



Israel's raid of a "Freedom Flotilla" of activists that ended with nine deaths brought a global firestorm of protest, dimmed the chances for a peace deal, and threatened Israel's relations with Turkey, its closest ally in the region.

Both sides immediately claimed the protection of international law, with Israel citing legal justification for effectively extending its naval blockade into international waters where the flotilla was heading for Gaza. Yet for most Western governments, with the exception of the United States, the question is not so much the legality or illegality of Israel's action. Rather, European countries from Germany to Britain are focusing on the broader legal context of Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip and the suffering of civilians there.

Lists of items forbidden to enter under the blockade include everything from canned fruit and fishing rods to musical instruments, donkeys, and nutmeg. A ban on concrete and iron, carried by the "Freedom Flotilla," aims to stop the building of rocket-proof bunkers – but has hampered reconstruction in the wake of Israel's 2009 offensive to stop Hamas rocket fire.

Three reports last month assessed the damage a year after the offensive ended. The United Nations Development Program said three-quarters of the damage "remains unrepaired and unreconstructed." The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs noted some 40 percent of Gazans lack adequate food, while American Near East Relief found 8 in 10 people need aid. In addition, pools of untreated sewage have grown as large as 100 acres in recent months.

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