

BRICUP NEWSLETTER

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Jeff Halper has provided the following reflections on the breaking of the Gaza siege by the Free Gaza Movement's two small boats. Jeff is the Director of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHN) and he was one of those who sailed to Gaza aboard the SS Free Gaza. on August 23rd, 2008.

End of an Odyssey

Now, a few days after my release from jail in the wake of my trip to Gaza, I'm posting a few notes to sum things up. First, the mission of the Free Gaza Movement to break the Israeli siege proved a success beyond all expectations. Our reaching Gaza and leaving has created a free and regular channel between Gaza and the outside world. It has done so because it has forced the Israeli government to make a clear policy declaration: that it is not occupying Gaza and therefore will not prevent the free movement of Palestinians in and out (at least by sea). (Israel's security concerns can easily be accommodated by instituting a technical system of checks similar to those of other ports.) Any attempt on the part of Israel to backtrack on this - by preventing ships in the future from entering or leaving Gaza with goods and passengers, including Palestinians - may be immediately interpreted as an assertion of control, and therefore of Occupation, opening Israel to accountability for war crimes before international law, something Israel tries to avoid at all costs. Gone is the obfuscation that has allowed Israel to maintain its control of the Occupied Territories without assuming any responsibility: from now on, Israel is either an Occupying Power accountable for its actions and policies, or Palestinians have every right to enjoy their human right of traveling freely in and out of their country. Israel can no longer have it both ways. Not only did our two little boats force the Israel military and government to give way, then, they also changed fundamentally the status of

Israel's control of Gaza. When we finally arrived in Gaza after a day and a half sail, the welcome we received from 40,000 joyous Gazans was overwhelming and moving.

People sought me out in particular, eager it seemed to speak Hebrew with an Israeli after years of closure. The message I received by people of all factions during my three days there was the same: How do we ("we" in the sense of all of us living in their country, not just Palestinians or Israelis) get out of this mess? Where are WE going? The discourse was not even political: what is the solution; one-state, two-state, etc etc. It was just common sense and straightforward, based on the assumption that we will all continue living in the same country and this stupid conflict, with its walls and siege and violence, is bad for everybody. Don't Israelis see that? people would ask me. The answer, unfortunately, is "no." To be honest, we Israeli Jews are the problem. The Palestinians years ago accepted our existence in the country as a people and are willing to accept ANY solution - two states, one state, no state, whatever. It is us who want exclusivity over the "Land of Israel" who cannot conceive of a single country, who cannot accept the national presence of Palestinians (we talk about "Arabs" in our country), and who have eliminated by our settlements even the possibility of the two-state solution in which we take 80% of the land.

So it's sad, truly sad, that our "enemies" want peace and co-existence (and tell me that in HEBREW) and we don't. Yeah, we Israeli Jews want "peace," but in the meantime what we have - almost no attacks, a feeling of security, a "disappeared" Palestinian people, a booming economy, tourism and ever-improving international status - seems just fine. If "peace" means giving up settlements, land and control, why do it? What's wrong with the status quo? If it's not broken, don't fix it.

When in Gaza I also managed to see old friends, especially Eyad al-Sarraj of the Gaza Community Mental Health Program and Raji Sourani, Director of the Palestinian Center for Human Rights, whom I visited in his office. I also received honorary Palestinian citizenship, including a passport, which was very meaningful to me as an Israeli Jew. When I was in Gaza everyone in Israel - including the media who interviewed me - warned me to be careful, to watch out for my life. "Aren't you scared?" they asked. Well, the only time I felt genuine and palpable fear during the entire journey was when I got back to Israel. I went from Gaza through the Erez checkpoint because I wanted to make the point that the siege is not only by sea. On the Israeli side I was immediately arrested, charged with violating a military order prohibiting Israelis from being in Gaza and jailed at the Shikma prison in Ashkelon. In my cell that night, someone recognized me from the news. All night I was physically threatened by right-wing Israelis - and I was sure I wouldn't make it till the morning. Ironically, there were three Palestinians in my cell who kind of protected me, so the danger was from Israelis, not Palestinians, in Gaza as well as in Israel. One Palestinian from Hebron was in jail for being illegally in Israel; I was in jail for being illegally in Palestine. As it stands, I'm out on bail. The state will probably press charges in the next few weeks, and I could be jailed for two or so months. I now am a Palestinian in every sense of the word: on Monday I received my Palestinian citizenship, on Tuesday I was already in an Israeli jail.

Though the operation was a complete success, the siege will only be genuinely broken if we keep up the movement in and out of Gaza. The boats are scheduled to return in 2-4 weeks and I am now working on getting a boat-load of Israelis. My only frustration with what was undoubtedly a successful operation was with the fact that Israelis just don't get it - and don't want to get it. The implications of our being the strong party and the fact that the Palestinians are the ones truly seeking peace are too threatening to their hegemony and self-perceived innocence. What I encountered in perhaps a dozen interviews - and what I read about myself and our trip written by "journalists" who never even attempted to speak to me or the

others - was a collective image of Gaza, the Palestinians and our interminable conflict which could only be described as fantasy. Rather than inquire about my experiences, motives or views, my interviewers, especially on the mainstream radio, spent their time forcing upon me their slogans and uninformed prejudices, as if giving me a space to explain myself dealt a death blow to their tightly-held conceptions. Ben Dror Yemini of the popular Ma'ariv newspaper called us a "satanic cult." Another suggested that a prominent contributor to the Free Gaza Movement was a Palestinian-American who had been questioned by the FBI, as if that had to do with anything, the innuendo being we were supported, perhaps even manipulated or worse, by "terrorists". Others were more explicit: Wasn't it true that we were giving Hamas a PR victory? Why was I siding with Palestinian fishermen-gun smugglers against my own country which sought only to protect its citizens? Some simply yelled at me, like an interviewer on Arutz 99. And when all else failed, my interlocutors could always fall back on good old cynicism: Peace is impossible. Jews and Arabs are different species. You can't trust "them." Or bald assertions: They just want to destroy us. Then there's the paternalism: Well, I guess it's good to have a few idealists like you around. Nowhere in the many interviews was there a genuine curiosity about what I was doing or what life was like in Gaza. No one was interested in a different perspective, especially if it challenged their cherished slogans. No one was going beyond the old, tired slogans. Plenty of reference, though, to terrorism, Qassam missiles and Palestinian snubbing our valiant efforts to make peace; none whatsoever to occupation, house demolitions, siege, land expropriation or settlement expansion, not to mention the killing, imprisoning and impoverishment of their civilian population. As if we had nothing to do with the conflict, as if we were just living our normal, innocent lives and bad people decided to throw Qassam rockets. Above all, no sense of our responsibility, or any willingness to accept responsibility for the ongoing violence and conflict. Instead just a thoughtless, automatic appeal to an image of Gaza and "Arabs" (we don't generally use the term "Palestinians") that is diametrically opposed to what I've seen and

experienced, a slavish repeating of mindless (and wrong) slogans which serve only to eliminate any possibility of truly grasping the situation. In short, a fantasy Gaza as perceived from within a bubble carefully constructed so as to deflect any uncomfortable reality.

The greatest insight this trip has given me is understanding why Israelis don't "get it:" a media comprised by people who should know better but who possess little critical ability and feel more comfortable inside a box created by self-serving politicians than in trying to do something far more creative: understanding what in the hell is going on here. Still, I formulated clearly my messages to my fellow Israelis, and that constitutes the main content of my interviews and talks:

(1) Despite what our political leaders say, there is a political solution to the conflict and there are partners for peace. If anything, we of the peace movement must not allow the powers-that-be to mystify the conflict, to present it as a "clash of civilizations." The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is political and as such it has a political solution;

(2) The Palestinians are not our enemies. In fact, I urge my fellow Israeli Jews to disassociate from the dead-end politics of our failed political leaders by declaring, in concert with Israeli and Palestinian peace-makers: We refuse to be enemies.

(3) As the infinitely stronger party in the conflict and the only Occupying Power, we Israelis must accept responsibility for our failed and oppressive policies. Only we can end the conflict.

Let me end by expressing my appreciation to the organizers of this initiative - Paul Larudee and Greta Berlin from the US, Hilary Smith and Bella from the UK, Vaggelis Pissias, a Greek member of the team who provided crucial material and political input, and Jamal al-Khoudri, an independent member of the PLC from Gaza and head of the Popular Committee Against the Siege and others - plus the wonderful group of participants on the boats and the great communication team that stayed ashore. Special appreciation goes to ICAHD's own Angela

Godfrey-Goldstein who played a crucial role in Cyprus and Jerusalem in getting the word out. Not to forget our hosts in Gaza (whose names are on the Free Gaza website) and the tens of thousands of Gazans who welcomed us and shared their lives with us.

May our peoples finally find the peace and justice they deserve in our common land.

Jeff Halper

For more information on the Free Gaza Movement, visit: <http://www.FreeGaza.org>. For more information on ICAHD, visit: <http://www.ICAHD.org>. Jeff can be reached at <jeff@icahd.org>.

The PACBI Column

Paul McCartney Embraces Israeli Apartheid

Paul McCartney insists on going ahead with his planned gig in Israel despite many [appeals](#) to him to cancel it due to Israel's crimes against the Palestinians, particularly its current brutally devastating siege of 1.5 million in Gaza. Not only will such a concert violate the [Palestinian cultural boycott](#) against Israel; it will convey a message that McCartney either condones or apathetically ignores Israel's reality as a colonial power and an apartheid state that oppresses the indigenous Palestinians and occupies Arab land. Just as in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, Palestinians are asking international artists to exercise their moral responsibility by staying away from Israel until freedom, justice, equality and human rights are respected for all.

In a recent media interview McCartney confessed, "I was approached by different groups and political bodies who asked me not to come here. I refused. I do what I think, and I have many friends who support Israel." Public opinion in the UK, however, does not support Israel's occupation and violation of international law. Media reports revealed, furthermore, that many in Liverpool itself are apprehensive towards McCartney's gig in Israel. Now Sir Paul will have far fewer friends

across the world, those who still uphold human rights and abhor apartheid.

Adding insult to injury, McCartney told the media, "I've heard so many great things about Tel Aviv and Israel, but hearing is one thing and experiencing it for yourself is another." Hadn't he heard even greater things about Sun City in South Africa, too? Would that have been enough for him to ignore the South African anti-apartheid movement's call for boycott? Israel is recognized by the United Nations and the overwhelming majority of nations across the world as a repressive occupying power that maintains illegal colonies in the occupied Palestinian territory (OPT) and persistently violates international law.

Despite our denunciation of Paul McCartney's effective complicity in covering up Israel's occupation and system of racial oppression, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) strongly and unequivocally condemns any violent threats made against him or, for that matter, against any other cultural or academic figure who decides to visit Israel in violation of the Palestinian boycott of Israel. As a civil resistance movement whose message is anchored in an unwavering commitment to universal human rights and ethical responsibility, we strive to persuade people, to appeal to their minds and hearts to boycott Israel - through campaigns of public awareness raising and non-violent pressure - due to its occupation, racist oppression and unique system of apartheid.

PACBI, Occupied Ramallah,
15th. September 2008

For more information see www.PACBI.org
Media inquiries to: info@Boycottisrael.ps

Tours of Palestine

The Olive Cooperative's Teacher's Tour, October 26th to November 2nd 2008.

This tour offers participants a unique opportunity to visit educational institutions in Palestine and

Israel, to hear first hand about the effects of the occupation on Palestinian education and the problems of increased militarisation of the Israeli education system. From schools and Universities to refuseniks, Trade Union activists and peace organisations, this tour will visit Jerusalem, Hebron, Bethlehem and Nablus. The Olive Cooperative has 5 years experience running tours to Palestine and Israel, and extensive knowledge of a broad spectrum of civil society organisations.

Designed for those with a particular interest in education, the tour will also suit anyone wanting to gain a general understanding of the current situation in Palestine and Israel, giving them the opportunity to see the wall, visit refugee camps and meet inspiring Palestinian and Israeli individuals and organisations.

Participants will benefit from the experience and personal contacts of our tour guide, a London-based teacher who ran our successful Teacher's Tour in 2007 and has worked in the West Bank including as a long term volunteer with the International Women's Peace Service.

Please note: Olive tour guides monitor the situation on the ground using a wide range of contacts. All itineraries are subject to change due to local circumstances and to ensure tour customer safety and security. Our comprehensive Travel Guidance Notes are available from our website www.olivecoop.com.

For full details and itinerary please visit www.olivecoop.com/tours/Teachers08.html

A Clinicians' tour to Israel & Palestine 13 – 23 November 2008

This tour will provide an opportunity to witness the situation on the ground, including many places not visited by conventional tours to "The Holy Land". You will see Israel's 'facts on the ground' and visit Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Nablus, Hebron and Gaza. You will visit hospitals, mobile clinics, and medical schools with opportunities to give seminars on appropriate topics and to assist with practical medical work. You will meet with Jews, Christians and Muslims, and through hearing their

stories will be able to draw your own conclusions about what is happening in Israel and Palestine. The tour also offers a very practical way to make a difference. First, you can stand in solidarity with those who suffer injustice, including the Israelis who are marginalized by their own society for their stance on working for a just peace. Second, you are encouraged to raise around £100 in local fund-raising efforts to donate to the various organisations. This humanitarian element allows you to involve your family and friends as you give them the opportunity to learn about the displacement of the Palestinian people and to make a small donation if they so wish. You report back to them upon your return and tell your stories. Third, you will be able to share some of your clinical expertise by leading a seminar in your clinical subject. Finally, you will be able to help provide treatment with the PHR-I mobile clinics. The last 2 opportunities will depend on the local interest in, and need for, your skills. Applicants will be invited to attend a briefing session in London at which time the subjects and speakers for the specialist seminars presented by participants will be determined.

The tour will be administered by Experience Travel Tours, based in England, which specialises in study tours to Israel and Palestine. Obtain details by email to: tours@icahduk.org, studytours80@hotmail.com Tel: 01737 843408. This tour is hosted by the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAH) and Physicians for Human Rights – Israel (PHR-I). Both organisations work to see the end of Israel's Occupation of Palestine with a just and sustainable solution. ICAHD's rebuilding of Palestinian homes that have been demolished by Israeli authorities and PHR-I's provision of mobile clinics in the West Bank demonstrate their direct commitment to supporting the rights of the Palestinian people. For more information see www.icahd.org and www.phr.org.il). Ground arrangements are by Golden Gate Tours & Travel, a Palestinian Tour Agency, based in Bethlehem. Please note that every effort will be made to complete the itinerary as seen, however flexibility is required.

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