

## A New Flotilla Steams Towards Gaza

Elizabeth Murray is aboard a new flotilla to highlight the illegality of the 12-year old blockade that is choking the people of Gaza.

By [Elizabeth Murray](#)

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*Featured image: Al Awda (The Return): Ship Murray is sailing on to Gaza.*

*Aboard the Al Awda*

“Islands Brygge,” an idyllic harbor park that stretches along the east bank of Copenhagen, was alive with a celebratory crowd on Monday as three ships were about to steam towards Gaza. The 2018 Freedom Flotilla—two ships from Sweden and one from Norway — will call at ports in Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, Spain, Portugal and Italy before traveling through the Mediterranean Sea to its final destination: Gaza harbor.

Volunteer boat guides explained the history and mission of the Gaza Flotilla movement, which has organized a number of journeys to demonstrate solidarity with the people of Gaza and break the illegal economic siege. An independent U.N. panel and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) [say](#) the blockade violates the Geneva Conventions and is illegal.



Israel dragged the last Israeli settlers from Gaza and withdrew the Israeli Defense Force in 2005. When the Palestinian Authority lost a 2006 election in Gaza to Hamas, Israel imposed the illegal blockade. A considerable number of young Danish people learned about Gaza for the first time and walked away with new political awareness of the injustices suffered by Gaza's children, who are denied the same carefree life enjoyed by Danish children.

The upbeat music and offerings of traditional Palestinian falafel wraps washed down with Danish beer created a festive atmosphere at the Freedom Flotilla tent. Passerby lined up to buy 'Boat to Gaza' T-shirts, Palestinian *kaffiyehs* (traditional checkered scarves) while a Palestinian musician strummed the *oud* (traditional Palestinian lute) and sang a song of sentimental love for his Palestinian homeland. A local Palestinian man danced and waved the Palestinian flag while the crowd clapped along.

Image on the right: Murray: Boarding her boat to Gaza.

I feel proud and privileged to join a group of international passengers aboard the Norwegian ship "Al Awda," ("The Return" in Arabic) as we prepared to embark on the first leg of our journey. Along our route we hope to raise awareness and educate people about the plight of Palestinians, especially in Gaza, who are denied the basic freedoms and human rights the rest of us take for granted.

Earlier this month as Gazans held The Great March of Return to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Nakba (or the Catastrophe) — in which 800,000 Palestinians were forcibly driven from their land and homes by Israel in 1948 — Israeli snipers cut down peaceful demonstrators one by one, killing hundreds and maiming thousands, generating shock and outrage around the world and providing further incentive for people to support the burgeoning Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS).

Targeting Athletes



Israel seems to have reserved a special brand of sadism for Gaza's athletes — several promising young cyclists and soccer players have become amputees, since Israel refused to allow them to leave Gaza to obtain the necessary medical attention that would have saved their legs. Reports of such heinous acts — documented widely in social media posts by those on the ground in Gaza — have served to further isolate Israel internationally and

alienate peace-loving people around the world, who deplore the moral depravity of its government.

Reaching the harbor of Gaza (which means “jewel” in Arabic) should be as simple and straightforward as entering any harbor in Germany, France or Spain. But instead, Israel has denied Gazans use of their own harbor for commerce, trade and travel, and has bombed it on numerous occasions, along with their electric power plants and sewage systems, making life miserable for the local population and rendering 97 percent of the drinking water toxic.

As the Freedom Flotilla embarks on its peace odyssey, it is our hope to bring a light of hope and solidarity to the people of Gaza, who deserve the peaceful, dignified and joyful existence that is their right.

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*Elizabeth Murray served as Deputy National Intelligence Officer for the Near East in the National Intelligence Council before retiring after a 27-year career in the U.S. government, where she specialized in Middle Eastern political and media analysis. She is a member of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).*

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