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## Ankara threatens reprisals if Israel halts flotilla for Gaza

DEBKAFfile *Exclusive Report* May 24, 2010, 12:14 PM (GMT+02:00)

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Turkish ferry Mavi Marmara sets sail

The Turkish government sent a secret message to Jerusalem Monday, May 24, threatening reprisals if the Israeli Navy prevents the "Freedom Flotilla" of nine boats from reaching the Gaza Strip on May 27 for the avowed objects of breaking Israel's blockade on the Hamas-ruled territory and delivering humanitarian aid. **DEBKAFfile's** military and intelligence sources report that the Turkish message was

an ultimatum to Israel threatening retaliation against Israeli interests. It is backed by the unreported presence of one or more helicopters on one or more of the Turkish vessels for challenging Israeli Air Force support for the naval blockade.

Three boats set sail from Turkey Sunday, May 23, to rendezvous en route with vessels from the UK, Greece, Algeria, Ireland, Sweden and Kuwait carrying 750 assorted pro-Palestinian activists and \$20 m worth of cement, medical equipment and schools supplies. The venture, on behalf of the Turkish-based Humanitarian Aid Foundation is sponsored personally by Prime Minister Recep Erdogan. This foundation is quietly sponsored by Turkish intelligence and all its operations, including the Gaza flotilla, the most ambitious yet for breaking the Israeli blockade on Gaza - drawn from the prime minister's office in Ankara.

Israel has imposed a 20-nautical mile closure on the Gaza coast and vowed to prevent the Turkish-led flotilla from entering port. A fleet of private Israeli vessels is on its way from the Herzliya marina to protest its arrival. They are flying banners protesting eight years of Gaza missile fire against Israel and photos of kidnapped soldier Sgt. Gilead Shalit, held for four years.

Our sources report Erdogan has approved a plan of action whereby when Israeli warships and naval commandoes board the vessels to prevent them reaching Gaza, the helicopter carrying the leading activists will take off, fly over their heads and land in Gaza. The assumption is that the Israeli Air Force will not dare to intercept the helicopter and bring it down while still offshore for fear of an international outcry against a purported humanitarian mission.

Jerusalem has not yet replied to the Turkish ultimatum. It is standing fast as yet - barring provocations or shooting from the convoy to gain media attention - by the decision to block the flotilla's entry to a Gazan port. The vessels will be diverted to an Israeli port, if necessary by Israeli naval units boarding them, and the people aboard detained at a special camp thrown up to house them.

The cargo will be unloaded and, if it contains no materials usable for Hamas' military effort against Israel, trucked to the Gaza Strip and handed over. Ankara is perfectly aware that Israel does not object to overland deliveries of humanitarian aid to Gaza. Its "Freedom Flotilla" is therefore aimed solely at breaking the blockade thrown up around the terrorist enclave by Israel and Egypt.

In Gaza the UN Relief and Works Agency protest the vandalization of one of its 435 holiday camps for a quarter of a million Palestinian teens and children.

In the past month, the Hamas regime has sanctioned five executions - three last Tuesday in front of their families - and dumped their bodies in the Shifa hospital.