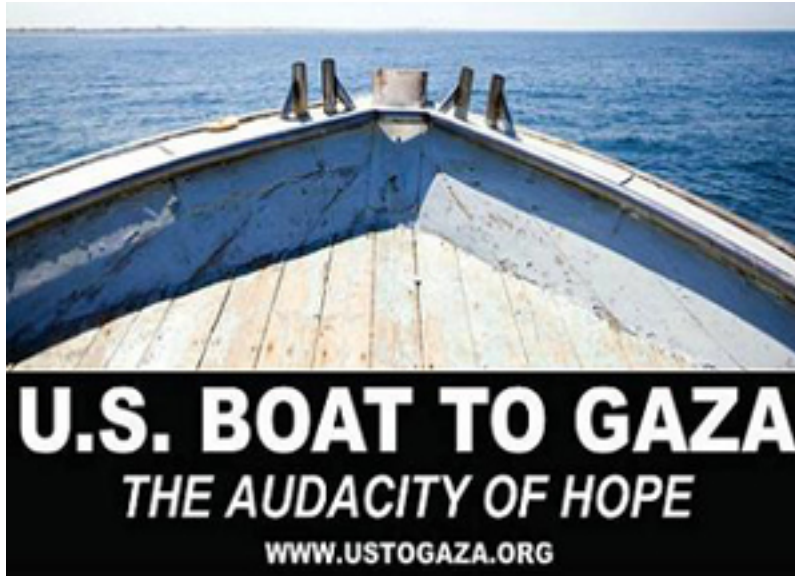


Freedom Flotilla II: A Successful Failure

By Sylvia Schwarz



The U.S. flagged boat, The Audacity of Hope, was refused permission to sail from a Greek port. Other boats in the flotilla were sabotaged. But activists continue their determination to break the siege of Gaza and end the suffering of the people.

I woke up Sunday, July 3, to the news that the European Union (EU) had approved Greece's bailout. Greece, in a deep financial crisis, had coincidentally been preventing several of the ships of the Freedom Flotilla II from leaving the Greek ports where they were docked, ready to depart for the Gaza Strip, in an attempt to break the four-year siege. Greece had used different ploys to prevent the ships from sailing, first claiming that they were not seaworthy, and finally arresting the captain of the U.S. ship. (He was later released without charges.) Only one small ship had been able to set sail for Gaza, and it had departed from a port outside of Greece.

I despaired at the news that the Greek bailout had been approved. Even though it seemed clear that Israel was calling the shots, and that the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the EU, and even individual governments all seemed to obey Israel's orders, the announcement seemed to be a message directed specifically to international Palestine solidarity activists. The message was: "You who dare to go up against Israel, see how we always win? You may have growing numbers, but we have all governments on our side. We will continue to have our way; we will continue to act with impunity, and there is nothing that you can do to stop us."

The history does indeed indicate that Israel always wins: In 2006, in an election deemed free and fair by international observers, Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied territories had overwhelmingly elected the political party Hamas, and rejected the

Fatah party. Fatah had been widely seen as corrupt and collaborationist, while Hamas had set up infrastructure, food distribution, orphanages, and schools. Ironically, even though Israel, itself, had played an important part in the genesis of Hamas (believing that a religiously based political party would be a good balance to the secular Palestine Liberation Organization, the PLO), it would not accept the outcome of the elections. Israel declared Hamas a terrorist organization and would not allow it to be legitimized. After fighting among factions from the two parties, Hamas and Fatah, the major players in Fatah left Gaza and set up headquarters in the Palestinian city of Ramallah, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.



Code Pink's Medea Benjamin and former U.S. diplomat Ann Wright on the Audacity of Hope. Kathy Kelly of Creative Voices for Nonviolence and the writer Alice Walker were also passengers on the ship that never set sail.

That followed was that, in an effort to induce Palestinians to reject Hamas, Israel imposed a severe siege on Gaza. Although Israel claims that the siege is legal under international law, it is impossible to come to that conclusion by any even casual reading of the international laws and covenants. For example, the Fourth Geneva Convention clearly spells out that civilians are to be protected by an occupying power. Because Israel controls all the borders, the sea and air space, imports, exports, and commerce, and conducts frequent military incursions and extrajudicial killings, it is the occupying power— yet none of the Palestinians within Gaza are afforded basic protections.

The siege collectively punishes all Gaza's residents (another violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention) and has resulted in the devastation of Gaza's economy with 45 percent unemployment, loss of fishing and farming rights, 80 percent of residents dependent on humanitarian aid, and a housing crisis (during Operation Cast Lead, the three-week incursion in December 2008 – January 2009, Israel destroyed 11,000 homes, and Gazans were not able to rebuild because Israel prevented sufficient building materials from entering), but this is not a humanitarian disaster. This is intentional on Israel's part. Dov Weisglass, Israeli government advisor, said in February 2006: "The idea is to put the sPalestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger." Israel can thus claim that there is no humanitarian crisis in

Gaza and that therefore there is no reason for internationals to “violate Israeli waters.” (The flotillas have no intention of entering Israeli waters. According to the Oslo accords of the 1990s, Palestinians have the right to fish within 20 miles off the coast of Gaza; but the Israeli sea blockade effectively restricts this distance to three miles. However the situation is viewed, ships entering from international waters into Gaza territory are not within Israeli jurisdiction.)

Even without a humanitarian crisis, the siege is crippling. Necessary material goods come in insufficient quantities from Israel, and therefore many are smuggled in through tunnels (which Israel periodically blows up, claiming they are used to transport weapons).

Perhaps the most crippling of the deprivations is the lack of freedom of movement. Israel controls all movement in and out of the Gaza Strip. Many of the 1.5 million residents of Gaza, including students, people seeking medical treatment, and those with spouses in the West Bank, cannot go outside the Strip’s 140 square mile area (from north to south, Gaza is about the same distance as St. Paul to Minnetonka, and it is only about 6 miles wide). This restriction of movement is in violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 13(2), which states that “everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.”

With these clear violations of human rights and international law, the Gaza Freedom movement was organized to break the siege of Gaza. One year after Operation Cast Lead, the Gaza Freedom March, in which I participated, intended to reach Gaza by land, but was stopped by the Egyptian government. Only former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu know what transpired during the talks at that time, but as the recipient of the second largest amount of U.S. military aid in the world, Mubarak, unwilling to put that at risk, did the bidding of Netanyahu. (Incidentally, even now, with the Arab Spring overthrow of the Mubarak regime and the Egyptian people’s overwhelming support of the Palestinian cause, the Rafah crossing between Egypt and Gaza, highly touted as opened, seems to be just as tightly shut as previously.)

In 2008, five ships managed to sail to Gaza before Israel stopped further ships, disabling and destroying them and arresting passengers. Far more damaging to Israel than allowing humanitarians to bring in a few meager supplies was the prospect of having international media shine its spotlight on the conditions in Gaza.

And shine they did, though under tragic circumstances, and in spite of Israel’s attempts to prevent journalists access. In May 2010, Freedom Flotilla I was the next to set sail. It included six ships with international passengers, and was another attempt to break the siege. This time the results were lethal. Eight Turkish and one U.S. citizen were shot dead when the Israeli navy violently boarded one of the flotilla ships, the Mavi Marmara, in the middle of the night. Very efficiently, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) confiscated all video equipment, computers, and cell phones. Only one passenger succeeded in smuggling out one video. Israel made its own

video and released that, but passengers dispute that it was taken during the actual attack on the Mavi Marmara.

So, this past summer, when Freedom Flotilla II was prevented from sailing from a Greek port, the pattern appeared the same—yet another country not at liberty to act on the conscience of its citizens.

But it is the citizens, not the governments, that will effect change. The movement for justice is active in the West Bank, Gaza, and around the world, and has gained enormous strength and attention recently. In 2005, Palestinian civil society issued a call for the international community to boycott, divest from, and sanction (BDS) Israel until Israel complies with international law. Using the BDS movement against South African apartheid as a model, the movement against Israeli injustices has taken off, with divestment initiatives at universities and states (including the Minnesota Break the Bonds Campaign) and boycotts against such Israeli exports as Ahava beauty products and Sabra food items, and heavy equipment manufacturer Caterpillar, which makes bulldozers to use specifically for the demolition of Palestinian homes.

In conclusion: Was I right to be initially dispirited by the apparent control that Israel is able to exert over other countries? No. With every solidarity action like the Freedom Flotilla, Israel has to expend enormous energy to counteract it. It is no longer possible to stem the tide of solidarity activists all around the world who are now able to see Israel's actions for what they are—colonialism, apartheid, and oppression. As Israel institutes ever more restrictive, undemocratic laws, more internationals are certain that BDS is the way to compel Israel to comply with international law. Just as the campaign of BDS against the South African apartheid regime was successful in ending that regime, so, too, will the campaign of BDS, coupled with all the other nonviolent measures, be successful in ending Israel's apartheid and its oppression of Palestinians.

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1 Haaretz, “Netanyahu’s Big Fat Greek Wedding”, by Barak Ravid, 1 July 2011

2 Information Clearing House, “ Hamas History Tied to Israel”, by Richard Sale, 18 June 2002

3 See the interview of the Deputy Head of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Mathilde De Riedmatten, at <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/interview/2011/palestine-israel-interview-2011-05-19.htm>

4 See also Haaretz, "Defense Ministry ordered to release internal documents on Gaza policies", by Amira Hass, 30 March 2011.

5 In March 2011 the Knesset passed a bill prohibiting commemoration of the Nakba, the ethnic cleansing in 1948 which resulted in over 750,000 Palestinians becoming refugees. On July 11, the Knesset passed a bill making the calling for BDS a crime, and is debating another which does not allow human rights organizations to raise money abroad. Haneen Zoabi, an Arab woman member of the Knesset, said in a speech in Minneapolis on 20 May 2011 that there are at least 35 racially based laws in Israel, privileging Jews and denying privileges to non-Jews.