



The Gaza flotilla attack and its aftermath

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Section International Affairs and Defence Section

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- The assault on the Gaza flotilla and the consequent loss of nine lives caused a great international outcry. The UK subsequently called the Gaza blockade “unacceptable and unsustainable.”
 - Demands for an international investigation were rejected by Israel, which has set up its own commission of inquiry, with two international observers including Lord Trimble, and an Israeli Defence Force internal investigation.
 - The UN Human Rights Council set up an investigation which should report in September. The UK abstained in the vote to set up the Human Rights Council investigation.
 - The two most commonly-cited arguments in favour of the legality of Israel’s actions are that it was protecting a lawful blockade or that it was acting in self-defence. Both of these have problematic elements. A contrary argument that the actions amounted to piracy is incorrect.
 - Israel has eased the blockade, allowing consumer goods to enter the Strip. Arms and dual-use goods (as defined by Israel) remain controlled; some much-needed construction material will be allowed in, but only in certain limited circumstances. Israel has also acted to ease inspection bottlenecks.
 - The US and Israel have recently moved to repair relations, which were affected by Israel’s actions over the flotilla. Relations with Turkey remain severely strained and the flotilla incident may have done permanent damage to Israel’s international standing.

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1 Background

On 31 May Israeli commandos boarded a ship taking aid to the Gaza strip, and in the ensuing violence nine lives were lost. The events focussed new attention on the blockade of Gaza, which has been in place ever since the Islamist Hamas party seized control of the Strip from rivals Fatah in June 2007, marking the end of the national unity government that had ruled the Palestinian territories since 2006. After the takeover, Israel blockaded land border crossings to the Gaza Strip and Hamas began firing rockets into nearby areas of southern Israel. The stated reason for Israel's blockade is to deprive Hamas of materials that could be used for military purposes. Some suspect, however, that Israel wants to impose a collective punishment on the residents of Gaza to discourage them and other Palestinians from voting for Hamas. Since the Hamas takeover of Gaza there have been many deaths and injuries, particularly of Palestinians during Israel's Operation *Cast Lead* (27 December 2008 to 17 January 2009), and mounting international criticism of the deprivation suffered by ordinary Palestinians in Gaza. After Operation *Cast Lead*, Israel extended the blockade to cover sea access.

There had been eight other attempts since 2008 to get aid to Gaza directly by sea, rather than pass through an Israeli port (usually Ashdod) to have the aid checked for any items that Israel considered of potential military use. None of the earlier attempts had resulted in bloodshed; some had been allowed to enter Gaza, some had been boarded by Israeli security forces, though none by helicopter.

2 The organisers

The flotilla of six ships was organised by two charities. The Free Gaza Movement is an international coalition of voluntary organisations including Jewish, Christian and Islamic religious groups and is endorsed by Desmond Tutu, among others. It was launched in 2008 with the specific aim of breaking the Israeli government's blockade of Gaza and delivering aid to its residents, and has its headquarters in Cyprus. In June 2010, the Free Gaza Movement sent another ship, the *Rachel Corrie*, which was boarded by Israeli security forces without violence and prevented from sailing to Gaza.

IHH, the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief, is an Islamic charity based in Turkey.¹ It is reported to be close to Turkey's ruling AKP party, which is Islamist, and has grown in influence since the AKP came to power in Turkey. Israel accuses IHH of supporting terrorism and of connections to al-Qaeda, accusations which the group denies. Turkish-based analysts say that it is unlikely that the Turkish government would allow the group to operate in Istanbul if there were links with al-Qaeda.² However, a US terrorism investigator reported that in 1996, calls were made from the IHH headquarters to an 'al-Qaeda guesthouse'. IHH representatives denied that the organisation was responsible for the calls. The report also said that IHH had sent people to fight in Afghanistan and Chechnya, however, an Israeli institute with links to the Israeli Ministry of Defence said recently that there were no known current links between IHH and global jihadism.³ The group

¹ See the organisation's website: [Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief \(IHH\)](#)

² 'Islamic charity in flotilla raid known for aid work, clashes', *Washington Post*, 10 June 2010

³ Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, cited in 'Islamic charity in flotilla raid known for aid work, clashes', *Washington Post*, 10 June 2010

is not listed as a terrorist organisation by the US but is banned by Israel. The largest ship in the flotilla, the Mavi Marmara, belongs to IHH.

The Turkish Government denies that it was involved in setting up the flotilla, and deputies from the ruling AKP party who were due to take part in the mission pulled out, reportedly after pressure from the Government.⁴

3 The journey towards Gaza and the assault

The ships assembled in Cypriot waters on 30 May 2010, with Edward Peck, former US ambassador to Iraq, Ann Wright, former US soldier and diplomat who retired in protest at the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and European and Arab parliamentarians on board.⁵ In total, nearly 700 activists were aboard the flotilla, most of them on the Mavi Marmara. 37 of them were British.

The Israeli assault on the ships occurred during darkness, when boats and helicopters approached the convoy. Armed Israeli personnel abseiled from the helicopters and encountered resistance from the activists on the largest of the ships, the Mari Marmara. There was no serious violence on the other ships. There are conflicting accounts of what happened on the Mavi Marmara. The Israeli Government claims that the protesters armed themselves with iron bars and knives, and captured firearms from the Israeli soldiers, some of which were discharged.

Activists aboard the Mavi Marmara deny that the activists were armed in preparation for violence, and that the Israeli personnel let off stun grenades as they descended to the ship. It seems likely that the activists used only what weapons they could find on the ship, as they were reportedly searched by Turkish security services before they boarded.

The nine killed in the raid were identified as eight Turkish citizens aged between 32 and 61, and a Turkish-American student aged 19, who was shot at close range with four bullets in his head.⁶

Other activists, including the British citizens on the ships, were detained and taken to Israel. The Irish foreign minister made an official complaint about how Irish activists were denied access to consular representatives and independent health and legal professionals.⁷ The activists were departed from Israel to Turkey.

4 International reaction

In a statement to the House of Commons on 2 June, Foreign Secretary William Hague made clear his rejection of the violence that had taken place, together with his concern for the welfare of the British citizens in custody in Israel:

Our clear advice to British nationals is not to travel to Gaza. However, we have made clear in public and to the Israeli Government that we deeply deplore the loss of life, and look to Israel to do everything possible to avoid a repeat of this unacceptable situation. The United Nations Security Council and the European Union have rightly condemned the violence that resulted in the loss of these lives. We continue to demand urgent information and access to all United Kingdom nationals involved. Their welfare is our

⁴ 'Islamic charity in flotilla raid known for aid work, clashes', *Washington Post*, 10 June 2010

⁵ 'Groups behind flotillas', *Financial Times*, 1 June 2010

⁶ 'We have nothing to be sorry for, Israel tells Turkey', *Daily Telegraph*, 4 June 2010

⁷ 'Israelis to deport Gaza aid crew', *Sunday Times*, 6 June 2010

top priority at this time, along with support for the families, who are understandably very worried. We are seriously concerned about the seizure of British nationals in international waters, and that aspect of the Israeli operation must form a key part of the investigation into the events.⁸

He went on to set out the Government's analysis of the root cause of the incident:

The events aboard the flotilla were very serious and have captured the world's attention, but they should not be viewed in isolation. They arise from the unacceptable and unsustainable situation in Gaza, which is a cause of public concern here in the United Kingdom and around the world. It has long been the view of the British Government-including the previous Government-that restrictions on Gaza should be lifted, a view confirmed in United Nations Security Council resolution 1860, which called for "sustained delivery of humanitarian aid" and called on states "to alleviate the humanitarian and economic situation".

The fact that that has not happened is a tragedy. It is essential that there be unfettered access not only to meet the humanitarian needs of the people of Gaza, but to enable the reconstruction of homes and livelihoods and permit trade to take place. The Palestinian economy, whether in Gaza or on the west bank, is an essential part of a viable Palestinian state which I hope will one day live alongside Israel in peace and security.⁹

The Obama Administration did not condemn the raid outright. The statement from the State Department ran as follows:

The United States deeply regrets the tragic loss of life and injuries suffered among those involved in the incident today aboard the Gaza-bound ships. We are working to ascertain the facts, and expect that the Israeli government will conduct a full and credible investigation.

The United States remains deeply concerned by the suffering of civilians in Gaza. We will continue to engage the Israelis on a daily basis to expand the scope and type of goods allowed into Gaza to address the full range of the population's humanitarian and recovery needs. We will continue to work closely with the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, along with international NGOs and the UN, to provide adequate access for humanitarian goods, including reconstruction materials, through the border crossings, while bearing in mind the Government of Israel's legitimate security concerns. However, Hamas' interference with international assistance shipments and work of nongovernmental organizations, and its use and endorsement of violence, complicates efforts in Gaza. Mechanisms exist for the transfer of humanitarian assistance to Gaza by governments and groups that wish to do so. These mechanisms should be used for the benefit of all those in Gaza.

Ultimately, this incident underscores the need to move ahead quickly with negotiations that can lead to a comprehensive peace in the region.¹⁰

The fact that the US did not condemn Israel directly for the assault was a source of disappointment for pro-Palestinian groups.

Russia's comments were more robust: the Russian foreign ministry said:

⁸ HC Deb 2 June 2010, c437

⁹ HC Deb 2 June 2010, c438

¹⁰ 'Free Gaza Flotilla', US Department of State press release, 31 May 2010

Obviously, the use of arms against civilians and the detention of the vessels on the high seas without any legal grounds constitute a gross violation of generally accepted international legal norms.

At the same time we consider the incident as confirmation of the need for an early end to the siege of Gaza by Israel and for the implementation of real steps to alleviate the humanitarian and social situation for the people of the Strip.¹¹

Responding to international criticism of the raid, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu said:

Once again, Israel faces hypocrisy and a biased rush to judgment. The international community cannot afford an Iranian port on the Mediterranean... The same countries that are criticising us today should know that they could be targeted tomorrow.¹²

Israel's foreign minister was reported as saying:

We didn't start this provocation. We did not send bullies with knives and metal rods to Turkey. The entire blame, all of it, from beginning to end, is that of Turkey. We have nothing to apologise for.¹³

The Turkish Government's reaction has been vigorous. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said:

Israel cannot clean the blood off its hands through any excuse. It is no longer possible to cover up or ignore Israel's lawlessness. This bloody massacre by Israel on ships that were taking humanitarian aid to Gaza deserves every kind of curse.¹⁴

Turkey has demanded that Israel should apologise for the raid, return the seized ships, agree to an international investigation and offer compensation for the victims. Turkey has recalled its ambassador to Israel and cancelled several joint military exercises, and on 29 June it was reported that Turkey had banned an Israeli military flight from its airspace, in retaliation for the flotilla raid. Turkey might not resume diplomatic representation unless its conditions are met within a "reasonable timeframe."¹⁵

Israel's relations with its erstwhile 'strategic partner' Turkey have been cooling for some time but the flotilla incident has accelerated that process. However, Turkey is resisting the pressure from some quarters to rush to cut ties with Israel completely, worried that that might not be in Turkey's long-term interests. For example, in May 2010 Turkey resisted both Arab and domestic pressure and voted in favour of Israel's OECD membership application.¹⁶

An Israeli official told an Israeli news site:

Turkey is continuing to downgrade its relations with Israel. This is a long-term process and not something that began just after the flotilla incident. We are very concerned.

¹¹ 'Incident with "Humanitarian Convoy" for Gaza', Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release, 31 May 2010

¹² 'Netanyahu defiant as pressure builds to lift siege', *Guardian*, 3 June 2010

¹³ 'We have nothing to be sorry for, Israel tells Turkey', *Daily Telegraph*, 4 June 2010

¹⁴ 'Turkey: 'Special relationship' in tatters as PM vents fury', *Guardian*, 2 June 2010

¹⁵ 'Turkey may not send Israel envoy back', *Ynet News.com*, 17 June 2010

¹⁶ 'Accession : OECD welcomes Chile, Estonia, Israel and Slovenia', OECD news release, 27 May 2010

5 UN investigation

After the assault, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called for a “prompt, impartial credible and transparent investigation.”¹⁷ Israel announced that it would be mounting its own investigation, but rejected calls for any internationally-run investigation, saying that there would be international representation on the Israeli commission.

There are various ways in which the different parts of the UN can investigate incidents. Some of these have already been initiated.

The UN Secretary-General has powers under Article 99 of the UN Charter to “bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security”. This gives the Secretary-General considerable scope for inquiry and investigation. He may also undertake investigations at the request of the General Assembly, Security Council or other UN organs. Ban Ki-moon called very early on for a “full investigation” and instructed his Special Coordinator, Robert Serry, and UNRWA Commissioner General Filippo Grandi, to coordinate with all relevant parties.¹⁸ However, Israel has rejected his proposal for an international panel of enquiry led by Sir Geoffrey Palmer, the former prime minister of New Zealand and an expert in international maritime law, and including representatives from Israel, the US and Turkey.

The President of the UN Security Council later issued a statement calling for “a prompt, impartial, credible and transparent investigation conforming to international standards” into the incident.¹⁹ This could seemingly be met by an Israeli-led inquiry and was consistent with the US policy not to call for an international inquiry.

On 2 June 2010 the UN Human Rights Council issued a resolution²⁰ on an “independent international fact-finding mission to investigate violations of international law” arising from Israeli actions against the flotilla of ships on 31 May. The resolution authorises the President of the Human Rights Council to appoint members of this international fact-finding mission, adding that they should report their findings to the Council at its 15th session in September 2010. 32 member states of the Human Rights Council voted in favour of the resolution and three voted against it (USA, Netherlands and Italy). Nine states abstained, including the UK and France. The EU’s proposed amendments to the resolution were not adopted, and nor was Norway’s suggestion that the proposed fact-finding mission be headed by the UN Secretary-General.²¹

6 Israel’s investigations

Having rejecting a UN inquiry, the Israeli Government has set up its own commission, while the Israeli Defence force has also set up an internal inquiry. Prime Minister Netanyahu said:

¹⁷ ‘Blair urges Israel to ease Gaza blockade’, *Independent*, 4 June 2010

¹⁸ [Secretary-General’s remarks to the media at ICC Review Conference - includes statement on Gaza](#), 31 May 2010

¹⁹ Statement by the President of the Security Council, [S/PRST/2010/9](#), 1 June 2010

²⁰ Human Rights Council, [resolution on the Grave Attacks by Israeli Forces against the Humanitarian Boat Convoy](#), A/HRC/14/L.1, 1 June 2010

²¹ Human Rights Council press release, [Human Rights Council decides to dispatch independent fact finding mission to investigate Israeli attack on humanitarian boat convoy](#), 2 June 2010

I am convinced that uncovering the facts will prove that Israel acted in an appropriately defensive fashion in accordance with the highest standards. The committee will clarify to the world that Israel acts according to law with responsibility and full transparency.²²

There were discussions between the US Administration and the Israeli Government over the establishment of an Israeli commission of inquiry, during which US representatives stressed that some form of international participation was desirable:

We understand that the international participation in investigating these matters will be important to the credibility everybody wants to see. We recognize that international participation... would be an essential element to putting this tragedy behind us and then hopefully creating some additional trust.²³

On 14 June Israel announced the membership of the commission.²⁴ The members of the commission are retired supreme court judge Jacob Turkel, Shabtai Rosenne, a 93-year-old international law academic and former diplomat, and Amos Horev, who is a retired major general in the Israeli Defence Force aged 86.

These members will be joined by two international observers: Lord Trimble, former head of the Ulster Unionist Party, and Ken Watkin, former chief legal adviser to the Canadian armed forces.

The commission will take evidence from Israeli Government ministers and will receive full cooperation from "every relevant government body" but, rather than being able to receive testimony directly from service personnel, it will see the results of the IDF inquiry. If the commission is dissatisfied with the information passed to it by the IDF inquiry, it may put in a request for further investigation into the matter by the IDF inquiry.²⁵

The observers will not be able to vote on the result of the commission's deliberations and will not see evidence that may, according to the chairman, compromise national security.

Pro-Palestinian groups have criticised the composition of the commission as highly partisan, accusing Rosenne of being involved in an earlier alleged cover-up of controversial Israeli military actions, and Horev accused of participating in alleged reprisal attacks against Arabs.²⁶ Critics have also claimed that Lord Trimble is a well-known supporter of Israel.

Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian National Authority, said that the inquiry as announced by Israel did not comply with UN demands; a spokesman for Hamas, the group ruling Gaza, said:

By refusing the formation of an international committee to investigate the massacre, Israel is condemning itself.²⁷

²² 'Israel's flotilla probe criticised', *alJazeera.net*, 14 June 2010

²³ 'Judge Jacob Turkel to probe flotilla raid?', *Ynet News*, 11 June 2010

²⁴ '[Government establishes independent public commission](#)', Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs news release, 14 June 2010

²⁵ For the full terms of reference, see '[Government establishes independent public commission](#)', Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs news release, 14 June 2010

²⁶ See for example '[Shabtai Rosenne and the Qibya cover-up](#)', RichardSilverstein.com

²⁷ 'Israel's flotilla probe criticised', *alJazeera.net*, 14 June 2010

7 Was the assault legal?

The two most commonly-cited arguments in favour of the legality of Israel's actions are that it was protecting a lawful blockade or that it was acting in self-defence. Both of these have problematic elements. A contrary argument that the actions amounted to piracy is incorrect.

One argument in favour of the legality of Israel's actions is that they were lawful under the Article 67(a) of the [San Remo Manual on International Law Applicable to Armed Conflict at Sea](#).²⁸ This permits attacks on neutral merchant vessels if they "are believed on reasonable grounds to be carrying contraband or breaching a blockade, and after prior warning they intentionally and clearly refuse to stop, or intentionally and clearly resist visit, search or capture." The legality of the interdiction depends first on whether the blockade of Gaza is lawful. If the conflict between Israel and Hamas is an 'international armed conflict' – and opinion is divided on this point – then Israel undoubtedly has the right to blockade Gaza. Whether such a right exists in '*non-international* armed conflict' is less clear. But even if the blockade itself is lawful, it must also be exercised lawfully, for instance it must not cause disproportionate damage to the civilian population.²⁹

Another possible argument³⁰ is that Israel's actions were in self-defence, which is lawful under Article 51 of the UN Charter as an exception to the prohibition on the use of force in Article 2(4). But again the status of Gaza and Hamas complicates the issue. According to the International Court of Justice in the [Nicaragua v US](#) case, self-defence is lawful only in response to an armed attack for which a state was responsible; but this approach has been subject to considerable challenge. In any case, the use of force in self-defence must comply with the rules of humanitarian law, and is subject to two main considerations: necessity and proportionality.

Contrary to some claims, the attack cannot be piracy, since under both customary international law and Article 101 of the [1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea](#), that term applies only to acts done for private gain.

8 Further flotillas?

Further missions are planned by IHH and other groups. An all-woman mission aboard a Lebanese ship was being arranged, and the Israeli security forces are reported to be planning to halt it using an all-female group of commandos.³¹ A ship with Iranian members of parliament was also due to leave from Lebanon;³² according to a representative of Hamas, at least eight ships are planned to arrive from the Gulf "after the World Cup" (which finishes 11 July 2010) and a further wave during the month of Ramadan (which begins on 11 August 2010).³³

9 Easing the blockade

Under intense international pressure, Israel has announced that it will ease the blockade on Gaza. The following measures were announced on 20 June 2010:

²⁸ This is a non-binding statement of the generally-accepted international law in this area.

²⁹ See Articles 93-104 of the [San Remo Manual](#)

³⁰ See Marc Weller, "[Blockading the enemy](#)", *New Law Journal*, 11 June 2010

³¹ 'Israel tries feminine touch to halt new peace ship', *Sunday Times*, 27 June 2010

³² 'Lawmakers from Iran plan voyage to Gaza', *New York Times*, 27 June 2010

³³ 'Iranian ships could join wave of flotillas to Gaza, says Hamas chief', *Independent*, 28 June 2010

1. Publish a list of items not permitted into Gaza that is limited to weapons and war materiel, including problematic dual-use items. All items not on this list will be permitted to enter Gaza.
2. Enable and expand the inflow of dual-use construction materials for approved PA-authorized projects (schools, health facilities, water, sanitation, etc.) that are under international supervision and for housing projects such as the U.N. housing development being completed at Khan Yunis. Israel intends to accelerate the approval of such projects in accordance with accepted mechanisms and procedures.
3. Expand operations at the existing operating land crossings, thereby enabling the processing of a significantly greater volume of goods through the crossings and the expansion of economic activity.
4. Add substantial capacity at the existing operating land crossings and, as more processing capacity becomes necessary and when security concerns are fully addressed, open additional land crossings.
5. Streamline the policy of permitting the entry and exit of people for humanitarian and medical reasons and that of employees of international aid organizations that are recognized by the GOI. As conditions improve, Israel will consider additional ways to facilitate the movement of people to and from Gaza.
6. Israel will continue to facilitate the expeditious inspection and delivery of goods bound for Gaza through the port of Ashdod.³⁴

Tony Blair, representative of the Middle East Quartet who was involved in negotiations with the Israeli Government over the blockade, warned that Israel would have to deliver substantial change:

Plainly there are still issues to be addressed and the test of course will be not what is said, but what is done. But I welcome strongly this statement of policy and the Office of the Quartet Representative looks forward to working closely with the Government of Israel and other partners on its implementation.³⁵

9.1 Controlled items

The list of controlled goods was published on 4 July.³⁶ It includes all arms and munitions, all dual-use items listed under the Wassenaar Arrangement,³⁷ and additional dual-use items based on Israeli legislation. The new policy allows construction materials to enter Gaza, but only for Palestinian Authority-authorized projects (which in practice is likely to exclude Hamas-authorized projects) “implemented and monitored by the international community.”³⁸

³⁴ ‘Prime Minister’s Office statement following the Israeli Security Cabinet meeting’, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release, 20 June 2010

³⁵ ‘Tony Blair welcomes new policy on Gaza’, Office of the Quartet Representative press release, 20 June 2010

³⁶ Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Gaza: Lists of Controlled Entry Items](#), 4 July 2010

³⁷ [The Wassenaar Arrangement on Export Controls for Conventional Arms and Dual-Use Goods and Technologies](#), an agreement signed in 1995. ‘The Wassenaar Arrangement has been established in order to contribute to regional and international security and stability, by promoting transparency and greater responsibility in transfers of conventional arms and dual-use goods and technologies, thus preventing destabilising accumulations. Participating States seek, through their national policies, to ensure that transfers of these items do not contribute to the development or enhancement of military capabilities which undermine these goals, and are not diverted to support such capabilities,’ [Introduction, accessed 8 July 2010]

³⁸ Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Gaza: Lists of Controlled Entry Items](#), 4 July 2010

The Israeli Government says construction materials “are liable to be used for Hamas military purposes (building bunkers, fortifying positions and digging tunnels).”³⁹

9.2 Crossing points and construction projects

The other problem that Israel agreed to address was the long delays caused by inadequacies in the capacity of the inspection system at border crossing points. Israel announced that it had increased the flow of lorries at the Kerem Shalom crossing from 80 to 90 lorries a day to 150, and at the Karni crossing from 80 to 120.

The Israeli Government also said that, in cooperation with the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah and the United Nations, USAID and the European Union, it had authorised 31 new construction projects, bringing the total of authorised projects from 14 to 45.

9.3 The movement of persons

The Israeli Government has pledged to streamline the procedures for allowing the entry and exit of persons for humanitarian and medical reasons and that of employees of international aid organizations. No steps to further this policy were announced on 4 July. On 7 July, the Israeli Supreme Court rejected a petition on behalf of a Gazan lawyer to be allowed to travel to the West Bank to pursue her studies. In evidence to the court, the Israeli Defence Force made it clear that there would be no relaxation of the restrictions on Palestinians’ freedom of movement in and out of Gaza except in the most extreme circumstances.⁴⁰

The Office of the Quartet Representative, Tony Blair, welcomed the changes:

These changes are significant and, once implemented, should have a dramatic influence on the daily lives of the people of Gaza and on the private sector.

Thousands of items that have not been available through legitimate channels for the last three years should now enter as a matter of course. This will produce a counterweight to the tunnel economy, which has been under Hamas control.⁴¹

10 Did the raid mark a watershed?

The international condemnation of the Israeli raid on the flotilla was possibly unprecedented in its severity and it is widely accepted that the assault was an important victory for opponents of Israeli policy in Gaza in terms of public opinion. Crucially, this happened at a time when US-Israeli relations were severely strained by the Netanyahu government’s intransigence on the settlements problem and particularly by the announcement of an Israeli housing development in occupied East Jerusalem during the visit of us Vice President Joe Biden in March 2010.

After the interception, the Israeli ambassador to the USA briefed other Israeli diplomats on relations between Israel and the US for Netanyahu’s visit to Washington in July 2010. According to those present at the meeting he said:

There is no crisis in Israel-US relations because in a crisis there are ups and downs. Relations are in the state of a tectonic rift in which continents are drifting apart.⁴²

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ ‘Israel threatens to expel Palestinian politicians from Jerusalem’, *Guardian*, 8 July 2010

⁴¹ Office of the Quartet Representative ‘[New Gaza guidelines will support health, education, water and sanitation projects](#)’, Press release, 5 July 2010

⁴² ‘Washington-Jerusalem relations rocked by ‘tectonic rift’’, *Guardian*, 28 July 2010

The diplomat is also quoted as saying that President Obama is less likely to heed Israel's supporters than either of his two predecessors.

Mahmoud Zahar, a leading figure in Hamas in Gaza, gave an interview with a British newspaper in which he was bitterly critical of western policy towards Gaza since the Hamas takeover of the strip in 2006. On the other hand, he derived "considerable satisfaction" from the pressure put on Israel by the Middle East Quartet of the UN, the US, the EU and Russia to relax the blockade of Gaza. He described this as a "big change".⁴³

Many observers, therefore, believe that the flotilla interception did change the situation significantly. The fact that Israel has agreed to ease the blockade is, in itself, a watershed of a sort. Pressure will reduce as memories of the events fade, however and, as it does, the Israeli Government will gain room for manoeuvre, but the flotilla assault has hardened the opinion around the world that Israel's Gaza policy (and for some at least, the West's refusal to deal with Hamas) cannot continue. Much will depend on what happens to the forthcoming missions to Gaza, and the lives lost in the raid mean that there will probably be more missions than would otherwise have been the case.

One of the beneficiaries of the raid will be Hamas. The main perception after the raid was that the blockade policy had failed and could not be continued, so any easing of the blockade will be seen as a victory for Hamas in its confrontation with Israel, further marginalising Fatah and the Palestinian Authority Government of Mahmoud Abbas, whose contrasting strategy of talking to Israel is perceived by many pro-Palestinian voices to be ineffective.

Another beneficiary of the events is Turkey, whose policy overtures to its neighbours will be assisted by its perceived leadership in support of the Palestinians. There has certainly been a step change in Israel's relationship with Turkey (see above). The Egyptian Government, on the other hand, could be damaged in international opinion (and particularly Muslim opinion) by its peace treaty with Israel, its participation (more or less enthusiastically) in the blockade and, at home, its repression of Islamist politicians and general lack of sympathy for supporters of the Palestinian cause.

The events are unlikely to make much difference to the moribund peace process, where direct talks have not taken place for months. Whether the Netanyahu government makes a change in strategy in its dealings with the Palestinians depends most importantly on whether the "tectonic plates" of Israel and the USA really are drifting apart.

On 6 July, Prime Minister Netanyahu visited Washington. He had been due to visit in May but the event had been cancelled due to the flotilla assault. Both the Obama Administration and the Israeli Government appeared to be at pains to improve the relationship. Mr Obama said:

We had an extensive discussion about the prospects for Middle East peace. I believe that Prime Minister Netanyahu wants peace. I think he's willing to take risks for peace. And during our conversation, he once again reaffirmed his willingness to engage in serious negotiations with the Palestinians around what I think should be the goal not just of the two principals involved, but the entire world; and that is two states living side-by-side in peace and security.⁴⁴

Mr Netanyahu said:

⁴³ 'Iranian ships could join wave of flotillas to Gaza, says Hamas chief', *Independent*, 28 June 2010

⁴⁴ 'Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel in Joint Press Availability', White House press release, 6 July 2010

As the President said, we discussed a great deal about activating, moving forward the quest for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. We're committed to that peace. I'm committed to that peace. And this peace I think will better the lives of Israelis, of Palestinians, and it certainly would change our region.⁴⁵

While the US and Israel have made efforts to stop the deterioration in relations between their two countries, it is still possible that permanent damage has been done by the flotilla events. Israeli relations with Turkey, too, may never get back to their state before the assault.

⁴⁵ Ibid.