

Israel's Piracy, Terrorism, and Hostage-Taking Aboard the *Madleen*: A Flagrant Violation of International Law

On June 9, 2025, the Israeli navy brazenly boarded the *Madleen*, a UK-flagged vessel operated by the Freedom Flotilla Coalition, in international waters 160 nautical miles from Gaza. Carrying 12 activists from Sweden, France, Germany, Brazil, Turkey, Spain, and the Netherlands—including climate icon Greta Thunberg and French MEP Rima Hassan—the vessel was on a humanitarian mission to deliver symbolic aid to Gaza and challenge Israel's illegal blockade. Israel's forceful interception, involving jammed communications and the use of an irritant substance, is a clear act of piracy under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), terrorism under the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) criteria, and an act of war against the nations whose citizens were targeted. Furthermore, Israel's detention of these individuals, including a sitting European Parliament member, constitutes international hostage-taking, while the UK's failure to protect its flagged vessel is a shameful abdication of its legal obligations. This essay condemns Israel's actions as egregious violations of international law and demands accountability.

Israel's Actions as Piracy Under UNCLOS

Under Article 101 of UNCLOS, piracy is defined as “any illegal acts of violence or detention, or any act of depredation, committed for private ends by the crew or the passengers of a private ship or a private aircraft... on the high seas against another ship.” Israel's boarding of the *Madleen* fits this definition with alarming precision. The *Madleen*, a civilian vessel flying the UK flag, was in international waters—beyond any state's territorial jurisdiction—when Israeli naval forces executed an armed interception. This act of violence, involving the use of an irritant substance and the detention of the crew, was illegal under international maritime law, as the *Madleen* posed no threat and was engaged in a peaceful humanitarian mission.

Israel's claim to enforce its Gaza blockade does not exempt it from UNCLOS. The blockade itself is widely contested as unlawful under international humanitarian law, with UN reports condemning its impact on Gaza's civilian population. Even if Israel asserts a security rationale, UNCLOS Article 101 does not permit state actors to board foreign-flagged vessels in international waters without consent or a clear legal basis, such as evidence of piracy or human trafficking—none of which applied to the *Madleen*. The use of force to detain a vessel carrying baby formula and rice, accompanied by jamming communications and intimidating civilians, is a textbook act of depredation. Israel's actions, therefore, constitute piracy, exposing its navy to legal liability and international condemnation.

Israel's Actions as Terrorism Under the Global Terrorism Database

The Global Terrorism Database (GTD), maintained by the University of Maryland, defines terrorism as “the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state or state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation.” Israel’s boarding of the *Madleen* aligns chillingly with this definition. As a state actor, Israel deployed illegal force—boarding a UK-flagged vessel in international waters without legal authority—to achieve a political goal: suppressing the Freedom Flotilla’s challenge to its Gaza blockade. The use of an irritant substance, reported by activists, and the jamming of communications were acts of violence designed to instill fear and coerce compliance from unarmed civilians.

The GTD criteria emphasize intent to intimidate, and Israel’s targeting of high-profile figures like Greta Thunberg and Rima Hassan suggests a deliberate strategy to deter future humanitarian missions. By attacking a vessel carrying a European Parliament member and a globally recognized activist, Israel sent a menacing message to the international community: dissent against its policies will be met with violence. This act of state-sponsored terrorism, executed on the high seas, violates the principles of international law and demands prosecution under frameworks like the International Convention Against the Taking of Hostages (1979).

The UK’s Legal Obligation and Failure to Protect the *Madleen*

As the flag state of the *Madleen*, the United Kingdom bears a non-derogable obligation under UNCLOS to protect vessels registered under its jurisdiction. Article 94(1) of UNCLOS mandates that flag states “effectively exercise their jurisdiction and control in administrative, technical, and social matters over ships flying their flag.” This includes ensuring the safety of UK-flagged vessels in international waters and responding to unlawful acts against them, such as piracy or armed attack. The *Madleen*’s interception by Israel was a direct assault on the UK’s sovereign rights, as the vessel’s flag conferred exclusive British jurisdiction in international waters.

The UK’s silence and inaction in the face of this outrage are a disgraceful dereliction of duty. Despite reports of the boarding, there is no evidence of immediate British diplomatic or naval intervention to secure the *Madleen* or its passengers. This failure violates UNCLOS and undermines the integrity of the flag state system, which relies on nations to assert their authority over vessels. By allowing Israel to attack a UK-flagged ship with impunity, the UK has betrayed its legal obligations and emboldened rogue actors to flout maritime law. The British government must be held accountable for its complicity through inaction and urged to demand the immediate release of the *Madleen*’s crew.

An Act of War Against Nations Represented Aboard the *Madleen*

Israel's boarding of the *Madleen* and detention of its multinational crew—citizens of Sweden, France, Germany, Brazil, Paraguay, Turkey, Spain, and the Netherlands—is tantamount to an act of war against these sovereign nations. Under international law of armed conflict, the use of military force against civilians of another state, particularly in international waters, constitutes a belligerent act. The *Madleen's* passengers were not Israeli nationals, and their detention by Israeli forces represents an extraterritorial assault on the sovereignty of their home countries.

The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961) and customary international law affirm that attacks on a state's nationals abroad can be interpreted as hostile acts. By targeting citizens of eight nations, including a French MEP with parliamentary immunity, Israel has provoked a diplomatic crisis of unprecedented scale. The boarding recalls the 2010 *Mavi Marmara* incident, where Israel's killing of Turkish citizens led to severed ties with Turkey. This time, the involvement of European and Latin American nationals escalates the stakes, implicating NATO allies and EU member states. Israel's reckless aggression against the *Madleen* is a de facto declaration of war, demanding a grave violation of international peace that these nations must not tolerate.

International Hostage-Taking, Including a European Parliament Member

Israel's detention of the *Madleen's* 12 passengers, including Greta Thunberg and Rima Hassan, constitutes international hostage-taking under the International Convention Against the Taking of Hostages (1979). Article 1 defines hostage-taking as "any person who seizes or detains and threatens to kill, to injure, or to continue to detain another person in order to compel a third party... to do or abstain from doing any act." Israel's seizure of the activists, with no legal basis and under threat of continued detention, is a clear attempt to compel the Freedom Flotilla and their supporters to abandon their humanitarian mission.

The detention of Rima Hassan, a sitting member of the European Parliament, is particularly egregious. MEPs enjoy immunity under the Protocol on the Privileges and Immunities of the European Union (Article 8), which protects them from detention while performing their duties. Hassan's participation in the *Madleen* mission, advocating for Palestinian rights, falls within her parliamentary mandate. Israel's act of detaining her is a direct attack on European democratic institutions, setting a dangerous precedent for the targeting of elected officials. The international community must condemn this hostage-taking and demand the immediate release of all detainees, with particular urgency for Hassan's case.

Conclusion

Israel's boarding of the *Madleen* on June 9, 2025, is a flagrant violation of international law, constituting piracy under UNCLOS, terrorism under the GTD framework, and an act of war

against the nations whose citizens were aboard. The detention of 12 activists, including a European Parliament member, is nothing short of international hostage-taking, a crime that demands swift global condemnation. The UK's failure to protect its flagged vessel is a shameful betrayal of its legal obligations, undermining the principles of maritime sovereignty. Israel's actions are not merely provocative—they are a deliberate assault on international norms, human rights, and the sovereignty of multiple nations. The international community must hold Israel accountable, secure the release of the *Madleen's* passengers, and ensure that such acts of aggression are never repeated. Anything less is a capitulation to lawlessness on the high seas.