

## Political

**update:** – At least nine killed as Israeli forces take control of a flotilla of vessels headed towards the Gaza Strip – 1 June

### Key points:

- At least nine people have been killed by Israeli forces as they encountered unexpectedly violent resistance whilst attempting to take control of a flotilla of vessels carrying aid and activists towards the Gaza Strip. All six vessels are now in the Israeli port of Ashdod.
- The British prime minister, foreign secretary and shadow foreign secretary have issued statements deploring the loss of life and have called for Gaza to be opened for unfettered aid access.
- The UN Security Council has called for a “prompt, impartial, credible and transparent” Israeli inquiry into the incident.
- The Free Gaza Movement has asserted that, despite the loss of life, it will sail two more vessels towards Gaza next week.

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### Latest diplomatic developments

- Responding to the tragic deaths of at least ten people which occurred as a consequence of Israel’s attempt to take control of a flotilla of Gaza-bound ships carrying aid and hundreds of activists on Monday morning (31 May), Foreign Secretary William Hague said:

“I deplore the loss of life during the interception of the Gaza Flotilla. Our Embassy is in urgent contact with the Israeli Government. We are asking for more information and urgent access to any UK nationals involved. We have consistently advised against attempting to access Gaza in this way, because of the risks involved. But at the same time, there is a clear need for Israel to act with restraint and in line with international obligations. It will be important to establish the facts about this incident, and especially whether enough was done to prevent deaths and injuries.”

“This news underlines the need to lift the restrictions on access to Gaza, in line with UNSCR 1860. The closure is unacceptable and counter-productive. There can be no better response from the international community to this tragedy than to achieve urgently a durable resolution to the Gaza crisis. I call on the Government of Israel to open the crossings to allow unfettered access for aid to Gaza, and address the serious concerns about the deterioration in the humanitarian and economic situation and about the effect on a generation of young Palestinians.” (31/05/10)

- Echoing the Foreign Secretary’s statement, Prime Minister David Cameron has told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that he “deplored the heavy loss of life” that occurred during Israel’s interception of the flotilla.
- Shadow Foreign Secretary David Miliband said it was right to condemn the death of innocent civilians and warned that any inquiry into the incident should be swift. He also described Israel’s restrictions on access to the Gaza Strip as “self-defeating”.
- The UN Security Council held an emergency meeting on Monday (31 May) and has agreed a statement calling for an Israeli inquiry into the incident which is “prompt, impartial, credible and transparent”. The statement also expressed “deep regret” over the “loss of life and injuries resulting from the use of force during the Israeli military operation”. The Security Council also described the situation in Gaza as “not sustainable” and called for Israel to release all of the ships and civilians involved in the flotilla and to permit full consular access.

- The UN Security Council statement was reportedly the result of a compromise between Turkey and the US, with Turkey wanting stronger condemnation as all the fatalities appear to have occurred on the Turkish lead vessel of the flotilla, the Mavi Marmara.
- The European Union and Russia, who are involved in a two-day joint summit in the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don, have also called for an impartial inquiry into the Israeli operation.
- Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu released a statement on Monday (31 May) in which he described the incident as “regrettable” but asserted that the deaths occurred as the Israeli soldiers were “compelled to defend their lives”. He cut short a visit to Canada to deal with the crisis and cancelled a scheduled meeting in Washington with US President Barack Obama on Tuesday (1 June).
- Greta Berlin, head of the Free Gaza Movement, said on Tuesday (1 June) that the organisation intends to sail two more vessels to Gaza next week, asserting that “we don’t plan on stopping we have people from all over the world interested in donating money and we have no problem recruiting additional people and ships”.

### **Israel’s military operation in response to the flotilla**

- The flotilla consisted of three cargo ships and three passenger ships, carrying around 700 people. The passengers were mainly Turkish, but also included UK, US, Australian, Greek, Canadian, Belgian, Irish and Swedish nationals as well as three German parliamentarians.
- Israeli armed forces boarded all six vessels early on Monday morning (31 May) and experienced only passive resistance on five of the boats. However, when boarding the largest vessel, the Turkish registered Mavi Marmara passenger ferry carrying approximately 500 people, Israeli troops experienced heavy resistance. The Mavi Marmara passenger ferry was one of three ships provided by İnsani Yardim Vakfi (IHH), a Turkish aid organisation banned in Israel due to its alleged links to Hamas and al-Qaeda. The other vessels were provided by the Free Gaza Movement.
- Initial reports and video evidence suggest that when landing on the ship from a helicopter, the soldiers met with considerable and immediate force and, after being beaten with metal poles, attacked with knives and thrown from the upper decks of the ship, they drew their side-arms in self defence. Captain Aria Shaliker of the Israeli Defence Force, who was part of the operation, said that until they felt their lives were endangered, the commandos used paint ball guns designed to disperse crowds. However, the activists are claiming that, contrary to such reports, the Israeli troops came on board shooting live rounds.
- The incident occurred about 40 miles (64 km) out to sea, in international waters. Speaking on BBC Radio 4’s Today Programme on Tuesday (1 June) maritime lawyer Douglas Guilfoyle explained that it is legal to intercept ships in international waters to enforce a legal maritime blockade. He also said that the force used by the Israeli troops was legal and proportionate if the shots were fired in self defence.
- Prior to boarding the Mavi Marmara vessel, the following communication took place:

**Israel Navy:** “Mavi Marmara, you are approaching an area of hostilities which is under a naval blockade. The Gaza area coastal region and Gaza harbour are closed to all maritime traffic. The Israeli government supports delivery of humanitarian supplies to the civilian population in the Gaza Strip and invites you to enter the Ashdod port. Delivery of supplies in accordance with the authorities’ regulations will be through the formal land crossings and under your observation, after which you can return to your home ports on the vessels on which you have arrived.”

**Mavi Marmara response:** “Negative, negative.”

- After the incident all six ships were lead into Israel’s Ashdod port. Of the surviving activists, only 50 agreed to be voluntarily deported and more than 30 are being treated in hospital for

their injuries. Almost 600 people are still being held in Israel and are being questioned by the authorities.

- During a search of the Mavi Marmara, Israeli forces uncovered a cache of weapons including numerous knives, slingshots, rocks, smoke bombs, metal rods, improvised sharp metal objects, sticks and clubs, hammers, firebombs and gas masks.

## **Background**

- Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Yigal Palmor issued a statement on 24 May directed towards the organisers of the flotilla, requesting that they allow Israel to transfer their 10,000 tonnes of aid into Gaza through the land crossings and repeating Israel's position that the ships would not be permitted to dock in Gaza.
- In a typical week, 15,000 tonnes of supplies enter Gaza. Truckloads of meat, poultry, fish, dairy products, fruits, vegetables, milk powder, baby food, wheat and other staples arrive on a daily basis. However, restrictions remain tight and there is a particular shortage of construction materials in the territory as, in the past, they have been used by Hamas to construct weapons and fortify its military infrastructure. Israel's crossings into Gaza have been closed to all but humanitarian aid since Hamas seized the territory in June 2007.
- The Goldstone report into 2008/9's Operation Cast Lead highlighted the restrictions on the crossings as constituting part of the context behind the conflict in Gaza. The EU announced last January its willingness to reactive its Border Assistance Mission at the Rafah border crossing as soon as conditions allow. Likewise, the Council of the European Union also issued a statement on 16 June 2009 which said that:

“The EU is also ready to contribute substantially to post-conflict arrangements aimed at ensuring the sustainability of peace agreements, addressing also the regional economic and security dimensions.”  
(16/06/09)

- However, no specifics on how substantial an involvement the EU was offering were given and no new agreements have been made.