

# Israel and the Freedom Flotillas: “Clever Madman”

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Global Research, July 14, 2011

14 July 2011

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

*There is much angst among people of conscience over the fate of Freedom Flotilla II, but by effectively scuttling it, Israel is really just hammering more nails in its own coffin.*

The efforts by Israel to prevent Freedom Flotilla II from leaving Greece have been largely successful. Of the original 10 ships, only the French ship Al-Karama (dignity) with 10 activists including French politicians, which sailed from the French Corsica two weeks ago, and the sabotaged-and-repaired Juliano (named after Juliano Meir Khamis, the murdered Israeli director of Jenin’s Freedom Theatre), were able to elude the Greek coastguard as of early this week.

Then Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman telephoned Sierra Leone’s President Ernest Bai Koroma and persuaded him to withdraw his country’s flag from the Swedish Juliano, giving the Greek coast guard the opportunity to block the ship in Heraklion. Though Al-Karama was apprehended by the Greeks while refueling at sea near Crete, it managed to give them the slip and is still chugging along, the lone survivor.

The Spanish Gernika (named after Picasso’s 1937 mural against fascism) is still in port along with the remaining ships, though 20 Spaniards are occupying their embassy — six of them on a hunger strike. Activists haven’t given up hope that the Gernika, another French boat the Louise Michel, the Italian Stefano Chiarini, the Freedom for All and the Methimus II — all sequestered or sabotaged — will still prevail.

Israeli special operatives were able to dive in Greek and Turkish waters to sabotage some of the ships, including the Juliano and the Irish Saoirse (sabotaged in Gocek, Turkey). Both vessels had their propellers damaged — if they had not discovered the damage, they could well have sunk at sea.

“Anonymous” (Israeli) complaints of unseaworthiness were used by Greek authorities to delay other ships. The Greeks, clearly acting on Israeli-US orders arrested the captain of the American ship, and then did the same to his crew members who went on a hunger strike outside the US embassy in Athens on 4 July, the anniversary of American independence.

The Canadian ship Tahrir had actually departed after its captain decided he was endangering the crew by remaining in the port, with Israeli frogmen liable to conduct further acts of sabotage. Spokesman Dylan Kenner explained that the Greek coast guard illegally boarded the ship and towed it back to port. When the passengers refused to identify the captain of the ship, all 50 of them were taken into custody.

The Tahrir finally threw in the towel when Greek authorities suddenly demanded new papers, knowing organisers would not be able to produce them on short notice. Ditto the US

Audacity of Hope.

The Israeli government has thus extended its illegal blockade of Gaza to Greek ports, Kenner argued. Greece offered to ferry the aid to Gaza in cooperation with the UN, an offer the activists turned down as “insufficient”, since their mission was also about the rights of the Palestinian people and not just about aid.

The response from Israel was delight at the Greek actions. In Jerusalem , Israeli President Shimon Peres told Greek President Karolos Papoulias, “I want to thank you for following the instructions of the United Nations secretary-general and stopping the Gaza flotilla... Israel always has its hand stretched out in peace.” Greece and Israel are currently carrying out joint military manoeuvres, the sixth in the past year.

The response of the US Congress was to vote 407-6 to suspend funds to the Palestinian Authority should it pursue a unilateral declaration of statehood at the UN in September. House Majority Leader Eric Cantor said, “We stand by Israel as our most valued ally.”

In related news, another ship, the Spirit of Rachel Corrie from Malaysia , after seven weeks trying to break the siege, was finally allowed to unload its 32 tons of PVC pipes at the El-Arish port in Egypt , thanks to the direct intervention of Egyptian Prime Minister Essam Sharaf, who assured activists that the pipes would reach Gaza . Their success coincided with the visit to Egypt of former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, who is a staunch friend of Palestine . Malaysia does not recognise Israel and is one of the few countries with a principled stand against Israeli atrocities.

As the Flotillers licked their wounds, hundreds of Western activists attempted to enter Israel en masse 8 July in a “Flytilla” to show solidarity with Palestinians in the West Bank . Israeli “intelligence” was prepared however, providing European airports with no-fly-lists of known peaceniks, preventing 350 from boarding their flights, in violation (what else is new?) of international law. More than 500 still made it to Ben-Gurion International Airport in Tel Aviv. Of them, 124 were arrested, 40 are now on a hunger strike after being denied access to lawyers and medical treatment, and 69 have already been deported.

As always, Israel achieves its narrow, tactical victories at the expense of its long term strategy of achieving respect as a legitimate nation; instead, isolating itself further as a rogue nation with no concern for human rights or the welfare of others, despised by most of the world. In a 2010 European opinion poll 60 per cent saw Israel as the greatest threat to world peace (74 per cent in the Netherlands ).

It extends its criminal siege of Gaza and occupation of the West Bank to Greek ports and European airports. It acts to encourage anti-Jewish sentiment where there is none, as it insists it speaks on behalf of the world’s Jews, its very raison d’etre being to act as a “safe haven” for them. The over-reaction by Israel to these peaceful protests, according to Gilad Atzmon, proves once again what Israel is all about: “the Jewish State is a closed society driven by ‘Pre-Traumatic Stress Disorder’ fuelled by vivid imaginary fantasies of destruction.”

The Flotilla, composed of well-meaning, perhaps naive peaceniks, was never intended to best the world’s most dangerous and highly militarised society. With virtually all the world’s governments in thrall to Israel, its sole purpose was first, to show Palestinians that they have the world’s people behind them and to encourage them to keep up their heroic

resistance, and second, to highlight just how reprehensible Israel is as a state, how unprincipled and untrustworthy as a partner.

By its actions, the Israeli government and its cheerleaders have unwittingly done their part in this pro-Palestinian public relations campaign. Whatever the fate of the Flotilla, it has acted as further fuel to the boycott, divest and sanctions (BDS) campaign and the struggle to delegitimise Israel , or rather to assist Israel in its self-inflicted process of delegitimation as an apartheid state.

Appropriately, this week, the seventh anniversary of the International Court of Justice ruling against the separation wall, the Free Gaza Movement (FGM) and the Palestinian Boycott National Committee called for an immediate and comprehensive military embargo on Israel . “The international community has a legal and moral responsibility to end their complicity with Israel ’s unlawful actions,” declared the FGM. This is the only way to pressure Israel to abide by international law, to stop attacking civilian ships in international waters and bombing civilians with white phosphorous.

Israeli politicians are smirking at their ability to stymie the Freedom Flotilla II. But, writes blogger Saker, this is a Pyrrhic victory for the Israeli ship of state. They are like those partying on the deck of the Titanic, who were oblivious to the fact that, thanks to their hubris, their ship would soon rest at the bottom of the ocean.

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Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-West relations since the 1980s. He has lived in both the Soviet Union and Russia, and then Uzbekistan, as a UN adviser, writer, translator and lecturer. Presently a writer for the foremost Cairo newspaper, Al Ahram, he is also a regular contributor to Counterpunch, Dissident Voice, Global Research, Al-Jazeera and Turkish Weekly, and is a commentator on Voice of the

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