



Following the events of the Great Return March, anti-Israeli activists in Europe are trying to organize a flotilla to the Gaza Strip (initial report)

April 29, 2018

Overview

Concurrently with the events of the Great Return March, **the Freedom Flotilla Coalition, an umbrella framework of organizations engaged in sending flotillas to the Gaza Strip, announced that preparations were being made to send a flotilla to “break the siege” over the Gaza Strip** (Al-Aqsa, April 15, 2018). The flotilla, which numbers **several boats** (currently **four or five**), is expected to depart for the Gaza Strip **from several European countries** (Twitter, PalInfo, April 9, 2018). The boats will depart **in the weeks ahead** (according to one version on May 15 and according to additional versions at the end of the month of Ramadan, apparently in mid-June). On their way to the Gaza Strip, the boats will stop at a number of ports in European countries, including **Denmark, Britain, Italy, Spain and Greece**. In each port there will be acts of solidarity with the Palestinians by local supporters demanding the lifting of the “siege” over the Gaza Strip **in order to generate media coverage for the flotilla and turn it into a propaganda event**.

► **IHH**, a radical Islamist, anti-Israeli and anti-Western Turkish aid organization that carries out humanitarian activities worldwide, **is apparently involved in the preparations for the flotilla**. In the past, IHH was **the driving force behind the flotilla project**, which was designed to challenge Israel with regard to maritime traffic to the Gaza Strip. **IHH, which supports Hamas in the Gaza Strip, played a key role in the Mavi Marmara flotilla (May 31, 2010) and its activists played a key role in the violent confrontation with the IDF soldiers on board the Mavi Marmara** (in which 10 Turkish activists died, and nine IDF soldiers and dozens of passengers were wounded).¹ **IHH Deputy President Hüseyin Oruç** recently granted an interview detailing the plans for the flotilla. Among other things, he said that the flotilla would include six boats. **One participant from Turkey** will be on board each.

¹ See, for instance, the ITIC’s Information Bulletin from August 13, 2014: “The IHH, the jihadist Turkish organization that played a major role in the Mavi Marmara flotilla, currently leads an international anti-Israeli coalition that announced its intention to dispatch another flotilla to the Gaza Strip in 2014.”

► Since the Mavi Marmara flotilla, several attempts have been made to organize additional flotillas to the Gaza Strip by IHH and other pro-Palestinian organizations, mainly European ones. However, these flotillas were unable to organize and sail to the Gaza Strip for various reasons, mainly budgetary problems, lack of volunteers, unseaworthy boats and, moreover, inability to mobilize significant international support for the flotilla project. **In the ITIC's assessment, the "Great Return March" in the Gaza Strip has revived the motivation of the various anti-Israel activists and organizations and they intend to organize another flotilla to the Gaza Strip. This will be done in cooperation with Hamas, which is interested in continuing the "return" events even after the end of the marches on May 15.**

► In the ITIC's assessment, **the campaign is in the early stage of purchasing, renovating and organizing the vessels at the various ports of origin.** The boats that have been purchased so far are **small and can accommodate only a small number of activists**, let alone supplies for the residents of the Gaza Strip. However, the real purpose of the flotilla is not to transfer aid to the Gaza Strip, **but rather to promote the battle for hearts and minds against Israel**, as stated by **Zaher Birawi**, in an interview with Felesteen, Hamas's daily newspaper. In the same interview, Birawi said that **the main purpose of the flotillas was not to "break the siege,"** but rather to leave the Palestinian issue in the Gaza Strip and the "siege" imposed on it as "living" issues in international public opinion. In addition, according to him, the flotillas were intended to defame Israel and to attract attention to the political and media campaigns accompanying the launching of the boats².

Statements about the flotilla

► **Hüseyin Oruç, deputy president of the Turkish IHH organization, which is apparently involved in organizing the current flotilla, granted an interview detailing the plans for the expected flotilla to the Gaza Strip:**

- ◆ According to him, **the ship Al-Awda** (The Return), already purchased by the Norwegians, **will be joined by five more vessels.** He added that the aim of the flotilla was **to raise the awareness of world public opinion about the distress in the Gaza Strip, as well as to emphasize the "right of return" of the Palestinian refugees.**

² For details, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from September 17, 2017: "A Hamas-affiliated Palestinian in Britain admitted the flotilla project to the Gaza Strip was not intended to "break the siege" and bring humanitarian aid, but rather to promote the battle for hearts and minds against Israel."

◆ He noted that **there would be around 60 passengers on board the ships. One participant from Turkey will be on board each ship.** The participants, including those from Turkey, have not yet been chosen. The ships will also carry medical and other supplies for residents of the Gaza Strip. Hüseyin Oruç said that everyone was determined to reach the Gaza Strip. According to Oruç, if everything goes as planned, the ships are expected to reach the Gaza Strip **in early July 2018** (Anatolia News Agency in English, April 21, 2018).



IHH Deputy President Hüseyin Oruç
(Anatolia News Agency English, April 21, 2018)

► **Zaher Birawi, head of the International Committee for Breaking the Siege of Gaza (ICBSG),** said in an interview that a fleet of small and medium-sized ships was currently being organized, which would carry “dozens of activists.” According to him, two of the ships were purchased and equipped in northern Europe and will **sail from the Port of Copenhagen in Denmark.** He said that they might be accompanied by additional ships. According to him, two ships will sail from **Sweden and Norway.** One of them **will bear the name Al-Awda (The Return).** He said the flotilla would pass through ports in Europe as well as in the port of one of the North African countries (he refused to name the country but noted that it was not Egypt). **Support events** will be held in **Turkey and Tunis.** The ports in Europe where the ships will stop include ports in **Germany, the Netherlands, Britain, Spain and Italy.** The participants **will include journalists. Some of the participants participated in previous flotillas** (Al-Jazeera, April 19, 2018).

► The Freedom Flotilla Coalition announced that on May 15, 2018, **six ships from Norway would set sail for the Gaza Strip** (one of them is “the Return”). According to **Hafiz al-Karmi, president of a body by the name of the Palestinian Forum in Europe,** the intention is to dispatch the ships at the end of the month of Ramadan (around mid-June 2018). He noted

that **there would be European and international activists on board the ships** (alresalah.net, April 7, 2018).

Preparations on the ground (updated to April 29, 2018)

It appears **that until now, there has been a discrepancy between the statements and expectations of the organizers and the reality on the ground. So far, four ships are known to have been purchased for the flotilla: one in Norway and three in Sweden.** According to the Swedish and Norwegian campaign websites, the ships that are to take part in the flotilla are **old and small and can carry only a very small number of activists.**

► **Norway's Ship to Gaza campaign** announced that a Norwegian fishing boat from 1963 that is currently undergoing renovations would take part in the flotilla to the Gaza Strip. The original name of the boat was Kårstein, **but it was changed to Al-Awda (The Return)** (Campaign website, April 13, 2018). The Al-Awda is **expected to sail from Bergen on April 30, 2018 and anchor at the Port of Leirvik on the island of Stord on May 1, 2018** (Norwegian website Stord24, April 27, 2018). The ship's captain is **Herman Reksten, who participated in flotillas to the Gaza Strip in 2012 and 2015 and was arrested by Israel. Torstein Dahle,** head of the Norwegian Ship to Gaza campaign and member of the Bergen city council, confirmed that he would participate in part of the flotilla (Norwegian website Bergensavisen, April 27, 2018).



Right: The Al-Awda (Norwegian Ship to Gaza campaign website, April 13, 2018). Left: A post by Zaher Birawi reporting on the ship and the flotilla's date of departure (Zaher Birawi's Facebook page, April 14, 2018).



The "Kårstein" (right) and Captain Herman Reksten (left)
(Norwegian website Bergensavisen, April 27, 2018)

► **Three boats were purchased in Sweden for the flotilla:**

- ◆ According to the Facebook page and the website of the **Swedish Ship to Gaza campaign**, the Swedish branch of the organization intends to participate in the flotilla by means of **three ships**. In early June 2017, the organization purchased an **Albin Ballad nine-meter long sailboat with five seats**. The campaign decided to name the ship after **Mairead Maguire**, a social activist from Northern Ireland who had previously participated in flotillas to the Gaza Strip. On February 15, 2018, it was reported that the organization had **purchased another sailboat from the 1970s**. It is over 20 meters long and has a two-meter high sail.



Photo attached to the report on the purchase of the second boat
by the Swedish Ship to Gaza campaign (website of the Swedish Ship
to Gaza campaign, February 15, 2018)

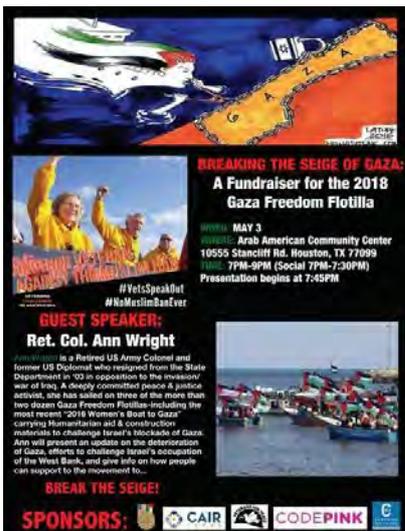
- ◆ On March 16, 2018, the campaign reported that it had purchased a **third boat**, a nine-meter long sailboat with five seats. According to the report, **the first boat is in Goteborg and the third is in the Stockholm area**. On April 22, 2018, the campaign posted a call on its Facebook page for assistance in renovating a third boat, **located in Gustavsberg in the Stockholm area**. According to the posting, the boat is expected to

set sail on May 14, 2018 (Facebook page of the Swedish Ship to Gaza campaign, April 22, 2018).



A boat of the same model as the third boat purchased by the Ship to Gaza campaign (Swedish Ship to Gaza campaign website, March 16, 2018)

► An article published about Roger Fowler, a pro-Palestinian activist from New Zealand (New Zealand news website Stuff, April 17, 2018; and a posting from April 23, 2018 on the Facebook page of Ann Wright³) stated that **four boats would take part in the flotilla**. According to the posting, the boats will sail from one of the Scandinavian countries on May 15, 2018, and it will take the flotilla 75 days to reach the Gaza Strip.



While in Europe recently to help organise the 2018 international 'Freedom Flotilla' to Gaza, Roger Fowler, left, visited one of the flotilla's four boats with veteran United States peace activist Ann Wright.

Right: Roger Fowler and Ann Wright visiting one of the boats that will take part in the voyage (New Zealand news website Stuff, April 17, 2018). Left: Invitation to a fundraising event for the flotilla. The event will take place in Houston, Texas, where Ann Wright will speak (Ann Wright's Facebook page, April 23, 2018)

³ An activist in the Freedom Flotilla Coalition in the United States.