

A First-Hand Account of Women's Boat to Gaza

For almost a decade, Israel has maintained a blockade of Gaza and its nearly 2 million people, preventing even humanitarian missions such as the capture this month of the Women's Boat to Gaza, as Ann Wright describes.

By Ann Wright

Five hours after our Women's Boat to Gaza, the Zaytouna-Oliva, was stopped in international waters by the misnamed Israeli Defense Force (more appropriately called the Israeli Occupation Force), the coast of Gaza came into view. The Gaza shoreline was starkly visible – for its darkness.

The contrast was startling between the bright lights of the Israeli coast – from the border city of Ashkelon north to Tel Aviv and beyond – to the Gaza coast, south of Ashkelon, shrouded in black. The electricity shortages caused by the Israeli control of much of the electrical network of Gaza condemns the Palestinians in Gaza to a life of minimal electricity for refrigeration, for pumping of water from roof tanks to kitchens and bathroom, and for study. It condemns the people of Gaza to a night, every night, in darkness.

Among those the bright lights of Israel live 8 million Israeli citizens. In the Israeli-controlled darkness in the small 25-mile-long, 5-mile-wide Gaza Strip live 1.9 million Palestinians. The internationally isolated enclave called Gaza has almost one quarter of the population of Israel yet is kept in virtually perpetual darkness by the policies of the State of Israel, which also limits the amount of water, food, construction and medical supplies that go into Gaza.

Israel attempts to keep the Palestinians in yet another type of darkness, by imprisoning them in Gaza, severely limiting their ability to travel for education, medical reasons and family visits – and for the pure joy of visiting other peoples and lands.

Trying to sail two boats in 20 days from Barcelona to Gaza with stops at two ports was fraught with challenges including replacing one boat, Amal or Hope, whose engine failed upon departing Barcelona, readjusting from one boat to another passengers who had flown into the ports from all over the world, replacing things that broke during the voyage including a metal rod shroud by a professional Greek rigger brought to the Zaytouna-Oliva off Crete for an at sea repair of the shroud. (The boat in this video is filled with Greek activists who brought the rigger to our boat and helped replenish our fuel supply.)

During the days on the Zaytouna-Oliva and especially on the last three days, our

satellite phones rang virtually continuously with interviews with media from all over the world. Our participants described why each felt it was important to be on the voyage. The exception to media coverage of the Women's Boat to Gaza was the U.S. media that did not call for interviews and gave very little information to the citizens of the country that most supports Israel and its policies that oppress and imprison Palestinians.

At the end of our 15-day, 1,715-mile voyage from Barcelona, Spain, around 3 p.m. on Oct. 5, we began to see the outlines of three large naval vessels on the horizon. At 3:30 p.m., Israeli naval forces began radio broadcasts to the Women's Boat to Gaza, crackling with "Zaytouna, Zaytouna. This is the Israeli Navy. You are heading for an internationally recognized Security Zone. You must stop and divert to Ashdod, Israel or your boat will be forcibly stopped by the Israeli Navy and your boat will be confiscated."

Our Captain Madeline Habib, an extraordinarily experienced captain licensed to command all ships of any size responded, "Israeli Navy, this is the Zaytouna, the Women's Boat to Gaza. We are in international waters heading for Gaza on a mission of bringing hope to the people of Gaza that they are not forgotten. We demand that the government of Israel end its naval blockade of Gaza and let the people of Palestine live in dignity with the right to travel freely and the right to control their destiny. We are continuing to sail to Gaza where the people of Gaza are awaiting our arrival."

Vessels Approaching

Around 4 p.m., we saw three vessels coming at high speed toward the Zaytouna. As planned during our frequent nonviolence training discussions, we gathered all 13 women in the cockpit of the Zaytouna. Two journalists of Al Jazeera, who had been reporting daily on the progress of the Zaytouna during the final nine day voyage, continued their filming, while our Captain and two crew members sailed the boat toward Gaza.

As the Israeli fast boats approached, our participants held hands and had a minute of silence and reflection for the women and children of Gaza and our voyage to bring international attention to their plight.

By 4:10 p.m., the Israeli boats had come along side of the Zaytouna and ordered us to slow to 4 knots. The Israeli zodiac vessel had approximately 25 people on board including ten women sailors. Fifteen young Israeli sailors quickly boarded the Zaytouna and a woman sailor took command of the Zaytouna from our Captain and altered our course from Gaza to the Israeli port of Ashdod.

The sailors did not carry visible weapons, although there probably were weapons

and handcuffs in the backpacks that several brought onboard. They were not dressed in combat gear, but rather in white long sleeved polo shirts with blue military vests on top and Go-Pro cameras attached to the vests.

They immediately took our individual document belts that contained our passports and stored them below as they searched the boat. Later a second team searched the boat more thoroughly apparently looking for cameras, computers, mobile phones and any electronic devices.

A young Israeli female medic asked if anyone had medical problems. We replied that we had our own medical doctor on board – and the medic said, “Yes, we know, Dr. Fauziah Hasan from Malaysia.”

The boarding group brought aboard water and offered us food. We replied that we had plenty of water and food, including 60 hard boiled eggs that we had prepared for what we knew would be a lengthy journey to an Israeli port after the boarding.

For the next eight hours until after midnight, we sailed and motored with 15 more people on board, a total of about 28 people on the Zaytouna-Oliva. As was typical at virtually every sunset on our nine-day journey from Messina, our crew sang to remind us of the women of Palestine.

Crewmember Emma Ringquist had composed a powerful song entitled “For the Women of Gaza.” Emma, Synne Sofia and Marmara Davidson sang the lyrics as we sailed with the sun setting for the final evening on the Zaytouna Oliva, the Women’s Boat to Gaza with everyone singing the chorus that so aptly described our mission: “We will sail for your freedom our sisters in Palestine. We will never be silent until you are free.”

Deportation Orders

After arriving in Ashdod, we were charged with entering Israel illegally and presented with a deportation order. We told the immigration officials that we had been kidnapped in international waters by the Israeli Occupation Force and brought to Israel against our will and refused to sign any documents or agree to pay for our air tickets to leave Israel. We were sent to the immigration and deportation processing jail at Givon and after lengthy processing finally

arrived at our cells around 5 a.m. on Oct. 6.



We demanded to see the Israeli lawyers that had agreed to represent us and to also see representatives of our respective Embassies. By 3 p.m., we had spoken to both and had agreed to the legal advice to write on the deportation order that we were in Israel against our will. By 6 p.m., we were taken to the deportation jail at Ben Gurion International Airport and Israeli officials began putting our Women's Boat to Gaza participants and crew on flights to their home countries. The Al Jazeera journalists had been deported to their homes in the UK and Russia the evening we arrived in Israel.

All of our participants and crew, who have now arrived safely to their homes, are committed to continuing to speak out strongly about the conditions in Gaza and the West Bank and demand that Israel and the international community bring Gaza out of the darkness imposed by their policies.

We know our voyage was important to the people of Gaza. The photos of preparations for our arrival and videos that thank us for our efforts have been heartwarming. As the young Palestinian woman said, "It doesn't matter that the boats are towed (to Israel) and the passengers deported. Just knowing that supporters are still willing to keep trying (to get to Gaza) is enough."

Many Participants

The long voyage of the Women's Boat to Gaza was to bring hope to the people of Gaza that they are not forgotten by the international community. The women and men supporting the Women's Boat to Gaza are committed to continuing their efforts by sending international delegations by boat to Gaza to put international pressure on the Israeli government to change its policies toward Gaza and to lift the inhumane and brutal naval and land blockade of Gaza.

The Women's Boat to Gaza, the Zaytouna Oliva, set sail from Barcelona, Spain on Sept. 15 to bring international attention to this Israeli-imposed darkness. We sailed with 13 women on our initial voyage, a three-day trip to Ajaccio, Corsica, France. Our captain was Madeline Habib from Australia, who has decades of captaining and sailing experience recently as the Captain of the Dignity, a Doctors Without Borders ship that rescues migrants from North Africa.

Our crewmembers were Emma Ringqvist from Sweden and Synne Sofia Reksten from Norway. The international participants selected to be on this part of the journey were Rosana Pastor Muñoz, member of Parliament and actor from Spain; Malin Bjork, member of the European Parliament from Sweden; Paulina de los Reyes, a Swedish professor originally from Chile; Jaldia Abubakra, Palestinian from Gaza now a Spanish citizen and political activist; Dr. Fauziah Hasan, medical doctor from Malaysia; Yehudit Ilany, political consultant and journalist from Israel; Lucia Muñoz, Spanish journalist with Telesur; Kit Kittredge, U.S. human rights and Gaza activist. Wendy Goldsmith, Canadian social-worker human rights campaigner, and Ann Wright, retired U.S. Army Colonel and former U.S. diplomat were designated by the Women's Boat to Gaza organizers as co-leaders of the boat.

Other participants who had flown to Barcelona but were unable to sail due to the breakdown of the second boat, Amal-Hope, were Zohar Chamberlain Regev, a German and Israeli citizen resident in Spain, and Ellen Huttu Hansson from Sweden, boat co-leaders from the international Freedom Coalition; internationally recognized non-violence trainer Lisa Fithian from the U.S.; Norsham Binti Abubakr, medical administrator from Malaysia; Palestinian activist Gail Miller from the U.S.; and crew members Laura Pastor Solera from Spain, Marilyn Porter from Canada and Josefin Westman from Sweden. Ivory Hackett-Evans, a boat captain from the United Kingdom, flew to Barcelona and then to Messina from work with migrants in Greece to help find another boat in Sicily to replace the Amal-Hope.

A new group of women joined us in Ajaccio, Corsica, France for the 3.5-day trip from to Messina, Sicily, Italy. Besides our crew, the participants were boat co-leaders Wendy Goldsmith from Canada and Ann Wright from the U.S.; medical doctor Dr. Fauziah Hasan from Malaysia; Latifa Habbechi, member of Parliament from Tunisia; Khadija Benguenna, Al Jazeera journalist and broadcaster from Algeria; Heyet El-Yamani, Al Jazeera Mubasher On-Line journalist from Egypt; Yehudit Ilany, political consultant and journalist from Israel; Lisa Gay Hamilton, TV actor and activist from the United States; Norsham Binti Abubakr, medical administrator from Malaysia; and Kit Kittredge, U.S. human rights and Gaza activist.

A third group of women sailed for nine days and 1,000 miles from Messina,

Sicily, to 34.2 miles from Gaza before the Israeli military stopped us in international waters, 14.2 miles outside the illegal 20-mile Israeli imposed "Security Zone" that limits access to Palestine's only port located at Gaza City. The eight women participants were Nobel Peace Laureate from Northern Ireland Mairead Maguire; Algerian Parliamentarian Samira Douaifia; New Zealand Parliamentarian Marama Davidson; Swedish First Substitute Member of the Swedish Parliament Jeanette Escanilla Diaz (originally from Chile); South African Olympic athlete and university student rights activist Leigh Ann Naidoo; Spanish professional photographer Sandra Barrialoro; Malaysian medical doctor Fauziah Hasan; Al Jazeera journalists British Mena Harballou and Russian Hoda Rakhme; and Ann Wright. Also onboard were the three crew members: Captain Madeleine Habib, Emma Ringqvist and Synne Sofia Reksten.

While the Zaytouna-Olivia sailed to Sicily, our international coalition attempted to find a second boat to continue the mission to Gaza. Despite great efforts, ultimately a second boat could not be fully crewed due to the delayed timeline and many women who traveled from around the world to Messina were unable to go on the final voyage to Gaza.

That group's participants were Çigdem Topçuoğlu, a professional athlete and trainer from Turkey who sailed in 2010 on the Mavi Marmara where her husband was killed; Naomi Wallace, playwright of Palestinian issues and author from the U.S.; Gerd von der Lippe, athlete and professor from Norway; Eva Manly, retired documentary maker and human rights activist from Canada; Efrat Lachter, TV journalist from Israel; Orly Noy, online journalist from Israel; Jaldia Abubakra, Palestinian from Gaza now a Spanish citizen and political activist; boat co-leaders from the international Freedom Coalition Zohar Chamberlain Regev, a German and Israeli citizen resident in Spain, Ellen Huttu Hansson from Sweden, Wendy Goldsmith from Canada; and crew members Sofia Kanavle from the U.S., Maite Mompó from Spain and Siri Nylén from Sweden.

Many members of the Women's Boat to Gaza steering committee and national and organization campaign organizers traveled to Barcelona, Ajaccio and/or Messina to help with media, ground preparations, logistics and delegate support. Many other local volunteers in each port opened their homes and their hearts to our travelers, participants and support crew.

At each of our stops, local organizers arranged for public events for the participants. In Barcelona, organizers had three afternoons of public events at the Barcelona harbor with the Mayor of Barcelona speaking at the farewell ceremony for the boats. In Ajaccio a local band entertained the public.

In Messina, Sicily, Renato Accorinti, the Mayor of Messina hosted various events in the City Hall, including an international press conference for the departure

of the Women's Boat to Gaza on its final 1,000-mile leg of the journey to Gaza.

The local Palestinian support group in Messina arranged a concert at the city hall with Palestinian, international and local artists. And the Palestinian Ambassador to Italy Doctor Mai Alkaila traveled to Messina to visit the boats and offer her support.

Ann Wright is a retired US Army Reserve Colonel and a former US diplomat who resigned in 2003 in opposition to the Iraq war. She has been to Gaza six times and participated in the 2009 Gaza Freedom March and the 2010, 2011 and 2015 Gaza Freedom Flotillas.
