

When Boats Brought Hope to Gaza

Israel continues to cut off the 1.8 million people of Gaza from receiving relief supplies from sea, an illegal blockade that will be challenged again this year by the Women's Boat to Gaza, writes retired Col. Ann Wright.

By Ann Wright

For years, Israel has blocked international ships from reaching the isolated people of Gaza, thus denying the 1.8 million embattled Palestinians maritime contact with the rest of the world and the hope that comes from knowing that they have the support of many people across the globe.

With all of the tragedy that surrounds Gaza, including the 50 Israeli military strikes on the Palestinian territory last weekend, we need to remember the exhilaration of the people of Gaza one day in August 2008 when two small international boats arrived to show that the Gazans were not forgotten.

After that, four other shipments reached Gaza along with European land caravans, called "Viva Palestina" that travelled into Gaza through the border with Egypt. However, after Israel's December 2008-January 2009 war on Gaza, Israel forcefully intercepted ships headed for Gaza.

On May 31, 2010, Israel reacted to a flotilla of ships challenging the blockade by launching a military attack on the six boats that killed nine activists on the Turkish ship, Mavi Marmara. Since then, other challenges to the naval blockade have been prevented from taking to sea (Greece 2011) or stopped illegally in international waters, the passengers kidnapped and the boats taken to the Israeli port of Ashdod and the passengers to prison on charges of entering Israel illegally and eventually deported.

The latest challenge to the Israeli blockade of Gaza will be the Women's Boats to Gaza that will sail in mid-September to again demonstrate that we do care about the people of Gaza.

A Tale of Hope

Greta Berlin, co-founder of the Free Gaza Movement, reminds us of the joy of the people of Gaza when the first international boats in 40 years arrived in the Gaza City port in August 2008 by providing the words of Gamaal Al Attar, who wrote:

The sun was shining on August 23, 2008, and everyone in Gaza was waking up in order to get ready for the D Day. It is the day everyone in Gaza has been

waiting for a long time; a day we will feel like there some people in the world who care for our suffering. A day we will feel that we belong to the human race, and our brothers and sisters in humanity care for our daily struggles. Scouts from different scout groups had signed up to be in the welcoming committee on the fishing boats. So, we headed directly to the main port of Gaza at 08:00, and, together with policemen who are there to secure the crowds, we boarded the boats and started the trip to the open sea.

Hours of waiting in the boats made everyone seasick, and, by noon, most of our hope flew away with the wind. It looked like the two boats were not coming. We were screwed. All the dreams and feelings that there was someone who cared for us got smaller and smaller as time went on. Jamal El Khoudari (the coordinator for the campaign) spoke at a press conference that the boats had gotten lost and made some excuse. I and the other scouts in Gaza did not want to listen to excuses. The people of Gaza wanted them here now.

The smiles that were on every single face by the morning, the joyful people in the port waiting at sunrise, and the hope of seeing someone who would care for us changed to a huge disappointment. By noon, nearly everyone had left the port and gone back home.

On the way back home, I saw Gaza looking darker than ever, and a small tear escaped from my eye. "It looks like there is no one who cares for us," A boy scout told me. I opened my mouth to tell him that this wasn't true, but I could not find a word to say.

Just like all the scouts, I went home, took a shower, and tried to rest after a long day under heavy sun. All of us were seasick and sick in our hearts as well. I lay on my bed to sleep and forget about humankind. I set my head on my pillow and thought. "We are on our own, and nobody cares."

The Boats Arrive

Then my mum came to my room with a smile on her face, "Jamal, the boats are visible on TV." Mum said. So I jumped from my bed and asked her, "When?" She said, "It is just breaking news." I can't remember how, when, or why I found myself on a bus going back to the port with the scouts. I can't remember how we managed to be together again going to the Port of Gaza. We all jumped on board different fishing boats and sailed to the open sea again.

There, on the horizon, I saw three elements: A beautiful sunset, the SS *Liberty*, and the SS *Free Gaza*. On the east side of the Port, more and more people from Gaza were gathering. This time, their disappointed faces were not there. We could hear the people laughing high and delighted as they strained to catch

sight of the boats.

In a couple of minutes, those of us on the fishing boats came closer to the *Free Gaza*, and I saw the peace flag hanging up, and Maria Del Mar Fernandez waving a Palestinian flag and shouting. Suddenly, I saw many kids taking off their t-shirts and jumping into the sea, swimming to the *Free Gaza*. My small boat got me closer to the boats, and as my feet touched the deck, it gave me a shock. My mind was blown away as I forget every single suffering I had in my life under Israel's blockade. I moved over to someone who was so calm and a bit away from all the media.

"Hey, welcome to Gaza." I said with a smile.

I kept repeating these words and getting happier with every handshake. By the side of the cabin, I saw a muscled guy with Tattoos on his arms and a nice cap. "Is he the captain?" I wondered. After shaking his hand, I kept speaking to him, and within moments, we became friends. He was this nice Italian guy who had left Italy searching for justice and truth whose name was Vittorio Utopia Arrigoni. I shared the Palestinian flag with him, and we started waving to the media and the tens of thousands of people who came to see the boats in our small port.

For a short period, the boats orbited the port; then it was time to evacuate the boats and to greet our guests on land in Gaza. We scouts stood in a line and saluted the new Palestinians who had come from across the globe with one message, "Stay Human".

I will never forget all the small and big hands that came out from the crowds to shake hands with the activists. I can't forget how tanned the people were after that very long waiting day in the port, but also I can't forget the spirit in the crowd after those heroes landed on the shore. I remember I went home that day with a charged battery for life and hope.

The two boats weren't necessarily bringing supplies to the people of Gaza, but they brought what is more important, They brought enough hope for over 1.5 million people who live under the blockade that someday we would be free.

Ann Wright served 29 years in the US Army and retired as a Colonel. She was a US diplomat for 16 years and resigned in March 2003 in opposition to Bush's War on Iraq. She was a passenger in the 2010, 2011 and 2015 Gaza Freedom Flotillas. She is on the steering committee of the US campaign for the Women's Boat to Gaza and on the International Steering committee.
