**MOWBRAY: Flotilla focus turning to terror ties**

U.S. investigation is moving into high gear

By Joel Mowbray

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The fallout from the ill-fated "Freedom Flotilla" appears far from over. The initial reaction focused on Israel's raid of the ship attempting to break the blockade of Gaza, which killed nine. Now, however, the Turkish charity that sponsored the flotilla is being investigated by the United States for its possible ties to terrorism.

Key congressmen are pushing the Obama administration to complete its investigations "swiftly." House Foreign Affairs Chairman Howard L. Berman, California Democrat, and Ed Royce, California Republican, the ranking member of the Foreign Affairs terrorism subcommittee, sent a letter last week to the Treasury Department stating that publicly available information "strongly supports designating" as a terrorist entity the Foundation for Human Rights and Humanitarian Relief, also known as the Turkish IHH.

Although they referenced "the group's sponsorship of the provocative flotilla in May," Mr. Berman and Mr. Royce relied mostly on the group's reported connections to Hamas and al Qaeda, which predated the incident.

For example, the letter cites the statement of French counterterrorism magistrate Jean-Louis Bruguiere, who said that in the case of the millennium bombing plot that targeted Los Angeles in 1999, the Turkish IHH was "basically helping al-Qaida when [Osama] bin Laden started to want to target U.S. soil."

The letter's timing was opportunistic. Just one week earlier, the State Department sent a letter to Rep. Ron Klein, a hawkish Florida Democrat, in which it admitted that "U.S. government agencies are taking a close look at IHH" for terrorist designation because "serious questions of support to terrorist organizations have been raised."

While it appears that the group has been pushing the terrorism envelope for years, it likely has become a priority for U.S. investigators now because of its sponsorship of the flotilla.

Judging by the recent rash of terrorism designations for Iranian-linked entities, the Obama counterterrorism team has been focusing these days primarily on the Iranian mullahs. The Treasury Department, which is responsible for most designations, recently pulled analysts off other investigations to focus on Iranian-related cases, according to a former Treasury official who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Designating the Turkish IHH would help thwart its ability to assist terrorists. If it is named a Specially Designated Global Terrorist, the Turkish IHH would be shut out from the U.S. financial system, and it could not work with U.S. charities, nongovernmental organizations or governmental agencies, nor could it raise money here. Such a designation also could help in freezing IHH money flows in the United States and elsewhere.

The greater impact of designation, though, would be political. In branding the Turkish IHH a terrorist entity, the United States would be sending a signal that it supports the Egyptian-Israeli blockade of Hamas-controlled Gaza and that efforts to break it will not be taken lightly.

Though the current inquiries were triggered by the flotilla, Treasury Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Stuart Levey is a serious professional known for being meticulously careful. "This would not be a political designation; the evidence would need to meet the approval of Justice Department lawyers, based on the facts of the case and available intelligence," explains former Treasury analyst Jonathan Schanzer, who is vice president of research at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (where this journalist is an adjunct fellow).

With investigations already under way, a bipartisan letter co-signed by Mr. Berman, the deeply respected foreign-policy dean of the House, undoubtedly will give an extra push in case there are jitters about taking an action that could adversely impact the U.S. relationship with Turkey.

As the counterterrorism professionals in the Obama administration grapple with the question of designating the suddenly high-profile group, many State Department diplomats and even some White House strategists presumably will worry about the inevitable political fallout.

Should the Obama administration designate the Turkish IHH a terrorist organization, it would place additional strains on the once-strong U.S.-Turkey relationship. Then again, many experts think no amount of wooing will win over the current Islamist regime. The key to restoring the relationship to its previous strength, in other words, is simply for Turks to vote out Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP Party.

"This designation, if the administration allows it to go forward, would be a long-overdue recognition of what we already know," Mr. Schanzer notes. "Turkey has gone to the Iranian axis."

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