Memoire of a journey across apartheid landscapes: From South Africa to break the siege of Gaza

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This reflection is a reportage, some would say stream-of-consciousness piece, giving some insight into the thinking and action I committed to, as part of the International Freedom Flotilla mission of September/October 2016. The Women’s Boat to Gaza (WBG) was the first all-women international solidarity flotilla mission, since flotilla’s set sail to deliver humanitarian aid to the illegally blockaded Gaza Strip. The WBG was a different kind of mission in that the 15 meter-long yacht was not carrying any food or money or medical supplies, as flotillas before had done. The WBG was a boat of 13 women from around the world who represented the many ordinary people who remain aware of the injustices in Palestine and are willing to act to organize action, further than the protest marches, discussions, documentary film screenings – which ensure that the plight of Palestinians remain in the consciousness of people around the world. This was a mission, as are many international solidarity efforts, which required commitment, resources, and lots of behind the scenes work to make possible. The collective effort meant that many people engaged in developing an action that was hopeful, while at the same time also potentially horrific. I kept the diary that follows in the hope that it would provide some reflection on the experience of participating in a solidarity mission from the perspective of a South African activist.
Day 1 – Thursday 22 September 2016

It was very hard for me to leave the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), particularly to leave Johannesburg, and the current struggles in South Africa around free decolonized higher education. Most of my day was spent reading, thinking and responding to the struggles raging on university campuses across the country and spilling out into the streets. Alongside all of this, I was up like many others at 5.30am to get my child ready for school or get to work. I no longer listen to the radio when I am driving her to the school bus. I realized that she listens and is affected by what she hears. I took her to a meeting at Wits on Wednesday afternoon and she began to panic when she saw the riot police on campus. As concerned academics and students sat on the university library lawns she played with her soccer ball. She kept coming over and asking me if we could leave. I wanted to take her away. To protect her from this unfolding scene, our university, like many others across the country was occupied by police and private security guards. She asked me why the police helicopter was flying around and around. I decided to take her home and miss the important discussion. Once back in the car she said, I don’t like the police, they make me scared with their guns and I'm worried that they are going to arrest you and take you away.

I was overwhelmed in that moment and had to fight back my tears. The first time I remember feeling scared of the police and afraid that they would take my parents away was when the security branch of the apartheid regime busted into my house and arrested my dad. I was five. I was always wary of the police as a result. Here was my 7-year-old, reminding me of what many children in South Africa, in my time and hers, have experienced and seen police do. Now that I am the parent, the adult who understands a little bit and works against some of the childhood traumas I experienced growing up under apartheid, am I going to expose my child to this? Like the majority of children in South Africa, she was being exposed to the struggles for a more just system. I thought of all the children privy to the daily protests and evictions in townships and inner cities in South Africa. Was I going to hide it all from her? I also thought of the way my partner, who was born in 1976 like me, but grew up 5kms away on the white side of the railway tracks, has spent more than half of her life trying to unlearn and work against what could be understood as the violence of being duped by family, friends and society into thinking everything was okay in Apartheid South Africa. How many people currently living in Israel-Palestine are duped into thinking that everything is okay there?

I thought about the video I had watched the day before. It had a trigger warning and was about Palestinian children, and since I was going in a few days on a solidarity mission to Gaza, I felt I should see it. I was not prepared, how can anyone be, to see three separate incidents of Jewish settlers executing children. Shooting them and then circling them and screaming "die you dogs" while they bled to death in the street with adults watching and cameras rolling. Those children, their parents, don't have much choice.

In South Africa, while we no longer have the apartheid laws that separate our lives as explicitly as they do in Israel-Palestine, there are many parents who can't protect their children from the violence that is everywhere. This is not unique to Palestine and South Africa. When I
was in the USA with my daughter a few years ago, friends took us to a restaurant, and were worried that my then four-year-old daughter who is black should behave as confidently in a public space as she was doing. They advised me out of concern for her that in the USA a black child that wanted to survive needed to learn to respond to authority and act subserviently so they could avoid harm. I was glad in that moment not to be raising my daughter in the USA, and felt appreciative of the progress that has been made in South Africa. The contradictions and inequalities in South Africa however remain extreme, but I know that when I get on a plane tonight, I start my journey to one of the most violent and oppressed places on the planet. My phone keeps ringing for media comments on the question of whether free higher education is possible. I agree to squeeze in a trip to the South African Broadcasting Corporation offices to record an interview to be aired on the evening news when I will be in the air. I don't have a T.V. at home but catch a glimpse of the news at the studio. It is being reported that a few hundred people have died in the Mediterranean Sea trying to flee to a better life in Europe. In a few days I will be on that beautiful and ghastly, ghostly sea where so many thousands have died, have been left to die, have been killed. I rush home to pack.

I must pack only things that I am okay not to return with. I must pack things that won't come back. I have packed many times. Travelled many times. But never have I packed to not bring back. Never have I packed with the possibility of not coming back. Freedom flotilla's get attacked. Well, to put it bluntly, humanitarian and solidarity flotillas are often attacked. In 2010, one of the vessels was attacked by the Israeli Occupying Forces (IOF) and ten people on board were killed. In other years, boats were rammed, one capsized. I remember the terrible news of a few days ago that Barak Obama has just signed another multi-billion dollar package with Israel for arms over the next ten years. Does this mean that my partner's family, my family and friends, who live in the USA may have some of their taxes go towards maintaining and growing the IOF that is likely to stop us from bringing a message of solidarity and hope to the people of Gaza?

What about the children in the IOF? I hear from many who have experienced a checkpoint or been on a flotilla mission that the IOF soldiers are young. Some just out of school. What kind of compassion can I have for these young people? What will I feel when I come face to face with them? When they demean and ridicule those who try to support or show solidarity with their "enemy"? I have read some accounts of young Israeli's refusing national military service. They do not escape the violence and the trauma of being so young and yet carrying a gun and a hatred around to maintain an occupation of a people. Their own defense force breaks them for disobeying and resisting. No one leaves this conflict unscathed.

I say goodbye to my partner and my child, my family that is trying hard not to simply remain comfortable and safe, while others don't have the possibility to be so. For us, even as we have choice, the possibility to not hear and not see the injustices next door or far away, is not an option. I remember this commitment as I board the first of three planes, a train, and hopefully a boat to take a message of solidarity from South Africa to the people, especially the women and children of occupied Gaza.
Day 2 – Friday 23 September

After a night of flying to Dubai and a midday flight from there to Rome, I started feeling excited to finally be making my way to Messina where I will hopefully be getting on the boat Zaytona (Olive in Arabic). I felt like I was already closer to Palestine because I was hearing Arabic translations on the Etihad Airline. The second boat Amal (Hope in Arabic), which I was meant to be on, was not able to sail because of engine difficulties. It was disappointing to hear that it did not make it out of the harbour in Spain, and there were rumours of sabotage. Now the 30 women who planned to sail together on two boats will have to be reduced to 13 women on one boat. I hope I am still able to sail to Gaza, but I will only know in a day or so once final selections have been made. So many people, who are supporting this mission behind the scenes, are now working harder to try and secure another boat in just a few days. The collective spirit of this solidarity mission is amazing even if, as with any solidarity work, difficult.

Today I will move out of the transit zones of planes and airports into the Schengen territory, entering through Italy. Once my passport is stamped and I am in, it will all feel more real, and possible. My entry into Rome is seamless. I have wondered for months, whether Israel is powerful enough to stop me before I even make it to the boat. I am relieved to realize they are not all powerful or maybe not as interested, or maybe not as well informed, as I imagined. Taking off from Rome we head out over the Mediterranean Sea. This is what will take us to Gaza if all goes well. It looks calm and beautiful with no indication of the many thousands who have lost their lives trying to get to Europe. Once I land in Palermo, I will take a bus to the main train station and then a 3-hour train trip to Messina.

At Palermo I am the last person waiting for checked baggage. I would love to care even less about losing luggage. I have a lot to learn from people who live with much less than I do. I remember Neville Alexander's question and challenge to us all before he passed a few years ago: What is enough to live with? What might a theory or principles of sufficiency be? So much of change and development thinking and work is geared towards directing people towards middle class life. But a more fruitful orientation is towards a practice of sufficiency, questioning what is really necessary for a good life. The image of success cannot be first world, middle-class life. As Frantz Fanon wrote, decolonization is about putting the last first when imagining radical change.

The people of Gaza have managed to live with almost nothing as well as live with knowing that they may not return from doing the most mundane things like going to school. I have read that four children have been executed at checkpoints over the last week by Israeli soldiers who claimed the children were threatening attack. There is very little recourse under conditions of occupation to prove these claims true or false. In the USA right now, a supposed model democracy for many, police kill black unarmed Americans and Indigenous people at an alarming rate. A police force heavily armed and antagonistic to its own black citizens, an unofficial occupation. Audio and video evidence show their mistakes and yet still no one is held to account. Maybe it has nothing to do with evidence at all. Black and brown people across the world leave home daily, knowing that coming home is less likely for them than for their white counterparts.
On the bus to catch the last train to Messina I am pleasantly surprised to have free Wi-Fi for the trip and so am able to catch up on news from home. Fellow Wits students have marched to Cosatu (The Congress of South African Trade Unions), the biggest federation of unions in South Africa. The students leading the march from Wits are aligned to the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC). I have little hope that they will be able to steer the ANC towards progressive decisions. I wish I were closer to understand the reasoning and argument behind this and other decisions. I will watch as much as I can from afar.

It has been a long day of travelling and the final 3-hour train trip seems to take forever. I arrive at Messina train station around midnight and take a cab with Shabnam Mayat and her sister, who have been working to arrange everything for me. We go for an early morning pasta and I crawl into bed, exhausted. Tomorrow I start preparing for the hardest and most important part of my journey.

Day 3 – Saturday 24 September

Busy admin day. We meet the women’s boat participants that have arrived so far, some from home and some from the first leg of the Zaytona journey from Barcelona. They have travelled 700 nautical miles to get here. We go straight from the introductory meeting into a press conference. The Mayor of Messina comes to welcome us in his free Tibet t-shirt. There are group photos to be taken and a couple of interviews to be done. An important part of this mission is ensuring that we get as much media attention around the world to focus on the illegal blockade of Gaza.

The plan for tonight is an opportunity for participants to give longer testimony on why they are here. A number of locals come to engage with participants and a well-known band with a Palestinian band member that performs. Some of the participants from WBG also perform either music or testimony. It is a beautiful evening filled with diverse people and views from participants and the public.

Day 4 – Sunday 25 September

After a good night's rest, I woke up excited to participate in the non-violence training in preparation for possible encounters with the Israeli Occupying Forces (IOF). Also to hear from the many women here who have been on freedom flotilla's before, what to expect when stopped, when boarded, when arrested, when interrogated and when deported. I'm the kind of person who likes to be prepared for the worst possible unfolding of events. I always imagine the worst case scenario. I think it comes from having to spend my childhood worrying about my father being taken by the apartheid security forces. This morning’s training will hopefully allow me to come to terms with the worst case scenario on the boat.
The workshop started with the question, what is non-violence to you? My answer: non-violence for me is a creative, critical and strategic response to an oppressive situation. Some other participant’s answers were: being human; seeing humanity in others; thinking about those who come after us; not simple passivity. We discuss nonviolence as the harder way to respond to the violence of structural oppression. Ann Wright our boat leader and an ex-army general from USA states “nonviolence is the attempt to obtain your objective by not harming other people either physically or emotionally”. Naomi Wallace a US playwright says “still learning what nonviolence is, and it seems it is a choice”, “Nonviolence is human solidarity in action” say a Canadian organizer. A Russian camera women from Al Jazeera suggests “it is a method to resolve any conflict without violence”. An Israeli channel news person says “nonviolence is a good cause and I hope we can maintain it”.

Our Facilitator reminds us, there is no right or wrong strategy, strategy is what enables us to achieve our goals and to live our principles in life.

Testimony from a Turkish participant – “I was on the Turkish boat the Mavi Mamara to break the siege of Gaza. My husband was killed by the IOF and he died in my arms. We did not go to spread violence in 2010. We will go again in peace with the women’s boat to Gaza in 2016”. Lisa, the nonviolence trainer says “Strategic nonviolence the USA is a very violent country and culture and we carry that violence in ourselves. I recognize that there is a war being waged on people around the world - war on immigrants, war on Palestine, war on Black people, war on woman. When there is war, we can choose to fight or not. And if we choose to fight we can fight violently or nonviolently. The power of nonviolence is about taking the violence of oppression and bringing it back to their home. Bring the crisis back home. Because the crisis will (eventually) bring deep change”.

I try not to judge, but when in a group we have to make an agreement and stick to it. It is important today to be clear what will be good for all of us, for the common good. This is sacred work; it is not a joke or a game. This is about life or death and people could die on this mission but I am hopeful that won’t happen.

We must remember that the young Israelis have been trained to believe that we are all “terrorists”. They will be afraid of us and we must understand that fear can create foolish actions. Today we are going to do a variety of activities and discussions. Usually we would do 3 days but we have a few hours. We will focus as much as possible on what we must do on this mission

Some of the words from the training that have stuck in my head:

Detention center… Holding facility… Prison… Deportation… Arrest… Interrogation… Imprisoned… Detention camp… Processed… Deported… Techniques designed to break your spirit… We are often criminalizing ourselves - remember the women of Gaza and Palestine and women from around the world… Power in jail… Hungry… Tired… Scared

We break for tea, or so we think. We are in a corridor at the bottom of the stairs and an unplanned role play of the Israeli Occupation Forces boarding our boat begins. There is lots of
shouting, lots of commands being given, we are being wet, some people are being grabbed. After this exercise, it all feels more real. We had a good reflection discussion on our actions in the simulation and whether our actions would have yielded the results we wanted. They would not have. It becomes more apparent what we shouldn’t do when approached forcefully by the IOF.

Next is the interrogation simulations. This is all meant for us to be more prepared in the event of us being intercepted in international waters and kidnapped by Israel. Fortunately for us we have two women who are 70+ on the mission and they have been through flotilla missions before. A number of activists have been arrested, interrogated and detained before, so we learn a lot from the simulation. Our boat leader Ann is a retired US army general. She is amazing and kind. I’m not sure how her amazingness was formed out of the horror that is US imperialism. But she had enough and left the military when the US invaded Iraq.

I was really grateful for the non-violence training. We really do go in peace on this mission. And I feel a bit more prepared to deal with the provocation that we might have to withstand. Inshallah we will make it to Gaza without incident. I spend the rest of the day repacking and picking up last minute supplies. I have a night watch shift from 7-11pm ensuring that the Zaytona isn’t tampered with while docked at the harbor, and then it’s to bed.

**Day 5 – Monday 26 September**

I asked my father, Derrick Naidoo, to reflect on his 41-day hunger strike in 1981, with reference to the continuing hunger strikes of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons. He was a history teacher before he was imprisoned and banned from teaching. This is what I received from him via email.

*A Call for Solidarity*

*Many of us stand by and watch as the Zionist occupation in Palestine continues violating every basic human right through their modern day fascist state, beginning to rival Hitler’s Germany. The courage and commitment of Palestinian liberation fighter’s ongoing resistance against all odds within this huge apartheid prison called Israel, is indeed an inspiration and a lesson in struggle for all revolutionaries and freedom fighters worldwide.*

*Revolutionaries like Bobby Sands (66-day hunger strike) have demonstrated that even under the most hopeless situations of imprisonment, the last option to resist and win is usually the hunger strike. The hunger strike by imprisoned Palestinians today brings back vivid memories of my own personal experience (41 days) of this under Section Six of the Terrorism Act in South Africa.*

*Continuous interrogation, solitary confinement and an accumulation of human rights abuses make the necessary ingredients for prisoners to choose a dangerous path of resistance. A choice to inflict personal damage on themselves as*
a political statement, sometimes a last stand for justice. Whilst the international community supports the Tokyo Declaration, a very limited agreement related to the hunger strike, more is required. We need collective action from all of us not only to expose inhumane treatment of prisoners but to support the just liberation struggles internationally.

**Barbarism in the 21st Century**

Gaza, is now a modern day concentration camp and for many, has begun to rival similar such inhumane practices world-wide. The first known experiment in conscious human extermination through concentration camps were carried out in Southern Africa. In Namibia, Snake Island represented the location where over 3000 women and children were dumped over time on an isolated island to die. This killing through starving people to death was only one of the steps in the process of killing thousands of Nama people by their German colonisers. The cost of these genocides was comparatively inexpensive to the modern day one’s, as the prison walls in this case became the icy Atlantic Ocean. The next hideous example of the concentration camps manifested itself during the Anglo-Boer war by English colonisers in the early 1900’s. Once again, large number of Indigenous South Africans with over 100 thousand Boers (Afrikaners) were imprisoned in concentration camps and died in their thousand although in separate camps. The same Afrikaners who suffered such outrage decades later constructed a crime against humanity called apartheid. It appears that Jews persecuted under Nazi Germany led by Hitler who had perfected a more systematic extermination of Jews using large concentration camps and finding the most vicious and dehumanising modes of killing.

It is ironic, that theses hideous camps that Hitler used against Jews to exterminate millions of their families in Germany is adapted today by Israel. Zionists today even try to justify repeating similar camp atrocities against Palestinians in the 21st century. This must represent the most sophisticated form of concentration camps, judging by not only the international world’s tolerance but the ongoing military support of USA. The shooting of children, bombings and blockades coupled with land dispossession at the same time, probably represents some of the most barbaric and inhuman actions in modern history. The most shocking aspect is that Zionist Israel continues to break every international convention with impunity with a deadly international silence being the usual response.
International Solidarity Action Can Break the Blockade

This is the context that has given rise to some of the most desperate forms of resistance including suicide bombing and the recent hunger strikes. The recent hunger strike demonstrates prisoner’s valiant effort to expose Israeli occupation and its fascist type application of detention laws. While the recent hunger strike might be over, the struggle still continues. In my own experience of assurances given by the Apartheid regime to stop my 41-day hunger strike, eventually were betrayed and never honoured. This is the most probable reaction.

If Gaza is undoubtedly the weak link in the Zionist plan, then it is the maximum security section of this large concentration camp called Israel. The free movement of capital today represents the very antithesis of Palestinian’s ability to move. Egypt’s collaboration with Israel to enforce the Gaza blockade is indeed an act of betrayal. This explains why attempts to break the blockade will be met with extreme violence. This should serve to motivate collective and creative action to support the Palestinian freedom fight.

Day 11 – Sunday 2 October – Sea Day 6

Today watching the sun rise ahead of us a few things have become clearer to me. I have settled into the 4am-8am watch, which means my day begins watching the sun rise in the East, which is the direction we are sailing to Gaza, and being on deck as the Muslim women on board say their early morning prayer. As I write this I am overwhelmed and grateful for what this journey or mission has afforded me. Mostly this has to do, I think with solidarity and its relation to the continued role of women in the struggles of the world. I have learned so much from my Maori Green Party New Zealand parliamentarian comrade on the boat around the struggles with land dispossession, violence, racism and the difficult but important question of how to deal with oppression, violence and resistance.

Conversations with the grannies on the boat who have worked for decades in very violent contexts, setting up peace processes in Northern Ireland, and resigning from the US government and army to build a movement for peace. The Swedish parliamentarian who was exiled from Chile her home country, and the Spanish activist photographer from the Basque areas. The Australian all-vessel sea captain who has been a green peace activist and done the most amazing direct actions at sea. The Malaysian gynecologist who has started three hospitals and does medical operations and raises funds to reduce the waiting time of Palestinians who need lifesaving operations. The Algerian parliamentarian who is on this mission even as Algeria has no diplomatic relations with Israel, and as we are all likely to spend some time in detention in the next few days, she in particular will have a difficult time getting help.

There are a number of things that have been confirmed for me on this mission. This has to do with the importance of creating, even as it is difficult, opportunities to talk, think, disagree
and learn together across struggles. That this remains crucial to inform decisive and direct action
to resist oppressive situations. And that solidarity, for me, is the ability to struggle with those
who are oppressed in one way or another, even if the struggle does not directly affect one’s own
life. The struggle for the freedom of Palestinians may not directly affect many of you reading
this, but it does affect us indirectly. Was it MLK (Martin Luther King) who said "injustice
anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere"? Gaza, where we hope to arrive in the next few days,
is a serious injustice. An open-air prison that remains illegally and inhumanely blockaded by
modern day settler colonists.

We have another group meeting to discuss the program for the next three days. We also
discuss the ideas and practices of non-violence. There are a diversity of experiences and views
on the topic but we are clear that the mission we have undertaken is a peaceful one. I wonder
how one of the most well-funded military forces in the world will respond to a peaceful boat
with 13 women on board. Guesses on board are that they will treat us like previous flotillas, and
stop us when we get 100 miles from Gaza. They will treat us like the “terrorists” they believe we
are. They will come with military boats with big guns. Trained young soldiers to force our boat
off course. They will search us and look for weapons that they think we must have. They will
interrogate us to try and find out who else was involved in planning this peaceful direct action.
They will detain us. And when they are ready, they will deport us.

Those amongst us who have been through this before, describe in detail their experiences
so we can prepare and be as ready as possible. Maybe they will let us go to Gaza so we can take
a message of solidarity.

**Day 12 – Monday 3 October – Sea Day 7**

I have been so worried about what is going on in South Africa at the moment. There is no access
to news on the boat but I managed to get the South African president and the countries security
cluster’s response to the ongoing shut down protests happening at universities in South Africa
(and the Wits Vice Chancellor, Adam Habib’s final letter informing the university community of
the security and police coming to forcefully open Wits campus to break the protest). How is it a
liberation party turned majority government can be so obsessed with the threat of regime change
is beyond me. For sure there have been and continues to be intervention by powerful nations in
the running of smaller ones. But to think and plan to suppress student protests for free quality
decolonized higher education because they believe students and some non-governmental
organisations are working as puppets of imperialist forces working towards regime change is
baffling. Really?

I am thinking about those students and academics in South Africa who continue to
struggle through argument and direct action for free quality decolonized higher education. The
ones who are being labelled as an anarchist minority, ultra-left, as third force, as criminals hell
bent on destroying education in SA. The ones who will be on the receiving end of the short
sighted response from an insecure and paranoid government and the arrogant, cowardly
university managements. University managers who cannot see that no one wants to lose a year of study, but that the implications of allowing the continued privatization and corporatization of education has far more wide reaching effects. Not to mention the far reaching effects of responding to critique and protest and resistance by placing security personnel at the gates and doors of our universities.

No one wants to lose a year of study but more than that, we do not want universities to fail at finding creative solutions to urgent issues of social justice. Are the "leaders" of universities really going to turn to police to oversee the process of dealing with conflict? In any case, my thoughts are on the open air prison that is occupied Gaza, as much as they are on universities in SA, which seem to be becoming more like prisons than spaces for disagreement and engagement.

We are 200 miles from Gaza, which means about 2 more days of sailing. Today we have switched the engine off and are sailing with the wind. The feeling of sailing without the motor is one that brings us closer and more connected to the sea, which we have been moving on top of. This has been a life changing journey for me and I am sure others on the boat and back home as part of the SA campaign that made my participation on the WBG possible. We have a live feed with Al Jazeera again. We also read a screen play dealing with the connecting of the struggle of civil rights in the USA and the struggle for freedom of Palestine. It is a powerful play that was written in September by an African American actor and writer Kia Corthron. It is called “Reunion” and is a conversation between an African American and American Jewish woman who were best friends at school together and lost touch and then end up on a park bench catching up and fighting about the conflict in Israel-Palestine. We read the play on the deck of the boat and it highlighted some key questions and sticking points in this terrible struggle.

One of the crew from Sweden is a music teacher and she has been writing a song about the journey. She started writing the tune and the words on the first leg from Barcelona in conversation with participants. She has continued to write verse two and three over the last few days and we have been practicing the chorus. We will probably sing it tomorrow. Music and struggle have always found each other.

Our meeting today covers the interception, possible boarding, arrest, processing, interrogation, transporting and then deporting. We also talk about how we will all get home after the deportation. I decide to go to bed early to be fresh for my 4-8am watch. But also we will probably spend at least 8 hours on our boat with the IOF soldiers before getting to land. Tomorrow we will spend the day cleaning the boat, packing the little things we have, preparing food and water for the big day, which is when we either arrive in Gaza or are taken into custody.

For South Africa, I wish that universities find a way to resolve the current impasse without guns and security personnel. For us on the boat, I wish that we make it to Gaza without having to encounter guns and security personnel.
Day 14 – Wednesday 5 October – Sea Day 9

It’s just after midnight and I am about to go to sleep because I need to be up for my final 4-8am watch. Sunrise today is when we reach the 100 miles from Gaza mark, which means the IOF are likely to be around and possibly intercept us or try and force us to turn around from here onwards. Most flotillas have been stopped between 70 and 100 miles from Gaza, which is in fact quite far away if you consider that it will take us about 24 hours to sail the last 100 miles at a speed of 5 miles.

The IOF probably want to make their interception as uncomfortable for us as possible, so it deters more people from doing this in the future. They also don’t want the bad press and attention they got when they attacked the Turkish boat in 2010. What they are likely to do is to start radioing the captain of the Zaytona at around the 100-mile mark at sunrise. She will not be deterred by their commands - for her to turn the boat around. They will then show themselves to us by either forming a line of navy ships in our path or surround us with them. They will try to scare us into giving up. If that doesn’t work, they have previously launched Zodiac boats, which are James bond looking boats like big rubber ducks with 12-15 IOF soldiers on board. They are likely to board our boat and then go through all our stuff including searching the boat for whatever they think we have that they need to find. On some flotillas, passengers have been handcuffed behind their backs, and on others they have been cable tied. The point is that we will be made to sit while restrained for a number of hours.

Most boats have been driven to an Israeli detention centre where participants were processed by different Israeli officials. Here there is likely to be a first or further interrogation. From there we will either be moved to a prison or our deportation will be done while we are being held at the detention centre. Our embassies will come to help us and our legal representatives will do the same. Hopefully our mission will highlight the unlawful and inhumane blockade of Palestine.

Even as we may not be physically able to deliver our message of solidarity to Gaza, we are still hopeful that we will, our message of hope and solidarity will be able to reach the minds and hearts of Palestinian women. Inshallah we will make it to the shores of Gaza and if not we will come back to try again.

[Break – as Israel kidnaps and detains 13 women on the boat to Gaza]

Reflection after Israeli detention, deportation and return to South Africa

When we reached the 100-mile mark to Gaza, we saw the naval ships. Our satellites and communications were cut off, which gave us a sense that we would be intercepted. We saw the first military ship flanking us, then another appeared on the opposite side and lastly one behind us. They sent three military ships to stop a small boat of thirteen women on international waters, to let us know that there was no way they were going to let us past them. We could send no more
messages, take no more images about what was happening and what we were feeling. There were three different military personnel who spoke to our captain via the boats radio. They said, in terms of the [apartheid] law, we will not allow you to break this blockage. Our orders are to board you. At first before talking about boarding us, they were using very broad language about we will have to use force against you.

In addition to the superior military technology that Israel has, the technological warfare around who communicates the story is, where you see where the power lies. South Africa also tried desperately to control the narrative of what was happening during apartheid trying to normalise an absurdly oppressive situation. The images you see of the interception by Israeli soldiers was carefully controlled by the IOF. About eight soldiers got on board (four women, four men), their average age was about twenty-one. We had seven hours on the boat with these young people. Every soldier who was on our boat had a Go Pro camera, they had a photographer in a boat next to us, they had someone with a video camera as well. It was clear that they were going to try and make the best story out of this for the Israeli state. We were not allowed to film anything. They went through the boat with a fine tooth comb, looking for memory cards and cameras. Even the media on board had all their equipment taken away from them. That is a violation of our right to report on what happened to us.

When they boarded us, they brought on picnic bags. They started putting the picnic bags down, and started saying: are you hungry? They started with water, falafel and then other things. One of our sailing crew took water and then some food. We had agreed not to speak to soldiers directly, because if we antagonize them, they could get violent, so we spoke to them through our boat leader. But at this moment I had to say something. I told the soldier loudly that I supported BDS (Boycott, Sanctions and Divestment Campaign) and that I didn’t eat Israeli products at home and I wasn’t about to start doing so now.

For those who say dialogue works, dialogue works for the people who own the guns and the cameras, the military and the media. We tried to talk to them, we told them we don’t have guns, we don’t even have food or money to take, this was not a humanitarian boat. All we were doing was taking a message of hope and solidarity, to a devastated place. Surely you cannot argue about taking hope.

The 36 hours that we were on land, reminded me of the basic ways that Black people were dehumanized under the apartheid regime. The colonial project insisted that people are different from one another, some people more superior than others, some people have more choice (like being born a couple of kilometers on the wrong side of the fence/wall/railway line). Apartheid was, and the Israeli-Apartheid system is, one that forces people to expose themselves physically by doing strip searches and by dehumanizing you. We all know the pass system is very much alive in Occupied Palestine. The dehumanizing practices are about locking people up, stopping you, questioning and cross-questioning you as though you are a terrorist. When you are on the wrong side of this, you are the enemy.

We were processed at Ashdod Port around midnight by a sea of Israeli officials – navy, military, police, prison – and then taken to Givon Prison. It was apparent that we were treated
much, much better than any Palestinian or even critical Jewish person would have been. We were largely kept away from other prisoners, in a part of the prison that seemed unused. In the 36 hours we were detained we were refused our right to make a phone call. I had prepared myself for the military might that would be displayed, but what I didn’t prepare myself for was the complicated system of control and the very subtle ways that my human rights were almost inflicted on me. I had two medical examinations, I saw a social worker, appeared in front of a judge for a bail hearing I didn’t want, had my person and property searched again and again, and my biometric and passport details recorded. It didn’t matter how fresh the food was, or how much they made it appear that we were being taken care of, the bottom line is that this system maintains an unjust settler colonial situation that is unsustainable. It seems to me we urgently need to do more in South Africa and around the world to express international solidarity with Palestine and the Palestinian people, in the same way solidarity was given to us from all over the world during apartheid.

Epilogue

Solidarity and solidarity actions have been important forms of resistance for a long time. Part of the reason that apartheid fell in South Africa was because of the international forms of solidarity expressed and enacted by people around the world. My father wrote me an email while I was on the WBG mission where he described the 41-day hunger strike he undertook in the early 1980’s when he was imprisoned along with the high school students he taught. He went on that hunger strike because of the conditions of imprisonment and particularly because young students were being tortured inside South African prisons. The ongoing Palestinian prisoner hunger strikes reminded him that there are many people currently imprisoned to maintain unjust systems of governance and held under inhumane conditions. He always said to me that things need to be pretty dire if someone is willing to starve themselves as a tactic to draw attention to injustice. Liberation or revolution to me is the radical change of society in the direction of justice. There have been many liberation struggles fought in the world with very few resolving themselves sufficiently. In South Africa, and other countries on the African continent, the “liberation” parties who have taken control of the process of social and economic change have done a dismal job of improving the lives of the majority of people. This, I think, is partly because of the deep and severe damage that the project of settler colonialism has inflicted on all exposed to it, but especially the Indigenous people. South Africa is a classic example of how a negotiated settlement and a transition into democracy, at the same time that the Cold War ended, has failed. Inequality, unemployment and poverty have increased since the onset of democracy. The leaders of the liberation party, the ANC, negotiated what they believed to be a better future for all the people in South Africa, yet the question of transition or revolution has returned in 2015 through the student movements demand for decolonization. What I understand this to mean is that while there has been a process of transition in South Africa – some would say liberation – there has not been a significant dealing with the devastating political, economic, social, epistemic and
psychological damage that has been wreaked here by settler colonialism. It means, that the leaders (mostly men) who sat and tried to negotiate and imagine a new future have failed, and that we need new or different processes to imagine a just future, while also trying to deal with the morphing and neo forms of colonialism and apartheid that stubbornly remain.

It is devastating that we in South Africa have managed to get rid of legal apartheid and yet failed to in meaningful ways, redistribute land, resources and opportunity for life. It is devastating to see the lack of concern for the poor Black majority in South Africa by a Black government. One thing is clear from the South African case, the work to afford a more equitable opportunity for life to the most marginalised and vulnerable in society is an absolutely ongoing mission. This will be true for whatever resolution is brokered for the conflict in Israel-Palestine. We have to remain ever vigilant to how forms of oppression change. An important part of doing this is solidarity, which allows for engagement with issues by diverse groups of people across time and space.

Aluta Continua!