

HUMAN RIGHTS

Flotilla Fact Check

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Flouting international demands for an independent investigation of its deadly attack on a humanitarian aid flotilla in international waters, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has formed an internal commission composed of three Israelis and two, non-voting international observers. The commission chair, retired Israeli Supreme Court justice Yaakov Tirkel, expressed his hope that the panel would finish its work as "quickly" as possible. And Netanyahu has promised that the "Gaza flotilla probe will show the world Israel acted lawfully." Both comments leave many observers wondering how seriously the findings of a quick, internal investigation with a seemingly pre-determined outcome can be taken. Skepticism is heightened by the way in which Israel handled evidence of the incident and by what many see as its misinformation campaign designed to discredit the flotilla's humanitarian aid workers.

How did Israel handle evidence of its deadly raid in international waters?

According to Australian journalist and flotilla passenger Paul McGeough, "The systematic attempt and very deliberate first priority for the Israeli soldiers as they came on the ships was to shut down the story, to confiscate all cameras, to shut down satellites, to smash the CCTV cameras that were on the Mavi Marmara, to make sure that nothing was going out. [They were hellbent on controlling the story.](#)"

After seizing all recordings of the event, Israeli authorities then began releasing highly-edited footage, including footage stolen from journalists and others on board the ships. The Committee to Protect Journalists denounced Israel's use of stolen footage. And the Foreign Press Association in Israel, representing hundreds of foreign correspondents, called the use a "[clear violation of journalistic ethics and unacceptable](#)" and warned news outlets to "treat the material with appropriate caution."

Israel claims its heavily-armed Navy commandos were "lynched" by the flotilla passengers and acted in self-defense. Do the facts support this claim?

CLAIM #1: The violence onboard the Mavi Marmara resulted from the surprising resistance the Israeli commandos encountered when they boarded the ship. According to an Israeli military spokesman, "[We had in mind a sit-down, a linking of arms.](#)"

IN FACT:

- Testimony from passengers confirms that Israeli commandoes began firing before boarding the ship. According to Al-Jazeera correspondent and *Mavi Marmara* passenger [Jamal El Shayyal](#), "Commandos on board the choppers joined the firing, using live ammunition, before any of the soldiers had descended onto the ship. Two unarmed civilians were killed just meters away from me. Dozens of unarmed civilians were injured right before my eyes"
- An Israeli soldier's [testimony](#) shows that "the commandos threw a number of stun grenades and fired warning shots before rappelling down onto the deck."
- Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Michael Oren acknowledged that Israel considered the Mavi Marmara to be "[simply too large to stop by nonviolent means.](#)"
- And Israel's Maariv newspaper [documented](#) the significant planning that went into the raid, including the approval of the use of force by senior government officials well ahead of the incident.

CLAIM #2: "when IDF forces tried to quietly carry out their mission to stop the flotilla, they unfortunately [met violence](#), including from firearms on deck of the ship that were used against IDF soldiers." *Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon*

IN FACT: The IDF could provide no evidence of this claim. The boats and passengers were thoroughly searched before setting sail and were only cleared to sail because they were found to be free of weapons. IDF sources then changed their story claiming that firearms may have been [thrown overboard](#). *Mavi Marmara* passengers confirm that firearms were in fact thrown overboard - firearms which passengers confiscated from the Israeli commandos in self defense. [According to Swedish Mavi Marmara passenger](#) and professor of religion Mattias Gardell, "An Uzi and a pistol were seized, emptied of ammunition and were thrown into the sea. We would by all means show that there was a peaceful campaign and that we did not have weapons....Then came the paratroopers in four helicopters and they shot sharply already from the time they were in the air."

CLAIM #3: When Israeli soldiers boarded the ship ["they were going to be killed and they had to act in self-defense"](#) *Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu*

IN FACT:

- As a result of the IDF's violence, which began prior to boarding the ship, nine passengers on the Mavi Marmara were killed, having been shot a total of 30 times. Five of the nine were shot in the head, some at close range, some from the back, and one, a 19 year old American citizen named Furkan Dogan, was shot in what can only be seen as execution-style: once in the chest and four times [in the head from a range of less than 45 centimeters](#).
- [Photographs from the incident](#) show that, once they were disarmed, IDF soldiers had their wounds treated and were given water by passengers, further disproving the claim that they were intent on killing Israelis.
- The testimony of filmmaker [Iara Lee](#) who was onboard the Mavi Marmara shows that passengers called for medical help for the injured, "but [they] were ignored, and a lot of people who were injured actually ended up bleeding to death and died." Her testimony is supported by other eyewitness accounts.

What other claims did Israel make that were then retracted or proven false?

"GO BACK TO AUSCHWITZ"

The Israeli military released what it claimed were [audio transmissions](#) of flotilla passengers responding to radio calls from the IDF by telling the soldiers to "go back to Auschwitz" and to "remember 9/11."

IN FACT:

- Investigative journalists uncovered the fact that IDF had previously released what appeared to be identical video of the exchange between this Israeli sailor and the Mavi Marmara in which the only reply from the ship was ["Negative, negative. Our destination is Gaza. Our destination is Gaza."](#)
- One of the individuals whose voice appears on the IDF's tape, Huwaida Arraf, confirmed that she was not even on the Mavi Marmara, but on another ship altogether.
- The IDF then admitted that the audio transmission was edited and released what it claims was the full, unedited transmission. Though as New York Times reporter [Robert Mackey points out](#), "since they are snippets of audio over a black screen, it is impossible to verify their authenticity."

IHH LINKS TO TERROR

Israel claims that groups participating in the flotilla, particularly the Turkish aid group , Insani Yardim Vakfi (IHH) "[are non-governmental organizations that support terror and are affiliated with terror](#)" and that the flotilla's organizers "have close, longstanding ties with agents of international terror, international Islam, Hamas, Al-Qaeda and others."

IN FACT:

- The Israeli government [failed to provide evidence](#) of individual claims of terrorist affiliations or intentions.
- The Israeli government [edited its own websites](#) to remove Al-Qaeda assertions after it could not substantiate claims that flotilla passengers had connections to Al-Qaeda.
- The Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, a think tank with ties to Israel's Defense Ministry, concluded that there is "[no known evidence of current links between IHH and 'global jihad elements.'](#)"
- Not only does the IHH not appear on the US State Department's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations, the group played an active role in delivering humanitarian aid to Haiti after the devastating January earthquake while the US military directed relief efforts there.

What about Israel's claims regarding the humanitarian situation in Gaza?

Israel claims that it told the flotilla that if they docked in Ashdod, the Israeli government would "[transfer their aid through the existing land crossings, in accordance with established procedures.](#)"

Did the flotilla passengers have reason to doubt that Israel would in fact let the humanitarian aid enter Gaza?

Yes. According to a [guide produced by the BBC](#), for much of the last three years, Gaza's "1.5 million people have relied on less than a quarter of the volume of imported supplies they received in December 2005." This falls far short of the minimum required to avoid malnutrition, poverty, and prevent or treat a variety of illnesses. According to Amnesty International's recently-released annual report, the siege has resulted in "mass unemployment, extreme poverty, food insecurity and food price rises caused by shortages."

Israel claims that "[there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza](#)"

Consider the following [statistics](#):

- 61 percent of households face food insecurity, defined as inadequate physical, social or economic access to food, and rely on assistance from aid agencies. An additional 16.2 percent are considered vulnerable to food insecurity.
- 65 percent of the food insecure are children under the age of 18.
- Unemployment is at 40 percent.
- 10 percent of children under five are stunted (low height for age, usually attributed to a chronic lack of protein and micronutrients, including iron and essential vitamins), a steadily increasing trend over recent years, according to UNICEF.
- More than 10 percent of children are chronically malnourished, according to the World Health Organization, a significant increase since siege began.
- The number of children under five suffering from acute malnutrition nearly doubled between 2006 and 2008 from 1.4 to 2.4 percent, according to UNICEF.
- 65 percent of children aged 9-12 months, and 35 percent of pregnant women are anemic.
- According to a recent poverty survey conducted by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, the number of Palestinian refugees completely unable to secure access to food and lacking the means to purchase even the most basic items,

such as soap, school stationery and safe drinking water ('abject poverty') has tripled since the imposition of the blockade in June 2007.

Israel claims that its blockade of Gaza is in response to rockets fired into Israel.

- As documented by the Israeli human rights organization [Gisha](#), "Beginning in September 2007, Israel openly stated that it would restrict the movement of goods into and out of Gaza not in order to protect against security threats stemming from the transfer, but rather as part of a policy to apply "pressure" or "sanctions" on the Hamas regime." This amounts to collective punishment of Gaza's civilians, and as such is a violation of international humanitarian law (Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949). Further, as an occupying power, Israel is required under Articles 55, 59 and 60 of the Fourth Geneva Convention to ensure free, unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief and is prohibited from impeding the full realization of the occupied people's human rights. Israel's blockade impedes Gazans' rights to food, to an adequate standard of living, to work, and to the highest attainable standard of health.
- Further, [according to Amnesty International](#), Hamas upheld its end of the 2008 cease-fire and halted rockets, yet Israel did not respond by lowering the blockade on Gaza. The cease-fire had been "the single most important factor in reducing civilian casualties and attacks on civilians to the lowest level since the outbreak of the uprising (intifada) more than eight years ago. The ceasefire [had] brought enormous improvements in the quality of life in Sderot... However, nearby in the Gaza Strip the Israeli blockade remains in place and the population has so far seen few dividends from the ceasefire."
- The [cease-fire was unilaterally broken by Israel](#) on November 4th, 2008 and led to an escalation of hostility and the eventual Operation Cast Lead.
- Those ["22 days of death and destruction"](#) resulted in the deaths of roughly 1,400 Palestinians, destroyed Gaza's infrastructure, schools, and hospitals, and left its citizens in even greater humanitarian crisis than before.
- The [items blockaded by the Israeli government](#) at various times include "light bulbs, candles, matches, books, musical instruments, crayons, clothing, shoes, mattresses, sheets, blankets, pasta, tea, coffee, chocolate, nuts, shampoo and conditioner." These items have no connection to Hamas rocket capacity and serve only to punish Gaza's civilian population , half of which is comprised of children.

For more information on the legal issues surrounding Israel's blockade of Gaza and attack on the flotilla: [Israel's Siege of Gaza and Attacks on the Humanitarian Aid Flotilla - Legal Background](#)

For more information on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza: [The Facts Behind Israel's "Gourmet Gaza" Claims](#)



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