

Freedom Flotilla Missions Will Continue 'Until Palestine Is Free'

The bold journey of the 2018 Freedom Flotilla Coalition dared Palestinians and the world to dream of peace, dignity and freedom for all. Now, we must keep working to build a culture of nonviolence, writes Elizabeth Murray.

By Elizabeth Murray

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What's next for the 2018 Freedom Flotilla Coalition?

In August, the crew and passengers of the Freedom Flotilla ships, Al Awda and Freedom, returned to their home countries after being hijacked, interrogated and imprisoned by Israeli commandos. The outcome may have appeared anticlimactic, since many supporters had hoped for a triumphant arrival by the flotilla ships in Gaza Harbor and a breaking of Israel's illegal 12-year land and sea blockade of the small Palestinian enclave.

But in many ways, the 2018 Freedom Flotilla mission has achieved its goals—which were to challenge the Israeli blockade of Gaza, raise public awareness of the blockade and other human rights violations, and let the people of Gaza know that they are not alone.

Of course, had the flotilla ships been able to reach Gaza unhindered, it would have been a remarkable accomplishment and the first time the blockade had been breached in 10 years.

Back then—in August 2008—two boats carrying international solidarity activists sailed into Gaza's shores to a hero's welcome from the locals, including children, who swam out to greet them. It was a dramatic display of people-to-people solidarity against the illegal Israeli blockade.

Their arrival in Gaza was momentous and cathartic, and served notice to the people of Gaza that their plight—and Israel's criminal blockade—had not gone unnoticed by the world. Israel has since shown great resolve in its determination to prevent such a display of humanity and solidarity from ever recurring again—even at the cost of innocent lives.

Since then, Israel has blocked similar solidarity ships from arriving in Gaza, either by hijacking them in international waters (as took place this year) or by pressuring other governments to detain the ships, as when the Greek government compelled the Gaza-bound Audacity of Hope to return to port shortly after its departure from Athens—under threat of armed force.

A Challenge to Israel

In 2010, heavily armed Israeli commandos boarded the Gaza-bound cruise ship Mavi Marmara, assaulting and injuring numerous passengers and killing nine of them, including a U.S. citizen. Despite the clear death threat from Israel, the Freedom Flotilla boats keep coming, including the Estelle in 2012 and the Marianne in 2015, challenging the Israeli blockade.

The Freedom Flotilla phenomenon makes it evident that the movement's momentum, persistence and staying power have little to do with its actual physical arrival in Gaza and more to do with other less tangible aspects of the journey.

The actual *act* of challenging Israel's illegal land and sea blockade of the Gaza Strip is in itself a bold and even revolutionary statement of the need to hold Israel accountable under international law for its human rights violations. These repeated sea-based challenges to Israeli impunity have garnered international attention and admiration from the grassroots public—particularly in view of the unwillingness of governments to acknowledge and confront Israel's 70-year subjugation and occupation of the Palestinian people.

The Freedom Flotilla's international composition—with crew and delegates of numerous nationalities (including New Zealand, Malaysia, Australia, Canada, First Nations, Spain, Israel, United States, Norway, Sweden, etc.) has inspired and energized Palestinians in the diaspora and in their homeland. They realize that this small group of activists willing to undergo significant collective risk to highlight the Palestinians' plight and break the silence represents the world's people.

Palestinians have responded by staging bold nonviolent actions of their own, such as the recent series of seaborne flotillas Gaza fishermen initiated to challenge the sea blockade and protest Israel's arbitrary fishing restrictions and random acts of terrorism against fishers, who are routinely harassed and shot at while they are trying to fish, and whose fishing boats are either shot up or confiscated. Diaspora Palestinians showed up in large numbers to greet, celebrate and host the Freedom Flotilla at every port of call.

United Against Inhumanity

The Freedom Flotilla's engagement of local grassroots community organizations,

media interviews, interaction with the public through boat tours and one-on-one conversations have raised the profile of Gaza's plight, reminding the outside world that residents of Gaza have no freedom of movement, and that repeated, massive Israeli aerial bombings have disabled the electricity grid, destroyed the sewage treatment plant and rendered 98 percent of the water undrinkable.

Meanwhile, the blockade prevents the entry of critical food, medicine and construction materials—preventing Gazans from rebuilding or repairing their destroyed homes and infrastructure.

Freedom Flotilla delegates were honored at parliamentary sessions and feted by local dignitaries and government officials in several cities along their route, raising the profile of Palestinian suffering under the Israeli blockade. As a result, the Freedom Flotilla earned explicit statements of political support for their anti-blockade mission from the Spanish municipality of Asturias-Gijon and from other grassroots political organizations.

Some Freedom Flotilla participants have provided media accounts describing abusive treatment at the hands of their Israeli captors, including [this piece](#) by United Kingdom-based Al Awda delegate and orthopedic surgeon Dr. Swee Ang. This reporting has outraged the public in their respective countries and redoubled the resolve of many organizations to promote the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS).

Roger Waters, the musician of Pink Floyd fame and an active proponent of BDS, recently invited several Freedom Flotilla crew members to his August concert in Oslo and publically hailed them as his "heroes."

Indeed, in the wake of the Freedom Flotilla action, the BDS movement has seen several notable successes. At least 15 international bands and artists have withdrawn from an Israeli music festival. Six of 11 invited speakers also have confirmed their withdrawal from a scientific forum at Ariel University, which is built on occupied Palestinian land in an Israeli settlement. Palestinian scholars had urged speakers to withdraw, citing Israeli travel restrictions on Palestinian academics. As Israeli crimes against Palestinians continue unchecked, these developments build on the international outrage.

At the same time, the Freedom Flotilla's nonviolent challenge to Israel's blockade coincided with the (still ongoing) weekly protest by Gazans known as the [Great March of Return](#). During this peaceful action—in which unarmed Palestinians have been asserting their rights to liberty and freedom—Israeli snipers have been shooting and killing civilians of all ages, including children, women and medical workers. Casualties now are in the thousands. Images of the victims of Israeli violence have elicited expressions of disgust and

outrage toward Israel, as well as sympathy and support for Palestinian freedom.

Giving Palestinians a Voice

These are the atrocities that have moved members of the Freedom Flotilla to risk their own lives to make a change.

First Mate Charlie Andreasson, a red-haired, blue-eyed Swede, explains: "Anything I've suffered at the hands of the Israelis is nothing compared to what the Palestinians suffer."

Asked why he was on his third Freedom Flotilla mission (he was aboard the Estelle and Marianne), Andreasson said: "I have blue eyes and white skin. I may as well put them to good use." The remark alluded to an awareness that because of his race and nationality, any suffering he might be subjected to would draw international media attention—unlike the suffering of ordinary Gazans, whose daily tragedies and humiliations pass largely unnoticed by most Western news services.

Andreasson noted that historically, change is not initiated by governments, but by ordinary people "who have had enough" and who are "standing united against injustice." He cited as examples the U.S. civil rights movement, women's rights, the fall of the apartheid regime in South Africa, and the rights of LGBT persons.

"So I believe we are wasting our energy when time after time we demand that our governments take action instead of getting people united around the world," he said. "That is why we have to get our asses off the sofa and start to make a change. After all, we want to be able to look at ourselves in the mirror without feeling ashamed that we didn't do anything."

Addressing those who might not be up for a sea journey to Gaza, Andreasson counseled: "You don't have to sail with the Freedom Flotilla, you don't have to risk your life or take any time off—it can be enough just to refuse to buy Israeli products."

Divina Levrini, a passenger aboard the Al Awda who also hails from Sweden and, like Andreasson, is a veteran of previous Freedom Flotilla journeys, said she has worked on behalf of the Palestinian cause since her teenage years. It was "a natural thing" for her "to go and try to put an end to the blockade" since she has been educating others about it for so many years. "If it takes Westerners to give the Palestinians a voice, so be it," she said.

Levrini thought the flotilla "made a difference." In addition to the "very important" media publicity, the flotilla mission helped bring about political

change, she said. "During the two-and-one-half months the flotilla journeyed from port to port, we actually compelled politicians to act," she said—a reference in part to Navarre becoming the first Spanish state to adopt a BDS resolution.

Pointing to the dire United Nations warning that Gaza would be "uninhabitable" in two years, Levrini stated that political change "is what Gaza needs. They need that change right now. We need to take an extreme course of action to make a change."

Asked what message she would like to send to Israel, Levrini—who briefly staged a hunger strike during her incarceration in Israel to protest prison conditions—stated: "My only message to Israel is a bold one. The ships will continue to sail until Palestine is free from Israeli terror."

Right to a Just Future

Before we can move toward any real justice in Gaza, more people need to acknowledge the injustice that exists.

On July 29, Israeli Navy gunboats surrounded the Al Awda as it approached Gaza Harbor with 22 passengers and crew aboard (five days later, the Freedom followed with 12 aboard). Masked commandos armed with machine guns boarded the ship and violently tasered and assaulted several passengers and crew members, including the ship's captain, Norwegian national Herman Reksten. They did this despite being repeatedly advised by Al Awda crew member Mikkel Gruener by radio that the Al Awda was in international waters and "wanted no business" with Israel.

The Israelis seemed to reserve a special contempt for the mostly Norwegian crew. Not only did they physically assault them, but they tore down the Norwegian flag and trampled it underfoot, deeply offending the crew members, who managed to salvage it.

Both the Al Awda and the boats were purchased, refurbished, and outfitted through the private donations of Freedom Flotilla supporters from around the world. They were to have been delivered to Gaza's fishers as gifts of friendship and solidarity from the international seafarers. Instead, Israel has confiscated them and looted the personal effects of the passenger and crew on both flotilla ships—taking laptops computers, camera equipment, watches, credit cards, cell phones, clothing and cash.

"They stole everything," said Levrini, who was reduced to tears after witnessing Israeli commandos savagely beat, head-slam and then threaten to execute Al Awda captain Reksten. First Mate Andreasson tweeted that Israel "stole our private belongings" adding: "Once again, we got to know what it's like to be

Palestinians.”

Perhaps worst of all has been the Israeli military’s failure thus far to release 114 boxes of medical supplies—including medical gauze and sutures for the Gaza health system—that had been loaded onto the Al Awda just prior to the final leg of its journey. The consignment of medical aid was to have provided needed medical supplies and equipment to a populace being bombed and shot at mercilessly, even as weekly Great March of Return demonstrations at the no-man’s land between Gaza and Israel continue. A [petition is circulating](#) to demand that the medical supplies be delivered to Gaza.

The passengers and crew of the Freedom Flotilla boats are people of privilege. We can travel freely and do not have to deal with incessant Israeli repression, violence and humiliation. We know our experience cannot hold a candle to what people living in Gaza are forced to endure under Israel’s suffocating yoke of oppression.

But the bold journey of the Freedom Flotilla Coalition dared Palestinians and the world to dream—to dream of a day when people of the world unite with such fervor for justice and human rights that barriers and obstacles will fall away, and peace, dignity, and freedom will be possible for all.

The sentiment of all those who shared in the Freedom Flotilla’s journey—passengers, crew, and the land-based support teams—perhaps can best be summed up by the words of Irish Nobel Peace Prize recipient Mairead Maguire, a veteran of many Gaza solidarity boat journeys (one of the 2018 Freedom Flotilla ships was named after her) who understands the challenge ahead.

“I believe, with Gandhi, that we need to take an imaginative leap toward fresh and generous idealism for the sake of humanity—that we need to renew this ancient wisdom of nonviolence, to strive for a disarmed world, and to create a culture of nonviolence.”

Elizabeth Murray served as Deputy National Intelligence Officer for the Near East in the National Intelligence Council before retiring after a 27-year career in the U.S. government, where she specialized in Middle Eastern political and media analysis. She is a member of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS). Murray was a delegate on the first leg of this year’s Freedom Flotilla.

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