

**Israel announces commission to investigate Gaza flotilla**  
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Israel said Sunday "an independent public commission," including two foreign observers, would investigate its naval raid on a Gaza-bound aid flotilla in which nine Turkish activists were killed.

Israel, which had rejected calls for an international probe into the May 31 incident, said retired Israeli supreme court judge Yaakov Tirkel would chair the commission.

In an apparent bid to boost the credibility of the probe, Irish Nobel Peace Prize winner David Trimble and Ken Watkin, a former judge advocate general of the Canadian armed forces, were named as observers.

"In light of the exceptional circumstances of the incident, it was decided to appoint two foreign experts who will serve as observers," said a late-night statement from the office of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

But Trimble and Watkin "will not have the right to vote in relation to the proceedings and conclusions of the commission," the statement added.

And the two could also be denied access to documents or information if it was "almost certain to cause substantial harm to national security or to the state's foreign relations."

Earlier Sunday, Netanyahu told senior members of his right-wing Likud party that the composition and mandate of the commission was being coordinated with the United States.

Government ministers at the Likud meeting said the Israeli leader had spoken by telephone with US President Barack Obama late Saturday and updated him on the commission.

The US welcomed the announcement as "an important step forward," but said it expected the the investigation to be carried out promptly.

"While Israel should be afforded the time to complete its process, we expect Israel's commission and military investigation will be carried out promptly," said a statement by White House press secretary Robert Gibbs.

"We also expect that, upon completion, its findings will be presented publicly and will be presented to the international community."

The UN Security Council had called for an "impartial" investigation into the incident, stopping short of calls by Turkey and other countries for an independent, international investigation.

Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu had said that Israel should accept an international inquiry if it wanted to restore Israeli-Turkish ties

The announcement came as Israel faced mounting pressure to end its blockade of the Gaza Strip in the wake of the botched commando raid on the aid flotilla.

Earlier Sunday Netanyahu said he had been looking at how to meet Gaza's humanitarian needs while keeping weapons out of the Hamas-run coastal strip before the latest crisis.

"Before the flotilla set sail for Gaza, we discussed, in various forums, the continuation of our policy toward the Gaza Strip," Netanyahu told reporters at the weekly cabinet meeting.

Netanyahu said he had held talks on the issue with Middle East Quartet envoy Tony Blair, who represents the United Nations, the United States, the European Union and Russia.

In a statement Sunday, Blair welcomed Netanyahu's latest comments, saying they made a clear distinction between Israel's security concerns and the need to let Gazans live a normal life.

Local media have said that Israel, in consultation with Washington, is weighing the possibility of allowing maritime shipments of supplies to Gaza: a third party would inspect vessels at sea to ensure they were not carrying arms or other contraband.

Israel and Egypt cut off most access to the Gaza Strip when Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit was captured by Hamas and other militants during a cross-border raid in June 2006.

The closure was tightened further the following year when the Islamist group, which has fired thousands of rockets and mortar rounds into Israel, seized power in Gaza.

The Israeli statement said the commission would examine Israel's naval blockade of Gaza and its legality under international law and the "actions taken by Israel to enforce the naval blockade in the incident of 31 May 2010 with the rules of international law".

It would also examine "the actions taken by the organizers of the flotilla and its participants, as well as their identity."

Netanyahu planned to seek the approval of his Cabinet on Monday for the proposed commission.

Israeli army chief of staff Gabi Ashkenazi meanwhile defended the actions of the soldiers who boarded the flotilla.

"We are in the middle of the process of investigating and learning lessons from the flotilla incident, but I can already say without a doubt and without reservations that the soldiers acted properly given the dangers they faced," he said.

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