

Jewish activists set sail for Gaza planning to break blockade

Voyage by boat carrying supporters of Jews for Justice for
Palestinians comes four months after Israeli attack on flotilla

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Four activists board the catamaran Irene, named Irene, before their departure from the port of Famagusta in Cyprus.
Photograph: Hasan Mroue/AFP/Getty Images

A boat carrying Jewish activists from [Israel](#), Germany, the US and Britain set sail today for [Gaza](#), hoping to breach Israel's naval blockade there.

Richard Kuper, an organiser with the British group Jews for Justice for Palestinians, said one goal was to show that not all Jews supported Israeli policies toward Palestinians. Kuper said the boat, which set sail from northern [Cyprus](#) flying a British flag, would not resist Israeli authorities.

The voyage by the 10-metre catamaran Irene comes nearly four months after Israeli commandos boarded a flotilla of Gaza-bound ships, killing eight pro-Palestinian Turkish activists and a Turkish American aboard the Mavi Marmara.

Rami Elhanan, an Israeli passenger whose daughter Smadar was killed in a suicide bombing at a shopping mall in Jerusalem in 1997, said it was his "moral duty" to act in support of Palestinians in Gaza because reconciliation was the surest path to peace.

"Those 1.5 million people in Gaza are victims exactly as I am," Elhanan, 60, said.

Alison Prager, another organiser from Jews for Justice for Palestinians, said many Jews had been on previous "blockade-busting trips" to Gaza, but this was the first time Jewish groups had banded together to send a boat of their own.

In Jerusalem, an Israeli foreign ministry spokesman, Andy David, called the boat "a provocative joke that isn't funny".

"It's unfortunate that there are all kinds of organisations involved in provocations that contribute nothing and certainly don't contribute to any kind of agreement," he said.

Yousef Rizka, an official with Hamas, the Islamic militant group that controls Gaza, said: "The government has received Jewish activists arriving to Gaza before. The government positively views all attempts to break the siege on Gaza."

The voyage came as Israelis, Palestinians and US mediators sought a compromise that would allow talks to continue after an agreement to slow Israeli settlement building expired.

Israel maintains a strict naval blockade on Gaza as part of a wider blockade imposed when Hamas took power.

After the international backlash over the Mavi Marmara attack, Israel eased its blockade on commercial goods, but maintains tight restrictions on construction materials, exports and on the movement of Gaza's residents.

The three-year blockade, which is supported by neighbouring Egypt, has badly impoverished Gaza residents, penned them into the territory and caused one of the world's highest unemployment rates.

Kuper said the activists were not seeking to support Hamas, but to send a message that Gaza civilians should not be punished for the actions of their rulers.

The Irene catamaran, carrying a total of nine passengers and crew members, set sail

from the breakaway Turkish north of Cyprus because the internationally recognised Greek south imposed a ban on all Gaza-bound vessels in May, citing "vital interests." Prior to the ban, international activists had used south Cyprus to launch eight boat trips to Gaza over a two-year span. Kuper said the activists were not seeking to stir controversy by leaving from north Cyprus, but that "practicalities" necessitated the choice.

The Irene vessel plans to deliver children's toys, medical equipment, outboard motors for fishing boats and books to Gaza residents.

Kuper said the voyage was a "symbolic statement" intended to draw attention to what he called Israel's "illegal, unnecessary and inhumane" blockade of Gaza.

"Jewish communities around the world are not united in support of Israel," Kuper said in a telephone interview from London. "Israel's future peace is coming to terms quickly with the Palestinians." The trip was funded entirely by supporters' donations, he added.

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