

# The Global Sumud Flotilla of 2025: Humanitarian Activism or Islamist Influence Operation?

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### Executive Summary



The *Global Sumud Flotilla of 2025* represents the culmination of fifteen years of maritime and land-based efforts to challenge Israel’s blockade of Gaza—an evolution from isolated activist voyages into a coordinated transnational movement rooted in Islamist-linked civil society networks. Framed as a humanitarian mission amid the 2023–25 Gaza war, the flotilla brought together over forty vessels and five hundred participants from forty-four countries, uniting Western activists, Global South NGOs, and long-standing Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated organizations under a banner of “steadfastness” (*sumud*). Israel’s interception of all vessels

reignited a global debate over whether such actions constitute civilian solidarity or political theater directed by Hamas’s foreign apparatus.

This report traces the flotilla’s organizational architecture, mapping how the Freedom Flotilla Coalition, Turkey’s İHH, the Popular Conference for Palestinians Abroad, and other Brotherhood-linked charities operated as a cohesive ecosystem spanning Europe, the Maghreb, and Southeast Asia. It documents the continuity of personnel and funding structures connecting the 2010 *Mavi Marmara* flotilla to the 2025 effort, revealing how Islamist charities and diaspora fronts have adapted under new branding while maintaining ideological and logistical alignment with Hamas.

#### Key findings include:

- Leadership overlapped with Hamas-linked entities such as the PCPA and affiliated NGOs.
- Muslim Brotherhood-aligned charities formed the flotilla’s logistical and financial base.
- Turkey, Qatar, and Malaysia offered tacit political and operational support.
- Western figures lent legitimacy that masked underlying ideological ties.
- Humanitarian rhetoric merged with Islamist strategy to influence global opinion.

The report concludes that the *Sumud Flotilla* embodies the evolution of Gaza solidarity activism into a sophisticated, transnational movement where **humanitarian empathy and ideological ambition coexist**. Its significance lies not only in its political affiliations but in its success at turning humanitarian symbolism into a global instrument of influence.

## Background

The Gaza Strip has been under an Israeli-imposed blockade since 2007, tightening after Hamas took control of the territory <sup>1</sup>. Early attempts by international activists to break the siege saw occasional success – between 2008 and 2016, a handful of small boats reached Gaza – but since 2010, virtually all flotillas have been intercepted by Israel <sup>2</sup> <sup>1</sup>. The first large-scale effort, the May 2010 “Gaza Freedom Flotilla,” ended in a deadly raid when Israeli commandos boarded the Turkish vessel *Mavi Marmara*, killing 10 activists and sparking global outrage <sup>3</sup>. Despite that fallout, pro-Palestinian coalitions continued organizing aid convoys by sea and land throughout the 2010s, framing them as humanitarian missions to “break the illegal siege” while Israeli authorities condemned them as provocations <sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup>. These dueling narratives set the stage for the **October 2025 Global Sumud Flotilla**, the largest such effort to date, consisting of over 40 vessels and 500 participants from 44 countries <sup>6</sup>. The Sumud Flotilla sailed amid the ongoing Gaza war (2023–25), which has created catastrophic humanitarian conditions in the enclave. As famine loomed in Gaza after two years of intense bombardment <sup>7</sup>, the flotilla organizers positioned their action as an urgent civilian intervention. Israel, however, vowed to stop what it viewed as an unlawful breach of its naval blockade, even dispatching naval commandos and drones to sabotage or intercept the boats <sup>8</sup> <sup>9</sup>. The confrontation that ensued in late September–early October 2025 – with all flotilla boats ultimately seized by the Israeli navy – reignited a global debate over humanitarian activism versus security and underscored longstanding ties between flotilla organizers and Islamist networks. Below, we examine the actors, historical patterns, networks, funding, and messaging surrounding the Sumud Flotilla, with a balanced look at both organizers’ perspectives and claims by Israeli and Western security sources.

## Key Actors

**Freedom Flotilla Coalition (FFC):** A core organizer of the 2025 effort, the FFC is an international alliance of pro-Palestinian groups that has coordinated Gaza-bound voyages since 2010. It provided “advice and expertise” from **15 years of experience** with such missions <sup>10</sup> <sup>11</sup>. The coalition’s ranks include campaign groups from North America, Europe, and beyond – for example, *Canadian Boat to Gaza*, *Ship to Gaza Sweden/Norway*, and others – many of which also joined earlier flotillas. Notably, **İHH (Humanitarian Relief Foundation)** of Turkey – the lead organizer of the 2010 flotilla – has been involved in subsequent missions (e.g. the Women’s Boat to Gaza in 2016) and was again listed as a sponsoring group by 2016 <sup>12</sup> <sup>13</sup>. İHH is an Islamist charity with a history of supporting the Palestinian cause; it purchased the *Mavi Marmara* ferry and openly challenged the blockade in 2010 <sup>14</sup>. (İHH is banned in Israel for alleged Hamas links but remains legal elsewhere <sup>15</sup>.) The presence of **İHH activists and “tough Turks”** on the 2025 flotilla was noted by organizers themselves <sup>16</sup> <sup>17</sup>, underscoring Turkey’s continued grassroots role in these efforts.

**Global Movement to Gaza (GMT Gaza):** This is a newer network that co-organized the Sumud Flotilla, described as a “grassroots movement organizing global solidarity actions” <sup>18</sup>. It is the successor to the **Global March to Gaza**, a series of international land convoys and protests in the early 2010s. GMT Gaza helped mobilize civilian boats from multiple regions under a unified banner. The movement’s coordination center – while ostensibly an independent civil-society effort – includes individuals long active in Palestinian solidarity and charity campaigns worldwide. In fact, Israeli sources allege that the GMT Gaza/“Movement to Gaza” initiative is intertwined with Hamas’s own foreign influence apparatus (details below) <sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup>.

**Maghreb Sumud Flotilla:** A North African regional coalition, formerly known as the *Sumud Convoy*, which contributed ships and delegates from **Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Libya, and Mauritania** <sup>21</sup> <sup>22</sup> . By mid-2025, this Maghreb flotilla had organized multiple small aid missions (“soumoud” means steadfastness) and joined the global effort by launching **23 boats from Tunisia** <sup>23</sup> . Tunisian civil-society groups and Islamist-leaning charities spearheaded this effort. For example, activists in Tunis held ceremonies blessing the boats, and after one *Sumud* vessel was damaged by a drone strike, North African NGOs urged their governments to protect the flotilla <sup>24</sup> <sup>25</sup> . Tunisia’s government under President Kais Saied (while not aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood) allowed the boats to depart and even saw public rallies in support. Across the Maghreb, Islamist political figures and relief organizations have historically supported the Gaza cause; it’s likely some of these same networks – including members of Ennahda (Tunisia’s Islamist party) or charitable groups linked to the **Union of Good** (see below) – were quietly involved in fundraising and recruitment for the Sumud Flotilla. Amnesty International noted that “*Arab delegates*” from the Maghreb and Middle East were among those detained and potentially at higher risk of mistreatment by Israel <sup>26</sup> , indicating a significant Arab participation driven by regional solidarity.

**Sumud Nusantara:** A Southeast Asian contingent led by activists from **Malaysia, Indonesia, and other Muslim-majority nations** in the region <sup>27</sup> . “Nusantara” (Malay for archipelago) reflects the involvement of Malaysian NGOs and possibly government-aligned bodies. Malaysia’s Islamist-oriented civil society – including groups like *Aqsasyarif* or *MyCare* – and high-profile figures (former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad had previously launched a Gaza flotilla in 2014) have championed breaking the blockade. In 2025, a well-known Malaysian volunteer, actress Ardell Aryana, was aboard a Sumud vessel that was attacked, later recounting a “*harrowing encounter at sea*” with the Israeli navy <sup>28</sup> . Malaysian media and officials highlighted that **12 Malaysian activists were among those detained** by Israel <sup>29</sup> . This underscores Malaysia’s role: the Sumud Nusantara campaign enjoyed public support and likely financial backing from Malaysian donors, while the government (a vocal critic of Israel) called for their citizens’ release. Indonesia’s humanitarian organizations (e.g. *MER-C*) also endorsed the effort. Notably, these Southeast Asian participants brought Global South political backing to the flotilla – Malaysia’s parliament had earlier hosted a “*Popular Conference for Gaza*” in support of Palestinian resistance, and some Sumud Nusantara organizers are tied into that broader Islamist-leaning solidarity infrastructure.

**Individual Organizers and Networks:** Beyond organizational names, a few key personalities serve as connective tissue between the 2025 flotilla and the **global Muslim Brotherhood (MB)/ Hamas support network**:

- **Zaher Birawi:** A Palestinian-British activist based in London, Birawi has been a central flotilla organizer for 15 years. He served as an *official spokesperson* for the *Mavi Marmara* in 2010 and helped found the Freedom Flotilla Coalition <sup>30</sup> <sup>31</sup> . Birawi chairs the UK-based EuroPal Forum and the **International Committee to Break the Siege of Gaza**, and was identified in an Israeli intelligence list as “*head of Hamas’ sector within the PCPA in the UK*” <sup>32</sup> . (The **Popular Conference for Palestinians Abroad (PCPA)** is a diaspora body discussed below.) Israeli documents uncovered in Gaza describe Birawi as a senior Hamas operative leading the flotilla effort from Europe <sup>19</sup> . Indeed, Birawi appears in photos alongside Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh and exiled Muslim Brotherhood figures <sup>33</sup> . However, Birawi **denies any terrorist affiliation**, insisting he is simply a political organizer. In October 2023, a UK parliamentarian named him under parliamentary privilege as a Hamas agent, citing his role in a charity tied to the MB <sup>34</sup> . Birawi responded by suing a financial database for libel and notes he has never been charged with a crime <sup>35</sup> . In the Sumud Flotilla, Birawi was reportedly a “*key organizer behind the Gaza-bound aid boat Madleen, which carried Greta*

Thunberg”<sup>36</sup>. *He livestreamed that boat’s launch from Sicily and celebrated it as “an act of resistance”*<sup>37</sup>. His long resume – from Trustee of the UK charity Education Aid for Palestinians\*\* (an organization linked to the MB’s Union of Good)<sup>38</sup><sup>39</sup> to hosting pro-Hamas events – illustrates the blurred line between humanitarian activism and Islamist political networks.

- **Saif al-Abu Keshk (Saif Abu Kashk):** A lesser-known but pivotal player, Abu Keshk is a Palestinian-Spanish individual who emerged as a logistical linchpin of the 2025 flotilla. He is a member of the PCPA in Spain and, according to Israel’s Foreign Ministry, the **CEO of “Cyber Neptune”**, a private maritime company based in Barcelona that *“owns dozens of the ships participating in the ‘Sumud’ flotilla”*<sup>40</sup><sup>41</sup>. Spanish corporate records show that a Saif Abdelrahim Abukeshek took control of Cyber Neptune and even changed its business purpose to maritime transport just days before the flotilla’s launch<sup>42</sup>. Israeli officials allege this is a Hamas front to covertly finance and supply vessels, effectively meaning *“the ships are secretly owned by Hamas”*<sup>40</sup>. Abu Keshk was previously arrested by Egypt in June 2025 for organizing a “March to Gaza,” reportedly in collaboration with a prominent Muslim Brotherhood cleric<sup>43</sup>. He has **strongly denied** any Hamas ties, stating that his work *“has been fully transparent and focused solely on delivering life-saving aid”*<sup>44</sup><sup>45</sup>. Nonetheless, the inclusion of Abu Keshk on Hamas-linked lists and his sudden role in boat procurement is viewed by Israeli intelligence as a smoking gun tying the flotilla’s infrastructure to Hamas’s international network.
- **Mohammad Sawalha:** An exiled Hamas operative living in Britain, Sawalha was a coordinator of the 2010 and 2011 flotillas (though he kept a lower profile in 2025). Steven Merley’s research and other analyses identify Sawalha as a *“senior Muslim Brotherhood figure connected to Hamas”* who fled the West Bank after engaging in Hamas military activities<sup>46</sup>. He co-founded the **Muslim Association of Britain (MAB)** and chaired the British Muslim Initiative – both part of the UK Brotherhood network<sup>47</sup>. Sawalha also led the **International Committee to Break the Siege of Gaza**, which was an official flotilla organizing body in 2010–2011<sup>48</sup>. Israeli sources claim he has **publicly supported jihad** and remained involved behind the scenes in flotilla efforts<sup>48</sup>. In the 2025 Sumud Flotilla, his name did not feature publicly, possibly due to his notoriety. However, given that the same London-Doha-Istanbul activist circles were involved, it’s likely that veterans like Sawalha advised or helped mobilize resources. (Notably, the flotilla’s European hub included London-based groups with PRC/MB ties that Sawalha helped establish.)
- **Amin Abou Rashed:** A key figure in the Netherlands, Abou Rashed (also known as Amin Abu Ibrahim) exemplifies the crossover between charitable fundraising and flotilla activism. He was formerly a leader of the **Al-Aqsa Foundation in Rotterdam**, which was the Dutch branch of the Union of Good coalition raising money for Hamas<sup>49</sup><sup>50</sup>. After Al-Aqsa NL was shut down, Abou Rashed founded the **Palestinian Platform for Human Rights and Solidarity (PPMS)** in 2005 and became its chairman<sup>51</sup>. He was a *“chief organizer”* of the Mavi Marmara flotilla in 2010 – Israeli authorities detained him during the raid – and a **founding member of the European Campaign to End the Siege on Gaza (ECESG)**<sup>52</sup>. In fact, Abou Rashed appears in a 2011 photograph with MB spiritual leader Yusuf Qaradawi, underlining his prominence in the Brotherhood’s Europe circles<sup>53</sup>. Israel designated him in 2013 as part of Hamas’s European structure<sup>54</sup>. By 2025, Abou Rashed was reportedly involved in coordinating European delegations and fundraising for Gaza convoys (if not sailing himself). His track record – from Union of Good finance to boat diplomacy – typifies the **MB/Hamas support ecosystem** at the heart of many Gaza missions.

Other notable actors include **Interpal (Palestinian Relief and Development Fund)** in the UK – a charity repeatedly investigated for links to Hamas. *Interpal's managing trustee, Essam Yusuf (Essam Mustafa)*, who served as Union of Good chairman, organized dozens of “Miles of Smiles” land convoys into Gaza from 2009 onward <sup>55</sup> <sup>56</sup> . While *Miles of Smiles* was a separate land route effort, its personnel and sponsors overlap with the flotilla scene. Indeed, the Freedom Flotilla Coalition's 2016 project was openly endorsed by *Miles of Smiles* and by Interpal's network <sup>57</sup> <sup>58</sup> . In 2025, Yusuf and his associates supported Sumud flotilla publicity and likely helped channel donations through charity networks.

Finally, **political figures and dignitaries** also played roles: On board the Sumud Flotilla were Western politicians like former Barcelona Mayor **Ada Colau**, climate activist **Greta Thunberg**, and a handful of European Parliament members <sup>59</sup> . Their presence was meant to underscore the legitimacy and “civil society” nature of the mission, and they became high-profile detainees when Israel intercepted the vessels <sup>60</sup> . Additionally, sympathetic government officials abroad – such as Colombian President **Gustavo Petro**, who dramatically expelled Israel's ambassador after the flotilla's seizure <sup>61</sup> – became vocal actors in the saga. Meanwhile, on the opposing side, Israeli officials like National Security Minister **Itamar Ben-Gvir** (who called flotilla participants “terrorists” to be imprisoned) and the Israeli Foreign Ministry (which led an info campaign to expose alleged Hamas links) were key actors framing the narrative <sup>9</sup> <sup>5</sup> .

In summary, the Sumud Flotilla brought together a *broad coalition*: humanitarian NGOs, Islamist charities, diaspora activists, and even sitting politicians. Many are longtime players in the pro-Palestine movement, and a significant subset have documented affiliations with the **Global Muslim Brotherhood network or Hamas support infrastructure**. These linkages are not incidental – they reflect historical continuity in how Gaza solidarity campaigns have been organized, as explored next.

## Historical Continuity

Far from arising in a vacuum, the 2025 flotilla is the latest chapter in a long-running campaign that has, for over a decade, married **humanitarian activism with the agendas of Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and Hamas-linked networks**. Patterns established during the 2010 Gaza Freedom Flotilla and subsequent convoys have carried through to the present, involving the same organizations and personalities.

**Steven Merley's 2011 study**, “*Turkey, the Global Muslim Brotherhood, and the Gaza Flotilla*,” documented how the 2010 flotilla was coordinated by a nexus of MB-linked groups from Turkey, Europe, and the Middle East <sup>58</sup> <sup>4</sup> . Key among them was Turkey's **İHH**, which Merley identified as part of a broader Turkish-Muslim Brotherhood network. İHH worked in concert with **six Turkish Islamist NGOs** and global MB affiliates to launch the flotilla <sup>62</sup> <sup>63</sup> . The Turkish charitable and political establishment under the AKP government tacitly supported this effort – İHH's president publicly thanked Turkey's ruling party at the send-off of the *Mavi Marmara*, even as Ankara officially denied organizing the flotilla <sup>64</sup> <sup>65</sup> . Merley's report and other analyses (e.g. by analyst Ehud Rosen) highlighted the deep involvement of the **Union of Good (UoG)** – an international coalition of Islamist charities headed by MB leader Yusuf al-Qaradawi – in flotilla and convoy projects <sup>4</sup> <sup>66</sup> . The Union of Good, formed in 2000 to aid Palestinians, was designated a terrorist entity by the U.S. in 2008 for transferring funds to Hamas <sup>4</sup> <sup>66</sup> . Yet its member charities (Interpal, Al-Aqsa Foundation, etc.) remained pivotal in Europe. According to Rosen, “*many of the participating organizations [in the 2011 Second Flotilla] can be directly linked with the Union of Good... The [flotilla's] prime aim is to create provocations and harm Israel's image*” <sup>4</sup> <sup>67</sup> . This underscores that even as flotilla organizers spoke of human rights, a parallel objective was political theater aligned with MB/Hamas goals. The **International Solidarity Movement (ISM)** – a pro-Palestinian activist group – and far-left Western activists were also

involved, but notably “the entire Gaza convoy movement is largely a project of the Global Muslim Brotherhood,” as the Global Muslim Brotherhood Daily Watch observed <sup>68</sup> .

Several NGOs formed in the late 2000s explicitly to organize siege-breaking efforts, all tied to Brotherhood circles. The **European Campaign to End the Siege on Gaza (ECESG)**, based in Brussels/London, sent its own boat in 2010 <sup>69</sup> <sup>70</sup> . Its director, Dr. Arafat Madi Shoukri, was simultaneously an executive of the **Palestinian Return Centre (PRC)** in the UK <sup>71</sup> <sup>72</sup> . PRC is a known Hamas- and MB-affiliated think tank: two PRC board members also led the MB’s **Muslim Association of Britain**, and another PRC director (Ghassan Faour) was a trustee of Interpal, the Union of Good charity <sup>73</sup> <sup>38</sup> . PRC events have featured top Brotherhood figures and even hosted Hamas’s Ismail Haniyeh via video link <sup>74</sup> . Another key group was the **International Committee to Break the Siege of Gaza (ICBSG)**, led by Mohammad Sawalha in London <sup>48</sup> . Sawalha – as noted, a fugitive Hamas commander – brought deep MB connections, having co-founded MAB and engaged in Hamas support networks across Europe <sup>75</sup> <sup>76</sup> . Under Sawalha’s leadership, the ICBSG was an official organizer of the 2010 flotilla <sup>48</sup> and continuously involved thereafter <sup>13</sup> .

These same *actors and entities reappear in each subsequent mission*: The *2011 Freedom Flotilla II* (which ultimately stalled in Greece) was again coordinated by Sawalha and populated by Union of Good charities <sup>4</sup> . The *2015 Third Flotilla* (with the ship *Marianne of Gothenburg*) had sponsorship from Brotherhood/Hamas-linked groups – a fact documented by watchdogs after the event <sup>77</sup> . Meanwhile, **land convoys** proliferated: British MP George Galloway’s *Viva Palestina* trucks (2009–2010) had heavy MB participation, and the **Miles of Smiles** convoy series (2009–present) became essentially a Union of Good project <sup>55</sup> <sup>56</sup> . By 2013, *Miles of Smiles* had sent **22 relief convoys** to Gaza, led by Essam Yusuf of Interpal <sup>78</sup> <sup>55</sup> . These convoys openly coordinated with Hamas authorities in Gaza – e.g. Yusuf (aka Dr. Issam Mustafa) met with the Hamas Prime Minister during a 2011 convoy <sup>55</sup> . The convoys were celebrated by Brotherhood leaders: the head of the Jordanian MB hailed them as “a new page of the Jihad against the occupation” in 2012 <sup>79</sup> . Despite changes in geopolitical context (e.g. Egypt’s brief opening of Rafah under Morsi in 2012), the fundamental constellation of players remained consistent.

**Recurring NGOs:** Several names stand out across the 2010–2025 period – **İHH, ECESG, Interpal, Al-Aqsa Foundation, PRC, Union of Good, Miles of Smiles, International Solidarity Movement**, etc. For example, İHH was involved in flotillas in 2010, 2011, 2016, and likely provided material support in 2025 (Turkish activists and know-how) <sup>12</sup> <sup>13</sup> . **Interpal** continued to bankroll humanitarian shipments; even after the UK Charity Commission ordered it to cut ties with the Union of Good in 2009, Interpal’s leaders (Yusuf) simply shifted tactics while remaining deeply involved in Gaza aid and advocacy <sup>80</sup> . **Miles of Smiles** convoys operated parallel to seaborne flotillas, often coordinating timing. In fact, during summer 2025, as the Sumud Flotilla prepared to sail, Miles of Smiles was reportedly planning its 40th convoy through Egypt – a multi-pronged strategy reminiscent of earlier years. The **Union of Good** as a formal coalition was outlawed in some jurisdictions (Israel, US), but its member organizations – from the Middle East (e.g. Qatar Charity, Turkey’s İHH) to Europe (Interpal, Pals Relief Netherlands) – continued their activities, rebranding when necessary. Each new flotilla or convoy would pull from this “**ecosystem**” of **Islamist charities**, leveraging their donor bases and activist volunteers <sup>68</sup> .

**Recurring Personalities:** In addition to Birawi, Sawalha, and Abou Rashed, we see others like **Dr. Essam Yusuf/Essam Mustafa** (Interpal, Miles of Smiles organizer) and **Shawqi Islamil (Essam)** who coordinated convoy logistics. **Bulent Yildirim** (İHH’s president) became a hero in Turkey after 2010 and remained a vocal advocate for Gaza—his organization’s continued influence likely provided behind-the-scenes coordination for Sumud. Another figure is **Raed Salah**, leader of the Islamic Movement in Israel (often aligned with MB) –

he participated in the 2010 flotilla coalition and his name surfaced in PRC conferences documented by Merley <sup>81</sup> <sup>82</sup> . **Nihad Awad** of CAIR (USA) even showed up at a 2008 “Palestinians in Europe” conference linked to PRC <sup>83</sup> , illustrating the global MB family’s engagement in the narrative around the Gaza siege. Notably, **Ismail Haniyeh** ( Hamas political bureau chief ) has personally blessed these efforts: he appeared via video to European rallies and, per newly revealed documents, corresponded with diaspora organizers (PCPA) in 2021 to encourage their unity <sup>84</sup> <sup>85</sup> .

In summary, **the Sumud Flotilla did not emerge ex nihilo as just a spontaneous humanitarian endeavor** – it is the cumulative product of structures and relationships built over at least 15 years. The same MB-linked NGOs and leaders that were present in the 2010 flotilla reappear in 2025 as prime movers. As the Global Muslim Brotherhood Daily Watch concluded in 2013, “*generally unreported by the media is that the entire Gaza convoy movement is largely a project of the Global Muslim Brotherhood*” <sup>68</sup> . The public branding may emphasize civil society and human rights, but the **documented continuity** of MB/Hamas involvement – from Merley’s 2011 report through subsequent watchdog analyses – is undeniable. This historical context is crucial for understanding how the 2025 flotilla was organized and why Israeli intelligence viewed it as more than a mere peace cruise.

## Network Mapping: Flotilla Ties to the Global MB/Hamas Support Ecosystem

The 2025 Global Sumud Flotilla was not an isolated group of do-gooders; it sat at the center of a **transnational network** of organizations and individuals that align with the Muslim Brotherhood’s global influence operations and Hamas’s diaspora support infrastructure. Mapping these connections reveals a multi-layered web spanning NGOs, charities, political lobbies, and state-backed platforms.

**The Popular Conference for Palestinians Abroad (PCPA):** Perhaps the most direct link between the flotilla and Hamas was through the PCPA. This organization, founded in 2017 in Istanbul, Turkey, serves as an umbrella for Palestinian diaspora activists worldwide. Ostensibly, the PCPA’s mission is to involve Palestinians abroad in political decisions and represent their voice. In practice, **Israeli intelligence identifies PCPA as Hamas’s “foreign arm” – essentially Hamas’s diplomatic and organizational front abroad** <sup>19</sup> . Israel’s Ministry of Defense formally **designated PCPA as a terrorist organization in 2021**, calling it “*a proxy for the Hamas organization*” <sup>86</sup> . According to Israeli documents released in September 2025, **the “real leadership” of the Sumud Flotilla was composed of individuals from PCPA with documented ties to Hamas and the MB** <sup>87</sup> <sup>88</sup> . For instance, Zaher Birawi is head of PCPA’s UK sector and Saif Abu Kashk a member of PCPA-Spain <sup>32</sup> <sup>40</sup> . A 2021 letter signed by Ismail Haniyeh (then Hamas chief) explicitly called on the PCPA chairman to unite efforts – an endorsement of PCPA by Hamas’s top leader <sup>84</sup> . This letter, found in Gaza, was touted by Israel as proof that Hamas guides PCPA’s activism <sup>19</sup> <sup>84</sup> . The PCPA’s involvement provides structural coordination: it convenes activists (many of whom double as NGO leaders) under one strategy. The Sumud Flotilla was in fact initially referred to as the “March to Gaza” campaign – an initiative PCPA helped launch in mid-2025, involving land marches in multiple countries. Egyptian authorities arrested Saif Abu Keshk in June 2025 precisely for organizing a PCPA-linked march toward Gaza’s borders <sup>43</sup> . After those land routes were stymied, PCPA networks pivoted to the sea flotilla. In short, **PCPA acted as a command-and-control framework**, translating Hamas’s strategic goal (breaking the blockade and rallying global opinion) into coordinated international action <sup>89</sup> <sup>90</sup> . It provided the connective tissue among organizers from Europe, the Maghreb, Asia, and the Middle East.

**Diaspora Organizations and MB Institutions:** Beyond PCPA, several long-established diaspora bodies with MB ties were key nodes:

- The **Palestinian Return Centre (PRC)** in London – as noted, a think tank and lobbying group for Palestinian refugees, long accused of Hamas links. PRC officials (Birawi, Shoukri, etc.) were heavily involved in flotilla planning <sup>72</sup> <sup>91</sup> . PRC gave the effort political cover, presenting it as part of the legitimate discourse on Palestine. Notably, the UK Charity Commission has investigated PRC-linked charities for extremism concerns in the past <sup>34</sup> . Israeli and German intelligence have labeled PRC a Hamas front, though PRC denies this. Its events often feature Brotherhood figures and even Western MPs, bridging political mainstream with Islamist networks.
- The **EuroPal Forum** (chaired by Birawi) and **Miles of Smiles coalition** (led by Essam Yusuf) also form part of the network. These groups coordinate European politicians and NGOs for Palestinian solidarity. For example, EuroPal lobbied European Parliament members to join the flotilla or support it diplomatically. Miles of Smiles, through its convoys, had the infrastructure to deliver aid and worked in parallel with the flotilla to amplify the message that “*Gaza needs help; Israel is blocking aid.*” Both groups maintain links to Hamas-friendly charities: Essam Yusuf was not only Interpal’s trustee but also *former head of the Union of Good*, directly connecting him to Hamas financing <sup>55</sup> <sup>56</sup> . That he continues leading convoys (land or sea) highlights how **charity networks and flotilla activism converge**.
- **International Islamist NGOs:** The **Union of Good** itself (though formally dormant due to sanctions) was effectively represented by its component members. For instance, the *Turkish IHH*, *Qatar Charity*, the *Algerian “Justice and Charity” organization*, and others all have seats at the table in planning Gaza relief efforts. In 2025, IHH’s know-how in running flotillas was invaluable, and the group reportedly helped equip some Turkish participants <sup>17</sup> . *Qatar Charity* (formerly Qatar’s Eid Charity) has funded projects in Gaza and was once led by a Brotherhood figure; while there’s no open evidence QC funded the flotilla, Qatar’s general patronage of Hamas means their money underpins many related activities. We also see involvement from Malaysia’s **ABIM** (Muslim Youth Movement) and Indonesia’s Islamist NGOs (often affiliated with *Muhammadiyah* or *PKS* parties) in Sumud Nusantara <sup>27</sup> . These groups form a global Islamist civil-society network sympathetic to Hamas’s narrative.
- **Samidoun and Others:** It’s worth noting a newer entrant – **Samidoun Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network**, which is a radical advocacy group active in Europe and North America. Israel has alleged Samidoun is linked to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) rather than Hamas, but it operates in the same milieu. Samidoun members were reportedly on some flotilla boats, and they coordinate with MB-affiliated groups in anti-Israel campaigns. This illustrates that the flotilla network is not *exclusively* Brotherhood/Hamas – it also pulls in far-left anti-imperialist groups, human rights NGOs, and others – but the **Brotherhood/Hamas-aligned infrastructure provides the backbone** (funding, organizing skill, contacts) that keeps such coalitions functioning <sup>92</sup> <sup>67</sup> .

**Charity Financial Networks:** The flotilla’s support ecosystem is interwoven with the global Islamic charity circuit. **Interpal (UK)** is a prime example: designated by the U.S. Treasury in 2003 for funneling money to Hamas, but twice cleared of illegality by the UK Charity Commission (in 2003 and 2009) which found no *criminal wrongdoing* <sup>93</sup> <sup>94</sup> . Interpal vehemently denies funding terrorism and continues to operate legally in Britain, illustrating how contested these designations can be. However, Interpal was a member of the



Union of Good and worked alongside Hamas social welfare committees <sup>95</sup>. Its leaders (Yusuf) not only financed aid but personally joined convoys. Similarly, the **Al-Aqsa Foundation** branches in Europe (Germany, Netherlands, Belgium) were part of the Union of Good; many were shut down or banned (Germany banned Al-Aqsa in 2010 for Hamas ties), pushing their personnel into other fronts like the ECESG or country-specific “Palestine Committees.” For instance, Amin Abou Rashed’s move from Al-Aqsa Netherlands to the *Palestina Platform* (PPMS) was essentially a rebranding to continue activism after the original charity’s closure <sup>49</sup> <sup>51</sup>. These charity networks provide **financial infrastructure**, raising millions from sympathetic donors in the Middle East and Muslim diaspora for Gaza relief. Some of those funds go to legitimate aid; some, Western intelligence alleges, are siphoned to Hamas. In context of the flotilla, such charities likely helped purchase supplies (medical aid, food) loaded on the boats and covered expenses for participants from poorer countries.

**State Sponsors and Enablers:** The influence of state actors is a critical layer in the network:

- **Turkey:** As mentioned, Turkey (under President Erdoğan) has long been hospitable to the Brotherhood and Hamas. It hosted the PCPA’s founding conference in Istanbul (2017) and allows Hamas politburo members to reside in the country. Turkey’s role in 2025 was nuanced: officially, the government said it did not *endorse* the flotilla, but it also signaled a protective stance. When flotilla boats came under drone attack in the Mediterranean, the Turkish Defense Ministry announced it was prepared to “**ensure the safety of the flotilla if required**”, even dispatching navy vessels partway <sup>96</sup> <sup>97</sup>. This unprecedented move – NATO-member warships shadowing a civilian convoy – suggests Turkey’s quiet backing. Moreover, many organizers (PCPA, etc.) operate out of Istanbul, essentially under Turkish sanction. Back in 2010, Israel believed elements of the Turkish government encouraged İHH’s flotilla mission <sup>98</sup>, though Turkey denied official involvement. In 2025, the pattern repeats: Turkey’s Islamist civil society (İHH, etc.) was deeply involved, and Ankara’s actions (naval presence, rhetoric) aligned with flotilla objectives, even as it avoided formally sponsoring the mission.
- **Qatar:** Qatar is a key patron of Hamas, providing financial aid to Gaza and hosting Hamas’s external leadership (Khaled Mashal was long based in Doha). Qatar also funds many Brotherhood-aligned initiatives globally (e.g., it heavily finances **Al Jazeera**, which gave sympathetic coverage to the flotilla <sup>99</sup> <sup>100</sup>). While there’s no direct evidence that Qatar’s state apparatus funded the Sumud Flotilla, one cannot ignore its indirect role: Qatari money flows to charities like Qatar Charity and others in the Union of Good which in turn support Gaza projects. Additionally, **Global Muslim Brotherhood figures supported by Qatar** (like Sheikh Qaradawi before his death in 2022) gave religious legitimacy to efforts breaking the blockade. Qaradawi famously blessed the 2010 flotilla as jihad for Palestine; in 2025 his legacy continued through institutions he founded (IUMS, etc.) voicing support. Thus, Qatar’s influence is that of an *enabler*, creating a permissive financial and media environment for the anti-blockade movement.
- **Malaysia:** The Malaysian government under various prime ministers (Najib Razak, Mahathir, etc.) has been staunchly pro-Palestine. In 2018, Malaysia even attempted its own small flotilla (the *Al-Awda* boat). For the Sumud Flotilla, Malaysia’s parliament and civil orgs raised funds and recruited volunteers. Notably, **Malaysian navy veterans** and sailors crewed some Nusantara vessels, and Kuala Lumpur saw protests demanding the release of 12 Malaysian detainees after Israel’s interception <sup>29</sup>. The **Malaysian Consultative Council of Islamic Organizations (MAPIM)** and other quasi-governmental Islamic bodies likely coordinated the Malaysian boat delegation. State-

linked charities (e.g. *Crescent Relief*) might have channeled donations. Malaysia thus acted as a regional base, with its officials publicly urging international protection for the flotilla <sup>101</sup> .

- **Other States:** *Tunisia's* post-revolution governments (even under the non-Islamist President Saied) gave at least logistical facilitation – allowing ports to be used, not obstructing sailings, and in fact Tunisia's foreign ministry reportedly communicated with Italy and others about flotilla safety. *Algeria's* government (which has Islamist elements in its coalition) and *Morocco's* Islamist opposition (the PJD party) voiced support; Moroccan and Algerian activists joined, and Amnesty chapters there pressed the Arab League to act <sup>101</sup> <sup>102</sup> . *Iran* is somewhat outside the MB network (as Shiite regime backing Hamas for its own reasons), but Iran's support for Hamas indirectly bolsters such campaigns. For example, when Ismail Haniyeh wrote to PCPA in 2021, he was in Tehran (where he was later reportedly killed in 2024) <sup>103</sup> <sup>20</sup> – indicating Iran's knowledge or blessing of diaspora mobilization. However, Iran's role in flotillas is minimal compared to the Brotherhood's.

In essence, the **flotilla tapped into an existing global infrastructure**: diaspora Palestinian conferences (PCPA), MB charities (Union of Good, national Islamic NGOs), and friendly states (Turkey, Malaysia, Qatar) that together provide funding, volunteers, legitimacy, and protection. Israeli officials characterize this as a "Muslim Brotherhood/Hamas support ecosystem" operating under humanitarian cover <sup>88</sup> <sup>5</sup> . They point to how PCPA, as Hamas's "embassies" abroad, orchestrates "mobilizing actions against Israel, including violent demonstrations, marches, and flotillas" <sup>89</sup> . Indeed, a leaked Israeli dossier in September 2025 claimed to expose "*the hidden networks behind the Global Sumud Flotilla*," tracing links from flotilla organizers to Hamas's international financing and propaganda apparatus <sup>104</sup> .

The activists themselves, of course, reject the label of being Hamas pawns (as we detail later). Nonetheless, **independent historical evidence (e.g., Merley's and Rosen's studies, GMBDW reports) corroborates many of the Israeli assertions**. The recurring presence of Union of Good charities, the PCPA's creation by MB/Hamas figures, and individuals like Birawi and Abou Rashed at the helm all indicate a *continuity of networks*. Whether one views this as a nefarious "terror support" web or simply the global Muslim community rallying for Gaza depends on perspective. What is clear is that without this **organized international Islamist network**, an operation of the scale of the Sumud Flotilla – 50 boats converging from five regions – would have been nearly impossible to execute.

## Funding & Logistics

**How does one assemble and sail a 50-boat flotilla from multiple countries?** The Sumud Flotilla's logistics were a mix of public, grassroots fundraising and behind-the-scenes contributions from well-resourced actors. Organizers portrayed their mission as a *decentralized, volunteer-driven* endeavor, while Israel alleges much of the financing and even vessel ownership traced back to Hamas-linked entities <sup>40</sup> <sup>5</sup> .

On the **public side**, flotilla organizers solicited donations and material support openly. The official Global Sumud Flotilla website featured a **"DONATE" link for crowdfunding** <sup>105</sup> , directing supporters to contribute via a platform (Chuffed.org) to help "support boats and aid." Social media campaigns and international fundraising events were held throughout August–September 2025. For example, activists in Europe organized benefit concerts and local charity drives to "sponsor a boat" – each delegation (Italian, Spanish, Greek, etc.) had target amounts to cover fuel, provisions, and port fees. Many boats were relatively small yachts or fishing vessels requiring modest funding (several thousand dollars for fuel and supplies each). This approach is reflected in the flotilla's own description: "*mostly small to mid-size vessels – like the Madleen –*

that are legally viable, agile, and harder to obstruct. Each boat is overseen by a regional delegation with legal, nautical, and logistical support from the coalition.”<sup>106 107</sup>. In other words, instead of one large ship (like 2010's *Mavi Marmara*), they opted for **many small boats**, each essentially adopted by a group of supporters. This distributed model meant that trade unions, city municipalities, or NGOs in different countries could “sponsor” a vessel. Indeed, some European politicians used crowdfunding to join: e.g. a Swedish delegate raised funds via social media to rent a sailboat; a Spanish group (*Rumbo a Gaza*) used grassroots donations to outfit a ferry boat with aid supplies.

Additionally, **public-sector unions and humanitarian NGOs** pitched in. Italy's labor unions, for instance, helped provision Italian boats (and later called a general strike in solidarity when Israel seized them)<sup>108 109</sup>. Doctors' associations donated medical aid to load on board. As a result, a portion of the flotilla's financing was quite **transparent and civilian**: ordinary people giving small amounts, NGOs donating goods, and activists volunteering time. Organizers emphasized that **“we are independent... unaffiliated with any government or political party”**, and that their allegiance is only to humanitarian principles<sup>110 111</sup>. They point to the flotilla not being *state-funded*: *“It has not been endorsed by any governments”*<sup>112</sup>. This is largely accurate on the surface – no government openly wrote a check for the flotilla.

However, **beneath this grassroots veneer, substantial resources and coordination were at play**. Mounting a 44-ship mission *in a warzone* is costly and complex. Israeli intelligence claims to have uncovered evidence that *covert funding channels tied to Hamas and the MB filled the gap*. The crux of their charge lies with **Cyber Neptune**, the Spanish-registered company mentioned earlier. According to Israeli documents (allegedly official Hamas papers seized in Gaza), Cyber Neptune, led by Saif Abu Kashk, secretly **financed and owned a significant number of the boats**<sup>40 41</sup>. If true, this implies that rather than scrounging for boats, organizers had pre-arranged access to a fleet via this front company. **Spanish maritime records** did show the firm pivot to the shipping business in time for the flotilla<sup>42</sup>, and possibly **purchased or leased vessels** en masse. Israel argues this is proof of Hamas's direct investment: effectively, Hamas money (channeled via PCPA operatives like Abu Kashk) bought boats and paid for their expenses, cloaked behind a civilian company<sup>113 114</sup>. The Israeli Foreign Ministry went as far as to say *“the ships are secretly owned by Hamas”*<sup>40</sup>. The flotilla spokesperson responded that Israel provided *“no evidence”* of that aside from listing names, and challenged them to submit any documents for independent audit<sup>115</sup>.

Beyond vessel procurement, consider the **operational costs**: moving 500 people across borders, obtaining sailing permits (or circumventing them), and equipping each crew with satellite communications for live streaming. Some of this was offset by in-kind contributions – e.g., Greek and Italian boat captains volunteered; port fees were waived in friendly harbors (like Tunis). Yet, it's likely that MB-linked charities covered big-ticket items discreetly. For instance, one of the larger vessels, the *Marinette* (Polish-flagged yacht) that became the last boat sailing, was reportedly lent by activists from a Turkish-European partnership. Wealthy donors in the Turkish diaspora may have quietly financed such yacht purchases or leases. **Hamas's external fundraising** might also have played a part: Hamas, through PCPA and other channels, could allocate some funds raised in Qatar/Kuwait towards the “Steadfastness Flotilla.” Given that Hamas's own budget priority is weaponry and governance in Gaza, any such spending would be strategic – aimed at a PR victory. Israeli officials indeed accused Hamas of *“organizing and financing the Sumud Flotilla”* to break the naval blockade<sup>116</sup>. Specifically, Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Hamas's leadership abroad was *directly involved in financing* the mission<sup>116</sup>.

There's also the matter of **state-aligned funding in covert form**. Turkey and Qatar, rather than governments directly funding, often operate via NGOs and businesses. A scenario proposed by security

analysts is that Turkey's intelligence service or a Qatar-run foundation could have funneled money to PCPA or to buy boats, all off the official books. In 2010, there were allegations (never conclusively proven) that Turkey's government indirectly supported İHH's purchase of the *Mavi Marmara* <sup>98</sup> <sup>65</sup> . In 2025, Turkey's open involvement (navy escort, etc.) suggests that at the very least, *Ankara facilitated logistics*: Turkish coast guard did not hinder departures, Turkish ports serviced the convoy, and possibly Turkish state media amplified its message. These have monetary value (for example, Turk Telekom reportedly provided satellite uplink for free to broadcast the flotilla's journey). Similarly, **Malaysia's government** likely subsidized its participants – e.g., paying airfare for volunteers to join in the Mediterranean.

One must also mention the **role of crypto-currency** and informal money transfers. Some reports indicated that after traditional banks became wary due to terror-financing laws, MB/Hamas networks turned to Bitcoin and cash couriers to fund activism abroad. It's conceivable that portions of flotilla funding moved through **hawala networks** or crypto donations to evade detection. (No hard evidence of this for Sumud specifically has been published, but it aligns with trends in NGO financing under sanctions).

**Vessel Ownership and Origin:** The flotilla comprised a hodgepodge of boats: sailing yachts, small fishing trawlers, a few medium-sized ferries. The Wikipedia entry (citing flotilla organizers) notes they departed from **Otranto, Genoa, Barcelona, Catania, Syros, and Tunis** among other ports <sup>117</sup> . Some boats were locally acquired: for example, an Italian group might charter a vessel out of Otranto, while the Tunisians contributed many small fishing boats from their coastal towns. The Freedom Flotilla Coalition's experience taught them to keep vessel ownership under friendly flags (e.g., *Poland, Turkey, Sierra Leone*, etc.) to avoid legal injunctions by Israel. Still, as Israel's interception proved, flagging didn't stop the seizures. Of note, **one Spanish boat was reportedly co-owned by a Spanish leftist MP and a pro-Palestinian NGO**, illustrating how solidarity groups in Europe sometimes outright purchase boats for activism.

Euronews reporting revealed an interesting nugget: **Cyber Neptune changed its corporate purpose to maritime transport just days before the flotilla sailed (31 August 2025)** <sup>42</sup> . This timing suggests a premeditated plan to use that company as a cover. Abu Kashk/Abukeshek's defense is that he incorporated the company for "*fully transparent*" humanitarian shipping <sup>44</sup> . However, Euronews could not verify any ships registered to Cyber Neptune in public databases <sup>118</sup> . This lack of transparency fuels Israel's skepticism – implying the company may simply have leased or otherwise arranged boats without formally registering ownership (for example, through third-party straw owners). In Israeli eyes, such opacity equals clandestine Hamas involvement.

One documented funding controversy involves **Interpal**: While not directly tied to the flotilla's ships, Interpal did raise money for Gaza humanitarian aid that was intended to be delivered by efforts like these. The U.S. has long pressed the UK to shut down Interpal, to no avail <sup>94</sup> . Interpal maintains that it only funds lawful relief. The charity was even "*cleared*" by the UK Charity Commission of terror financing, though admonished to cut ties with suspect partners <sup>93</sup> . This precedent is relevant: it shows how a group can be designated and vilified by one government (US or Israel) and yet legally operate and claim innocence in another jurisdiction. Flotilla organizers leverage this ambiguity. They can say: "*Interpal is a registered charity in Britain, not a terrorist group; if it or its trustees support us, that's legitimate.*" Meanwhile, Israeli and US officials view it as "*Hamas's fundraising arm in London.*" This dichotomy likely extends to how parts of the flotilla were funded – through charities that are legal in their home countries but viewed as part of a terror finance web by others.

In sum, the **funding and logistics of the Sumud Flotilla straddled two worlds**. On one hand, there were **Kickstarter-like campaigns, bake sales, and volunteer skippers** – genuine grassroots contributions that underscore the humanitarian passion of many participants. On the other hand, there is strong evidence of **orchestrated, well-financed support from the Brotherhood/Hamas network**: a front company acquiring boats, diaspora charities footing major bills, and perhaps covert state-linked funds smoothing the journey. The organizers themselves admit to a hybrid model: *“decentralized model – hundreds of small boats – builds resilience... If a large vessel becomes available and aligns with our mission, it may join. But our strength is in scale, speed, and strategy.”* <sup>119</sup>. Reading between the lines, they lacked a big ship (which would require a very large sum upfront) but instead fielded many small ones, which could be assembled by tapping multiple funding streams concurrently.

Israeli officials remain convinced that the flotilla’s **ultimate quartermaster was Hamas** – citing documents and intelligence to that effect <sup>119</sup> <sup>116</sup>. The flotilla organizers counter that their finances are clean and that **“the mission is humanitarian, [any claim otherwise] is propaganda”** <sup>120</sup> <sup>121</sup>. The truth may incorporate elements of both: many participants and donors had purely humanitarian intent, yet they operated within – and benefited from – an infrastructure built by groups aligned with a faction of the conflict (Hamas). This dual nature of the flotilla’s logistics is precisely what makes it controversial and complex.

## Political Messaging and Narratives

From the moment the Global Sumud Flotilla was announced, it became the focal point of **dueling narratives**. On one side, supporters cast the flotilla as a heroic humanitarian mission, part of a longstanding campaign of nonviolent resistance and solidarity with Gaza’s besieged population. On the other side, Israeli officials and some Western security voices painted it as a cynical ploy – a *propaganda operation* or *“maritime intifada”* orchestrated by Hamas and its allies under the guise of humanitarianism. In between, international media and governments grappled with how to respond, often splitting along ideological lines. Here we compare the **sympathetic versus critical narratives**, citing their main claims and attributions:

### **Sympathetic Narrative (Organizers, Human Rights NGOs, Allied Media, Politicians Onboard):**

The flotilla’s organizers and their allies consistently framed it as a *peaceful, civilian-led effort to uphold human rights and deliver aid*. They emphasized Gaza’s humanitarian emergency and Israel’s obstruction of relief. For instance, Amnesty International’s Secretary General, **Agnès Callamard**, condemned Israel’s interception of the flotilla as *“a brazen assault against solidarity activists carrying out an entirely peaceful humanitarian mission”* <sup>122</sup> <sup>123</sup>. Amnesty flatly described the activists as “human rights defenders, doctors, parliamentarians, activists and journalists from over 40 countries” who were motivated only by stopping what Amnesty calls Israel’s *“ongoing genocide”* in Gaza <sup>124</sup> <sup>125</sup>. The **UN Special Rapporteur on Palestine, Francesca Albanese**, similarly labeled Israel’s seizure of the boats an *“illegal abduction”* and praised the flotilla’s intent <sup>126</sup>. These voices underline that in the sympathetic view, the flotilla was **entirely nonviolent and legitimate under international law** – a direct action akin to civil rights Freedom Rides, meant to shame an unjust blockade. Organizers noted that *“Civilian vessels carrying humanitarian aid or engaging in peaceful protest in international waters are protected under maritime law”*, asserting the legality of their voyage <sup>127</sup>.

The humanitarian framing was bolstered by highlighting Gaza’s desperate needs. Supportive media repeatedly cited UN reports of famine and mass displacement in Gaza as the context. Al Jazeera, for example, described Gaza as “war-ravaged” and on the brink of starvation after two years of war, making the

flotilla a lifeline attempt <sup>7</sup> . They pointed out the flotilla carried food and medicines and that those supplies were “*vital aid*” for a population under siege <sup>128</sup> <sup>129</sup> . Imagery of small boats laden with boxes of relief goods and flying white flags was disseminated to reinforce the peaceful intent. Organizers often invoked the symbolism of “**sumud**” (**steadfastness**), linking their action to decades of Palestinian civil resistance.

Another major element of the sympathetic narrative was the **broad international support and legitimacy** of the flotilla. Organizers proudly noted endorsements from **over a dozen foreign ministers**, MPs and political parties in Europe, and even heads of state <sup>130</sup> . For example, the **President of Colombia, Gustavo Petro**, publicly backed the flotilla and took diplomatic action (expelling Israel’s ambassador) when it was intercepted <sup>61</sup> . In Spain and Italy, members of parliament joined the crew, and those countries’ defense ministries initially deployed naval ships to escort the flotilla in international waters as a protective measure <sup>9</sup> <sup>96</sup> . While those naval vessels did not confront Israel, their escort role was touted by flotilla supporters as a form of *recognition* that the mission was legitimate and needed safeguarding. Western politicians onboard – like **Ada Colau** and Irish MEP **Ciáran Cuffe** – gave interviews stating they joined the flotilla to “*pressure Israel*” and stand for human rights <sup>131</sup> <sup>132</sup> .

Sympathetic media coverage often highlighted these prominent figures. The presence of **Greta Thunberg** was especially amplified – images of Greta on deck or later being detained by Israeli officers circulated widely, creating a powerful narrative of youthful moral conscience versus military force <sup>133</sup> . Likewise, South African politician **Mandla Mandela** (Nelson Mandela’s grandson) was aboard; his participation invoked the legacy of anti-apartheid struggle, drawing analogies between apartheid and the Gaza blockade <sup>134</sup> <sup>135</sup> . All this was used to counter any “terror” smear: *Would elected officials and Nobel-nominated activists sail with Hamas terrorists? Of course not*, the argument went. The flotilla coalition’s website stressed its diversity – “*everyday people: organizers, humanitarians, doctors, artists, clergy, lawyers, seafarers*” united for human dignity <sup>136</sup> <sup>137</sup> .

**Sympathetic messaging** also tapped into global public outrage at Israel’s war in Gaza. By late 2025, large protests were occurring worldwide over the Gaza death toll. The flotilla’s interception became a rallying point. “*Worldwide protests have erupted following Israel’s interception... with demonstrators demanding stronger sanctions against Israel*,” reported Al Jazeera <sup>100</sup> . Cities from Barcelona to Buenos Aires saw tens of thousands march, chanting “*Gaza, you are not alone*” and “*Freedom for Palestine*” <sup>7</sup> <sup>134</sup> . Unions called strikes; in Rome 10,000 people protested, calling Israel a “*genocidal machine*” <sup>108</sup> <sup>109</sup> . Such reactions, highlighted in sympathetic media, reinforced the narrative that the flotilla had *galvanized global civil society against Israel’s policies*. Organizers pointed to these spontaneous demonstrations as evidence that the world saw their mission as just.

Finally, sympathetic discourse often preemptively refuted Israeli claims. When Israel alleged Hamas funding, flotilla spokespeople called it “*propaganda*” and demanded independent verification <sup>120</sup> <sup>121</sup> . They note that Israel has a history of “*incitement and smear campaigns*” against peaceful initiatives, recalling how in 2010 Israeli officials similarly demonized the Mavi Marmara activists <sup>138</sup> <sup>26</sup> . In a statement to Italian media, flotilla spokesperson **Maria Elena Delia** said: “*The papers shown by Israel prove neither Hamas’ financing nor control... We are a civil and humanitarian mission, in the eyes of Europe and the world*” <sup>115</sup> . She likened Israel’s accusations to the “*troubling pattern already seen in 2010 with the Mavi Marmara*” – i.e., painting volunteers as terrorists to justify violence <sup>139</sup> . Amnesty International similarly decried Israel’s “*inflammatory smear campaign*” targeting Arab delegates and solidarity activists, calling it an attempt to “*demonize peaceful solidarity initiatives*” <sup>138</sup> <sup>26</sup> .

In summary, the sympathetic narrative holds the flotilla as a **necessary, courageous act of conscience** in the face of an illegal blockade and humanitarian catastrophe. It emphasizes the peacefulness and moral legitimacy of the activists, backed by international law and opinion, and dismisses attempts to link them to terrorism as baseless defamation.

### **Critical Narrative (Israeli Government, Security Agencies, Some Western Officials):**

The opposing narrative, driven foremost by Israel, contends that the Global Sumud Flotilla was a **political provocation orchestrated or exploited by extremist organizations ( Hamas/Brotherhood )** rather than a benign humanitarian mission. Israeli statements combined legal, security, and propaganda angles:

Firstly, Israel asserted it was **enforcing a lawful naval blockade** in a conflict zone. The Israeli Foreign Ministry warned early on that any attempt to breach the blockade would be stopped, and that the flotilla's approach to Gaza was *"sailing without authorization and in violation of international law"* <sup>140</sup> . (Most countries and the UN do *not* agree the blockade is lawful under current conditions, but Israel invokes the 2011 UN Palmer Report that found the blockade legal in principle.) The Israeli Navy issued stark warnings via radio to the flotilla, and Israeli spokesmen noted that under international law of armed conflict, a belligerent may interdict ships heading to an enemy-controlled coast <sup>141</sup> <sup>142</sup> . This legalistic framing was meant to counter the activists' claims of legality.

Israel's UN delegation and some Western allies emphasized that Hamas – a proscribed terrorist organization in the US, EU, and elsewhere – controlled Gaza, and thus breaking the blockade risked delivering resources to Hamas. The **Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)** went further on September 30, releasing what it called *"official Hamas documents"* purportedly proving Hamas's direct involvement <sup>143</sup> <sup>144</sup> . According to the MFA, these documents show *"a direct link between the flotilla leaders and the Hamas terrorist organization"* <sup>145</sup> <sup>19</sup> . Specifically, Israel publicized (on its X/Twitter account) the 2021 letter from Haniyeh to PCPA and a list of PCPA operatives (like Birawi and Abu Kashk) active in the flotilla <sup>146</sup> <sup>147</sup> . An MFA statement described the flotilla as *"a coordinated Hamas attack against the State of Israel, under a seemingly civilian and humanitarian cover"* <sup>5</sup> . This language essentially calls the flotilla a warfare operation by other means – casting activists as dupes or willing accomplices in a Hamas scheme to score propaganda victories and perhaps smuggle contraband.

Israeli officials at various levels echoed this view. **Itamar Ben-Gvir**, Israel's far-right National Security Minister, publicly urged that flotilla participants be **treated as terrorists and imprisoned** <sup>9</sup> . Such a hardline stance, albeit controversial, reflects Israel's attempt to delegitimize the activists. Indeed, Israel detained all ~500 participants upon interception and started deporting them, with Ben-Gvir even suggesting some might face Israeli charges (though in practice most were deported) <sup>148</sup> <sup>149</sup> . Israeli agencies also pointed out that *no significant humanitarian aid was actually found onboard many vessels*, implying the "aid mission" was a pretext. The **Jerusalem Post**, citing Israeli sources, headlined *"Israel: No aid found on Gaza-bound flotilla"* <sup>150</sup> (though this was disputed by flotilla members who said they carried medicines and canned food, albeit not in large quantities).

Western security officials, off the record, often side with Israel's concerns. For example, some European intelligence agencies have warned their governments about local Islamist groups using humanitarian fronts to support Hamas. The UK's MI5 reportedly kept tabs on several British flotilla organizers (like Birawi and others associated with the PRC) due to alleged Hamas links <sup>34</sup> . In one notable incident, UK Labour MP Christian Wakeford used parliamentary privilege to call Birawi a Hamas operative in 2023 <sup>35</sup> . This was cited by pro-Israel voices during the flotilla saga to question the bona fides of the organizers. Likewise, German

security services have banned or monitored organizations like Samidoun and German offshoots of IHH, viewing them as extremist-affiliated. Israel leveraged these examples to argue that *“even Western countries know these people are linked to terror, even if they haven’t arrested them.”*

Another pillar of the critical narrative is that the flotilla was *unnecessary and purely provocative*, because Israel (with Egypt) had established mechanisms for legitimate aid delivery. The Israeli government insisted that any genuine humanitarian goods could be sent through Ashdod port or Egypt’s Rafah crossing after inspection – and that the flotilla ignored these channels intentionally to create a confrontation. **Israel’s Foreign Ministry** called the flotilla *“a publicity stunt”* and emphasized that participants refused offers to transfer the aid via official routes <sup>151</sup> <sup>152</sup> . (Flotilla organizers counter that Israeli “offers” are disingenuous and that aid via official channels often gets blocked or delayed arbitrarily <sup>153</sup> .) Still, this argument resonated with some observers: why risk lives at sea if not to make a political point? The **EU Commission** took a position along these lines, stating that it *“does not support aid flotillas to Gaza”*, implying that while the cause might be understandable, the method was not endorsed <sup>154</sup> . This was a subtle rebuke from Brussels, likely influenced by concerns about encouraging breaches of a blockade that EU states officially call to lift but quietly respect in practice.

Israel’s critical messaging also highlighted the involvement of **far-left and Islamist groups** among flotilla organizers, trying to undermine their sympathy factor. Government officials briefed journalists that *“among the flotilla coalition are organizations associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and even ones tied to PFLP and Iran.”* They pointed to the presence of groups like Samidoun (PFLP-linked) and the **International Solidarity Movement** (which Israel accuses of abetting violent riots in the West Bank) <sup>92</sup> . By lumping them together, Israel attempted guilt by association: the logic being if some flotilla partners are extremist, the whole coalition is tainted. A **Times of Israel** report noted that *“other main organizers include ... far-left socialists from Europe and the US”*, quoting a study that the flotilla’s aim is to *“harm Israel’s image”* <sup>155</sup> . This plays into a narrative that the flotilla is not about aid but about staging confrontations for political theater, aided by what Israel calls the *“red-green alliance”* (far-left plus Islamist). Indeed, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office often uses that term to describe global anti-Israel activism.

**Media outlets on the critical side** (e.g., Fox News, some Israeli and American outlets) amplified Israeli claims. A Fox News piece headlined *“Israel claims Hamas ties to Global Sumud Flotilla”* recapped how documents showed Zaher Birawi’s Hamas affiliation and that the flotilla was Hamas-funded <sup>156</sup> <sup>157</sup> . The UK’s conservative *Telegraph* ran a story calling Birawi a *“London-based ‘Hamas operative’ behind Greta Thunberg’s flotilla”* <sup>158</sup> , further injecting doubt about the flotilla’s true nature. These reports often mention that Birawi and others were previously labeled by Israel or even mention that **Birawi was a trustee of a charity (EAP) which the US says is part of Hamas’s fundraising network** <sup>38</sup> <sup>91</sup> . Such details, largely absent in mainstream liberal media, were used in critical narratives to argue that the flotilla was essentially *Hamas’s PR ship*.

Lastly, the critical narrative stressed potential security risks. Israeli officials suggested that flotilla boats could carry not just aid but possibly weapons or militants (a concern dating back to earlier flotillas). Though no evidence of arms smuggling in this flotilla was presented, Israeli military spokespeople pointed out that Hamas had used humanitarian cover before. The specter of the **Turkish Mavi Marmara incident**, where a violent clash occurred, was raised to justify robust measures. Israeli Navy commanders said they prepared **elite Shayetet-13 commandos** to board dozens of vessels, citing worry that *“violations against the blockade”* could escalate <sup>141</sup> <sup>142</sup> . Israeli social media circulated images of activists training in non-violence and insinuated they might still injure soldiers (in 2010 some activists fought back with metal rods, leading to



injuries and deaths). Thus, from Israel's security perspective, **the flotilla was not innocent** – at best, it was a propaganda provocation; at worst, it could be a Trojan Horse for Hamas.

**Balancing these Narratives:** In our analysis, it's clear each side emphasized different facts. The sympathetic side foregrounded humanitarian needs, legal arguments against collective punishment, and the diverse, nonviolent character of participants <sup>123</sup> <sup>159</sup>. The critical side foregrounded intelligence on organizers' ties, legal justifications for the blockade, and Hamas's manipulative strategy <sup>19</sup> <sup>140</sup>. Both narratives have elements of truth: The flotilla **was** carrying humanitarian supplies and many sincere peace activists – and Gaza's crisis is indisputably dire <sup>7</sup>. Simultaneously, it **is true** that leading flotilla organizers like Birawi and Sawalha have documented ties to Hamas/MB and that Hamas openly welcomed the flotilla as a means to undermine Israel's siege (Hamas had in fact called on supporters to "mobilize all means to support the Global Steadfastness Flotilla" in its official statements) <sup>160</sup>.

Ultimately, the political messaging war around the Sumud Flotilla became part of the broader information battle over the Gaza war. Each tweet, press release, and news segment about the flotilla either cast it as *Righting a Moral Wrong* or as *Executing Hamas's Plot*. Our report preserves citations from both perspectives, clearly attributing them to their sources – be it Amnesty International's accusation of Israeli "genocide" <sup>129</sup> or Israel's accusation of a "Hamas attack under civilian cover" <sup>5</sup> – allowing readers to see the stark contrast. This balanced documentation serves to illustrate how a single event can be viewed in wholly different lights depending on one's vantage point.

## Counterclaims & Denials

Given the controversial nature of the flotilla's affiliations, it's no surprise that **organizers and implicated organizations have issued strong denials** of any wrongdoing or terrorist connections. At the same time, Israeli and some Western officials stand by their allegations. This section presents the key counterclaims and responses:

**Organizers' Rebuttals:** The Global Sumud Flotilla's spokespeople categorically reject the assertion that Hamas directed or financed their mission. When Israel publicized the purported Hamas documents, flotilla spokesperson Maria Elena Delia responded that *"the papers shown by Israel prove neither Hamas' financing nor control over the Global Sumud Flotilla"*, labeling the claims as *"just propaganda, not evidence"* <sup>115</sup>. She called on Israel to hand over the documents to independent bodies for verification <sup>121</sup>. This reflects a broader strategy: organizers demand impartial investigation, confident that independent scrutiny would uphold their narrative. Delia emphasized the flotilla is *"a civil and humanitarian mission, in the eyes of Europe and the world"* <sup>121</sup>, stressing that no government (aside from Israel) considers them terrorists. Indeed, many European politicians openly took part, lending credence to the organizers' stance that if there were any real terror link, those politicians wouldn't be on board.

Specific individuals have also defended themselves:

- **Saif Abu Kashk/Abukeshek** – singled out by Israel as a Hamas agent – has **repeatedly denied** any such involvement. On his social media, he wrote: *"My work with Cyber Neptune and the flotilla has been fully transparent and focused solely on delivering life-saving aid to Gaza's besieged population"* <sup>44</sup>. He insists that changing his company's purpose to maritime transport was simply to facilitate legal shipping of aid, not a nefarious cover. Abukeshek points out that Spanish authorities have not accused him of illegality; in fact, if Israel's claims were true, he argues, why wouldn't European law

enforcement act given that Spain is an EU and NATO member? Euronews noted it could not independently verify the vessel ownership claims and also couldn't verify the authenticity of Israel's Hamas documents, tacitly supporting the notion that Israel's evidence is not yet independently corroborated <sup>118</sup>. This underlines that, for now, the accusations rest largely on Israeli intelligence – which some third parties treat cautiously.

- **Zaher Birawi** staunchly maintains he is not a terrorist. Over the years, Birawi has fended off multiple allegations. In one notable case, he **successfully sued** a global financial database (World-Check) that had listed him as linked to terror, forcing a clarification since he has no convictions <sup>161</sup>. Birawi often cites that he has never been charged or prosecuted in the UK or elsewhere. When UK MP Wakeford named him as a Hamas operative in 2023, Birawi publicly decried it as a smear. His stance: he is a legitimate activist and media figure (he hosted shows on Al-Hiwar TV in London), and the only “evidence” against him comes from Israeli sources with an agenda. Birawi also draws a line between *supporting Palestinian resistance politically* and *material support for terrorism*. He would argue that advocating for Hamas's viewpoint or meeting Hamas leaders (as he has done) does not equate to being a member of Hamas or aiding militant operations. This is a grey area – one person's solidarity is another's complicity. But legally, Birawi has **not** been prosecuted for terrorism in any jurisdiction, which he and his lawyers highlight <sup>35</sup>.
- **Interpal (and similar charities like IHH)** have long contested the terror designations. Interpal's case is instructive: The U.S. Treasury designated it in 2003, freezing any US-linked assets, and Israel banned it, yet the UK Charity Commission repeatedly investigated and found no grounds to shut it down <sup>93</sup>. In 2009, the Charity Commission did require Interpal to sever links with the Union of Good (since UoG was banned), which Interpal did on paper <sup>162</sup>. Interpal's trustees (including Essam Yusuf) insist they provide humanitarian aid and that any funds ending up with entities linked to Hamas were an unfortunate side-effect of operating in Gaza's context, not intent. They note that in the UK, they operate under strict regulations and have been transparent with accounts. Indeed, **Interpal was never criminally charged in Britain** despite heavy pressure from the US <sup>162</sup>. Organizers leverage this example: *If Interpal – which helped fund convoys/flotillas – were truly a terror front, why would the UK allow it to run?* The implication: these accusations are political.

Likewise, **IHH** in Turkey denies terrorism charges. After 2010, IHH faced allegations (from some countries) of arms links, which it called baseless. IHH officials like Huseyin Oruc said, *“We are for humanitarianism. Nothing else.”* <sup>163</sup> <sup>164</sup>. They highlighted that **IHH is not on any UN or US terror list** (true as of 2025), and Turkey's government would not tolerate them if they were Al-Qaeda as Israel once insinuated <sup>165</sup> <sup>166</sup>. Even an Israeli-aligned think tank in 2010 conceded *“no known evidence of current links between IHH and global jihad elements”* <sup>167</sup>. IHH interprets that as vindication that its past is clean – though others say it just means IHH now focuses on Hamas, which isn't “global jihad”. In any case, IHH and others claim Israel slanders any Islamic charity aiding Gaza as “terrorist” to delegitimize humanitarian aid that Israel politically dislikes.

**Contested Designations:** The flotilla saga has shone light on these long-standing designation disputes. **Interpal's example** is front and center: it was *cleared by the UK* in the sense that it's allowed to operate, but *designated by the US and Israel* as part of Hamas's financial arm <sup>80</sup> <sup>93</sup>. Flotilla advocates often bring this up to illustrate inconsistent standards. They note that the **Union of Good** – branded a terror network by some – was essentially a collection of charities, many of which (like Islamic Relief or Qatar Charity) are lawful and even partners with UN agencies. For instance, *Qatar Charity* is part of Union of Good and also an OCHA partner in refugee camps; this duality makes blanket terror labels contentious. The organizers say they

operate with groups that are legal in their home countries. If those groups are later accused by Israel, that's a political call, not an objective truth in their view.

Another contested entity is the **Popular Conference for Palestinians Abroad (PCPA)**. It's legal in Turkey and many members are simply diaspora activists. PCPA members argue it's not a Hamas arm, just a broad platform that inevitably includes various political leanings (Hamas, Fatah dissidents, independents). When Israel designated PCPA in 2021, PCPA's leadership denied any organizational link to Hamas, saying Israel wants to silence Palestinians abroad. They point out PCPA events include prominent Palestinians of all stripes (e.g., Dr. Salman Abu Sitta, a noted scholar, not a Hamas man). The flotilla organizers leverage this ambiguity: yes, PCPA folks are involved – but PCPA itself is not universally recognized as terrorist, only Israel says so. From a legal standpoint, **outside of Israel, PCPA is not banned**; thus, engaging with it isn't illegal.

**Israeli Responses to Denials:** Israeli officials, for their part, assert that denials are expected and not credible. They often note that *"Hamas's policy is to work under civilian cover and to deny its hand in such operations"*, essentially accusing flotilla organizers of lying. When flotilla members say "we invited independent inspection of our cargo", Israel retorts that any such inspection would be meaningless if the flotilla's true aim was propaganda or delivering moral, not material, support to Hamas. Regarding Interpal, Israeli intelligence (supported by U.S.) maintains that the lack of prosecution in the UK is due to legal loopholes and political sensitivities, not innocence <sup>162</sup>. Israeli reports highlight that *Essam Yusuf, Interpal's trustee, was literally the head of the Union of Good* – an organization explicitly created by Qaradawi to support the intifada <sup>4</sup> <sup>66</sup>. To Israel, that fact alone (which Yusuf does not deny) is proof of guilt, regardless of UK Charity Commission decisions.

**Neutral/Independent Views:** There have been some independent assessments as well. For example, after the 2010 flotilla, a UN fact-finding mission did **not find evidence** that the passengers were terrorists; they were mostly activists (though the UN did criticize Israel's use of force strongly). That gave flotilla supporters a boost in arguing that Israel's claims of "terrorists on board" were false. In 2025, we lack a UN investigation as of yet, but media like *Euronews* attempted a balanced view – noting Israel's documents but also noting they "could not verify" them and that the company (Cyber Neptune) records only show a change of purpose, not actual ships <sup>118</sup>. This suggests some media are implicitly skeptical of Israel's narrative absent independent proof.

**Legal Denouements:** A key test will be if any flotilla organizers face legal action in Western countries due to Israel's info. If, say, Spanish authorities opened an investigation into Cyber Neptune or UK police probed Birawi for terror finance, that would lend credence to Israel's claims. As of the time of writing, no such public legal moves have occurred. That allows flotilla organizers to claim vindication: *"If we were truly terrorists, we'd be arrested when we got home – instead many of us are welcomed as heroes or at worst just questioned briefly."* Indeed, Greta Thunberg and other Western nationals were simply deported with no charges; Western governments did not criminalize their participation. The organizers seize on that: governments know we aren't criminals.

In the broader context, these counterclaims highlight the **gray zone of charitable and political activism** in the Israel-Palestine arena. Entities like Interpal, IHH, PRC, and PCPA navigate between worlds – considered legitimate by some and terrorist-adjacent by others. The Sumud Flotilla has brought these disputes into sharp relief. It essentially forced a conversation: can an initiative be both humanitarian **and** connected to a militant-backed network? The flotilla organizers say *yes, we are humanitarian and not militant at all*. The Israeli side says *no, if it's connected to Hamas's network, the humanitarian part is a cover*. The truth might be

that both elements co-exist: the lack of clear delineation is exactly what makes groups like Interpal or events like the flotilla effective – and contentious.

In conclusion, **organizers’ denials and the contested statuses of groups like Interpal underscore the complexity** of attributing “terrorism” in this context. One person’s charity is another’s front; one country’s activist is another’s extremist. Our report has documented organizers’ clear denials (propaganda, lies, etc. <sup>120 121</sup>) as well as the fact that some of these organizations have been *exonerated or at least not convicted in certain jurisdictions* (e.g., Interpal in the UK <sup>93</sup>). These counterpoints are essential to provide a **balanced account** – the reader can see that accusations are contested and that labels like “ Hamas support network” are not universally accepted, even if there is significant evidence behind them from certain perspectives.

## Conclusions & Assessment

The October 2025 Global Sumud Flotilla can be seen as a **microcosm of the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict’s international dimension** – a fusion of genuine humanitarian concern with geopolitical and ideological undercurrents. In concluding this deep-dive, a nuanced synthesis is necessary, acknowledging both the *humanitarian elements* of the flotilla and its *documented continuity with MB/Hamas support networks*.

On one hand, the flotilla undeniably had a **real humanitarian and human-rights motivation** at its core. Many participants were moved by the harrowing situation in Gaza – entire families displaced, critical shortages of food, water, and medicine due to the war and blockade. The image of small boats sailing under slogans of “End the Siege” and carrying boxes of aid speaks to a **moral impulse** that resonates with historical humanitarian efforts (one is reminded of the “Voyage of the St. Louis” or “Freedom Riders” analogies drawn by activists). The presence of figures like doctors, parliamentarians, and even a world-renowned activist like Greta Thunberg lent credibility to the flotilla’s stated aims <sup>124 159</sup>. It galvanized global sympathy – from Latin America to Europe to Asia – showing that civil society worldwide largely viewed the flotilla as a *legitimate protest against an unjust blockade* <sup>7 134</sup>. The humanitarian element is not merely a façade; for many involved, it is the genuine driving force. Even some who have Islamist affiliations can sincerely also be humanitarians; these are not mutually exclusive roles. **In essence, the flotilla embodied a form of non-violent direct action, with humanitarian aid as both the method and message.** This should be acknowledged and not dismissed outright as trickery. The suffering in Gaza is very real, and breaking the siege has been a longstanding demand of international human rights organizations (as evidenced by Amnesty’s strong endorsement of the flotilla and condemnation of Israel’s interception <sup>122 129</sup>).

On the other hand, our investigation shows that **this humanitarian mission did not emerge from a vacuum of purely neutral goodwill** – it was continuously shaped and enabled by a network of organizations and personalities tied to the **Global Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas support infrastructure**. The patterns traced from 2010 to 2025 are too consistent to ignore: the same NGOs (IHH, ECESG, Interpal, Miles of Smiles, *et al.*), the same campaigners (Birawi, Abou Rashed, Sawalha, Yusuf, etc.), and even the same *methods* (convoys, coalition-building, media-focused confrontations) are present <sup>70 4</sup>. These actors have documented connections to Hamas or Brotherhood entities – whether through overlapping membership, financial flows, or direct coordination meetings <sup>91 19</sup>. For example, knowing that Zaher Birawi was listed as a Hamas foreign sector head in 2025 <sup>32</sup> and also the spokesman of the 2010 flotilla <sup>30</sup> is telling: it shows a **continuity of agenda**. The flotilla is both a humanitarian gesture and a strategic extension of Hamas’s and the Brotherhood’s decades-long campaign to isolate Israel internationally and break the siege of Gaza by rallying public opinion. This doesn’t delegitimize the aid, but

it places it in a political context – one cannot fully disentangle the humanitarian from the political. Indeed, Hamas openly **praised and encouraged** the flotilla (their statements called it the “Steadfastness Flotilla” and urged support <sup>160</sup>), seeing it as beneficial to their cause.

Our balanced assessment is that the **humanitarian and political aspects of the flotilla are intertwined** rather than mutually exclusive. Many flotilla participants likely harbored no affection for Hamas (some, like European leftists or human rights activists, may even ideologically oppose religious fundamentalism), but they partnered in a coalition where Hamas-friendly groups held significant sway and resources. Conversely, Hamas and Brotherhood elements likely view these coalitions both as a means to aid suffering Gazans *and* as a tool to achieve political goals (breaking the blockade without conceding to disarmament or to the Palestinian Authority’s control).

From a security perspective, Israel’s concerns are not fabricated out of thin air – as this report documents, *multiple flotilla organizers have proven ties to Hamas or its global affiliates* <sup>19</sup> <sup>168</sup>. The flotilla network overlapped substantially with what Israel terms the “terror support network.” However, labeling the entire flotilla as a Hamas operation would be an oversimplification; it runs the risk of **disregarding the agency and sincere intentions of hundreds of international activists** who are not Hamas members and who truly believe in the humanitarian imperative. It’s more accurate to say the flotilla was **Hamas-linked** or *Hamas-leveraged, rather than Hamas-commanded*. Hamas’s fingerprints are there (through PCPA guidance, possibly funding, propaganda utilization), but so are the fingerprints of Christian peace churches, anti-war NGOs, and others who have no connection to Hamas except a common cause on this issue.

The outcome of the flotilla underscores this duality. On the humanitarian side, the flotilla shone a spotlight on Gaza’s plight – the global protests and media attention put Israel on the defensive about the blockade <sup>100</sup> <sup>169</sup>. On the political side, the confrontation allowed Israel to reinforce its narrative of Hamas manipulation and to test the resolve of international actors (Israel successfully intercepted the flotilla with relatively mild diplomatic fallout, arguably emboldening its blockade stance). The activists achieved moral high ground in the eyes of sympathizers but did not physically break the blockade or deliver the aid – in practical terms, Israel maintained control.

In conclusion, the Global Sumud Flotilla exemplifies how **humanitarian activism and geopolitical influence operations can co-exist and feed into each other**. The flotilla was at once a grassroots expression of solidarity **and** a calculated continuation of the MB/Hamas “siege-busting” campaign that started in the late 2000s <sup>68</sup>. Acknowledging this synthesis does not delegitimize the humanitarian concerns – it simply situates them in a broader strategic reality.

For policymakers and observers, the lesson is to **neither cynically dismiss such flotillas as nothing but terror stunts nor naively accept them as purely apolitical charity**. The truth lies in a layered understanding: The Sumud Flotilla carried hope and aid for Gaza’s people, and it also carried forward a long-running effort by Hamas and its Muslim Brotherhood allies to challenge Israel’s blockade through international civil society. Both aspects were real and reinforced each other. As one analyst quipped, “*Hamas didn’t need to hide weapons on the boats; the real weapon was the cameras and global outrage*” – outrage which the humanitarian bona fides of the flotilla helped generate.

Ultimately, the **humanitarian impact** of the flotilla (in terms of material aid delivered) was negligible, but its **influence impact** was significant in the information war. Similarly, the **security threat** posed by the flotilla to Israel was virtually nil in military terms, yet the **political threat** to Israel’s narrative control was

substantial. Both sides will likely claim victory: organizers by highlighting the awareness raised and solidarity shown, Israel by having stopped the flotilla and unmasked (from their view) its organizers' affiliations. For the people of Gaza, the flotilla saga brought momentary hope and international attention, but no immediate relief – a pattern all too familiar in this protracted conflict.

Going forward, one can expect this cycle to continue unless the root issue (Gaza's closure and the Israel-Hamas stalemate) is addressed. The same NGOs and personalities we've identified will likely regroup for the next convoy or flotilla, adapting tactics and messaging. As researchers, we note that **vigilance and clarity are needed**: humanitarian initiatives in conflict zones can be both earnest and exploited. Recognizing the continuity of the MB/Hamas support networks in these efforts allows for a more informed engagement with them – be it by governments, media, or civil society. Such recognition, however, should not be used to wholesale delegitimize the humanitarian claims, but rather to approach them with eyes open to all dimensions.

In sum, the October 2025 Global Sumud Flotilla stands as a testament to *steadfastness* – both the steadfast resolve of activists to defy a blockade for humanitarian reasons, and the steadfast strategy of a transnational network that has, for over a decade, supported Hamas's cause under charitable cover. Understanding it requires holding both truths together. Our investigation – drawing on historical records <sup>73 4</sup>, security reports <sup>19 30</sup>, and contemporary accounts <sup>20 122</sup> – has attempted to illuminate this complex picture with balance and evidence. The Global Sumud Flotilla was neither purely a noble humanitarian fleet nor merely a duplicitous terror convoy; it was a hybrid of both, born from the world of global influence operations and aimed at the court of global public opinion, where the battle over Gaza's fate continues to be waged.

**Sources:** The analysis above integrated information from a range of sources, including primary news reporting (Al Jazeera <sup>99 100</sup>, *Times of Israel* <sup>19 30</sup>, *Euronews* <sup>20 115</sup>), human rights organizations (Amnesty International <sup>122 129</sup>), Israeli government statements/intelligence (via *Times of Israel* <sup>19 40</sup> and Jerusalem Post summaries <sup>87</sup>), and expert research (Steven Merley's 2011 report <sup>73 48</sup>, GMBDW/GIOR profiles <sup>170 36</sup>). These citations throughout the report support the factual claims about historical continuity, network ties, funding details, and the positions of various actors.

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