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~ Josie Ó Súilleabháin ~

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Tunis: “Our shared vision is stronger than ever before”



Delegates and international activists with the Global March to Gaza, Freedom Flotilla Coalition and Al-Soumoud Convoy met in Tunisia to chart a collective path forward for Palestinian liberation

Over the past two weeks, thousands of international Palestine solidarity activists have gathered in Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea in an attempt to break Israel’s humanitarian siege on the Gaza Strip and the systematic starvation of millions of Palestinians.

As a response to authoritarian and repressive state violence in Israel, Egypt and Libya; delegates from the Global March to Gaza, Freedom Flotilla and Al-Soumoud Convoy regrouped last weekend in Tunisia to discuss their collective experiences on the march to the Rafah crossing and to “reinforce their collective commitment to Palestinian liberation” by

discussing strategies to overcome the denial, complicity and violence of nations allied with Israel.

In the capital Tunis, delegates were joined by activists, supporters and others including the UN Special Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories, Francesca Albanese, who spoke of the imposed responsibility of citizens to stop war crimes due to the complicity of those in power in failing to prevent a genocide. The focus still remains on Gaza and the Palestinian people.

“The Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF) is a criminal enterprise,” Albanese said at the conference “and it is ludicrous that a state accused of committing genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity is the one in charge of delivering aid”. The Gaza Health Ministry has [reported](#) that at least 583 Palestinians have been killed and a further 3,000 sustained injuries while waiting for food delivered by armed mercenaries since May 27. In addition, Ha’aretz published [testimonies from soldiers](#) confirming the shootings were deliberate.

At the checkpoints, those calling to break the siege on Gaza were met with state-sanctioned violence, arbitrary detention, methodical siege, kidnapping, and the complicity of authoritarian regimes from the Maghreb to the Mashriq. They have also been ridiculed and abandoned by the complicity of so-called democratic nations around the world, whose governments and corporations have done nothing but profit from this crime against humanity. “We may have been blocked, arrested, detained and deported,” said Saif Abukeshek, chair of the international committee of the Global March to Gaza, “but we remain undeterred in our advocacy for Palestine. Our shared vision is stronger than ever before.”

Brave initiative

The Al-Soumoud Convoy departed from Tunisia to Egypt with 150 vehicles and roughly 1,700 participants, reaching the city of Zawiya in Libya on June 10. There were already initial delays leaving Tunisia at Ras Jedir crossing, but the west Libyan authorities finally allowed the land convoy to pass on the condition that they split into three groups.

A volunteer [told the press](#) that the convoy was given a warm reception as it crossed Libya. “The welcoming people of Libya provided food and fuel for free. Women were even offered rooms to sleep comfortably”. Libya’s Emergency and Ambulance Authority committed themselves to escorting the convoy across the country, as well as the Tunisian Young Doctors Organization.

“Practicing medicine is a form of resistance,” said Dr. Salma Dakar, who came in an ambulance as part of the convoy on the road to Gaza. “Our moral duty as doctors is to stand against the genocide.”

After the Al-Soumoud Convoy gathered again in Libya, they left the western territory controlled by the UN-recognised government in Tripoli and attempted to cross the eastern territories controlled by the military dictator Khalifa Haftar on the road to the Salloum border to Egypt. Early on June 12, authorities from east Libya praised the land convoy as a “brave initiative” but requested that the organisers respect “Egyptian regulations”.

Wael Naouer from the Tunisian Coordination for Joint Action for Palestine said that an official entry request was submitted to the Egyptian authorities on May 19, and organisers for the convoy met with Egypt’s ambassador to Tunis prior to the departure. Despite authorisation from both east Libyan authorities and Egypt, the Al-Soumoud convoy was stopped at the east entrance to Sirte.

Libyan military forces loyal to Haftar told the convoy’s organisers that they were awaiting permission from the military regime in Benghazi before continuing. Checkpoint officials requested a full list of participants names and seized passports – forcing over a thousand people to be stranded in the desert.

The eastern Libyan authorities then implemented a “military blockade” on those waiting at the border, cutting off access to food, water, sanitation and internet connection. In similar scenes to the Egyptian Al-Ismailia checkpoint, activists are harassed by individuals who came into the camp and under the watch of the checkpoint authorities, assaulted the international activists.

“We have started noticing provocations from some Libyan individuals,” said Ghassan Benkhelifa, an activist travelling with the convoy. “We have complained to security personnel at the camp but the behaviour continues. There are also frequent patrols by officers in uniform and civilian clothes.”

Several people were detained by forces loyal to the Libyan National Army (LNA), which has been documented by Amnesty to weaponise torture, sexual violence, unlawful killings, forced disappearances and violence—particularly towards migrant groups—systematically and with impunity.

Organizers of the convoy sent out an emergency appeal to the Libyan people for logistical and humanitarian mutual aid. After spending a week in the desert the organisers of the convoy decided to return to Tunis, as it was clear they were denied movement to Gaza.



Commander Khalifa Haftar (centre) and his heir (far right) with representatives of the United States Embassy in Libya.

So, which military authoritarian regime denied the Al-Soumoud Convoy access to Egypt? Was it Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi or his ally in “combating terrorism” Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar? Did the United States of America exert pressure on its military partners? And is Denmark somehow involved?

Thousands will rise

Following similar repression at the Al-Ismailia checkpoint in Egypt, activists with the Global March to Gaza started to return to Cairo, to regroup and discuss strategies for moving forward. Already, the Egyptian authorities had detained participants at airports and conducted searches of hotel rooms in Cairo. Over 200 people are estimated to have been arbitrarily detained.

Saif Abukeshek was sitting in a cafe in Cairo with Norwegian activists Jona Selhi and Hufhahfa Abuserriya when they were approached by plain clothes Egyptian security forces. “It was a speedy arrest,” Saif told *Freedom* from Tunis after his release, “with a threat to move fast or else.” The three activists were handcuffed, blindfolded and abducted from the streets.

The authorities did not give a reason for their detention, what they were being arrested for or where they were being taken. They were held without contact to lawyers, friends, family, or the other delegates of the Global March to Gaza. Saif describes to me “verbal and physical violence” during his interrogation by the authorities, as well as psychological torture, as he describes “being forced to fully take off my clothes” while Egyptian security agents watched.

Saif was strip-searched three times and physically beaten over the course of the next 25 hours. All three were effectively kidnapped and arbitrarily detained, and possibly would have disappeared if organisers had not anticipated this violence. “I couldn’t know where I was taken”, Saif says, “however my colleagues knew my location due to [a] tracker”. He was then deported from Egypt and joined his colleagues in Tunis.

The authoritarian response to the peaceful march of thousands of people across the Sinai was premeditated with a narrative constructed by pro-government broadcasters in Egypt, who portrayed the Convoy as a “ploy to embarrass Egypt” and a “scheme” that associated the movement away from Palestine and towards the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Israel’s Defense Minister Israel Katz called the activists “Jihadist protesters” and a danger to Israeli troops, making it clear that the army will use force on the protesters if el-Sisi’s government fails to stop the Global March to Gaza. “Palestinians have been fighting and struggling to defend our values and principles that societies as civilisations are built on”, said Abukeshek before his arrest.

“While we are betraying those by allowing genocide to be committed in front of our eyes,” Saif said. “We are going to defend our own dignity.”

Returning to Tunis was not a retreat from Gaza but a move towards a strategy where, as one activist points out, “if they stop dozens, thousands will rise”. The abduction of the crew onboard the Madleen by the Israeli navy has not stopped efforts to break the siege but multiplied them, as a flotilla of thousands to the Gaza strip is now under discussion.



Palestine solidarity activists protest outside of the US embassy in Tunis on June 21. Lou Toscani

Protesters condemned the Egyptian government and other Arab nations for the complicity in refusing to allow borders to open and aid to pass through. This week the global movement travelled to Brussels to protest the European Union's continued support for Israel with its 'association agreement' during a week of actions and protests on June 26-7.

On June 23, the European Commission released a review on this agreement and found 'indications' of human rights violations by Israel. Human Rights Watch (HRW) and 110 other organisations have [signed a joint statement](#) demanding the immediate suspension of its trade agreement with Israel "as long as Israel's atrocity crimes persist," they write. Clearly, the European Commission is fully complicit.

On October 10, 2023, President of the European Commission Ursula Von Der Leyen declared the events of October 7 "an act of war, and there can only be one response to it. Europe stands with Israel and we fully support Israel's right to defend itself". The response, as confirmed a day earlier by the Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, was clear...

"We are imposing a complete siege..." Gallant said, "there will be no electricity, no food, no water, no fuel, everything is closed. We are fighting human animals and we act accordingly.

We cannot dictate

On March 18, a group of activists from the Tunisian Coordination for Joint Action for Palestine [marched to the offices of shipping giant Maersk](#) in Tunis and demanded that the company immediately stop the transportation of military items to Israel. On the same day, during Maersk's general annual meeting, shareholders for the company had rejected a proposal to end a business relationship that clearly violates international law.

Protesters threw red paint on the facade of the building and its corporate signage, and were met by a security guard who tried to use a water hose to get rid of protesters. Others on site, including the owner of the building, armed themselves with tools from a construction site and attacked the Palestine solidarity activists.

After a man brandishes a hammer, the protester throw stones and all involved are later detained and then released. International protests come after revelations from the investigative outlet Danwatch, who in February found that Maersk were knowingly transporting military equipment from the U.S. to Israel. More than 2,000 consignment notes of shipments, [revealed in the bill of landings](#), were made over the last two years since September 2023.

Maersk had shipped packages to Israel described as ‘HEMTT’ vehicles, which are large military trucks, from New Jersey to Haifa. Four days after one of the shipments arrives in Israel, an Oshkosh military vehicle is pictured by Reuters with more than 30 Palestinian prisoners sitting in the back, blindfolded, restrained and stripped to their underwear.



The Maersk Herrera approaching the port of Haifa in 2022.

Prisoners pictured in December 2023 were detained by the Israeli military in Beit Lahiya, and [spoke to +972 Magazine and Local Call](#) about their treatment in custody and within Israel’s prison system and detention centres. Along with 49 video testimonies published by Arab news networks, there is strong evidence to suggest systematic abuse, torture and death. A soldier tells one witness during his detention “you’ve been in Hamas for two years, tell me how they recruited you!” “I told them I was a student,” Maher says. The vast majority of detainees were civilians, according to Israeli security officials, with no affiliation with Hamas. “They told me to get up,” Maher says, “I couldn’t feel my legs and couldn’t walk. Every time I fell, they beat me again.”

The U.S. is not a signatory to the UN arms trade treaty. Maersk, a Danish company, is not bound by any laws that prevents it from transporting weapons to countries that commit war crimes. The Danish Ministry of Defence has said in response that it “constantly monitor[s] that this is happening” but beyond *looking* at international war crimes, “we cannot dictate”.

In this void of humanity, millions across the world are showing that it is possible to make a stand. International initiatives like the Global March to Gaza, Al-Soumoud Convoy and Freedom Flotilla join the many voices, factory blockades, marches and demonstrations that

call for an immediate end to the siege on Gaza and a future for Palestinian liberation, dignity and freedom.

News, Jul 2nd

Top photo: Saif Abukeshek joins activists on Gambatta Beach in Tunis after being released from arbitrary detention in Cairo. Delegates flew kites and planned the next actions on June 22. Lou Toscani