

# Israeli government shores up Gaza blockade

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The Israeli government has moved to defuse mounting international condemnation of its illegal siege of Gaza, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet voting Sunday to "liberalise the system by which civilian goods enter Gaza". The modification of the blockade is designed to strengthen the Israeli military's hand in maintaining its crushing suppression of the 1.5 million Palestinians living in the territory.

Netanyahu sought to differentiate between a "civilian closure" of Gaza and a "security closure". He declared last Sunday: "The security closure will be tightened from now on." He repeated this to a Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee on Monday, explaining that the cabinet decision "intensifies the security blockade". This amounts to an ominous threat against the Palestinian people, who are yet to recover from Israel's indiscriminate three-week bombardment during the 2008-09 "Operation Cast Lead," which was also publicly justified in the name of "security".

US President Barack Obama immediately endorsed Israel's moves to maintain the blockade. It has since emerged that Netanyahu's policy shift had been worked out through prior discussions involving the White House and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who is the representative of the so-called Middle East Quartet (the US, European Union, Russia, and UN). Obama spokesman Robert Gibbs claimed that "these arrangements should significantly improve conditions for Palestinians in Gaza".

Washington's response is consistent with its stance adopted toward Israel in the aftermath of the May 31 Israeli massacre of nine Turkish activists aboard an aid flotilla headed for Gaza—unalloyed support for the Netanyahu government and its criminal activities, and determined efforts to deflect criticisms of Israel in the

United Nations and other international forums.

The latest US-Israeli manoeuvre is little more than a public relations move, as Netanyahu has effectively admitted. He declared Monday: "This is the right decision for Israel because it removes from Hamas its main propaganda element and allows us and our friends in the world to focus on our main demands in matters of security."

Israel's decision to allow selected consumer goods into Gaza will not lead to any significant alleviation of the social crisis there. There are desperate shortages of construction materials, including cement, iron, and engineering equipment, needed to rebuild the many homes, factories and social infrastructure sites destroyed by the Israeli military. Fertilisers are also needed to restart agricultural production. It remains unclear how much of these materials will be permitted into Gaza, as the Netanyahu government insists that no "dual use" items, i.e., those that could potentially be converted into weapons, will be allowed in. The sweeping "dual use" classification could be applied to virtually every construction product, as well as fertilisers.

Moreover, Israel has insisted that material will be permitted only for projects that are approved by the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank and supervised by the UN. The latter requirement will ensure that any redevelopment proceeds extremely slowly, as the UN in Gaza is already short-staffed and overextended. The first condition will mean that humanitarian reconstruction is subordinated to Fatah's drive to oust Hamas from Gaza. Ever since losing the 2006 Palestinian Authority elections to Hamas, Fatah has collaborated with Israel and the US, backing the siege and plotting a coup. These machinations led to

internecine fighting in mid-2007 and Fatah's expulsion from Gaza. PA President Mahmoud Abbas responded by unlawfully appointing a Fatah prime minister, Salam Fayyad, and stepping up his support for Israel's violent provocations. According to a *Haaretz* article (later denied by Abbas), the PA president told Obama earlier this month that Israel's naval blockade of Gaza should remain in place.

Netanyahu's decision to allow more consumer goods into the territory does not affect Israel's naval blockade. In other words, the policy which led to the Israeli commando raid on the MV Mavi Marmara will remain in place, with the Obama administration's support.

More aid ships are reportedly preparing to sail to Gaza from Lebanon and Iran, while the same Israeli troops involved in the May 31 massacre remain tasked with preventing any breach of the blockade.

Tensions remain extremely high. Last Friday 12 US warships reportedly crossed the Suez Canal toward the Red Sea, in one of the largest naval operations in the region for several years. According to the British-based Arabic language newspaper *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, thousands of Egyptian troops were deployed along the canal to guard the convoy. *Newsweek* cited unnamed US defence and national-security officials who denied that the deployment had anything to do with a planned aid convoy from Iran. Whatever the case, the incident underscored the heightened regional frictions produced by Israel's attack on the Gaza aid flotilla.

Just as the naval blockade is to remain unaltered, so too will Israel's draconian restrictions on the movement of Palestinians entering and leaving Gaza—including to visit relatives, study, and work in the West Bank.

Israel's decision to allow basic consumer goods such as foodstuffs, toys, and medicines into Gaza was driven by a recognition that the attempt to incite an impoverished Palestinian population against the Hamas government had failed. Sections of the Israeli political and military establishment have long argued that the siege is in fact playing into the Islamists' hands. Israel,

the US and the European Union coordinated a financial embargo on the Hamas government after the 2006 PA elections. Since then, an outright collapse in Gaza's public infrastructure has been prevented in part by Hamas collecting taxes on goods smuggled in via underground tunnels crossing the Egyptian border. The Netanyahu government now hopes to eliminate this revenue stream—while at the same time boosting the profits of selected Israeli exporters.

Christopher Gunness, a spokesman for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, rejected suggestions that the alteration to the blockade would improve conditions. "The siege must be ended, not just eased," he said. "We have to see the blockade lifted, because the blockade is illegal... The Israeli strategy is to make the international community talk about a bag of cement here, a project there. We need full unfettered access through all the crossings."

Israel remains guilty of the ongoing, brutal collective punishment of the Palestinian civilian population—a war crime for which senior government and military personnel ought to face arrest and prosecution.



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