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The Next Boat to Gaza



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From aboard the "Al-Awda" at the port in Amsterdam.

Aboard the international solidarity boat Al-Awda, part of the Freedom Flotilla Coalition (FFC), we are a more motley crew than the passengers aboard the Minnow in the old US TV series McHale's Navy: Among those who have joined us on one or more legs of the trip to Gaza are citizens of Spain, Israel, Norway, Malaysia, Canada (Indigenous), Denmark and the United States. Despite our diverse ages and backgrounds we have something important in common: *Minds* that comprehend the crimes and human rights

violations being committed daily against the people of the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories; *Hearts* that feel deeply the pain of those whose basic freedoms have been denied for 70 years; and *Consciences* that want to find a nonviolent way to reach out to these people, right the wrongs of the Gaza blockade and achieve a measure of justice.

The legitimate political representatives of our governments have failed us in having the political and moral courage to secure peace and justice for a people facing 70 years of sustained, brutal political and economic subjugation by a foreign power, Israel. Thus, we act. The international Freedom Flotilla Coalition (FFC) sails again. This time the FFC will not attempt to deliver medical supplies or foodstuffs to the suffering people of Gaza – past experience with previous FFC missions indicates that such materials will likely never end up in Gaza, or will arrive in spoiled or damaged condition. Instead, the “Al-Awda” will deliver itself – a refurbished Norwegian fishing boat – as a solidarity offering to the fisherman of Gaza, who are shot at and harassed on a daily basis, prevented from feeding their families, and whose fishing boats are regularly seized and destroyed by Israel.

There is so much misery in Gaza that could easily be alleviated, since nearly all of it is either deliberately manufactured by Israel (such as the bombing of sewage plants, the electricity grid, Gaza harbor, the undrinkable water) or is an immediate by-product of Israeli policy (widespread post-traumatic stress disorder and associated mental illnesses, a spike in the rates of cancer, once extremely rare among Palestinians). The economic blockade, the restrictions on foodstuffs and construction materials, the travel bans, and the sealed borders are all aided and abetted by the Egyptian leader al-Sisi, a close ally of Netanyahu. Under al-Sisi the Rafah border to Egypt – the only non-Israeli outlet available to the Palestinians of Gaza seeking medical aid or travel abroad – is almost always closed. These blatant violations of human rights and the Geneva Convention have occurred with the complicit wink of the US and Europe, whose weapons manufacturers profit handsomely from their arms sales to Israel.

The relegation of Palestinians to a less-than-human status by Israel (with the complicity of the US and its European allies as well as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and smaller Gulf states who have a thinly veiled alliance with Tel Aviv) — in particular the inhabitants of Gaza, who are perpetually locked into an open-air prison and subject to the Israeli blockade, was noted by MIT professor Noam Chomsky after a visit to Gaza to attend an academic conference. In comments broadcast by Democracy Now on Nov. 14, 2012, Chomsky remarked:

“It’s kind of amazing and inspiring to see people managing somehow to survive as essentially caged animals subject to constant, random, sadistic punishment only to humiliate them; no pretext. They [the Palestinians] would like to have dignified lives, but the standard Israeli position is that they shouldn’t raise their heads.”

During our ports of call in Germany, visitors to the Al-Awda told us that many German politicians as well as ordinary Germans are reluctant to speak out against human rights abuses against Palestinians because they say that if they do, they will be branded as anti-Semitic and possibly have their lives and careers ruined by this smear. Listening to these German citizens express their solidarity with the FFC mission in passionate, yet hushed tones, one cannot but think back to the suppression of free speech by the Communist-era East German government that was fiercely enforced by the secret police known as the Stasi, and deplore that the practice of self-censorship has become widespread in what is supposed to be a free and democratic united Germany. It also underscores the powerful political pressure that Israel brings to bear on many European countries.

Shortly before we departed from Wilhelmshaven, Germany, we were visited by Georg, a human rights advocate and photographer affiliated with the “Bundesverband Arbeiterfotographie,” who made the 50-mile road trip from Bremen to take photos, express support and offer a generous personal donation to the Freedom Flotilla mission before rushing back to Bremen to collect his 9-year-old son from school. He said: “I came over as soon as I heard about you.”

We were also blessed to meet Timo, a German trade union leader and youth organizer, who volunteered his time and talents to take care of some technical problems aboard the Al-Awda. Timo, who also hails from Bremen, spent an entire day driving around to half a dozen specialty maritime and hardware supply stores in Wilhelmshaven to help us obtain the proper parts; he then worked tirelessly until all was “shipshape” aboard the “Al-Awda.” When we offered to compensate him for his time and trouble, he refused, saying: “Let this be my small contribution toward peace.”

Meanwhile, the Palestinian-German community in Wilhelmshaven showered us with gifts of home-made Palestinian delicacies and serenaded us with singing, dancing and playing of the oud, a classical Palestinian stringed instrument. They thanked us for making this journey, saying they only wish they could join us and return to their original homes and villages. Their love and affection for our mission is overwhelming.

Tonight in Amsterdam we will be feted by local peace and social justice activists who will host a dinner featuring traditional Palestinian food. After a very rough night at sea two

nights ago en route to Amsterdam – during which the Al-Awda tossed and pitched amid enormous swells – we are grateful to be here in calm waters, enjoy freshwater showers, real bathrooms, and the warm hospitality of the local human rights community.

We have been met by peaceful, nonviolent groups of grassroots community supporters at every port of call thus far. We pray that we can approach Gaza harbor unimpeded, so that our supporters there can receive us as well.