



Is Gaza under occupation or not?

For more than two years, all border crossings to the Gaza Strip have been closed by the Israeli army. Since then, the 1.5 million inhabitants live in a state of siege, even more so since June, when the siege was tightened. As reasons for the siege Israel refers to Qassam rocket fire from the area and the alleged intention of the Hamas government to destroy Israel. At the same time, Israeli government officials emphasize that the occupation of the Gaza Strip has ended with the withdrawal of the Israeli settlements and army in September 2005 and that the Gaza Strip would now be considered foreign territory. But facts on the ground speak a different language.

The siege has a disastrous effect on the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip as it violates the human, economic and social rights of the population. More than 200 civilians have died because of the restrictions. In addition, the siege has severely impacted the flow of food, medical supplies and other necessities such as fuel, construction materials and raw materials for various economic sectors. Factories have been forced to close. The unemployment rate is the highest in the world, according to a recent UN report. About 60% of the Gazan households rely on donations, says UNWRA, and urges Israel to reopen the borders.

The current bloody rivalries between Hamas and Fatah add to the overall problem. Recently, the European Commission agreed on a direct aid of \$ 6.3 million for the poorest, to be distributed until the end of the year. At the same time, Europe supports the suffocation of the civilian population and the boycott of the democratically elected government, causing damage far beyond \$ 6.3 million. To relieve the distress, a few weeks ago, a Palestinian-Scottish couple took a truck from Scotland to deliver one and a half tons of medical supplies to the Gaza Strip. At the current moment, Khalil Al Niss and Linda Willis have been waiting for days on the Egyptian side of the partition wall in Rafah and they have not yet gotten a permission to cross the border. The Egyptians deny this. So, is Gaza under occupation or not? What does the so-called withdrawal of the Israeli army really mean?

To clarify this matter two boats are leaving Cyprus for Gaza on or about August 7. Forty members of the "Free Gaza Movement" are on their way now to meet in Cyprus and prepare the vessels. They are invited to Gaza by The Palestinian Medical Relief Society, The Gaza Community Mental Health Programme, The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, The Palestinian Ministry of Youth and Sport, the local popular committee to break the Gaza siege, and diverse individuals in Gaza. Legally, Israel has nothing to do with this enterprise, because the ships will not enter Israeli waters or ports. They will sail directly from international waters into Gazan waters.

Some expect Israeli forces to stop the vessels in order to make a clear statement that the Gaza population are prisoners without any legal or human rights except the ones granted by Israel, and that Israel can thus newly demonstrate to the world how its legal conceptions rank higher than international and human rights laws. In the morning of July 20, for instance, Israeli war vessels opened fire on Palestinian fishing boats north and west of Gaza City, according to the news agency Maan.

The usual justification for such action is the Israeli claim (or "fear", respectively) that arms are possibly smuggled into the area. Even the cease-fire, which Hamas and twelve other groups have been keeping since June 19, does not seem to make any difference to Israel – except for the fact that Israeli incursions are momentarily concentrated on Nablus and the West Bank. Legally, there are no grounds for any of these military measures.

The Free Gaza Movement consists of over 50 people from all over the world who are acting upon their conscience to lift the humanitarian crisis of Gaza by bringing medical and social aid to the Gazans. Only some of them will actually be on the "Free Gaza" and the "Liberty" and are expected to be welcomed at the coast by about ten Gazan ships. Some are on the land team in Cyprus and will be part of the organizing and media crew while the boats are at sea. It is a test case for more boats to open a sea bridge.

The boat passengers are, according to the current list, from Australia, Canada, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Lebanon, Pakistan, Palestine, Scotland, Tunisia, the UK, the USA.



Altogether, more than twelve languages will be spoken among them. Among the participants are sailors, media people, lawyers, engineers, construction workers, nurses, teachers, doctors, speakers, professors, photographers, clerics, scuba divers, and nonviolent organizers. They are Muslims, Jews, Christians and humanists. The youngest is 22 and the oldest, Hedy Epstein, will celebrate her 84th birthday on the ship.

Hedy Epstein, having survived the Nazi genocide, became a human rights advocate. She has published her memoirs in German. Lawyer and media expert Huwaida Arraf plans to come, as well as Anne Montgomery, a nun from the US who has worked with the Christian Peacekeeper Team in the Occupied Territories. Jeff Halper from the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD) is on board as well. From California arrives, among others, 74-year-old grandmother Mary Hughes-Thompson whose seventh trip to Palestine this will be since 2002. Ken O'Keefe, a former Marine and veteran of the first Gulf War will be there. Pakistani filmmaker and musician Aki Nawaz is part of the documentary team on board and physician William "Bill" Dienst is the medical expert who has worked in the clinics of Gaza and goes back to work again. Angela Godfrey-Goldstein who works with the ICAHD and Machsom Watch is on the land team in Cyprus along with Uri Davis, a well-known author from Israel.

Many international organizations and individuals support the Free Gaza project and acknowledge the importance of the mission, among them Noam Chomsky and Luisa Morgantini, Vice President of the European Parliament. Archbishop emeritus Desmond Tutu wrote: "Peace and security, we discovered in South Africa, do not come through the barrel of a gun ... I support the boat convoy in its attempt." Nobel Peace Laureate Mairead Maguire adds: "You carry with you the hopes and wishes of many people around the world." The list of endorsers on www.freegaza.org is updated daily now, as the date gets nearer and the world public turns its attention to the Free Gaza event.

The Free Gaza Movement is a humanitarian and a grass roots democratic project and not affiliated to any political party or agenda. Some public voices have tried to associate it with pro- or anti- group interests which the group vehemently rejects. In an email of one of the participants, Monir Deeb, the spirit of the unforgotten Count Folke Bernadotte is showing: "The Free Gaza group are investing their time, money, and safety to speak out against injustice. They are the same people who stood by the Jewish population of the world in the hard times of Nazi persecution." His Gazan father, says Deeb, actually met the Swedish diplomat and UN mediator Bernadotte during negotiations in the Sinai in 1948.

(Text: www.anis-online.de by Anis Hamadeh)