

## Quantitative easing

*AFTER pondering the matter for two days, the Israeli cabinet has announced it will ease some of the restrictions of Israel's land blockade of Gaza. After the meeting, the government released a statement saying:*



*"It was agreed to liberalize the system by which civilian goods enter Gaza [and] expand the inflow of materials for civilian projects that are under international supervision."*

But it is far from clear what this "liberalisation" will entail, or how fast it will happen. The statement also says that Israel would continue to implement the "existing security procedures to prevent the inflow of weapons and war materials" and that it will decide in the coming days how it will implement this decision. Some items banned from Gaza, mainly construction materials, are forbidden on the basis that they are "dual-use"—they might be used to build houses but they might also be for building bombs, says Israel.

The statement has been greeted with caution. Catherine Ashton, the EU's foreign policy chief, responded by saying that the EU supports Israel's intention to ease the blockade but pointed out that "this is an in-principle statement ... obviously the detail is what matters". Unsurprisingly, Hamas has been swift to criticise the proposal, dismissing it as propaganda.

The cabinet's decision reflects Israel's concern that its botched and bloody operation to stop a protest flotilla bound for Gaza last month has not just tarnished its reputation, but also undermined the legitimacy of its policy of besieging the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip. Barack Obama has said "the situation in Gaza is unsustainable". As America and Britain found with their sanctions against Iraq in the days of Saddam Hussein, an economic blockade tends to lose support over time and ends up isolating the sanctioner.

Tony Blair, the former British prime minister, presaged the change in Israeli policy by saying he was hopeful that the restrictions would change in emphasis. He suggested that instead of permitting only a restricted list of goods to enter Gaza, a new system would allow in all items except for a limited number placed on a "blacklist". It is unclear whether the cabinet decision goes this far.

But Mr Netanyahu will be hoping that he has yielded enough on the humanitarian front to maintain enough restrictions to choke the flow of weapons to Gaza. Arms, as well as civilian goods, flow into Gaza through the network of underground tunnels connecting the territory to Egypt. Israeli officials argue that the blockade prevents longer-range rockets, able to threaten Tel Aviv, from reaching Gaza.

From Israel's perspective, the key is to maintain the naval blockade. And that is what will be challenged repeatedly as more protest ships are prepared—including several sponsored by Iran that will call at various Arab ports. Things could get uglier still off the beaches of Gaza.

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