

# A Live Snapshot from the Sea

## Reflections from an International Lawyer on Board the Flotilla



By Alexis Deswaef

As an international lawyer, I embarked on the Global Sumud Flotilla in Barcelona on August 31, 2025, because urgent action is needed to stop the genocide in Gaza. Our European governments and the European Union – which have the means to act – are doing absolutely nothing or not enough. This international citizens' initiative is a response to the inaction of our governments in the face of a genocide that is being live-streamed on our mobile phones, the famine orchestrated by the Israeli occupying army, and the ongoing ethnic cleansing happening before our eyes in Gaza.

The goal of the flotilla is to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza so that international humanitarian aid can finally get in. We tried by land via Egypt in June with the Global March to Gaza, but we were stopped at the Suez Canal. Some countries, including my own, Belgium, tried to drop aid and food by air with parachutes, but that was completely insufficient and even dangerous.

Now we're trying to gain access by sea. And our governments will have no choice but to support us and say to the genocidal Israeli government: "Do not touch our citizens who are bringing humanitarian aid to Gaza in a legal and completely peaceful manner!" If our governments take a strong stand with the Israeli government, as they must do, the flotilla will succeed and open a maritime humanitarian corridor.

This global flotilla brings together nearly 50 boats and more than 300 activists from 44 countries. The size of the Global Sumud Flotilla might make a difference compared to previous Freedom Flotillas, such as the Madleen and the Handala this year, which were illegally stopped by the Israeli army in international waters and their participants arrested, detained in Israel, and finally expelled. Here, we hope to succeed by arriving in Gaza to deliver all the humanitarian aid we are carrying and to establish the humanitarian corridor so that all international humanitarian aid can finally enter Gaza.

As a lawyer on the list of councils at the International Criminal Court in the Hague (ICC) and vice president of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), I strongly believe that the defense of human rights must be carried out not only behind closed doors or in national or international assemblies but also on the ground, with the people who fight for their fundamental rights. It will take a long time for justice to overcome the total impunity of the Israeli perpetrators, and all the while the Palestinians in Gaza are facing a dramatic situation of absolute humanitarian emergency. This is the purpose of the Global Sumud Flotilla, even though there should be no need for such action! Indeed, this would not be necessary if our governments were to comply with their international legal obligations, for example, by implementing the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted by the United Nations on December 9, 1948, which places an obligation on State parties to act to prevent a genocide and to stop the perpetrators of a genocide.

Organizing this extraordinary flotilla in just a few weeks, mobilizing a large number

A general assembly of the flotilla participants in Bizerte.

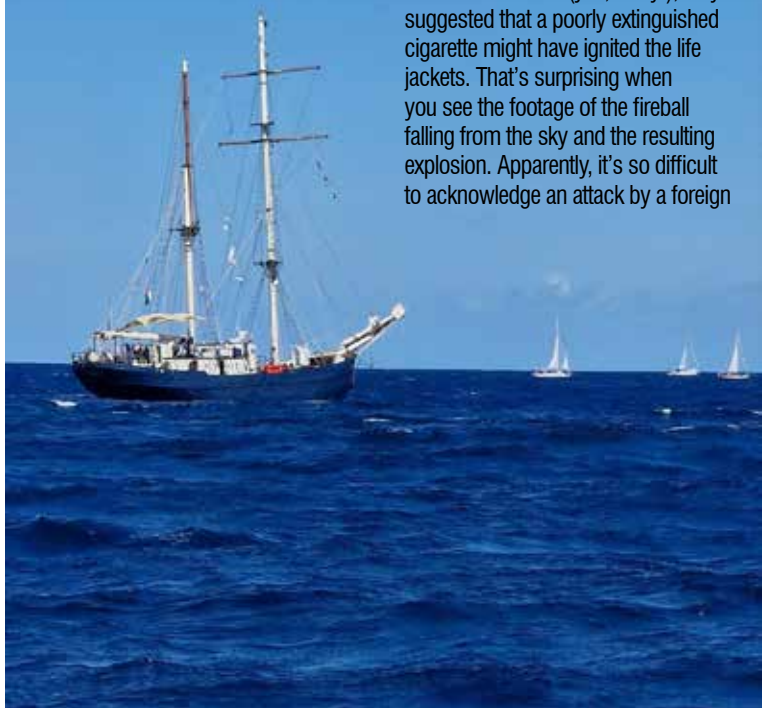


of volunteer participants, was an organizational challenge. Successfully setting sail from the port of Barcelona was therefore already a remarkable achievement. Why depart from so far away? Because Barcelona is a city that supports the Palestinian cause and could guarantee our departure – something that wasn't certain in other Mediterranean ports.

From Barcelona, we headed for Tunis, another friendly port.

Our sailboat, the Jeannot III (which we'd love to rename Dr. Hussam Abu Safiya, Ahed Tamimi, or Marwan Barghouti), is slower than the motorboats such as the Family or the Alma, our two main boats. So, along with the other sailboats, we missed the welcoming event in Tunis on Sunday, September 4, arriving in the middle of the night.

The stopover in Tunis was useful for boat repairs, resupply, and in-person crew meetings. (I'm the "organizer" on my boat, the link to the steering committee, with whom we meet every morning from our respective boats.)



And then, there were the beautiful encounters – like meeting again with the Queen of Queens, Francesca Albanese, UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories. She came to show her support for the flotilla and, in a powerful speech, reminded the world that international law is on our side.

The boats were anchored off the coast of Sidi Bou Said (Tunis). During the second night, the Family (the main boat) was attacked by a drone that dropped an incendiary bomb. Fortunately, those on board managed to put out the fire, and the damage was minor. But it could have been fatal.

Tunisian authorities have opened an investigation. After dumping the bomb debris into the sea (yes, really!), they suggested that a poorly extinguished cigarette might have ignited the life jackets. That's surprising when you see the footage of the fireball falling from the sky and the resulting explosion. Apparently, it's so difficult to acknowledge an attack by a foreign force on your own soil that the narrative shifted on social media: a clumsy participant allegedly misfired a flare that fell back onto the boat.

The following night, there was another attack – this time on the Alma (another large motorboat). The theory of a clumsy participant playing with flares became harder to defend. Yet, a journalist from a foreign media outlet still asked me the question, as if refusing to accept the facts: Is Israel (or a "friendly" proxy) carrying out attacks on the Flotilla already in Tunisia, so far from Gaza?

Within the Flotilla, we saw this attack as a warning, "testing the waters." First, testing the Flotilla: How will they react? Will they stop? Are they prepared? I can tell you, it only strengthened the Flotilla's resolve. Secondly, they're also testing our governments: How will the governments of these 44 nationalities respond to this first attack? I can tell you: Our governments failed the test – either by not reacting at all, or by issuing weak, hesitant responses. Or perhaps they passed the test from the Israeli perspective, who must have noted with surprise – and pleasure – the cowardly passivity of our political leaders.

The following night, I was on watch duty on our boat. Would there be a third consecutive attack? Police and army boats were patrolling among ours, armed with anti-drone bazookas – an impressive setup to fight off cigarettes and flares. The next day, we were asked to leave: Drone attacks just 1.5 kilometers away from the Tunisian president's residence were starting to become a bit embarrassing.

On we sailed to Bizerte, a seven-hour journey that turned into 14 because we were heading directly into the wind. Leaning at a 45° angle in rough seas, the sailing got intense. The result: a backed-up toilet and a flooded bilge. We had to bail water manually.



The auhor with Francesca Albanese.

As we were falling behind schedule, we, like the rest of the world, saw the images from Gaza on our phones. Gaza City "evacuated" and flattened. The last remaining large civilian buildings were bombed, including the headquarters of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), one of our two FIDH Member Organizations in Gaza (the other is Al Mezan).

On top of that, PCHR and Al Mezan have been hit with US sanctions – just like Al-Haq, our FIDH member organization in Ramallah – as part of a new misuse of anti-terror laws that are being used to silence human rights organizations. All this, under the complicit silence of Europe. What a shame!

Meanwhile, fascist Israeli Minister of Security Ben Gvir announced that all members of the Global Sumud Flotilla would be imprisoned as terrorists, under extremely harsh conditions in Tekziot prison (for men) and Damon prison

(for women), two of Israel's worst prisons. And even that threat received no reaction from our governments, who are supposed to protect us – especially given that we're doing nothing illegal. Indeed, bringing humanitarian aid to a population in desperate need is protected under international law and the law of the sea. Our mission is civilian and nonviolent. There is therefore no reason to attack us.

Now, we've left Sicily, where boats from Italy joined us. We are the Flotilla – a beautiful flotilla, the biggest in history that tried to break the siege of Gaza. Seeing all these boats together at sea, heading for Gaza, is deeply moving.

With the boats from Barcelona and Tunis, the Italian boats, and more boats joining us from Greece, we will be 40, maybe even 50 boats, all carrying humanitarian aid. Heading for Gaza!

The goal remains at the heart of our commitment: breaking the illegal blockade of Gaza, delivering the humanitarian aid we're carrying, and opening a maritime humanitarian corridor. In short, doing what our governments should have done a long time ago.

Yalla!

*Article photos provided by the author from the Global Sumud Flotilla.*

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