

## Gaza Flotilla:

### Why the Blockade Makes Sense for Israel

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](#)

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](#)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



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**T**he activists aboard the Gaza flotilla that was raided by Israeli security forces Monday may have believed that breaking the Gaza blockade was at its core forcing Israel to address an issue the activists see as moral blindness. Yet the situation is far more complex than they would like people to believe.

The story of the flotilla crisis begins from the time Israel withdrew from Gaza in August 2005. Israelis were told that if they stopped occupying foreign land, they would be more secure.

Between their withdrawal and the Gaza war of December 2008, however, Israeli citizens absorbed 3,335 rockets aimed at their homes. Their border towns became uninhabitable, as mothers had 45 seconds to hear a siren, gather their kids, and pray they would make it to a shelter.

Some of the rockets were Iranian-made Grad rockets and others were Fajr-3s that had a 27-mile range. The range of the rockets grew with each passing month after Israeli forces left. Moreover, since Israel withdrew from Gaza, it no longer controlled the Egyptian-Gazan border, where all of the rocket smuggling was taking place.

There was never a single UN Security Council session to discuss those attacks.

That's why Israel insisted on a naval blockade of the Gaza Strip: It was the only way to curb the Palestinian rocket attacks on its people.

While critics like to say that Israel retains forms of air and sea control, it ceded the area that counted in the withdrawal and exposed its citizens to rocket attacks. The lessons from that pullout will make a potential withdrawal from the West Bank much harder. There will be those who say, "If you didn't like the book, why would you see the movie?"

Now, in the wake of the confrontation between the flotilla and Israeli forces, the international community is calling on Israel to lift the blockade.

Could Hamas, the radical militant organization that effectively rules Gaza, be trusted to adhere to a lifting of the blockade?

While much has been made of the fact that Israel does not talk to Hamas (both Jerusalem and Washington deem it a terrorist organization), it is also true that Hamas has no interest in talking to Israel.

Hamas does not recognize Israel at any size -- even the area of a telephone booth on a Tel Aviv beach. Just last week in Damascus, Syria, PBS talk show host Charlie Rose kept asking Hamas leader Khaled Meshal if he would accept Israel if it withdrew to the pre-1967 borders; Mr. Meshal refused to answer.

He indicated that Israel should agree to the right of millions of Palestinians to relocate in Israel and not just a new Palestinian state, and then this should be put forward to a referendum of all of the world's Palestinians (not just the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza), and then who knows. Not much hope there.

So who would ensure that a lifted blockade from Gaza would not permit more rockets to come into Gaza? No countries have volunteered to be peace enforcers on Gaza's borders.

The European Union agreed to monitor a crossing point in Rafah, which is easier than enforcement as it requires no robust military presence but only computers -- proverbial pencils -- to issue reports.

Yet, even this is a pale challenge to the 12-kilometer southern border with Egypt, where smuggling has occurred. Yet, even at the Rafah crossing alone, the EU monitors repeatedly fled the scene when the going got rough during the past few years.

Complicating the situation further is the fact that reporting does not suggest that Gaza is on the verge of catastrophe. This is what the Financial Times's Tobias Buck wrote from Rafah just last week, alluding to the tunnel smuggling: "[T]he prices of many smuggled goods have fallen in recent months, thanks to a supply glut that is on striking displays across the [Gaza] Strip."

The tunnel smuggling, Mr. Buck writes, has "become so efficient that shops all over Gaza are bursting with goods. Branded products such as Coca-cola, Nescafe, Snickers and Heinz ketchup -- long absent as a result of the Israeli blockade -- are both cheap and widely available."

This suggests that the blockade has certainly not led to Gaza being on the brink of starvation.

The unspoken argument for the blockade is that it has been effective. In the past two years, Hamas leadership continually trails the popularity of the Palestinian Authority and Fatah in the West Bank as people understand that Hamas has not been able to declare business as usual.

Moreover, Israel has a silent partner in supporting the blockade: Egypt. Though Egypt announced a lifting of the blockade today, past gestures by the Mubarak government suggest this move will be equally short-lived. Cairo was willing to withstand protests at its embassies in the Arab world during the 2008-09 Gaza war, but still refused to open up its Rafah border crossing to Hamas.

While there is probably an argument to be made that the terms of the blockade should be adjusted at least somewhat to minimize social pain and cope with the reality of the tunnels, this should not be confused with normalizing the role of Hamas itself.

The Obama administration has reiterated criteria that the United States, United Nations, EU, and Russia established as a prerequisite for Hamas to play a constructive role: disavow violence, accept Israel, and adhere to previous agreements.

President Obama had made clear that the onus is on Hamas to change its ways before it becomes a legitimate peace partner. It has accepted the logic that an unreconstructed Hamas will spoil peace talks more from the inside rather than the outside, as Obama pursues a policy of seeking success in George Mitchell's West Bank proximity talks.

There is a reason for this view. Hamas has made clear that its condition for joining a united Palestinian government is abandoning peace talks with Israel and agreeing at best to some form of a cease-fire in return for many concessions that they know Israel cannot accept.

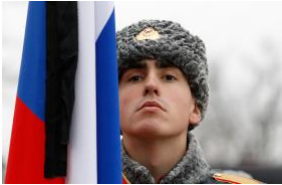
Like the Gaza flotilla, solving the issue of Gaza and Hamas does not look like smooth sailing.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of the [Project on the Middle East Peace Process](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/template102.php?) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/template102.php?>

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