

THE BRUTAL ATTACK OF ISRAEL
ON THE FREEDOM FLOTILLA
HAS NO PREDECESSOR
IN CURRENT HISTORY*

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Inge Hoeger (1950) is a German politician, and has been a member of the *Bundestag* representing the state of North Rhine-Westphalia since 2005. She was a deputy chairman of Germany's left-wing party, *Die Linke*, from 2005 to 2006. From 1993 to 2005, she was chair of the Women's Committee of the DGB, an umbrella organization of trade unions.

* Translated from German to English by Paul Grasse

Why did you join the Gaza Freedom Flotilla? What was your motivation?

I took part in the Flotilla to make a point concerning the ongoing blockade of the Gaza Strip, and also to focus on the humanitarian disaster created by the blockade. The Flotilla was also a vehicle to bring the occupation of Palestine by Israel back into the mind of global public opinion. The violent military attack named Operation Cast Lead [in late 2008 and early 2009] worked to exacerbate the situation of the Palestinian civilians even more. As an effect of Israel's continued blockade of the border crossings into Gaza, reconstruction of the destroyed buildings, as well as rebuilding the wrecked infrastructure is virtually impossible. It is still not possible to get building material like steel or concrete into Gaza. What we wanted was to call attention to the disastrous situation in Gaza, to break the siege, and to bring urgently needed aid material to the people. To make this clear, this was not only a humanitarian initiative but mainly a political one.

Did you foresee an Israeli attack before setting off? As you know, the Israeli authorities state that they warned in advance that they would not allow the Flotilla to go through.

We had been warned by the Israeli government that they would not let any of the ships go towards Gaza; but we had the international law on our side, we had the people on our side. There was also an Egyptian proposal to allow the landing of the Flotilla at an Egyptian harbour if necessary. From there, the Egyptian side said, we could take the goods into Gaza by crossing Rafah border. We actually hoped to manage to get into Gaza, whereas at the same time we feared to get forced out of our way by the Israeli Navy ships. But what happened was impossible to foresee. No one thought that Israel would act as brutally as it did, with all the rogue executions on board and all the unspeakable military violence, an unlawful and anti-humanitarian attack on unarmed aid ships in international waters. This kind of action has no predecessor in current history that I would know of.

How was the atmosphere on the *Mavi Marmara* before the attack?

The spirit on the ship was the feeling of international solidarity and unity in action against the oppression of the Palestinians. We all were there to help the Gazans, and that way to help ourselves and the international movements for justice and equality. The activists on the



Inge Hoeger, Matthias Jochheim (deputy chair of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War), Annette Groth (MP of Germany's left-wing party, Die Linke), Alexandra Lort Phillips, Norman Paech (retired German law professor and a former MP), (...), Nader al-Sakka (president of the Palestinian Community of Hamburg, Germany)

ships had all kinds of different social and political backgrounds, but were united by one goal. International solidarity became something very real and concrete during the days on the Flotilla. Israel's ruthless reaction proved the point: International solidarity is a weapon of justice, and the Israeli oppressors understood it that very way.

Could you please tell us what happened during the Israeli attack? How was the atmosphere? I would like to learn your personal experiences and what you witnessed.

At the time of the assault in the dead of night I was still half asleep on one of the lower decks of the *Mavi Marmara*. After the captain had announced that the ship had been under attack and that it had been taken over by the Israeli Navy, we were all supposed to move towards the upper deck of the ship and not to resist any of the soldiers' orders. On my way to the top deck I passed by many of the wounded, and only then I saw the heavily armed Israeli soldiers through the windows standing outside. They were pointing their loaded machine guns at people. Then we had witnesses tell us what they had seen. A *Knesset* [Israeli parliament] member, Haneen Zoabi, and others were trying to negotiate with the soldiers to fly the wounded for medical care into Israeli hospitals. Then all the passengers were searched one by one, and we were handcuffed with plastic cuffs. After that we were seated outside on the upper deck in the glaring sun for quite some time. We were told to wait again and

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again, there were helicopters flying in and out all the time. They constantly brought in new soldiers; it was absolutely nerve-wrecking.

You were all taken captive on the ship, and then forced to sail to Ashdod Port. Could you please tell us your story about what happened during that time, both on board and in Israel? Did you experience or witness any torture or abuse, either psychological or physical?

Many of the passengers were ordered to kneel for hours in the hot sun with their hands tied. Some were not even allowed to go to the bathroom. The first to get rid of their handcuffs were the European women aboard, after that some of the elderly and the ill – also mainly Europeans. Later we were allowed to move off the upper deck to get some of the ship's supplies to feed ourselves and to get something to drink. But none of us were allowed to move around freely, we were under observation at all times, we were forced to stay seated the whole time, and they repeatedly threatened us with their automatic rifles.

After arriving at Ashdod we, as the German group, agreed to be deported from Israel, where we never wanted to go anyway. Because we agreed, they did not put us under arrest. We had decided to agree to this proposal, because we thought that it was of central importance to inform the public and the media as soon as possible about what we had seen on the ships.

Could you please share with us the most striking events, tragic or surprising, that you experienced or witnessed on this journey, and will never forget throughout your life?

The most impressive was certainly the unconditional solidarity between the passengers, not only before but also, and even more, after the attack. Other things I'll never be able to forget are the impressions of the wounded and the omnipresent rifles we were threatened with.

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How was the atmosphere when you returned to your country? How did people react to you, and to the Israeli attack on the *Mavi Marmara*?

When I returned to Germany, I was greeted by friends and by members of the leftist fraction with flowers and warm, appreciative hugs and words. Everyone was happy that we got out unhurt and alive, which until then nobody knew. There were even rumours that we had been killed, and it was really hard – almost impossible – for the people at home to get any reliable information about our whereabouts. So everyone was really relieved.

There were quite some protests, and only then the media coverage really took off about the assault on the Flotilla. Israel was immediately denounced by large parts of the media and by quite a few governments for her breach of international law and the killings of unarmed humanitarian and political activists. Finally there were calls for ending the blockade, even though it is still in place today and although the so-called international community has failed in pressuring Israel to lift the blockade on Gaza. Only a few weeks after we came back, the Israeli propaganda of supposedly violent, Islamist or even “fascist” activists on the ships started blurring the picture.

After all these experiences, would you like to join another mission that sails to Gaza?

I can imagine and would gladly be willing to join another initiative in solidarity with the Palestinians. I would also very much like to get a first-hand impression of what life in Gaza is like these days.

Do you think the Freedom Flotilla was successful and achieved its goals? Because some people think that nothing was achieved, and many people were killed and wounded in vain. What are the most important achievements of this Flotilla?

After the attack on the Flotilla the situation in Gaza became a subject internationally, states started calling for ending the siege. So

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far the Flotilla was successful, even if that is at a very high price. It is a tragedy that people were murdered for taking part in the action of pointing out the ongoing crime of besieging Gazan people. The murderers of the activists and the ones in the higher ranks of the Israeli military should be prosecuted and have to be brought to justice. Although Israel has communicated that it would loosen the blockade, and obviously lets more trucks pass the border checkpoint now than before, it is far from enough. A report of international humanitarian aid organizations published at the end of 2010 has clearly shown that Israel has kept none of the promises it made after international pressure had increased. Now of course Israel has nothing to fear, since all the Western governments have once again forgotten all the crimes it has committed and is still committing everyday – by continuing the occupation, by murdering Palestinian civilians, by stealing more and more of the Palestinian lands, and by discriminating the Palestinians in Israel, adding to that the persecution of human rights organizations and activists in Israel.

You are a first-hand witness of the Israeli aggression. What do you think about Israel?

I don't think that Israel is doing itself a favour in its aggressive and ignorant behaviour towards the Palestinians and against the solidarity movement. Especially after the overthrow of the governments of thievery and collaboration in some Arab countries during the months passed, and due to the revolutions that might be ahead, Israel will isolate itself increasingly. The government of Israel should reconsider and withdraw from its oppressive positions, and take the international code of law seriously, instead of abusing it by misinterpretation to justify its actions. It has to take the UN Resolutions adopted against its policy seriously, and take up real peace negotiations with the Palestinians, recognizing their internationally guar-



Press conference on the Mavi Marmara on 30 May 2010: Norman Paech, Faruk Ünsal (president of Mazlumder, a human rights organization in Turkey), Inge Hoeger.

anteed rights to their lands [1967 borders] and their [Palestinian refugees'] right of return.

Are you hopeful of the ongoing international legal proceedings?

Well, honestly, no. I don't really expect anything productive to come out of these proceedings, since Israel's allies are sure to keep its reputation from any harm. But – as the saying goes – “Hope dies last.”

What does the *Mavi Marmara* mean to you?

I have developed a very emotional relationship with the subject, and I don't think that I'll ever forget what I have experienced on this unique ship of international solidarity.

I wonder about the Israeli lobby's efforts against you and other German MPs for your participation in the Flotilla. Is the Israeli lobby making any pressure or a smear campaign against you now?

Well, that's a good question. Of course my name is being mentioned in all kinds of publications sympathetic to Israel and also in the mainstream media. What started fairly soon was a campaign of defamation about that there were supposedly weapons on the ship, that the Turkish comrades were prepared to use violence and to die in the fight, that there were Turkish fascists involved, and all that. There was a lengthy report by an Israeli think-tank which repeated all the propaganda lies and gave detailed information on us. Then, apart from all the loving, appreciative e-mails and responses we had,

of course there were a lot of racist threats, mainly anonymous and electronically and also on the phone. I did a lot of touring through Germany after that, and most of the events were great, but at some the pro-Israeli mob disturbed the reports massively. Another interesting piece of paper is a report on the German left and anti-Semitism published in Israel by a guy working for a member of my own political fraction. All these could not get us down, we knew we were going to get smeared as anti-Semites, which is a crazy accusation, but I don't want to elaborate on that too much.

Unfortunately most of the heat was effectively concentrated on the German IHH [*Internationale Humanitäre Hilfsorganisation*] which was outlawed. I still believe that the German government simply didn't know that those two were not the same. So they accused them of working together with organizations in Gaza which deny "Israel's right to exist". That means all they have is supposed guilt by association without any proof, apart from the madness of accusing someone who is subject to Israeli war crimes nearly every day of not recognizing Israel's existence. I mean, how can you not recognize an airplane shelling your house? That's simply crazy, but a lot of the media and obviously the German judiciary system bought the argument.