

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

A Report on the VIVA PALESTINA USA Convoy mission to break the Israeli Siege of Gaza

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(Los Angeles, CA, USA; July 28, 2009) I was one of about 175 Americans who formed the VIVA PALESTINA USA Convoy that entered the Gaza Strip on Wednesday evening, July 15, 2009, carrying medical and other humanitarian aid. We entered the Gaza Strip through the Rafah crossing from Egypt with permission to stay 24 hours.

Background

The 1.5 million people who live in the Gaza Strip have been under Israeli restrictions for over 15 years. Starting in the mid-1990s, Israel imposed restrictions on permits for Palestinian men to work in Israel. Coincident with the unilateral, non-negotiated Israeli withdrawal of settlers and its army in 2005, Israel started to restrict imports and exports. Israel tightened these restrictions in 2006 in response to Hamas winning a majority in the Palestinian Authority elections, and again in 2007 when Hamas won a mini-civil war that was initiated by Fatah and took exclusive control of the Gaza Strip. Restrictions of food, fuel, and medical supplies triggered a humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip with the U.N. reporting a large fraction of the people, especially children, suffering from malnutrition. The cut-off of import and export of commercial goods led to destruction of the economy and massive unemployment. The situation was made much worse by the December 2008-January 2009 bombing by Israel that resulted in over 1,400 killed and many buildings destroyed, including government and civic buildings and housing for over 100,000 people.

Goal and Plan

VIVA PALESTINA USA's goal was to organize a large number of Americans to break the siege of Gaza. Participants would fly to Cairo, Egypt. In Egypt they would use donated funds to purchase aid vehicles, fill those vehicles with medical supplies, and convoy to the Gaza Strip through the Rafah crossing with Egypt.

Convoy Gathered in Cairo

About 175 Americans met in Cairo on July 6, 2009. VIVA PALESTINA used about half the \$1 million donated and purchased 7 pick-up trucks, 7 twelve-passenger vans, and 33 four-door sedans from the free port in Alexandria. Some medical supplies were purchased and donated in the United States, other supplies were purchased in Cairo, and other supplies were donated by Egyptian businesses. Convoy members were about 1/3rd Palestinian, 1/3rd other Arab and Muslim, and 1/3rd others. The Convoy was headed by George Galloway, British Member of Parliament, and co-headed by Charles Barron, New York City Councilman. Notable attendees included Cynthia McKinney, former Member of Congress from

Georgia and Green candidate for U.S. President in 2008, and four anti-Zionist, Neturei Karta Hasidic Jews from Monsey, New York.

Egypt Impounded Vehicles

The Egyptian government, presumably in coordination with the United States and Israeli governments, made accomplishing the VIVA PALESTINA mission difficult. The biggest difficulty was that the Egyptian government never gave VIVA PALESTINA permission to drive the 47 new vehicles from the free port in Alexandria across Egypt to Rafah without paying Egyptian taxes and registration. The 47 vehicles are effectively impounded in Egypt.

George Galloway, VIVA PALESTINA head, vowed that over the next few months, all 47 vehicles VIVA PALESTINA purchased will get into Gaza. I believe that that will happen. The Egyptian Government is both supporting Israel and the United States in keeping Gaza under siege, but at the same time the Egyptian Government allows the tunnels to operate that supply Gaza with food, fuel, and thousands of everyday item that make life in the Gaza Strip bearable. The Egyptian Government seems to eventually allow humanitarian goods and missions to enter Gaza; and so it will be with the 47 VIVA PALESTINA vehicles.

Getting to Gaza

With the vehicles impounded, VIVA PALESTINA devised a back-up plan. The 175 members would go by bus from Cairo to Rafah where they would then walk into the Gaza Strip. Ten trucks would be rented to haul the medical supplies and other humanitarian aid from Cairo to Gaza. Photo at left shows trucks leaving VIVA PALESTINA Cairo headquarters.

At this point the Egyptian Government imposed two additional barriers to the VIVA PALESTINA mission. First each Convoy member had to get an affidavit from the US Embassy acknowledging that the US Government discourages its citizens from entering Gaza, and that the US Government would not help us if we get into trouble in Gaza. Each convoy member had to appear at the US Embassy and pay \$30 to get the required affidavit.



The second barrier was that the Egyptian Government limited VIVA PALESTINA members to 24 hours in Gaza. The original plan was to stay in Gaza for 3-days. This would be particularly hard on the VIVA PALESTINA members who were using the VIVA PALESTINA convoy as a way to visit family for the first time in years, and the first time after the December-January massacre.

The VIVA PALESTINA convoy left its Cairo headquarters on Wednesday morning, July 15, 2009 in three large buses and two small buses. The drive to Rafah was uneventful. But formalities leaving Egypt were trying. Although there was no customs inspection, it took the Egyptian Government four hours to put

an exit stamp in each person's passport. The photos on the top of the next page show convoy members waiting in the Egyptian immigration hall at Rafah, and entering Gaza to great joy and cheering, where we were met by a vigorous press and Palestinian security.



24 Hours in Gaza – Our Tour

VIVA PALESTINA members spent our 24 hours in Gaza as guests of the Palestinian National Authority which provided bus service, hotel, meals, security (photo at right), and a tour of Gaza. Noting that the Palestinian National Authority in the Gaza Strip is Hamas, and supporting Hamas is illegal for Americans because the U.S. Government considers Hamas a terrorist organization, I took care to distance myself from tour events that were not humanitarian in nature. I sat in the bus during meetings with Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, at the bombed Parliament building, and at the Ministry of Detainees (the later with relatives of Hamas men who are prisoners in Israel). The following photo shows posters of Hamas Parliament members who are in Israeli prisons posted outside the bombed Parliament building.



The one official part of our tour that I participated in was a visit to the Shifa Hospital where VIVA PALESTINA presented the medical aid that we carried from the United States, through Cairo, and into Gaza. I skipped the ceremony to go into the hospital and visit with six patients to present gifts that I personally brought from California.

I did not witness the presentation of the ten truck-loads of medical aid that VIVA PALESTINA purchased in Cairo and was donated by Egyptian businesses. I was told by VIVA PALESTINA leaders that that aid was distributed to several NGOs. I wish that VIVA PALESTINA would report an inventory of the contents, of the trucks, and a list of the NGOs who received the aid.

Our tour was guided by employees of the Palestinian National Authority Ministry of Internal Affairs. They showed us areas destroyed during the December-January massacre. Even though the Gaza Strip is a small area (360 sq km, about twice the area of Washington, DC) the devastation differs greatly from place to place. I saw areas where every home and building was demolished, and other areas where there was essentially no destruction. Based on my limited exposure, I infer the following:

- In areas near the border with Israel homes, civic and commercial buildings, and orchards were completely demolished.
- In areas farther from the border, most civic and commercial buildings were destroyed, few homes were destroyed, but more homes were damaged.
- Far from the border, in built-up areas, some civic, government, and commercial buildings were demolished (using pin-point accuracy) and other buildings were raked with machine-gun fire.
- In contrast to WW-II bombing that attacked the central cities, this bombing left the central relatively unharmed, and focused on certain suburban areas.

Here are a few photos of destruction. Many photos of demolished homes have been distributed, so I do not reproduce any here. Rather I show views I found particularly important. The first two images show a high-rise in downtown Gaza City that was strafed with machine-gun bullets. The bullet holes are round suggesting that the building was strafed from a helicopter gunship. The second two images shows the destroyed American school and a destroyed restaurant complex in downtown Gaza City (not shown are intact adjacent buildings).





24 Hours in Gaza – Personal Impressions

Knowing that the Gaza economy was never good, the years of closures imposed by Israel made the situation worse, and the December-January massacre killed over 1,400 people and destroyed many buildings, I expected that the Gaza Strip would display a lack of civic order and economic activity bordering on subsistence farming. To my surprise, that was not the case. I observed civic order and a much higher level of economic activity than I expected.

My observations suggest that the Gaza system is working. That is likely due to the strength of the Palestinian character. Similar observations were published a few days ago by Alice Walker in the Electronic Intifada (<http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article10675.shtml>). Walker and I reach the same conclusion for different reasons. What I mean by working includes the following observations.

1. Gaza Port was reported bombed during the massacre, but it was functioning with many fishing boats in the harbor (photo). If there were port facilities that were damaged, the damage has been cleaned-up.
2. The streets are relatively clear of trash (photo).
3. There are many cars on the streets (photo) which raises the question of where they get gasoline. The Israelis greatly limit the amount of gasoline allowed into Gaza, so the six or seven gas stations I saw must get most of their product through the Rafah tunnels.



4. The lights were on. Driving from Rafah to Gaza City there were lights everywhere with no hint of an area in blackout. Overnight and the next day the hotel had constant power.

5. On the down side, the international land phone lines into the hotel were not operating.
6. Sit-down restaurants and 3-4-star hotels exist and are open for business.
7. There are no beggars (except for children) on the streets.
8. Shops selling every-day items (food, etc) are open and seem well stocked in both range of items and quantity on hand. Especially notable were shops that sell grain (or flour) in 70-pound sacks – I saw many of these shops and each had 50-100 sacks on hand.
9. I even saw luxury goods. That does not mean that Gaza is like Beirut with Beverly Hills brands. But I saw perfume shops, jewelry shops, higher-end dress shops, bridal dress shops, quality furniture shops, photography studios, and even ice-cream stands.
10. There are many commercial-scale greenhouses near Gaza City that appear in good repair (photo).
11. There are many commercial-scale crops (corn, pepper, etc) planted in the region around Gaza City, and right into empty lots in the Gaza City suburb (photo).



These observations were surprising to me because I expected to see a much more devastated economy. The Palestinian people were not defeated or demoralized by the December-January massacre, and are rebuilding their society.

It is obvious that my observations and conclusions do not excuse the three-year Israel siege of the Gaza Strip, or justify the 22 days of bombing that Israel imposed from December 27, 2008 to January 17, 2009. The siege is a violation of International law as well as Jewish law, and is not bringing peace to the region. In fact, my observations that the Gaza system is working in spite of the siege and December-January massacre demonstrate the futility of the Israel – United States – Egypt policy of isolating Hamas and depriving the 1.5 million people living in the Gaza Strip of food, fuel, and basic necessities of life in the hope that the people will revolt against their government.

Closing Thoughts

The VIVA PALESTINA convoy succeeded in spite of Egyptian government barriers and a disorganized convoy leadership. However, the VIVA PALESTINA USA Convoy will not break the Israeli siege of Gaza and the 1.5 million people living there. Continual pressure by the people of the world, and additional individual missions to break the siege like the Free Gaza boat trips from Cyprus and the VIVA PALESTINA Convoy will eventually succeed, if for no other reason than injustice cannot stand.

The VIVA PALESTINA leadership had a difficult task. It had to bring the Convoy together in less than 10-weeks. This task was not taken on by an existing team; rather an *ad-hoc* group was assembled that unfortunately never coalesced into a smooth-working team. The major deficiency is that an economic accounting of VIVA PALESTINA funds, both collections and expenditures, was never provided.

In spite of those problems, the VIVA PALESTINA USA Convoy was a great experience. It brought together 175 people of different faiths and political viewpoint in a humanitarian effort to break the siege of Gaza and bring the Gaza people some relief from their suffering. The Egyptian people who learned about VIVA PALESTINA were supportive, and donated significant quantities of medical aid.