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The Israel Project

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Cristoph Heil: Hello and welcome to the conference call with Colonel Richard Kemp. My name is Cristoph Heil, European Affairs Associate at The Israel Project, and I am moderating this call. Thank you for joining us today. The topic of this call is the Gaza flotilla's tie to terrorist organizations, facts, and context. Today's briefing is on the record. The Israel Project is a international nonprofit organization dedicated to providing journalists with accurate information about Israel and the Middle East. The Israel Project is not related to any government or government agency. Now, I would like to introduce you to our speaker, Colonel Richard Kemp. Colonel Richard Kemp is the former commander of British forces in Afghanistan and an expert on military operations and counterterrorism. Colonel Kemp served in the British Army from 1977 to 2006. He was commander of the British forces in Afghanistan, an infantry battalion Commanding Officer, worked for the Joint Intelligence Committee and for the National Crisis Management Group during the period of the 2005 London bombings and a series of high-profile kidnappings of British nationals in Iraq and Afghanistan. Throughout his military career, Kemp was posted in Northern Ireland, Germany, Kenya, Cyprus, and Afghanistan. He completed 14 operational tours of duty around the globe. After retiring from the Army in 2006, Kemp turned to writing. His first book, *Attack State Red*, is an account of the 2007 campaign undertaken by the Royal Anglian Regiment. *Attack Red State* was listed as a bestseller in the Sunday Times two weeks after its initial release. Colonel, we are pleased to have you with us and I would like to turn it over to you for some opening comments. And then we will move to the questions that were sent in by the people joining us. Thank you very much.

Colonel Richard Kemp: Thanks so much. I look forward to responding to questions as they develop. One thing I would say is that I do have quite substantial experience in the kind of conflict that we saw on the ship. My experience is not on board a ship, but on land where I have dealt with a number of tough, close call situations. So, I can speak about that. One thing I want to say is that [indiscernible], it's 30 days as far as I'm concerned. It's hard to make judgments until the facts come out. I've been following the case closely and thinking about what I can do to help you today by interpreting what I understand on the basis of my experiences. I'll hand it back to you now.

Cristoph Heil: Thank you. We had a number of questions come in by the people that are on the call listening. Let's jump right into it. Our first question comes from a German correspondent. From the operational point of view, would there have been a third attempt to the violent takeover of the Malmara ship such as [indiscernible] the ship or sabotage?

Colonel Richard Kemp: There are quite a few alternative operations that could have been considered and I am sure that they were considered by the Israelis. One would have been to head the ship off and to develop [indiscernible 00:03:32] warships. That would have been a very dangerous tactic and could have resulted in a collision, possibly including, you know, even greater loss of life that we saw in this operation. So, I suspect for that reason it would have been discarded. Another option would've been to disable the ship and to, you know, place an entanglement around its bellows to stop it so they would cooperate. It would've risked leaving the ship drifting out of control in the sea, again, possibly resulting in collision with other ships at night or, indeed, by day. That too could have possibly resulted in a bigger humanitarian problem than what we saw. In addition to that, it would've been required that the Israelis take the ship under tow and to take the ship under tow on the high seas necessitates boarding a ship. So, they would have to have gotten to the stage they got to in boarding the ship. It's a very, very

tough operation indeed. Once they made the decision to stop that vessel going to Gaza it is very difficult to see how else they could have done it apart from using the method they used to board that ship.

Cristoph Heil: The second question is, did you agree with Israeli assessments that the situation on board was mainly due to intelligence failure?

Colonel Richard Kemp: I think that's partially true. It does appear to be a failure of intelligence and understanding about what the soldiers were going to face when they went on board. Of course we know now - and some people there may have known beforehand - that the operation was organized by the IHH. The IHH is a humanitarian group, but it's more than that, it does have links to an organization called the Union of Hope. The Union of Hope is a Hamas and Iranian sponsored organization which has been proscribed in the United States of America because it supports and it involves organizing radicalization and extremist activities. I think when you look at the situation it was actually safe aboard the ship. When you look at the video footage you can see very clearly that there were a number of people intent on causing violence. I'm not suggesting that that applies to everyone aboard the ship. I'm not putting everyone in that category, but a number of them were very clearly intent - hard-core I would suggest - very clearly intent on causing violence towards the Israelis. And I have seen footage, some that you may have seen as well, that shows soldiers being attacked by iron bars and indeed it shows some of them throwing themselves in the boat alongside the ship Malmara and people [indiscernible 06:14] in chains against them. So, there appears to be no doubt if you accept the genuine nature of the video. It leaves no doubt at all as to what the Israelis faced. It was a very difficult situation and there was no intelligence, there does not appear to have been any intelligence to indicate that they should've prepared the soldiers for what they faced. Now, Israel has a very effective intelligence operation and it may be very surprising to hear that.

Having been somebody who worked in the intelligence world for many years, I can tell you that intelligence is far from being a science. There are many cases in many countries of where intelligence has failed. The Israelis, of course, now need to look at not only why their whole operation went the way it did, but also how they managed not to get [indiscernible 06:59].

Cristoph Heil: As it turns out, there were no arms supplies for Hamas on board. Would it not have been better to make the ship stop in Gaza to avoid the PR disaster Israel is now facing?

Colonel Richard Kemp: I think the reality of the situation is that Israel is imposing a blockade around Gaza, as indeed is Egypt, to prevent Hamas from receiving materials or weapons that could be used for carrying out attacks against Israelis, or indeed, direct weapons. And obviously every country -- every country's duty and every government's duty is to protect its citizens. And the citizens of Israel have, for a long time, been subjected to thousands of rocket attacks by Hamas from Gaza. And it's Israel's duty to stop that. Now, whether or not using a blockade is the best means, you know, that's really for Israel to judge rather than for you and me to judge. But if they have to impose that blockade, if they feel that they have to impose that blockade to protect their own citizens, then the sea has to be blocked, otherwise there would be no point in a land blockade. So, it's right that they are trying to prevent ships going into Gaza that could contain weapons for materials that could be used for the construction of weapons. I think it's a very difficult balance, you know, to what extent to which you relax the blockade and let people in - and we are speaking, of course, in hindsight and it has been a PR disaster for Israel. Israel has the very difficult task of trying to confront extremists who are intent on using - this is not the first time by the way, this is not the first time that Hamas and Hamas supporters have used innocent people, putting the lives of innocent people at risk for their own end, that is what they did during Operation Cast Lead when they were fighting. The idea of using their own

people as shields is not new, they deliberately positioned their own people as shields when they would come under fire and come into danger. So, this is not a new tactic or a surprising tactic as far as Hamas supporters are concerned. But coming out, it's a difficult balance to be made between the Israelis allowing something like that and accepting the risk that they would have to accept in this case. I would imagine they will, I am confident that they will be inquiring as to this right now from a military perspective to learn lessons about how to deal differently in the future.

Cristoph Heil: How could we be guaranteed that the investigations will be objective and as thorough as possible after Israel conducts its own investigation? Should it be [indiscernible 9:39]?

Colonel Richard Kemp: There will be -- there is absolutely no doubt that there will be a number of investigations. The ship, as I understand it, was Turkish flagged. And I think Turkey will undoubtedly conduct a thorough investigation into what happened. Israel, as a democratic state with a democratically accountable electorate government should conduct its own thorough investigation. I do not believe that Israel as a democracy - any more than any other western democracy - should be subjected to an international or completely independent investigation. We in the UK would not accept those terms in the event of a similar incident and I don't think there is any reason why Israel should either. But it is important that Israel, in addition to its lessons learned from a military perspective, and dealing with similar problems if it should face them - and it could well face a similar situation today or tomorrow - it needs to make sure it learns lessons from this experience. But separately from that, there needs to be more of a judicial [sounds like] investigation into what happened. And the Israelis, I believe, should be as transparent as they possibly can be about the outcome of that investigation. They should be prepared to accept mistakes that were made. And they should show the way people are being

held responsible. They should show who is being held responsible and how. And they should show the ways in which they work [indiscernible 11:01] the situation that they were just in.

Cristoph Heil: Another question comes from the UK. Can Colonel Kemp draw a parallel between what British forces are facing in Afghanistan and what the Israeli forces met on the boat? How does Colonel Kemp believe the IDF should have handled the operation and how would he have guided the flotilla? Did the flotilla members really have terrible actions as is believed?

Colonel Richard Kemp: I think I have already, to an extent, addressed the last part of that question, but I'll just go into it again. I think the IHH, as I mentioned, is connected to Hamas and is connected to the Union of Hope, or the Union of Good, which is a Hamas sponsored organization. Hamas itself is sponsored, funded, equipped, and directed by Iran and has connections, strong connections to Hezbollah, which also is organized and directed and funded by Iran. So, accepting the fact that both Hamas and Hezbollah are terrorist organizations, there is no doubt that the people involved in this operation were connected to terrorists. That does not necessarily make them terrorists themselves - I would not like to say either way whether they were or were not. I mean, clearly they were hard-core activists intent on violence, but that does not necessarily make them terrorists. But I don't think there's much doubt from what we know from the media and from reports I've heard that there are connections to terrorism. In terms of British forces in Afghanistan: British forces have faced the same kinds of situations that the Israelis faced. They have faced the Taliban, using the local population, using civilian people to - and weapons of war - and there've been situations where they have forced young boys of 14 years of age to throw grenades at British soldiers knowing that British soldiers will not respond, they will not shoot them. They have driven civilians in front of their own positions to get in the line of fire so that a British soldier will stop shooting and allow them to escape, exactly

the same as Hamas has done in Gaza. There is, of course, a connection between all of these groups. Iran sits at the center of much of this activity. Iran has links to the Taliban and Iran has links to many of the other extremist groups, obviously including Hamas and Hezbollah. Information is shared. Information is shared and tactics and techniques are shared. And so, the kind of extremist activity that the Israelis face in facing Gaza on the boat are the same, sort of, things the British are facing both in Afghanistan and in Iraq. In terms of how the IDF could have handled the operation - which we've spoken about the failure of intelligence here - I think also, upon my reading of it - and I stress that I'm only looking at the footage that I've seen - but, by my reading of it the Israelis went in bending over backwards to show that they were not being confrontational. They went almost to extremes to show you that they did not want to offer violence to the people on the ship. And, you know, using tazers and paintball guns does not suggest any intention to carry out lethal activities themselves. Now it may have been that if they had gone in, in the absence of intelligence to say what they were going to say, had they gone in expecting a worse situation and prepared to engage any attackers with small arms or some grenades or with gas should they have been attacked, then it may have led, it may have defused the situation and while it could've resulted in casualties, it may have been less casualties. This is all very much speculative. And, you know, when you are in that kind of situation it is very tough to make the right call. You know, I would not say that necessarily that the nine deaths that were there were the result of some wrong approach by the Israelis. I think they could've approached it differently and they may have avoided deaths, but what we shouldn't forget is that none of those deaths would've occurred had the people on that ship not attacked the Israeli soldiers. The Israelis had intercepted a number of other ships and there was no similar violence or deaths. It's wrong to put the blame, to lay blame at the door of the Israelis. It is right to blame, to lay the deaths at the door of the people that carried out the attack on the Israeli soldier that came down. Whether or not they intended to cause that level of

violence we don't know, but I think it's them that should shoulder the blame and responsibility for this.

Cristoph Heil: The last question is regarding the military situation. If the Gaza military blockade was removed, would Hamas' military have capabilities to [indiscernible 15:51] to the same extent that Hezbollah has in Lebanon?

Colonel Richard Kemp: I think Hamas has quite substantial capabilities already. Hamas has managed to circumvent the blockade to considerable extent. One has to make the assumption - and probably only Hamas and Israel really know the answer - one has to make the assumption that the situation would be considered worse if the blockade was not in place. Hamas would have developed greater capability and greater firepower than they have already. I have no doubt that Hamas, with its stated intention of eradicating Israeli states and its denial of Israel's right to exist, would eventually develop itself into the kind of extremely capable terrorist organization that Hezbollah is. And Hamas, I have no doubt, will continue to try and do that unless, you know, that is stopped by the Israelis or by other world agencies. But of course, Hamas' desperation to ferment conflict and create conflict with Israel [indiscernible 16:59] their own people. And they have consistently put their own people's lives at risk, you know, consistently risked their prosperity, livelihood, and the good of their own people in order to maintain this conflict with Israel. Now, I would not suggest for a moment that they should buckle down under Israel, of course they should not, you know, they should have an independent right to exist, but it is they who have, when the Israelis withdrew from Gaza, leaving the place free, they renewed their attack on Israel.

Cristoph Heil: I would like to remind everyone that on our website, www.theisraelproject.org, there are lists of expert resources and background information.

Thank you very much to our guest, Colonel Kemp, for taking the time to join us. And to all of our guests, thank you for participating in today's call. As always, if there is anything that The Israel Project can do to help you get the facts on the Middle East, please contact us. Thank you again.

Colonel Richard Kemp: Yeah.

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