

# **Navigating the Siege: Freedom Flotillas and the Enduring Blockade of Gaza**

## **1. Introduction**

The Gaza Strip, a narrow coastal territory, has been the subject of a stringent blockade for nearly two decades, profoundly shaping the lives of its inhabitants and remaining a focal point of international concern. This multifaceted siege, primarily enforced by Israel and supported to varying degrees by Egypt, has generated a complex humanitarian and political crisis. In response to the blockade and its severe consequences, a series of international civil society initiatives, commonly known as "Freedom Flotillas," have emerged. These flotillas, often comprising activists, journalists, and parliamentarians from around the globe, have attempted to breach the naval blockade, deliver humanitarian aid, and raise global awareness of the situation in Gaza.

This report provides an in-depth analysis of the history and current activities of these Freedom Flotillas, juxtaposed with an examination of the Israeli-led blockade of humanitarian aid to Gaza. It will explore the origins and evolution of the blockade, its stated justifications, and the mechanisms of its enforcement. Concurrently, it will trace the trajectory of the Freedom Flotilla movement, from its early attempts to the highly publicized 2010 *Mavi Marmara* incident and subsequent and ongoing missions. The report will further delve into the severe and deteriorating humanitarian impact of the blockade on the civilian population of Gaza, particularly in light of recent escalations. Finally, it will consider the contested legal frameworks surrounding the blockade and the interception of aid vessels, alongside the diverse perspectives of the primary actors involved and the responses of the international community. Through this comprehensive examination, the report aims to illuminate the intricate dynamics of this protracted issue, its human cost, and the enduring efforts to challenge it.

## **2. The Israeli Blockade of the Gaza Strip**

The Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip is a multi-layered system of restrictions on the movement of people and goods, which has evolved over decades but intensified significantly since 2007. Its establishment and continued enforcement are subjects of intense debate regarding legality, justification, and humanitarian consequences.

### **2.1. Establishment and Evolution of the Blockade**

Restrictions on movement to and from Gaza by Israel began as early as the 1990s, initially as temporary closures that became more permanent administrative measures

by March 1993.<sup>1</sup> During the Second Intifada in the early 2000s, Israel imposed several blockades on Palestinian territories, including Gaza, leading to severe economic repercussions such as soaring unemployment.<sup>1</sup>

A pivotal moment was Israel's disengagement from Gaza in 2005, involving the withdrawal of settlers and military forces. However, control over Gaza's borders, coastline, and airspace largely remained with Israel.<sup>1</sup> Following the Hamas victory in the Palestinian legislative elections in January 2006, Israel and international bodies imposed sanctions.<sup>1</sup> The situation escalated dramatically after Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007. Israel then significantly tightened existing restrictions, imposing a comprehensive blockade on the movement of goods and people. Egypt also largely sealed its Rafah border crossing with Gaza around this time.<sup>1</sup> This intensified phase saw a drastic reduction in truck transits for goods, limitations on food and fuel supplies, and restrictions on foreign currency.<sup>1</sup>

The naval blockade of the Gaza Strip was formally established by Israel on January 3, 2009, and announced by the Israeli Navy on January 6, 2009, declaring the Gaza maritime area closed to all maritime traffic.<sup>3</sup> This measure was, in part, a response to attempts by the Free Gaza Movement to enter Gaza by sea from mid-2008.<sup>3</sup> Prior to the 2008-2009 Gaza War, five shipments organized by the Free Gaza Movement had been allowed through, but all subsequent attempts were blocked by Israel.<sup>5</sup>

The nature of the blockade has fluctuated. After the 2010 Gaza flotilla raid, international pressure led Israel to announce an easing of restrictions, permitting more civilian goods while maintaining a list of prohibited "dual-use" items.<sup>1</sup> However, organizations like the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) concluded that these changes did not significantly improve livelihoods.<sup>1</sup>

## **2.2. Israel's Stated Justifications for the Blockade**

Israel has consistently cited security concerns as the primary justification for the Gaza blockade. The stated aims include preventing the smuggling of weapons into Gaza, particularly to Hamas and other militant groups, and protecting Israeli citizens from attacks originating from the territory.<sup>1</sup> Following Hamas's takeover in 2007, Israel declared Gaza "hostile territory" and argued that the blockade was necessary as the Palestinian Authority was no longer providing security on the Palestinian side.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond overt security rationales, there have been indications of broader political objectives. An Israeli government document in 2010 suggested the blockade was also intended to achieve a political goal and would persist as long as Hamas controlled Gaza.<sup>1</sup> Dov Weisglass, an advisor to former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert,

reportedly stated in 2006 that the aim was to "put the Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger," implying economic pressure designed to weaken Hamas.<sup>1</sup> The prevention of entry for "dual-use" goods—items with both civilian and military applications—is a core component of the security argument.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.3. Mechanisms and Scope of Restrictions

The blockade encompasses restrictions by land, sea, and air.<sup>1</sup>

- **Land Crossings:** Movement of people is severely restricted. The Erez crossing, controlled by Israel, is primarily for a limited number of approved individuals, including laborers and those with urgent medical or humanitarian needs. The Rafah crossing, controlled by Egypt, has also faced prolonged closures and restrictions.<sup>1</sup> The Karni crossing, once a major conduit for goods and Gaza's sole point for exports, was largely closed by Israel, with Kerem Shalom becoming the main commercial crossing, though operating under significant limitations.<sup>1</sup>
- **"Dual-Use" Items:** A critical aspect of the goods restrictions is the "dual-use" list. Initially, after the 2010 flotilla raid, Israel shifted from a list of permitted items to a list of prohibited items, primarily arms, munitions, and "dual-use" goods liable to be used for military purposes.<sup>7</sup> However, this list has been criticized for its breadth and lack of transparency. A 2010 Gisha document highlighted numerous seemingly civilian items as prohibited or heavily restricted, including specific types of food, stationery, and construction materials like cement and steel, unless for PA-authorized projects implemented by the international community.<sup>7</sup> A 2016 Gisha report detailed how this list expanded over time, even after the 2014 conflict, to include items like specific wood dimensions (less than 1 cm thick and 5 cm wide), Uninterruptible Power Supply (UPS) components, castor oil, and various chemicals essential for industry and agriculture.<sup>10</sup> The report noted that such restrictions condemn Gaza's residents to economic dependency and that the lack of transparency in how items are added to the list or how permits are judged undermines claims that it is solely a targeted security measure.<sup>10</sup> This suggests the "dual-use" designation serves not only as a security screen but also as a significant instrument of economic and developmental control, hampering reconstruction and civilian life far beyond direct military applications. For instance, the furniture industry in Gaza faced collapse due to shortages of necessary raw materials like wood, lacquers, and glues, despite declarations that Gazan furniture could be sold in Israel.<sup>10</sup>
- **Exports:** Exports from Gaza have been severely curtailed, a major impediment to economic recovery. Before the 2007 tightening, Gaza exported agricultural products, textiles, and furniture. The blockade decimated these industries.<sup>1</sup>

- **Naval Blockade:** Israel enforces a maritime blockade, restricting Palestinian fishing to a limited zone off the coast (e.g., 3-6 nautical miles, often changed), with Israeli patrols frequently firing on vessels exceeding this limit.<sup>1</sup>
- **Energy and Water:** Gaza relies heavily on Israel for fuel and electricity. Israel has, at times, reduced or cut these supplies, particularly in response to rocket fire or political developments.<sup>1</sup> These cuts have had a devastating impact on essential services, including hospitals and water sanitation.
- **Airspace:** Israel maintains control over Gazan airspace.<sup>1</sup>

The cumulative effect of these restrictions over many years has led to what can be described as a normalization of crisis conditions. The prolonged pressure has systematically undermined Gaza's productive capacity, creating a state of "de-development" and extreme aid dependency. This long-term structural degradation, characterized by a collapsed formal economy and high unemployment<sup>1</sup>, rendered Gaza exceptionally vulnerable to further shocks, such as the intensified blockade phases.

#### **2.4. The Blockade Post-October 7, 2023, and Current Status (May-June 2025)**

Following the Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, Israel announced a "total blockade" of Gaza on October 9, 2023, cutting off supplies of food, water, medicine, fuel, and electricity.<sup>4</sup> Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant stated, "We are putting a complete siege on Gaza ... No electricity, no food, no water, no gas – it's all closed".<sup>4</sup> The lifting of this siege was conditioned on the return of hostages taken by Hamas.<sup>4</sup>

While some aid began to enter Gaza from October 21, 2023, after international pressure, restrictions remained severe.<sup>4</sup> Reports from early 2024 indicated that a significant percentage of aid to northern Gaza was blocked by Israeli authorities, and UNRWA stated that food for 1.1 million Palestinians in Gaza had been blocked.<sup>4</sup>

The situation deteriorated further when, according to UN experts and OCHA reports, Israel imposed a full blockade on all aid entry into Gaza starting March 2, 2025.<sup>12</sup> This marked the longest and most comprehensive closure in the blockade's history. As of mid-May 2025, this full blockade had been in effect for 74 days.<sup>12</sup> OCHA reports from May and June 2025 indicated that since May 19, 2025, after nearly 80 days of this complete halt, Israeli authorities allowed a select number of UN agencies and international NGOs to resume delivery of very limited amounts of certain food items, nutrition supplies, some health supplies, and water purification items. However, the entry of other critical aid supplies, such as shelter materials, hygiene products, and medical equipment, remained blocked.<sup>16</sup> Humanitarian aid deliveries were described

as "grossly insufficient, unsafe, unpredictable and inefficient".<sup>16</sup>

## **2.5. Egypt's Role**

Egypt's role in the Gaza blockade is significant, primarily through its control of the Rafah border crossing, the main exit and entry point for people not controlled by Israel.<sup>1</sup> Since Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007, Egypt has largely cooperated with Israel in maintaining the closure, often citing its own national security concerns, including stability in the Sinai Peninsula and fears of militant spillover or Iranian influence.<sup>1</sup> Egypt has also been involved in destroying smuggling tunnels that once served as a lifeline for some goods into Gaza.<sup>8</sup>

The 2008 breach of the Egypt-Gaza border, where large numbers of Gazans crossed into Egypt seeking supplies, underscored the desperation caused by the blockade and Egypt's complex position.<sup>1</sup> While Egypt has played a role as a mediator in ceasefires and prisoner swaps between Israel and Hamas<sup>8</sup>, its policies regarding the Rafah crossing have often mirrored the restrictive nature of the Israeli blockade.

Post-October 2023, Egypt has expressed significant concerns about the potential for mass displacement of Gazans into the Sinai, adding another layer to its diplomatic and security considerations.<sup>17</sup> This intricate balancing act means Egypt is not a neutral observer but an active participant whose policies profoundly affect the reality of the blockade for Gaza's population.

The legality of Israel's blockade has been a persistent point of contention. While some, like the UN-appointed Palmer Report panel, found the naval blockade to be a legitimate security measure under specific conditions<sup>3</sup>, numerous other UN bodies, including the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) fact-finding mission on the 2010 flotilla, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and many international law experts, have condemned the broader closure regime as illegal collective punishment and a violation of international humanitarian law.<sup>3</sup> This enduring schism in international legal interpretation continues to shape diplomatic responses and the discourse surrounding the blockade.

## **3. Freedom Flotillas: A Persistent Challenge to the Gaza Blockade**

In response to the prolonged and severe Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip, various international groups have organized "Freedom Flotillas." These missions aim to deliver humanitarian aid directly to Gaza by sea, challenge the legality and morality of the blockade, and raise global awareness of the ensuing humanitarian crisis.

### **3.1. Origins and Objectives**

The primary initial organizers of these maritime efforts included the Free Gaza Movement (FGM) and the Turkish humanitarian organization İnsani Yardım Vakfı (İHH).<sup>5</sup> The FGM had made several attempts to break the blockade even before the large-scale 2010 flotilla, with some early successes in reaching Gaza prior to the 2008-09 Gaza War, after which Israel blocked all subsequent sea voyages.<sup>5</sup>

The stated aims of these flotillas were generally threefold:

1. **Raising international awareness:** To draw public attention to the dire situation in the Gaza Strip and the impact of the Israeli blockade.<sup>5</sup>
2. **Delivering humanitarian aid:** To transport essential supplies, including food, medicine, and construction materials, directly to the Gazan population.<sup>5</sup>
3. **Politically challenging the siege:** To directly confront and attempt to break Israel's naval blockade of Gaza, asserting the right of free passage and access.<sup>5</sup>

Over time, these efforts coalesced into a broader international grassroots movement known as the Freedom Flotilla Coalition (FFC), which officially came into being in 2010.<sup>23</sup> The FFC is composed of campaigns and initiatives from various countries, working collectively to end what they deem the illegal Israeli blockade.<sup>23</sup> Its objectives include educating the global public about the conditions in Gaza, responding to calls for solidarity from Palestinians, and undertaking non-violent direct action missions to support the dignity and human rights of Palestinians.<sup>23</sup> The FFC emphasizes its commitment to non-violence and works with civil society partners, rather than any political party or government.<sup>23</sup> Member organizations of the FFC include groups such as Canadian Boat to Gaza, Freedom Flotilla Italia, My Care Malaysia, Ship to Gaza Norway, Ship to Gaza Sweden, and the İHH / Mavi Marmara Freedom and Solidarity Association from Turkey, among others.<sup>24</sup>

### **3.2. The 2010 Gaza Freedom Flotilla and the *Mavi Marmara* Incident**

The most widely publicized and controversial of these missions was the Gaza Freedom Flotilla of May 2010. This flotilla consisted of six ships, with the *Mavi Marmara* as its flagship.<sup>5</sup> It carried 663 passengers from 37 nations, including activists, journalists, and parliamentarians.<sup>5</sup> The cargo comprised approximately 10,000 tons of humanitarian aid, valued at an estimated \$20 million, which included food, medical equipment, and construction materials like cement, the latter being prohibited by Israel under the blockade.<sup>5</sup>

Israel offered to inspect the cargo at the Port of Ashdod and facilitate the delivery of non-blockaded goods to Gaza via land crossings. However, the flotilla organizers rejected this proposal, emphasizing that their mission was not solely about delivering

supplies but also about politically challenging and breaking Israel's siege.<sup>5</sup> The UNHRC fact-finding mission later noted a "certain tension between the political objectives of the flotilla and its humanitarian objectives".<sup>3</sup>

On May 31, 2010, Israeli naval forces intercepted the flotilla in international waters in an operation codenamed "Operation Sea Breeze" or "Sky Winds".<sup>3</sup> The interception of the *Mavi Marmara* resulted in a violent confrontation. Israeli accounts maintain that their soldiers were attacked by activists wielding knives, metal rods, and clubs, and that they acted in self-defense.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, many activists and a subsequent UNHRC fact-finding mission reported that Israeli forces used excessive and lethal force, including firing live ammunition before and during the boarding of the ship.<sup>3</sup> The confrontation led to the deaths of nine activists aboard the *Mavi Marmara*; a tenth activist died years later from wounds sustained during the raid. Dozens of other passengers were injured, as were several Israeli soldiers.<sup>6</sup>

The *Mavi Marmara* incident triggered widespread international condemnation and led to a significant deterioration in relations between Turkey and Israel.<sup>6</sup> Several investigations were launched:

- **The Turkel Commission (Israel):** Appointed by the Israeli government, this commission concluded that both Israel's naval blockade of Gaza and the force used by Israeli soldiers during the raid were legal under international law.<sup>6</sup>
- **The UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) Fact-Finding Mission:** This mission deemed Israel's blockade of Gaza illegal. It condemned the Israeli military's actions during the raid as "disproportionate" and betraying an "unacceptable level of brutality," with evidence suggesting that at least six of the passenger deaths were "summary executions".<sup>3</sup>
- **The UN Secretary-General's Panel of Inquiry (Palmer Report):** This panel found Israel's naval blockade of Gaza to be a legal and appropriate security measure. However, it concluded that the force used by Israeli forces against the *Mavi Marmara* was "excessive and unreasonable." The report also raised "serious questions about the conduct, true nature and objectives of the flotilla organizers, particularly IHH," and noted the mistreatment of passengers by Israeli authorities following the takeover of the vessels.<sup>3</sup>

The divergent findings of these investigations highlight the deeply contested nature of the incident and the complexities of applying international law in such contexts. The politicization of humanitarian aid is evident in this episode, where the humanitarian cargo became enmeshed with the political objective of challenging the blockade, and Israel's response focused significantly on the perceived political threat and the

organizers' affiliations.

**Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Investigations into the 2010 *Mavi Marmara* Incident**

Investigative Body	Key Finding on Legality of Blockade	Key Finding on Israeli Use of Force	Key Finding on Conduct of Flotilla Organizers/Activists	Key Finding on Treatment of Detainees
<b>Turkel Commission (Israel)</b>	Legal <sup>6</sup>	Legal and in self-defense <sup>6</sup>	Activists (particularly on <i>Mavi Marmara</i> ) initiated violence, premeditated attack <sup>27</sup>	Not a primary focus, generally defended Israeli actions.
<b>UNHRC Fact-Finding Mission</b>	Unlawful, collective punishment, humanitarian crisis <sup>3</sup>	Disproportionate, "unacceptable level of brutality," "summary executions" for some deaths <sup>3</sup>	Primarily seeking to deliver aid; resistance to illegal boarding <sup>3</sup>	Grave violations of human rights and IHL in treatment of passengers <sup>3</sup>
<b>UN Palmer Report (UN Sec-Gen Panel)</b>	Naval blockade legal as security measure <sup>3</sup>	"Excessive and unreasonable" on <i>Mavi Marmara</i> <sup>3</sup>	Acted recklessly; "serious questions" about IHH's conduct and objectives; violent resistance by some passengers <sup>6</sup>	Significant mistreatment of passengers by Israeli authorities post-takeover <sup>18</sup>

### 3.3. Subsequent Flotilla Attempts (2011-2024)

Despite the deadly outcome of the 2010 mission, efforts to challenge the Gaza

blockade by sea continued, largely coordinated by the Freedom Flotilla Coalition and its member organizations.<sup>23</sup> A "Freedom Flotilla II" was planned for June 2011; while the *Mavi Marmara* itself did not sail due to damage sustained the previous year, IHH and other groups remained involved, intending to use other ships.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the years between 2011 and 2024, several other flotilla attempts were made, including missions such as the "Estelle" in 2012, "Freedom Flotilla III" in 2015, the "Women's Boat to Gaza" in 2016, and the "2018 Gaza Freedom Flotilla".<sup>29</sup> The general pattern for these attempts involved interception by Israeli naval forces, often in international waters, followed by the towing of the vessels to Israeli ports (usually Ashdod), the detention and subsequent deportation of activists, and the confiscation of the ships and their aid cargo.

These subsequent missions demonstrated an evolution in tactics by both the flotilla organizers and Israeli authorities. Organizers increasingly emphasized the non-violent nature of their actions, adherence to international law, and the involvement of high-profile international figures to garner media attention and political support. Israeli responses, while consistently aiming to prevent any breach of the blockade, also adapted, though the core policy of interception remained. The *Mavi Marmara* incident has cast a long shadow, serving as a stark reminder of potential risks for activists and a point of international scrutiny for Israel.

Table 2: Overview of Selected Freedom Flotilla Attempts (Post-2010, including 2025)  
(Based on available information; comprehensive data for all attempts between 2011-2024 is not detailed in the provided sources)

Year	Flotilla Name/Key Vessel(s)	Lead Organizer/s/Coalition	Stated Aims	Brief Summary of Cargo (if known)	Key Incidents /Interception Details	Outcome
2010	Gaza Freedom Flotilla / <i>Mavi Marmara</i> & 5 other ships	Free Gaza Movement, IHH, others <sup>5</sup>	Break siege, deliver aid, raise awareness <sup>5</sup>	10,000 tons humanitarian aid (food, medical, construction materials like)	Israeli military raid in international waters; 9 activists killed initially (1 later) on <i>Mavi</i>	Ships seized, activists detained/deported; aid not delivered as intended by flotilla;

				cement) <sup>5</sup>	Marmara, dozens injured <sup>6</sup>	international condemnation; some easing of blockade announced by Israel <sup>6</sup>
2011	Freedom Flotilla II	FFC (incl. IHH) <sup>23</sup>	Break siege, deliver aid <sup>26</sup>	Not specified, but intended humanitarian aid	<i>Mavi Marmara</i> did not sail; other ships faced difficulties, some reportedly sabotaged or blocked by Greek authorities [Implied by context of FFC persistence]	Mission largely did not proceed as planned.
2025	Conscience	Freedom Flotilla Coalition (ship owned by IHH) <sup>30</sup>	Protest blockade, deliver aid (non-violent direct action) <sup>30</sup>	Humanitarian aid <sup>30</sup>	Drone attack in international waters off Malta (May 2); fire, hull breach; FFC attributed attack to Israel <sup>30</sup>	Ship damaged, mission aborted; crew safe but refused rescue under certain conditions <sup>30</sup>
2025	<i>Madleen</i>	Freedom Flotilla Coalition	Break siege, deliver	Medical supplies, food	Departed Sicily June 1; drone	En route as of early June

		23	aid, raise awareness 13	(flour, rice), baby formula, diapers, water desalination kits, crutches, prosthetic s <sup>13</sup>	surveillance reported; Israel stated intent to intercept 32	2025; expected arrival near Gaza June 7; Israel preparing to block <sup>34</sup>
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### **3.4. Current Flotilla Activities (Focus on 2025)**

The Freedom Flotilla Coalition has remained active, with significant events occurring in 2025.

- The 'Conscience' Vessel Incident (May 2, 2025):

A vessel named the Conscience, reportedly owned by the Turkish İHH and part of an FFC mission, was attacked by drones on May 2, 2025, while in international waters off the coast of Malta.<sup>30</sup> The attack, which the FFC attributed to Israel, targeted the ship's generators, causing a fire and a hull breach, placing it at risk of sinking.<sup>30</sup> Prior to the incident, an Israeli Air Force C-130 Hercules aircraft was tracked flying near Malta.<sup>30</sup> The ship was carrying humanitarian aid and 16-30 international activists.<sup>30</sup> High-profile activists, including climate campaigner Greta Thunberg and former US Army Colonel Ann Wright, had reportedly planned to board the Conscience in Malta to join its journey to Gaza.<sup>30</sup> The incident represented a shift in tactics, potentially indicating a move towards more covert means of interception.

- The 'Madleen' Mission (June 2025):

Following the attack on the Conscience, the Freedom Flotilla Coalition launched another mission with a sailing boat named the Madleen. The vessel departed from Catania, Sicily, on June 1, 2025, carrying humanitarian aid and activists.<sup>31</sup> Notable participants on board include Greta Thunberg, Irish actor Liam Cunningham, and French Member of the European Parliament Rima Hassan.<sup>31</sup>

The stated aims of the Madleen mission are consistent with previous flotillas: to break Israel's siege of Gaza, deliver urgently needed humanitarian supplies (including medical items, food staples like flour and rice, baby formula, water desalination kits, and children's prosthetics), and raise international awareness about the ongoing crisis.<sup>13</sup>

Israeli authorities have stated their preparedness for "a range of scenarios" and have indicated that the Madleen will not be allowed to reach Gaza. Reports suggest the Israeli military could seize the ship and arrest the activists if they

disobey orders.<sup>32</sup> Activists on board the Madleen have reported drone surveillance during their journey.<sup>13</sup> As of early June 2025, the Madleen was en route, with an expected arrival near Gaza around June 7. The FFC is utilizing a live tracker for the vessel to enhance safety and transparency.<sup>23</sup> During its voyage, the Madleen reportedly changed course to respond to a distress call from a migrant boat.<sup>34</sup>

These recent events underscore the continued determination of the Freedom Flotilla Coalition to challenge the Gaza blockade, employing strategies that include high-profile participation and technological tools for visibility, even in the face of significant risks and evolving Israeli counter-measures. The flotilla organizers consistently invoke international law, particularly the freedom of navigation on the high seas and the right to deliver humanitarian aid, as the legal and moral basis for their actions.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, Israel frames its interception efforts within its right to self-defense and the enforcement of a naval blockade it deems necessary for security.<sup>3</sup> This turns international law into a contested domain, with both sides appealing to its principles to legitimize their fundamentally opposed positions.

## **4. The Humanitarian Crisis in Gaza: The Blockade's Enduring Impact**

The Israeli blockade has had a devastating and progressively worsening impact on the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip. International organizations like the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) have consistently documented the severe consequences for the civilian population.

### **4.1. Long-term Socio-economic Deterioration (Pre-October 2023)**

Even before the escalation of hostilities in October 2023, the Gaza Strip was facing a protracted humanitarian crisis due to the long-standing blockade. The ICRC stated as early as June 2010 that the closure was choking off economic development, leading to widespread suffering from unemployment and poverty, and pushing the healthcare system to an all-time low.<sup>3</sup> Restrictions on the entry of raw materials and the near-total ban on exports decimated Gaza's industries, including agriculture, fishing, and manufacturing.<sup>1</sup> This led to skyrocketing unemployment rates, with some reports indicating levels as high as 85% in the early 2000s due to blockades<sup>1</sup>, and pervasive poverty, forcing a large segment of the population into aid dependency.<sup>1</sup>

The inability to import sufficient construction materials severely hampered the repair and development of essential infrastructure, including water and sanitation systems,

electricity networks, and housing.<sup>1</sup> This resulted in chronic power outages and limited access to clean water. The healthcare system was under immense strain due to shortages of essential medicines, medical equipment, and the impact of electricity cuts on medical facilities.<sup>1</sup> The conditions created by the blockade led human rights groups and international observers to describe Gaza as an "open-air prison".<sup>1</sup> This prolonged state of de-development systematically eroded the resilience of the Gazan population and its institutions, leaving them exceptionally vulnerable to further shocks.

#### **4.2. The Humanitarian Situation Post-October 7, 2023**

The humanitarian situation in Gaza has reached catastrophic levels following the events of October 7, 2023, and Israel's subsequent imposition of a "total blockade".<sup>4</sup> This was further exacerbated by a complete halt to all aid entering the territory starting March 2, 2025, which lasted for nearly 80 days.<sup>12</sup>

- **Severe Restrictions on Essential Aid:**
  - **Food:** Widespread acute food insecurity has gripped the population, with the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) projecting in May 2025 that three-quarters of Gaza's population would face emergency or catastrophic levels of food insecurity, with famine thresholds likely to be surpassed under worst-case scenarios.<sup>12</sup> Reports from February 2024 indicated Israel had blocked food for 1.1 million Palestinians.<sup>4</sup> UN experts have accused Israel of the "weaponisation of humanitarian aid".<sup>13</sup>
  - **Water:** The cut-off of water supplies from Israel and the lack of fuel for water pumps and desalination plants have led to a severe scarcity of clean drinking water, dramatically increasing the risk of waterborne diseases.<sup>4</sup>
  - **Medicine and Healthcare:** The healthcare system has been described as decimated and on the verge of total collapse.<sup>12</sup> Hospitals have been repeatedly struck, and medical personnel killed or injured.<sup>12</sup> The Turkish-Palestinian Friendship Hospital, Gaza's only cancer hospital, was forced to shut down due to lack of fuel.<sup>4</sup> As of May 2025, WHO had documented 686 health attacks in Gaza since October 2023, affecting 122 health facilities and 180 ambulances.<sup>12</sup> There are critical shortages of medicines (43% out of stock as of May 2025), medical consumables (64% depleted), and fuel for hospital generators.<sup>12</sup>
  - **Fuel and Electricity:** The complete cut-off of electricity from Israel and severe fuel shortages have crippled all essential services, including hospitals, water treatment, and bakeries.<sup>4</sup>
- **Civilian Displacement:** The conflict and Israeli military orders have led to

massive and repeated displacement of the population. As of May 2025, over 436,000 people were estimated to have been displaced again since mid-March 2025 alone, with 71% of the Gaza Strip within Israeli-militarized zones or under displacement orders.<sup>12</sup> By early June 2025, over 640,000 Palestinians had been displaced since March 18, 2025.<sup>16</sup> People are confined to ever-shrinking, overcrowded areas, often in makeshift shelters lacking basic necessities.<sup>11</sup>

- **Casualties:** The conflict has resulted in tens of thousands of Palestinian casualties. As of May 14, 2025, OCHA reported at least 52,928 Palestinians killed and 119,846 injured since October 7, 2023.<sup>12</sup> By June 4, 2025, the reported death toll had risen to at least 54,607.<sup>16</sup>
- **Risks and Casualties Among Aid Workers:** Humanitarian operations have been severely hampered by the killing of aid workers. As of May 14, 2025, at least 430 aid workers, including 305 UN staff, had been killed since October 7, 2023.<sup>12</sup> Between May 1 and May 28, 2025, at least 28 aid workers were killed, an average of one per day.<sup>42</sup> This dangerous environment significantly impedes the delivery of life-saving assistance.

The systemic nature of these humanitarian obstructions, including explicit restrictions, denials of movement for aid convoys<sup>12</sup>, and conditions making aid delivery perilous, suggests that the impediments are not merely incidental byproducts of conflict but reflect a more deliberate leveraging of humanitarian access. This pattern is underscored by UN experts' assertions of aid weaponization.<sup>13</sup> The crisis disproportionately affects the most vulnerable, including children facing severe acute malnutrition<sup>12</sup>, women enduring a menstrual hygiene emergency<sup>42</sup>, and individuals with chronic illnesses unable to access care.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4.3. Current Aid Delivery Mechanisms (Post-March 2025)

The delivery of humanitarian aid into Gaza remains fraught with challenges.

- **Land Crossings:** Historically, the Rafah crossing (controlled by Egypt) and Kerem Shalom and Erez crossings (controlled by Israel) have been the main entry points.<sup>7</sup> However, their functionality has been inconsistent and severely restricted. The Rafah crossing was closed following an Israeli offensive in May 2024, reopened in January 2025, but then all aid was halted by Israel from March 2, 2025.<sup>15</sup> Kerem Shalom has been described as the primary goods crossing but faces operational limitations and security concerns preventing consistent monitoring.<sup>7</sup>
- **OCHA Reports on Access (May-June 2025):** After the nearly 80-day full blockade from March 2, 2025, Israeli authorities permitted a very limited resumption of aid from May 19, 2025, for select UN agencies and INGOs. This included small quantities of certain food, nutrition, health, and water items, while

critical supplies like shelter materials, hygiene products, and much-needed medical equipment remained blocked.<sup>16</sup> OCHA consistently reports that aid deliveries are "grossly insufficient, unsafe, unpredictable and inefficient".<sup>16</sup> Aid movements are frequently denied or impeded by Israeli authorities; for example, between May 7 and 13, 2025, 31 out of 53 attempts to coordinate aid movements were denied.<sup>12</sup> A new "militarized distribution system" for aid, reportedly backed by the US and Israel, has been criticized by the Humanitarian Country Team as not meeting needs, putting people at risk, and contravening humanitarian principles.<sup>42</sup>

- **Alternative Routes:** Maritime corridors (including the Joint Logistics Over-the-Shore - JLOTS pier) and airdrops have been attempted but deliver comparatively small amounts of aid and are not considered a substitute for sustained, large-scale land-based deliveries.<sup>15</sup>
- **Challenges to Distribution:** Even when aid enters Gaza, its distribution is severely hampered by damaged infrastructure, lack of fuel, ongoing hostilities, security risks for humanitarian workers, and complex coordination requirements imposed by Israeli authorities.<sup>11</sup>

The current humanitarian catastrophe is a direct consequence of the intensified blockade measures, compounding decades of pre-existing vulnerability and eroded coping mechanisms within the Gazan population.

## 5. International Law, Diplomatic Responses, and Contested Legality

The Gaza blockade and the interception of Freedom Flotillas exist within a complex and highly contested international legal and diplomatic landscape. There are profound disagreements over the legality of the blockade itself, the legitimacy of actions taken to enforce it, and the appropriate international response.

### 5.1. The Legality of the Gaza Blockade under International Law

The legality of Israel's blockade of Gaza is one of the most contentious aspects of the situation.

- **Arguments for Legality:** Israel, and some legal analyses such as aspects of the UN Palmer Report, have argued that a naval blockade can be a legitimate tool of warfare in the context of an armed conflict, primarily for self-defense and to prevent weapons smuggling to groups like Hamas.<sup>3</sup> Proponents argue that if a blockade is properly declared, effective, non-discriminatory, and allows for humanitarian exceptions, it can comply with international law.

- **Arguments Against Legality:** A significant body of international opinion, including the UNHRC fact-finding mission on the 2010 flotilla, the ICRC, numerous UN special rapporteurs, and many legal experts, asserts that the Gaza blockade, particularly in its comprehensive and prolonged nature, violates international law.<sup>3</sup> Key arguments include:
  - **Collective Punishment:** The blockade is seen as imposing collective punishment on the entire civilian population of Gaza for the actions of Hamas or other militant groups, a practice prohibited under Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention.<sup>3</sup> The ICRC has explicitly stated that the closure constitutes collective punishment.<sup>3</sup>
  - **Disproportionate Harm:** The severe and widespread negative impact on the civilian population is argued to be disproportionate to any claimed military advantage.<sup>3</sup>
  - **Obligations of an Occupying Power:** Many international bodies and experts maintain that Israel retains obligations as an occupying power in Gaza due to its continued significant control over the territory (despite the 2005 disengagement), including the responsibility to ensure the welfare of the occupied population.<sup>2</sup>
  - **Humanitarian Crisis:** The creation and exacerbation of a dire humanitarian crisis, including widespread food insecurity and the collapse of essential services, render the blockade unlawful.<sup>3</sup>
  - **Integral Closure Policy:** Critics argue that the naval blockade cannot be viewed in isolation but is an integral part of a broader closure policy affecting all aspects of life in Gaza.<sup>20</sup>

This fundamental disagreement over the blockade's legality creates a deep schism in international legal interpretation, allowing involved parties to selectively cite opinions that support their respective positions and hindering a unified international legal response.

## 5.2. Legal Framework for Intercepting Vessels in International Waters

The interception of Freedom Flotillas in international waters brings into sharp focus the tension between the principle of freedom of navigation on the high seas, enshrined in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 19, and a state's asserted right to enforce a blockade during an armed conflict.

If a naval blockade is deemed lawful, the blockading state may have the right to intercept vessels suspected of attempting to breach it, even in international waters, provided certain conditions are met regarding notification and effectiveness.<sup>19</sup> However, the use of force during such interceptions must be a last resort, proportionate to the threat, and preceded by clear warnings.<sup>18</sup>

Conversely, if the blockade itself is considered illegal, then any enforcement actions, including interception in international waters, would also be illegal.<sup>41</sup> Flotilla organizers and their legal supporters argue that humanitarian aid convoys should enjoy special protection and the right of passage, particularly when a blockade is causing a severe humanitarian crisis.<sup>41</sup> They assert that under UNCLOS, interference with peaceful vessels on the high seas is permissible only under very narrow exceptions, such as piracy, none of which apply to humanitarian missions.<sup>41</sup> The unresolved question of the blockade's legality under International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is therefore central to determining which legal framework—the Law of the Sea or the Law of Armed Conflict—takes precedence in these encounters.

### 5.3. The Role and Stance of International Bodies

Various international bodies have addressed the Gaza blockade and flotilla incidents, often with differing conclusions or emphasis:

- **United Nations:**
  - The **Security Council** condemned acts resulting in civilian deaths during the 2010 flotilla raid and called for impartial investigations.<sup>6</sup> It has passed resolutions concerning humanitarian access to Gaza.<sup>41</sup>
  - The **UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC)** has consistently issued strong condemnations of Israeli actions and the blockade. Its fact-finding mission found the blockade illegal and the 2010 raid brutal.<sup>3</sup> UN experts associated with the HRC continue to call for safe passage for flotillas and an end to the blockade, citing international law violations.<sup>13</sup>
  - The **UN Secretary-General's Panel of Inquiry (Palmer Report)** offered more nuanced findings on the 2010 incident, deeming the naval blockade itself as legal but the Israeli force used against the *Mavi Marmara* as "excessive and unreasonable".<sup>3</sup>
  - **OCHA** provides continuous reporting on the dire humanitarian situation, access restrictions, and the impact of the blockade.<sup>11</sup>
  - **UNRWA** advocates for Palestinian refugees and has also termed the blockade illegal and a form of collective punishment.<sup>7</sup>
  - **UN Special Rapporteurs** have frequently been critical of the blockade's human rights impact, with some accusing Israel of war crimes, including the weaponization of food and potential acts of genocide.<sup>14</sup>
- **International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC):** The ICRC has consistently maintained that the Gaza closure constitutes collective punishment in clear violation of Israel's obligations under IHL. It has repeatedly called for the lifting of the closure and reported on the collapsing humanitarian response, deeming the

aid blockage "unacceptable".<sup>3</sup>

- **International Criminal Court (ICC):** The ICC Prosecutor declined to open a full investigation into the 2010 flotilla incident in 2014, citing the "gravity threshold," a decision that was later subject to review.<sup>3</sup> More recently, UN experts have noted that the ICC issued a warrant for the arrest of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for the war crime of starvation in the context of the post-October 2023 Gaza conflict.<sup>14</sup>

#### **5.4. International Diplomatic Efforts and Pressure**

International diplomatic responses have varied. The 2010 *Mavi Marmara* raid led to significant diplomatic fallout, particularly straining Turkish-Israeli relations.<sup>6</sup> Numerous states and international organizations have called for the lifting of the blockade. The European Union has faced calls to uphold its obligations to protect humanitarian missions under international law<sup>41</sup>, though its actions have been criticized as insufficient by some.<sup>48</sup>

The United States has traditionally been a strong ally of Israel but has also engaged in mediation efforts and, particularly since October 2023, has exerted some pressure regarding the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza.<sup>4</sup> However, its broader support for Israel, including arms provisions and diplomatic cover at the UN, has been criticized by those advocating for stronger measures to end the blockade.<sup>13</sup> Current diplomatic pressure is focused on the ongoing catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza and the safety of missions like the *Madleen* flotilla.<sup>13</sup> Despite numerous legal and moral condemnations of the blockade's impact by international bodies, effective international action to compel a significant, sustained change in Israeli policy has been notably limited, revealing a gap between normative pronouncements and the political will or capacity for enforcement.<sup>44</sup>

### **6. Perspectives and Narratives**

The Gaza blockade and the Freedom Flotilla phenomenon are characterized by deeply divergent perspectives and narratives, reflecting the broader political and ideological conflicts at play.

#### **6.1. Israeli Government and Military Perspectives**

The Israeli government and military consistently frame the blockade as a necessary security measure to protect Israeli citizens from Hamas and other militant groups operating in Gaza.<sup>1</sup> The primary justification is the prevention of weapons smuggling into the territory.<sup>22</sup> From this viewpoint, Freedom Flotilla activists are often portrayed as provocateurs, with some participants, particularly those associated with

organizations like the İHH, accused of having links to terrorist organizations or violent intentions.<sup>5</sup> The IDF press release regarding the 2010 flotilla, for example, initially claimed (though later withdrew) that the ship carried mercenaries linked to al-Qaeda.<sup>5</sup>

The force used during interceptions, especially in the *Mavi Marmara* incident, is justified as self-defense against violent resistance from activists.<sup>6</sup> Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described the soldiers' actions in the 2010 raid as a clear case of self-defense, a position upheld by the Israeli Supreme Court and the Turkel Commission, which pinned blame on passengers for initiating violence.<sup>6</sup> Israel generally denies that its policies amount to collective punishment and asserts that sufficient humanitarian aid is allowed into Gaza, although the types and quantities of permitted goods are often disputed by international organizations.<sup>1</sup> Allegations of genocide related to its actions in Gaza are vehemently rejected, often characterized as "antisemitic blood libel".<sup>31</sup>

## **6.2. Palestinian Perspectives**

For Palestinians in Gaza, the blockade represents years of collective suffering, economic devastation, and an ongoing humanitarian crisis. Reports from OCHA and the ICRC, which extensively document conditions on the ground, reflect these experiences of daily hardship, lack of access to essential services, and the psychological toll of living under siege.<sup>3</sup>

Official statements from Palestinian political factions specifically regarding Freedom Flotillas are not extensively detailed in the provided research material.<sup>13</sup> While Hamas, as the de facto governing authority in Gaza, consistently condemns the Israeli blockade and the resulting humanitarian tragedy<sup>50</sup>, its direct public endorsement or strategic coordination with the flotilla movement itself is not clearly documented in these sources. Their general anti-blockade stance would logically imply support for efforts aimed at breaking it. Similarly, the Palestinian Authority (PA) also opposes the blockade, but its specific engagement with or statements on the flotilla initiatives are not prominent in the available information.<sup>13</sup> The internal Palestinian political divisions, such as those between Fatah and Hamas<sup>50</sup>, may also influence their respective approaches to such international civil society actions. This relative absence of direct, prominent official statements from major Palestinian political actors *specifically on the flotillas* is a notable aspect of the political landscape surrounding these missions.

## **6.3. Freedom Flotilla Coalition and Activist Perspectives**

The Freedom Flotilla Coalition and participating activists view their missions as acts of non-violent civil resistance and solidarity with the Palestinian people.<sup>13</sup> They

emphasize the humanitarian imperative to deliver aid directly to Gaza and to challenge what they consider an illegal and inhumane blockade that violates fundamental human rights.<sup>13</sup> Activists often highlight the dire conditions in Gaza, sometimes using strong terms such as "live-streamed genocide" to describe the situation and criticize international inaction.<sup>31</sup>

They accuse Israeli forces of aggression, disproportionate use of force, and violations of international law during interceptions.<sup>13</sup> The FFC attributed the May 2025 drone attack on the 'Conscience' directly to Israel.<sup>30</sup> Their legal arguments consistently assert the right of free passage in international waters and the protected status of humanitarian aid delivery missions under various international conventions.<sup>41</sup> The emphasis is on peaceful intent and the moral and legal obligation to act in the face of severe human suffering.

The starkly contrasting narratives surrounding events like the *Mavi Marmara* raid or the 'Conscience' incident illustrate a "narrative war" that runs parallel to the physical confrontations. Each side endeavors to frame the events, motivations, and legality in a manner that supports its position and aims to sway international public and political opinion. This battle for narrative control is a crucial dimension of the ongoing conflict over the Gaza blockade.

## 7. Conclusion

The history of the Gaza blockade and the Freedom Flotilla movement is a chronicle of enduring conflict, humanitarian distress, and contested international norms. The blockade, initiated with restrictions in the early 1990s and significantly intensified after Hamas's consolidation of power in Gaza in 2007<sup>1</sup>, has subjected the Palestinian population to nearly two decades of severe limitations on movement, trade, and access to essential resources. Israel has consistently justified these measures on security grounds, primarily to prevent weapons smuggling and counter threats from Hamas.<sup>1</sup> However, the scope and severity of the restrictions, particularly the "dual-use" goods list that has impacted broad swathes of civilian life and industry<sup>7</sup>, have led to widespread accusations of collective punishment and have systematically undermined Gaza's economy and infrastructure, fostering profound aid dependency.<sup>1</sup>

The Freedom Flotillas emerged as a direct civil society response, aiming to deliver humanitarian aid, raise global awareness, and politically challenge the legality and morality of the siege.<sup>5</sup> The 2010 *Mavi Marmara* incident marked a critical and tragic turning point, galvanizing international attention but also demonstrating the significant risks involved.<sup>6</sup> Subsequent flotilla attempts, including the recent 2025

missions involving the 'Conscience' and the 'Madleen'<sup>30</sup>, illustrate the persistence of these efforts and the evolving tactics of both activists and Israeli authorities.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza, already dire after years of blockade, has reached an unprecedented level of catastrophe following the "total blockade" imposed by Israel after October 7, 2023, and the subsequent complete halt of aid for an extended period starting March 2, 2025.<sup>4</sup> Reports from OCHA, ICRC, and other international bodies paint a harrowing picture of widespread starvation, a decimated healthcare system, mass displacement, and immense civilian suffering.<sup>12</sup> Current aid delivery mechanisms remain grossly insufficient to meet the overwhelming needs.<sup>16</sup>

Legally and politically, the situation remains deeply entrenched. There is no international consensus on the legality of the blockade itself, with significant bodies like the UNHRC and ICRC deeming it a violation of international law, while others, like the UN Palmer Report panel, found the naval blockade component to be a legitimate security measure under specific circumstances.<sup>3</sup> This fragmentation of legal opinion weakens the force of international law in resolving the dispute. Similarly, despite numerous condemnations of the humanitarian impact, effective international political action to compel a sustained change in policy has been limited, highlighting a persistent gap between normative pronouncements and tangible enforcement.<sup>44</sup>

The history of the blockade and the flotillas reveals a cyclical pattern of action and reaction: Israeli restrictions prompt flotilla attempts, which lead to Israeli interceptions, international scrutiny, and sometimes minor adjustments to the blockade, but ultimately result in further entrenchment of positions rather than a resolution. While Freedom Flotillas have succeeded in raising global awareness and highlighting the human cost of the siege, their capacity to fundamentally alter Israel's blockade policy or deliver substantial, sustained aid has been severely constrained by consistent state action to prevent them from reaching Gaza.

The interplay of Israeli security imperatives, Palestinian suffering and rights, the determined agency of international civil society activists, and the often inadequate or divided responses of the international legal and political system continues to define this protracted crisis. The Gaza blockade and the efforts to challenge it remain a potent symbol of an unresolved conflict with devastating human consequences and a persistent challenge to international humanitarian principles and legal norms.

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