

# Free Gaza Movement: Anti-Israel Boat Campaign Challenges Israel's "Siege of Gaza"

## INTRODUCTION

The latest in a series of efforts by anti-Israel activists to "break the siege" on Gaza has resulted in failure. The Freedom Flotilla II, an international coalition of groups seeking to send several ships to Gaza, were not permitted to leave the Greek port from where they intended to sail with a few hundred activists.

The second flotilla was intended to be a sequel to the May 2010 flotilla that tried to sail to Gaza but was intercepted by the Israeli Navy. The 2010 and 2011 flotillas were both organized by the Cyprus-based Free Gaza Movement (FGM), a wide variety of pro-Palestinian European organizations and [Insani Yardim Vakfi \(IHH\)](#), a pro-Hamas Turkish charity.

Since August 2008, FGM had sent several boats to Gaza under the guise of delivering humanitarian aid. Their missions have consistently sought to provoke confrontation with the Israeli military, in turn creating widespread propaganda value for organizers, who have used the international attention they receive to present their one-sided and biased views of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

FGM's mission, as stated on its Web site, is to elicit international opposition to Israel's policies: "We want to break the siege of Gaza. We want to raise international awareness about the prison-like closure of the Gaza Strip and pressure the international community to review its sanctions policy and end its support for continued Israeli occupation."



In the year leading up to the first mission and in the months that followed, organizers criticized Israel's founding, propagated messages about Israel's brutality and recommended international sanctions against Israel. They ran a highly effective campaign that raised several hundred thousand dollars in funds and garnered significant international support and media attention.

While the Israeli government allowed the first five boats to sail into Gaza's port without incident, in late December 2008, Israeli authorities intercepted the sixth FGM mission, which was attempting to sail into Gaza at the height of an ongoing [Israeli military campaign](#) in Gaza. Israeli naval forces also blocked the group's seventh mission two weeks later.

FGM's efforts have attracted journalists, parliamentarians and other notable participants, including: [Cynthia McKinney](#), former U.S. Congresswoman from Georgia and the 2008 Green Party presidential candidate; Alice Walker, the author of *The Color Purple*; Mairead Maguire, 1976 Nobel Peace Prize winner from Ireland; Clare Short, British parliament member and former Secretary of State for International Development; and Lauren Booth, journalist and sister-in-law of England's former prime minister Tony Blair.

FGM is the most significant achievement for the [International Solidarity Movement \(ISM\)](#), a grassroots movement that spreads anti-Israel propaganda and misinformation and voices support for those who engage in armed resistance against Israel. Several notable ISM figures have been involved in organizing the campaign and the various missions.

## FREEDOM FLOTILLA II

The Freedom Flotilla II resulted in a massive failure for the international "break the siege on Gaza" effort. The flotilla was intended to replicate the May 2010 flotilla, which failed to reach Gaza but spawned a significant propaganda victory for the anti-Israel movement when Israeli soldiers killed nine activists during a violent confrontation on board one of the ships. The ships comprising this year's flotilla, however, were not permitted to leave the Greek port where they had gathered and the flotilla participants were forced to give up after several days of failed attempts to receive authorization from Greece.

The flotilla had initially been scheduled to sail to Gaza in the fall of 2010, just a few months after the first flotilla, but was delayed several times and eventually was pushed off to early summer 2011. By late June, the ten boats had gathered in Greece and the activists were preparing to set sail. On July 1, however, the Greek government issued an order prohibiting the departure of ships to the "maritime area" of Gaza. The statement warned that "appropriate measures" would be taken to ensure the enforcement of the order. [In addition to the legal obstacles, the Freedom Flotilla II was also hamstrung by the sabotage of two of its boats and a series of threatened lawsuits by an Israeli NGO called Shurat HaDin.]

Despite lacking permission, several of the boats tried to depart from Greece, including the Canadian boat named "Tahrir" and the U.S. boat, "The Audacity of Hope." The boats were quickly intercepted by Greek authorities and brought back to port and the captain of the U.S. boat was arrested and detained for several days for defying the order.



U.S. Boat to Gaza via Flickr  
Fundraiser for US Boat to Gaza in New York City, August 2010

The Freedom Flotilla II had hoped to launch an even larger flotilla than the original flotilla in May 2010. Huwaida Arraf, a leader of the Free Gaza Movement (FGM), had warned during a July 2010 interview with a Malaysian newspaper that the upcoming flotilla would be "an escalation" from its predecessors.

Indeed, reports in early 2011 indicated that the flotilla would consist of 12-15 ships and more than a thousand activists, a significant increase from the first flotilla. A series of planning meetings held in several major international cities in early 2011 further demonstrated that organizers were highly motivated to repeat a large campaign aimed at embarrassing Israel on an international stage. At a meeting in Athens in April, organizers issued a press release calling on all their governments to "take preemptive action to assure that Israel will not use force" to prevent the flotilla from reaching Gaza. They also announced plans to meet with members of the European Parliament, the United Nations and other international bodies to "present Freedom Flotilla 2 and its goals."

During the last year, however, organizers faced a variety of obstacles that forced the flotilla to be delayed and scaled down, including the June 17 announcement by [Insani Yardim Vakfi \(IHH\)](#), a pro-Hamas Turkish charity that was one of the principal organizers of the 2010 flotilla, that its ship would not be able to participate because of "technical problems." The ship, the Mavi Marmara, had been the site of the violent clash during the 2010 flotilla and was supposed to "lead" the 2011 flotilla.

Notably, the 2011 flotilla had significant support from anti-Israel activists in the U.S. As mentioned above, a U.S. boat was planning to participate in the flotilla with 50 activists, including several Jewish anti-Zionists and Alice Walker, a prominent author who has recently become involved in anti-Israel efforts.

In addition, two dozen fundraisers were held in the U.S. for the American initiative, called "U.S. To Gaza," and organizers maintained a Web site and various social networking sites dedicated to promoting the effort and informing supporters about ways they could help the campaign. By sending an American

ship, domestic activists intended to demonstrate that there are American citizens who disapprove of U.S. support for Israel. Jane Hirschman, one of the organizers of U.S. To Gaza, stated, "There's never been a U.S. boat and we think it's time we stand up to our government and hold them accountable for what has happened; (Gaza is) an open air prison."

The Free Palestine Movement (FPM), a California-based group with similar motives to FGM, also sent a small delegation to Athens to participate in the flotilla, including Paul Larudee, a longtime anti-Israel activist and a founder of the Free Palestine Movement.

Anti-Israel activists in the U.S. also planned to hold protests in solidarity with the flotilla in anticipation of an Israeli Navy interception of the boats. Many of the protests were canceled when the flotilla failed to sail to Gaza but some cities in the U.S., including Chicago and San Francisco, held protests anyway. There, protesters gathered at the Israeli Consulates holding signs describing Gaza as "collective punishment" and calling for "independence from Israel." At the rally in Chicago, activists marched from the Israeli Consulate to the Greek consulate chanting "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" and "When people are occupied, resistance is justified."

A separate but similar initiative, called "Welcome to Palestine" also took place in early July. A variety of Palestinian solidarity organizations in Europe and the Palestinian territories organized a campaign to send several hundred activists to "break the aerial siege" and land in Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv on July 8. There, the activists planned to engage in nonviolent demonstrations and declare their intention to visit Palestine. Ultimately, only several dozen activists landed in Israel after a variety of European airlines barred access to the participants to fly to Israel. The activists who were able to fly to Israel, including two American activists who had planned to participate in the U.S. boat of the flotilla, were denied entry to Israel when they arrived.

While these two initiatives were seen as similar, and indeed both are motivated by anti-Israel agendas, it appears that Freedom Flotilla II and Welcome to Palestine are not organizationally connected and were not timed to coordinate with one another. In fact, the Welcome to Palestine campaign was, in a way, a critique of the singular focus on Gaza by flotilla organizers. In a letter encouraging activists to participate in the so-called "air campaign," Welcome to Palestine organizers cautioned that "we must not forget that Israeli colonial authorities are implementing their racist apartheid policies throughout historic Palestine."

## MAY 2010 FLOTILLA

On May 31, 2010, Israeli naval forces intercepted the "Freedom Flotilla," a convoy of six ships en route to Gaza organized by FGM, several European Palestinian solidarity organizations and [Insani Yardim Vakfi \(IHH\)](#), an Istanbul-based Islamic charity with ties to Hamas.

During the operation, people aboard an IHH-owned ship called the Mavi Marmara attacked the soldiers with weapons, including knives, metal rods, and clubs, and with live gunfire from weapons taken from the Israeli soldiers. In the resulting confrontation, nine individuals were killed and more were wounded, including least seven Israeli soldiers.

The flotilla departed from ports in Cyprus and Turkey a day earlier, despite repeated warnings from Israel that its ships would not be permitted to sail into Gaza. Some supporters in Turkey waved Hamas and Hezbollah flags, including flags of Hamas's Izziddin al-Qassam Brigades, as the flotilla ships set sail.

Despite claims that their primary goal was to deliver humanitarian aid to Palestinians, organizers of the flotilla repeatedly ignored the Israeli government's offers to deliver the aid items to Gaza through established land routes.



During a search aboard the Mavi Marmara, one of the ships in the Gaza Flotilla, Israel Defense Forces uncovered a cache of weapons used to violently attack Israeli soldiers. (Source: IDF)

Assertions that the campaign's priority was anything other than political are further invalidated by documents seized from one of the boats, which outlined the goal of the missions as follows: "to generate a lot of media about the blockade on Gaza and the illegal/criminal nature of it, as well as the situation of Palestinians in Gaza. Secondly, but connected is the goal of taking legal/political action, including jail stays, pushing foreign governments to do more than make statements, but to take punitive action towards Israel. Our position, then, is that reaching Gaza, while our intention is not our minimum strategic goal."

Greta Berlin, an FGM organizer and longtime anti-Israel activist, admitted in advance of the flotilla's departure that, "This mission is not about delivering humanitarian supplies, it's about breaking Israel's siege."

Additionally, organizers reportedly changed the flotilla's course in hopes of garnering the increased publicity that would result from a daytime, rather than a night-time, confrontation.

### ***Prepared for Conflict***

Prior to the departure of the "Freedom Flotilla," organizers and participants indicated that they were prepared to confront Israeli authorities. Many flotilla participants, including several affiliated with known extremist groups, expressed intent to resist efforts by Israeli authorities to block the flotilla from reaching Gaza, even at the expense of their own lives.

For example, videos taken prior to the Turkish vessel's departure show passengers chanting the anti-Jewish slogan "Khaibar, Khaibar ya Yahud, jaysh Muhammad sawfa ya'ud!," evoking the Koran's account of a battle between the Islamic prophet Muhammad and the Jews of the town of Khaibar which resulted in the subjugation of the Jews of Arabia. At least one passenger interviewed on video indicated that martyrdom was an equally desirable outcome of the mission as arriving safely in Gaza.

Below is a sampling of reports demonstrating that individuals involved in the flotilla acknowledged, in advance of the Israeli raids, that a violent confrontation might occur:

- "It's different this time - Israel has shown that it is willing to use violent means. That's why it's important that we don't stop, that we don't give in to the notion that military might prevails" - *Huwaida Arraf, Free Gaza Movement organizer and [International Solidarity Movement](#) co-founder, discussing plans for the summer flotilla, Cyprus Mail, March 30, 2010*
- "The strategy of the Freedom Flotilla, however, is to resist any attempts by the Israeli Navy to hijack its ships or to divide cargo ships from passenger vessels." - *Free Gaza team, in a posting on the Free Gaza Web site titled "We will resist Israel's attempts to stop us," May 25, 2010*
- "Khaybar, Khaybar, oh Jews, the army of Muhammad will return." - *Flotilla passengers videotaped chanting the anti-Jewish slogan prior to the Turkish vessel's departure, Al-Jazeera TV Qatar, May 28, 2010 (via the Middle East Media Research Institute/MEMRI)*
- "We await one of two good things – to achieve martyrdom or to reach the shore of Gaza." - *One flotilla passenger interviewed on video, Al-Jazeera TV Qatar, May 28, 2010 (via MEMRI)*

- "Israel should not be under any illusion whatsoever that their threats or intimidation will stop us or even that their violence against us will stop us." - *Huwaida Arraf, Aljazeera.net, May 29, 2010*
- "We fully intend to go to Gaza regardless of any intimidation of threats of violence against us... They are going to have to forcefully stop us." - *Huwaida Arraf, Tehran Times, May 31, 2010*
- "Bülent Yildirim, the leader of the IHH, one of the primary organizers of the flotilla, announced just prior to boarding: 'We are going to resist and resistance will win.'" - *BBC Monitoring Middle East, June 1, 2010*
- "When I went first convoy, I wanted to be a shaheed. I wasn't that lucky. Second time, I wanted to be a shaheed. Didn't work. Third time lucky inshallah I'll be shaheed." - *Passenger on one of the flotilla ships expressing his hope to become a martyr during the mission to Gaza, Press TV, June 3, 2010*
- "Millions of martyrs marching to Gaza!" - *Chant shouted by participants on the Mavi Marmara (via Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, June 18, 2010)*
- "We follow in the footsteps of the martyrs, the just, and the righteous... If we show fear, they will win once again. We don't want to be recorded in Allah's book as cowards." - *IHH leader Bülent Yildirim aboard the Mavi Marmara (via Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, June 18, 2010)*
- "We say: If you send the commandos, we will throw you down from here and you will be humiliated in front of the whole world" - *IHH leader Bülent Yildirim aboard the Mavi Marmara (via Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, June 18, 2010)*
- "If they board our ship, we will throw them into the sea, Allah willing!" - *IHH leader Bülent Yildirim's comments about a possible confrontation with Israeli naval forces, as expressed in Arabic by another speaker aboard the Mavi Marmara (via Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, June 18, 2010)*
- "I swear on Allah, live on TV, that we felt no fear whatsoever of those brothers of apes and pigs. By Allah, I loathed them before, and my hatred of them has only grown, not because they punished and humiliated us, but because I had thought them to be worthy enemies, but it turns out that they are too despicable even to be called our enemies, because they are not our equals. They are

cowards...Our hatred for these people is so intense that we wished, at those moments, that we could have been bombs, and blown up among those brothers of apes and pigs." - *Ahmad Ibrahim, Algerian delegation coordinator, Al-Aqsa TV, June 4, 2010 (via MEMRI)*

- "All the passengers on board the ship were ready for this outcome. Everybody wanted and was ready to become a martyr... Our goal was to reach Gaza or to die trying." - *IHH official Hussein Orush, Al-Jazeera TV, June 5, 2010 (via MEMRI)*
- "Prominent activists in the Yemeni flotilla delegation were three MPs from the Al-Islah party, an Islamist party that is close to the Muslim Brotherhood. One, Sheikh Muhammad Al-Hazmi, was photographed on the deck of the Mavi Marmara brandishing his large curved dagger." - *MEMRI, June 1, 2010*
- "The Egyptian flotilla delegation included two members of the Muslim Brotherhood bloc in the Egyptian parliament... Muhammad Al-Baltaji, of the Muslim Brotherhood faction in the Egyptian parliament, said: "The flotilla participants have two aims: to reach Gaza and break the siege, and to denounce Israel if it prevents the flotilla from entering Gaza, even at the cost of martyrdom or imprisonment." - *MEMRI, June 1, 2010*
- "Algerian delegation head Dr. Abd Al Razzaq Maqri, who is the deputy head of the Algerian group Movement of Society for Peace, Algeria's major Islamist party, said, "The Algerians on board will hear only the orders of their leaders, who seek to break the siege. [The options are] martyrdom, imprisonment, or breaking [the siege]."" - *MEMRI, June 1, 2010*
- "Algerian delegation coordinator Ahmad Brahimi [sic] said about his delegation: 'Algeria has been known for its support of the Palestinian cause since the days of Salah Al-Din Al-Ayyubi. Our fathers gave their blood and lives to defend Palestine... and we are the sons of those fathers.' He added that the delegation's only purpose was to reach Gaza, and that Israel could not prevent it from doing so." - *MEMRI, June 1, 2010*
- "Hussein Shaker, known as 'Abu Al-Shuhada' ('Father of the Martyrs') has reportedly expressed a desire to meet 'his martyrs' (i.e. relatives killed during the 2006 Lebanon war), and has called his participation in the flotilla revenge for their deaths." - *MEMRI, June 1, 2010*



- "Another participant, Attorney Fathi Nassar of Jordan, said: 'The Freedom Flotilla members are filled with determination to reach Gaza or die.'" - *MEMRI, June 1, 2010*
- "Rami Abdou, representative of the European Campaign to End the Siege on Gaza, said that most of the participants were willing to lay down their lives to reach Gaza. He stressed that they would not allow the occupation forces to tow the ship to Ashdod." - *MEMRI, June 1, 2010*
- "Shadha Barakat's husband Ayman said that his wife was likely to be harmed during the venture, adding that 'she will make no truce with Zionism' and that 'since she was a child, she has dreamed of attacking an Israeli.' - *MEMRI, June 1, 2010*
- "At a press conference in Antalya, Turkey, the flotilla organizers asked all the participants to 'write their wills.' Following the press conference, Kuwaiti Salafist MP Walid Al-Tabtabai reportedly 'did not hesitate to write his will, in defiance of the Israeli threats.'" - *MEMRI, June 1, 2010*

## ORGANIZERS & FUNDERS

Initially conceived as a domestic group with an international mission, the Free Gaza Movement (FGM) has evolved into an international campaign that attracts support, endorsement and organizational assistance from a wide array of organizations in the U.S. and abroad.

As a member of the Freedom Flotilla Coalition, the organizing body of the May 2010 and June 2011 flotillas to Gaza, FGM regularly collaborates with multiple international groups that share its goal of challenging Israel's "siege" of Gaza.

The five other groups that comprise the coalition are the European Campaign to End the Siege of Gaza and the International Committee to Lift the Siege on Gaza, both broad coalitions of anti-Israel groups; Ship to Gaza Greece and Ship to Gaza Sweden, regional boat campaigns launched in advance of the May 2010 flotilla; and [Insani Yardim Vakfi \(IHH\)](#), an Istanbul-based Islamic charity that was outlawed in Israel in May 2008.

IHH was the main sponsor of the Mavi Marmara, the ship at the center of the violent confrontation with the Israeli Defense Forces in May 2010 that left nine civilians dead. Many of the ship's passengers, including some of those killed and injured, and others who were indicated a willingness to engage in martyrdom, were members of IHH or its affiliates.

The willingness of IHH members to engage in violence on the Mavi Marmara—as well as the preparation the group had done for a confrontation, documented in IHH materials recovered from the ship—is consistent with the group's radical nature. IHH plays a significant role in the global fund raising operations of [Hamas](#), the terrorist group that governs the Gaza strip, and openly expresses support for Hamas and its tactics, including armed warfare against Israeli civilians. IHH is also an affiliate of the [Union of Good](#), a U.S.-designated terrorist entity that supports Hamas.

FGM has received support from other radical elements of the international community, including the Malaysian-based Perdana Global Peace Organization (PGPO). PGPO is an initiative of Perdana Leadership Foundation (PLF), a tax-exempt non-profit organization that was launched in 2003 with official backing from the government of Malaysia which seeks to "champion peace and global understanding" through its campaign to "criminalize war."

Mahathir Mohamed, the PGPO chairman and former Malaysian Prime Minister who has at times voiced anti-Semitic views, announced during an August 2009 press conference that he would establish the Gaza Fund to raise money in support of the FGM, following a visit with FGM officials the prior month. By June 2010 PGPO had reportedly donated \$366,000 to the FGM, funding among other things three ships for the May flotilla, making it the campaign's largest contributor.

Matthias Chiang, a PGPO leader and former secretary of Mahathir Mohamed, was on board one of the ships and had worked with FGM officials to plan for the flotilla. Chiang, a known Holocaust denier, also has a long record of promoting anti-Semitic views.

During a July 2010 conference that PGPO organized in response to the Mavi Marmara incident, Mohamed made several anti-Semitic comments and commended the passengers who died in support of the cause. "We are gathered here today not only to honor the Turkish martyrs who were brutally slaughtered by Israeli commandos on the Mavi Marmara," he said, "but also to counter the lies and propaganda by Israel and the Zionist controlled international mass media." At the conference, PGPO announced its intention to explore legal actions against Israel for its conduct on board the ship.

Another financial backer of FGM is Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor, first lady of Malaysia. She has not only donated money to PGPO's Gaza Fund, but reportedly financed FGM through the another fund, called the Palestinian Humanitarian Fund.

Much of FGM's early success may be attributed to the active role of the [International Solidarity Movement \(ISM\)](#), a grassroots movement that spreads anti-Israel propaganda and misinformation and voices support for those who engage in armed resistance against Israel.

In advance of and during the first several missions to Gaza, ISM made its media team available to FGM and posted FGM's press releases on its own Web site. As a result, FGM was able to reach an established audience of ISM activists and supporters. In addition, several notable ISM figures were heavily involved in organizing the campaign and the various missions, and many other ISM activists have shown particular interest in supporting and participating in FGM.

Most notably, Huwaida Arraf, a co-founder of ISM, continues to serve as FGM's chairperson. She has led several of the trips to Gaza and is the primary organizer of the group's efforts, including sending out frequent press releases and updates to the group's listserve, traveling around the world raising money for the flotilla and providing interviews to the media.



Huwaida Arraf on the S.S. Liberty the day before FGM's first group sailed to Gaza, Aug. 22, 2008.

### SUMMER 2009 MISSION

The Israeli Navy intercepted an attempt by the Free Gaza Movement (FGM) to enter Gaza by boat on June 30, 2009.

FGM's "Spirit of Humanity" boat left Lanarca, Cyprus, on June 29, despite earlier warnings from the Israeli Foreign Ministry that it would not be permitted to sail into Gaza. As the boat approached Gaza, Israeli authorities took control of it and redirected it to the Israeli port city of Ashdod.

FGM organizers issued a series of statements immediately afterwards in which they objected to Israel's actions. Huwaida Arraf, a coordinator of the trip, stated, "Our boat was searched and received a security clearance by Cypriot Port Authorities before we departed, and at no time did we ever approach Israeli waters." The Cypriot Embassy in Tel Aviv has stated that the FGM group received clearance to leave Lanarca "on the basis of its declaration that its intended destination was the port of Port Said in Egypt."

Arraf is a co-founder of [International Solidarity Movement \(ISM\)](#), which has had an active role in promoting Free Gaza's efforts. Adam Shapiro, another ISM co-founder and Arraf's husband, was also aboard the intercepted boat.

Included among the boat's 21 passengers were Cynthia McKinney, former U.S. Congresswoman from Georgia and the 2008 Green Party presidential candidate, and Mairead Maguire, 1976 Nobel Peace Prize winner from Ireland.

Several Arab, Muslim, and far-left groups expressed support for the group following the boat's interception by Israel, some calling on the U.S. to intervene on passengers' behalf. For example, American Muslims for Palestine, American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, [Council on American-Islamic Relations](#), and Muslim Public Affairs Council issued statements in response to Israel's interception, while the [New Black Panther Party](#) and the International Action Center, a self-described "anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist" organization founded by former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, organized or attended events held in protest against Israel's actions.

The June trip marked the first mission to Gaza since FGM split into two separate factions due to a series of internal disputes involving fundraising and board elections, among other things.

One of the groups, which organized the "Summer of Hope" campaign, is led by Arraf and five others who were elected to FGM's interim board of directors at a November 2008 meeting in London. Legally called F.G. Human Rights Projects, Ltd., the group is based in Cyprus and accepts U.S. funding through its fiscal sponsor, the Washington D.C.-based American Educational Trust (AET), an anti-Israel group that publishes the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs.

The second group, which is being called the Free Palestine Movement, is being run by former FGM co-founder Paul Larudee.

## PREVIOUS MISSIONS TO GAZA

Five Free Gaza Movement (FGM) missions successfully sailed from Cyprus to Gaza between August and December 2008.

- **December 20:** Fourteen passengers, including Lebanese and Qatari citizens, arrived in Gaza on a 66-foot yacht called the S.S. Dignity. Jamal al-Khoudary, an independent member of the Palestinian

legislature who helped arrange the FGM efforts, described this mission as "the first of the Arab Intifada ships to make it through." Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas' leader in Gaza, responded to the Arab participation in this mission by stating, "We hope it will be the beginning of Arab moves to break the blockade."

- **December 9:** Eleven passengers arrived in Gaza on the S.S. Dignity. Lubna Masarwa, the mission's leader, vowed to "come again and again and again until the world breaks its silence and we shatter this siege once and for all."
- **November 8:** Twenty-three passengers arrived in Gaza on the S.S. Dignity. This mission was co-sponsored by the European Campaign to End the Siege, a London-based coalition of Palestinian solidarity groups that has been supportive of FGM's efforts. The group included several European Parliamentarians who had been denied entry to Gaza by Egyptian authorities at the Rafah border crossing earlier in the month.
- **October 29:** Twenty-six passengers, including Israeli Arab Knesset member Jamal Zahalka, arrived in Gaza on the S.S. Dignity. Following the group's arrival, participants vowed to continue opposing Israeli restrictions on access to Gaza. Mustafa Barghouti, a Palestinian Legislative Council member who took part in the mission, said, "we believe in justice and will keep on trying to break Israel's siege."
- **August 23:** Forty-six passengers arrived in Gaza on FGM's first two ships, the S.S. Free Gaza and S.S. Liberty, which was apparently named to honor the 34 American servicemen killed on the [USS Liberty](#) in error by Israeli forces during the Six Day War.



The S.S. Liberty prior to departure.

Israeli authorities blocked FGM from entering Gaza for the first time on December 30, 2008. The group, which was attempting to sail into Gaza during Israel's [military action there](#), claimed that an Israeli ship rammed into the Dignity three times while others fired machine guns nearby. Following the incident, the boat sailed to Tyre, Lebanon.



FGM participants meet with Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh (center), August 24, 2008.

Journalists from CNN and Al Jazeera, and Cynthia McKinney, former U.S. Congresswoman from Georgia and the 2008 Green Party presidential candidate, were among the boat's 16 passengers. During interviews following the boat's arrival in Lebanon, McKinney likened the incident to the USS Liberty attack. She called on President-elect Obama to speak out on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the U.S. Congress to "stop sending weapons of mass destruction around the world."



The S.S. Dignity arrives in Lebanon after Israeli authorities blocked the group from entering Gaza, December 30, 2008.

FGM's seventh mission left Lanarca on January 12, carrying 34 passengers, but turned around three hours into the journey due to mechanical problems.

The ship departed again on January 14, carrying 21 passengers, but was blocked by Israel. Huwaida Arraf, an FGM coordinator and [International Solidarity Movement \(ISM\)](#) co-founder, claimed that the group decided to turn around after Israeli ships surrounded the boat and threatened to open fire.

### BACKGROUND ON THE FREE GAZA MOVEMENT

In May 2007, the Free Gaza Movement (FGM) announced its intention to sail a boat carrying international volunteers and humanitarian aid to Gaza later that summer.

In the year leading up to the first mission, which was delayed multiple times due to insufficient funds, organizers criticized Israel's founding, propagated messages about Israel's brutality and recommended international sanctions against Israel.

They ran a highly effective campaign that raised several hundred thousand dollars in funds, and garnered significant international support and media attention.

Since its conception, FGM organizers anticipated that Israeli authorities would try to stop the boats from entering Gaza, thereby validating their claim that Israel still controls Gaza. In advance of the trips they announced their intentions to multiple Israeli agencies, including the Israeli Navy, Ministry of Defense, and/or Foreign Ministry, and underwent security searches by the Cypriot Port Authorities prior to departure from Lanarca.

Organizers also initially indicated their intention to refuse inspection and resist arrest if a confrontation with Israeli authorities should ensue, and stated that they were prepared to remain at sea for up to two weeks in protest against Israel. (None of the groups stayed at sea that long).



During the trips, participants and organizers regularly posted statements, pictures, and in some cases videos of the boats' progress on the FGM Web site. Several of the FGM groups brought Palestinians back to Cyprus when they left Gaza, allegedly for medical and other humanitarian reasons.

Some FGM participants remained in Gaza after the boats returned to Cyprus, either to engage in ISM resistance efforts, humanitarian work, or to cross over into Israel. In multiple cases, these individuals were arrested by Israeli authorities.

In November 2008, for example, FGM participants who stayed in Gaza following the August mission were arrested at sea while accompanying Gazan fishermen on their boats, in what the activists claimed was an effort to protect the fishermen from the Israeli navy. After the boats allegedly crossed into prohibited waters the Israeli Defense Forces arrested 15 fisherman and the three internationals—Darlene Wallach of San Jose, CA, Andrew Muncie from Scotland, and Vittorio Arrigoni from Italy—who were then detained by Israeli authorities and deported to their respective countries.



At least three other FGM participants, all Israeli citizens, were arrested by Israeli border authorities at the Erez crossing between Gaza and Sderot for entering Gaza without a permit, which Israeli law prohibits. They were detained by Sderot police for questioning before eventually being released, some with court dates.

Upon their return to the U.S., many participants were invited by local antiwar and anti-Israel groups to speak about the campaign at churches and other venues.

For example, FGM co-founder Paul Larudee gave several presentations in the Bay Area in November 2008. Describing the steps leading up to the first mission, Larudee told one audience that he had discussed the legality of the trip and the possible Hamas meeting with members of the U.S. State Department and Justice Department, noting that he was told it would be permissible so long as no material support to terrorist organizations was provided. Additionally, he claimed that the Israeli government unsuccessfully attempted to pressure Greece to forbid sales of boats to FGM and to stop the boats from sailing. He also claimed that that Israel threatened to forbid Palestinians from leaving Gaza on the boats.

FGM organizers view their campaign as being the foundation for further action against Israel, and have encouraged humanitarian groups to circumvent Israeli border crossings by sending aid directly to Gaza by boat, as they did. In the months following FGM's first missions, several similar efforts to access Gaza by boat were in fact organized by various other groups in and around the Middle East.

Though FGM missions have delivered medical and other supplies to Gazans, organizers have consistently emphasized the political nature of the campaign. FGM, for example, stated in a June 2007 press release that the transport of aid supplies would not be "a primary part of our mission."

FGM's broader mission, as stated on its Web site, is to elicit international opposition to Israel's policies: "We want to break the siege of Gaza. We want to raise international awareness about the prison-like closure of the Gaza Strip and pressure the international community to review its sanctions policy and end its support for continued Israeli occupation."

In press releases and on its Web site, the group has described the Gaza Strip as an "open-air concentration camp controlled by land, sea and air" and asserted that Israel "withholds food and energy in an attempt to starve [Gazans] into submission." It has accused Israel of committing war crimes and Israeli politicians of "vicious racism." Additionally, it has lamented the "accelerated Judaization of Jerusalem" and referred to the events surrounding the founding of the Jewish State as a "historic injustice."

FGM has been endorsed by several American organizations that regularly promote anti-Israel views in campaigns and at events, including American Muslims for Palestine, [International Action Center](#), [Council on American-Islamic Relations](#), and the [Muslim American Society \(MAS\)](#) Freedom Foundation.



The [International Solidarity Movement \(ISM\)](#), a grassroots movement that spreads anti-Israel propaganda and misinformation and voices support for those who engage in armed resistance against Israel, played a major role in FGM's campaign, particularly during its early missions.

A variety of domestic American anti-Israel groups also played a crucial role in planning, fundraising for and executing FGM's early missions, including 14 Friends of Palestine, South Bay Mobilization (SBM), the Middle East Crisis Committee and [Jewish Voice for Peace](#).

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who has a [history of promoting anti-Israel efforts](#), stated his support for the campaign in a letter in which he lamented that Gaza "is suffering under a cruel siege."