

Israel Stops Jewish Activists From Entering Gaza



Jim Hollander/European Pressphoto Agency

The catamaran Irene was escorted by Israeli naval vessels on Tuesday after it tried to enter Gaza.

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TEL AVIV — Israeli Navy commandos on Tuesday peacefully commandeered a catamaran sailed by an international group of Jewish activists trying to break [Israel's](#) blockade on [Gaza](#).

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Jim Hollander/European Pressphoto Agency

A small group of left-wing Israelis waited on the beach north of Ashdod on Tuesday for the catamaran trying to break the blockade to be escorted into the harbor.

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Israeli Defense Forces, via Reuters

In this photo released on Tuesday by the Israeli military, Israeli soldiers boarded a Gaza-bound yacht carrying activists in the Mediterranean sea.

The nine activists, from Israel, the United States, Britain and Germany, among them an Israeli 82-year-old Holocaust survivor, responded defiantly to the Israeli Navy when it hailed them from a frigate demanding they identify themselves and give their destination.

“We are going to Gaza,” the group responded from the deck of the 30-foot catamaran, Irene, festooned with peace flags and carrying humanitarian aid, according to a [Twitter update](#) posted on its Web site.

Israel’s military said in a statement that the vessel was boarded without incident and that “no violence of any kind was used by neither the passengers onboard nor the Israel naval forces.”

But an army spokesman’s account was countered at least partially by Smadar Ben-Natan, a lawyer representing the group. She said that two brothers on board, one a former Israeli air force pilot and high-profile peace activist, were mistreated by the forces during the operation.

Ms. Ben-Natan said Yonatan Shapira, 38, the former pilot, was struck by a [stun gun](#) and that both he and his brother Itamar, 30, a former combat soldier, were “treated brutally and handcuffed and taken off the boat while the others were treated better.” She added that, over all, the seizure was peaceful.

The boat’s [voyage from Cyprus](#) was another attempt to thwart the blockade after an Israeli assault on a Turkish Gaza-bound aid boat on May 31 in which Israeli commando forces opened fire, killing nine Turkish Islamic activists on board and setting off an international dispute.

Israel maintains that its forces operated in self-defense after they said they came under attack by passengers. Last week a United Nations Human Rights Council investigation concluded that Israel violated international law in the raid. Israel dismissed the report as biased, and on Tuesday the United States said that its findings were

“unbalanced” but that it had heard no factual criticism of the report.

The Jewish activists, whose cellphones were confiscated when the boat was seized, according to an Israel-based spokesman for the group, were being taken by the navy to the southern port of Ashdod. A well-known Israeli passenger was Rami Elhanan, a peace activist whose daughter was killed by a [Palestinian](#) suicide

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10 Jewish Activists Aboard

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bomber.

The one American on board was Lillian Rosengarten, 75, a practicing psychotherapist from Cold Spring, N.Y., who fled the Nazis as a child in Frankfurt.

“I was very reluctant to see her go out of my own anxiety, but I find myself increasingly impressed with her bravery,” her daughter, Lydia Rosengarten, 46, said by telephone.

The group’s goal had been to try to reach Gaza and unload aid cargo in what the group said in a statement was a “nonviolent, symbolic act of solidarity and protest and a call for the siege to be lifted to enable free passage of goods and people to and from the Gaza Strip.”

In the wake of the huge condemnation that followed May’s deadly [flotilla](#) raid, Israel partly eased its land blockade on Gaza, which it imposed three years ago after the militant group [Hamas](#) seized power of the sandy coastal strip. Its naval blockade, however, remains in place, Israeli officials say, in an attempt to prevent the smuggling of weapons.

“The I.D.F. regrets that it must divert the Israel navy’s attention from its regular operational activity defending Israel and its citizens because of acts of provocation such as this,” the army statement said of Tuesday’s episode.

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