain's legal system.

Political and propaganda activity in Britain⁵

► **Zaher Khaled Hassan Birawi (Abu Hassan)** was born in 1961. He comes from the Palestinian village of Asira al-Shimaliya, north of Nablus. In 1988 he was interrogated by the Israeli security forces on suspicion of involvement in riots in his village and of incitement to riot. He denied the accusations. At the beginning of the nineteen nineties he went to Britain to study and has lived there ever since. In Britain he became involved in Islamist activity, especially activities affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, of which Hamas is an offshoot. **In 1996 he went to the Gaza Strip for a short time where he worked at the Islamic University in Gaza City, an academic institution under Hamas control.**

► At the beginning of the nineteen nineties he began his career as **spokesman for the Leeds Grand Mosque.**⁶ Between 2001 and 2003 he was the chairman of the **Muslim Association of Britain (MAB)**, an NGO affiliated with Muslim Brotherhood, established by Muhammad Sawalha (also a former Hamas activist who fled to Britain). Until a few years ago he was chairman and media person of an NGO called **The Palestinian Forum in Britain (PFB)**. He was also a senior activist in an organization called **The British Muslim Initiative (BMI)**, affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood in Britain and headed by Muhammad Sawalha.

► Birawi was also on the board of trustees of the **Education Aid for Palestine (EAP)**, which is up of Hamas-affiliated activists. The organization was established in 1993 by **Issam Yusuf, one of the founders of the Interpal in Britain**, a fund that was involved in transferring money to Hamas charity associations. According to a report on a website called The Global Muslim Brotherhood Daily, the EAP belonged to the Union of Good, an umbrella

⁴ See the February 21, 2010 bulletin, "Britain as a Focus for Hamas' Political, Propaganda and Legal Activities in Europe."

⁵ This section is based on ITIC bulletins that use former information. **It is uncertain to what degree the information is updated.**

⁶ At the time the Leeds Grand Mosque was mentioned in the media in connection with terrorists involved in the deadly terrorist attacks carried out on the London Underground in 2005. (http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/europe/july-dec05/london_7-15.html, July 15, 2005; The Independent, August 13, 2005). However, The Palestinian Forum in Britain issued a condemnation of the terrorist attacks (July 7, 2005).

organization that channels funds to Hamas.⁷ The organization represents itself as supporting Palestinians through education and vocational training, but it was involved with anti-Israeli activity (such as organizing demonstrations).

► **Zaher Birawi was also head of the Palestinian Return Centre (PRC), an institution based in London that conducts intensive anti-Israeli political and propaganda activity.**

It focuses on the demand that Israel accept into its territory all the refugees from 1948, representing Israel as solely responsible for the Palestinian refugee problem. The PRC is, in ITIC assessment, one of the main institutions in Britain affiliated with Hamas and its ideology. Several activists affiliated with Hamas who found a haven in Britain have filled senior positions on the PRC board of directors. The PRC's strong affiliation with Hamas ideology is what led Israel to outlaw it (December 27, 2010). According to a statement from the Israel Security Agency, the PRC was designated as "an unrecognized association, since it belongs to Hamas."⁸



The Palestinian Return Centre logo. The letter "r" on the kaffiyeh in the background stands for the "return" of the Palestinian refugees to the territory of the State of Israel. Inside the "r" is a small map of "Palestine." It represents the PRC's (and Hamas') final goal, the establishment of a Palestinian state on all the territory of Palestine, replacing the State of Israel.

► In the realm of media Birawi hosts programs on **al-Hiwar, an Arabic-language TV channel operating in London and affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.** Al-Hiwar disseminates Hamas propaganda and maintains ties with Hamas' al-Aqsa TV channel. For example, in March 2009 Birawi organized an interview with Isma'il Haniyeh, who at the time was head of the de facto Hamas administration in the Gaza Strip. In addition, in July 2010 he rebroadcast an al-Aqsa TV program about convoys and flotillas to the Gaza Strip.

⁷ Globalmbreport.org

⁸ See the March 8, 2011 bulletin, "The Palestinian Return Centre: London-based center for anti-Israeli propaganda, affiliated with Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, outlawed in Israel. It promotes the demand of the Palestinian refugees to return as a way of destroying Israel. Senior PRC figures send flotillas and convoys to the Gaza Strip and transfer funds to Hamas."

Birawi's involvement in dispatching convoys and ships to the Gaza Strip

► In the past Zaher Birawi was involved in dispatching convoys to the Gaza Strip ("Lifeline" convoys), organized by a British NGO called Viva Palestina. In ITIC assessment, he may have liaised between the organization and Hamas. He participated as spokesman for a convoy which clashed with the Egyptian security forces in January 2010. Eventually part of the convoy entered the Gaza Strip and was received by senior Hamas figures. Birawi was also involved in organizing the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla and participated in the ceremony held when the ship set sail from Turkey on May 22, 2010. He was also the spokesman for Viva Palestina's "Lifeline 5" convoy. Today as well Birawi continues his participation in the convoy project, with the title of **Coordinator of the International Committee for Breaking the Siege on the Gaza Strip**.



Reception for the "Lifeline 3" delegation in the Gaza Strip. Right to left: the cameraman, IHH leader Bülent Yıldırım, first deputy to the chairman of the Hamas faction in the Palestinian Legislative Council Ahmed Bahar, British extreme leftist and Hamas supporter George Galloway, and Zaher Birawi (Hurryupharry.org).

► In March 2012 Birawi was one of the organizers of marches called "Marching to Jerusalem" or "the Global Jerusalem March," whose stated intention was to march to the borders of Israel from all the neighboring countries. Their intention was to raise public consciousness about Jerusalem and the "siege" of the Gaza Strip (al-Quds TV, January 17, 2012). Anti-Israel activists from the Arab states and other countries were supposed to participate. The marches were held on March 30, 2012 in the countries bordering on Israel. They passed with relative quiet and were not given substantial media coverage.

► **Zaher Birawi**, who was a spokesman for the marches, said in an interview that the marches had been fairly successful, but the organizers were "realistic." He said the organizers knew that **if it had not been for "the weakness of some Arab and Islamic countries," many more people could have participated.** He comforted himself with the knowledge, he said, that it was a first step towards the next time, and that the marches had led to Israel's being on high alert, which had come at a high financial price. He called on the various nations of the world to exert pressure on their regimes, and said that all those who had organized the march would meet in the near future to **make a future working plan** (al-Aqsa TV, March 31, 2012).