

Will the Freedom Flotilla Sail to Gaza?

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The non-violence training to join the Freedom Flotilla Coalition's ships to Gaza has been intense. As hundreds of us from 32 countries gathered in Istanbul, we were briefed about what we might encounter on this voyage. "We have to be ready for every possibility," our trainers insisted.

The best scenario, they said, is that our three ships—one carrying 5,500 tons of humanitarian aid and two carrying the passengers—will reach Gaza and accomplish our mission. Another scenario would be that the Turkish government might cave to pressure from Israel, the United States and Germany, and prevent the boats from even leaving Istanbul. This happened in 2011, when the Greek government buckled under pressure and ten boats were stalled in Greece. With our boats docked in Istanbul today, we fear that Turkish President Erdogan, who recently suffered a crushing blow in local elections, is vulnerable to any economic blackmail the Western powers might be threatening.

Another possibility is that the ships take off but the Israelis illegally hijack us in international waters, confiscate our boats and supplies, arrest and imprison us, and eventually deport us.

This happened on several other voyages to Gaza, one of them with deadly consequences. In 2010, a flotilla of six boats was stopped by the Israeli military in international waters. They boarded the biggest boat, the Mavi Marmara. According to a UN report, the Israelis opened fire with live rounds from a helicopter hovering above the ship and from commando boats along the side of the ship. In a horrific display of force, nine passengers were killed, and one more later succumbed to his wounds.

To try to prevent another nightmare like that, potential passengers on this flotilla have to undergo rigorous training. We watched a video of what we might face—from extremely potent tear gas to ear-splitting concussion grenades—and we were told that the Israeli commandos will be armed with weapons with live rounds. Then we divided up into small

groups to discuss how best to react, non-violently, to such an attack. Do we sit, stand, or lie down? Do we link arms? Do we put our hands up in the air to show we are unarmed?

The most frightening part of the training was a simulation replete with deafening booms of gunfire and exploding percussion grenades and masked soldiers screaming at us, hitting us with simulated rifles, dragging us across the floor, and arresting us. It was indeed sobering to get a glimpse of what might await us. Equally sobering are Israeli media reports indicating that the Israeli military has begun “security preparations,” including preparations for taking over the flotilla.

That’s why everyone who has signed up for this mission deserves tremendous credit. The largest group of passengers are from Turkey, and many are affiliated with the humanitarian group, IHH, an enormous Turkish NGO with 82 offices throughout the country. It has consultative status at the UN and does charity work in 115 countries. Through IHH, millions of supporters donated money to buy and stock the ships. Israel, however, has designated this very respected charity as a terrorist group.

The next largest group comes from Malaysia, some of them affiliated with another very large humanitarian group called MyCARE. MyCARE, known for helping out in emergency situations such as floods and other natural disasters, has contributed millions of dollars in emergency aid to Gaza over the years.

From the U.S., there are about 35 participants. Leading the group, and key to the international coalition, is 77-year-old retired U.S. Army colonel and State Department diplomat Ann Wright. After quitting the State Department in protest over the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Wright has put her diplomatic skills to good use in helping to pull together a motley group of internationals. Her co-organizer from the U.S. is Huwaida Arraf, a Palestinian-American attorney who is a co-founder of the International Solidarity Movement and who ran for congress in 2022. Arraf was key to organizing the very first flotillas that started in 2008. So far, there have been about 15 attempts to get to Gaza by boat, only five of them successful.

The incredible breadth of participants is evident in our nightly meetings, where you can hear clusters of groups chatting away in Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, Malay, French, Italian, and English in diverse accents from Australian to Welsh. The ages range from students in their 20s to an 86-year-old Argentine medical doctor.

What brings us together is our outrage that the world community is allowing this genocide in Gaza to happen, and a burning desire to do more than we have been doing to stop people from being murdered, maimed and starved. The aid we are bringing is enormous—it is the equivalent of over 100 trucks—but that is not the only purpose of this trip.

“This is an aid mission to bring food to hungry people,” said Huwaida Arraf, “but Palestinians do not want to live on charity. So we are also challenging Israeli policies that make them dependent on aid. We are trying to break the siege.”

Israel’s vicious attacks on the people of Gaza, its blocking of aid deliveries and its targeting of relief organizations have fueled a massive humanitarian crisis. The killing of seven World Central Kitchen workers by Israeli forces on April 1 highlighted the dangerous environment in which relief agencies operate, which has forced many of them to shut down their operations.

The U.S. government is building a temporary port for aid that is supposed to be finished in early May, but this is the same government that provides weapons and diplomatic cover for the Israelis. And while President Biden expresses concern for the suffering Palestinians, he has suspended aid to UNRWA, the main UN agency responsible for helping them, after Israel made unsubstantiated claims that 12 of its 13,000 employees in Gaza participated in the October 7 attacks.

Given the urgency and danger this moment presents, the Freedom Flotilla Coalition is entering rough and uncharted waters. We are calling on countries around the world to pressure Israel to allow us “free and safe passage” to Gaza. In the U.S., we are asking for help from our Congress, but having just approved another \$26 billion to Israel, it is doubtful that we can count on their support.

And even if our governments did pressure Israel, would Israel pay attention? Their defiance of international law and world opinion during the past seven months indicates otherwise. But still, we will push forward. The people of Gaza are the wind in our sails. Freedom for Palestine is our North Star. We are determined to reach Gaza with food, medicines and, most of all, our solidarity and love.

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Featured image: The flotilla waits to sail from Istanbul. (Photo credit: Medea Benjamin)

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