

THE ISRAELI SOLDIERS DID NOT CARE ABOUT HUMANITY AT ALL

Alexandra Lort Phillips

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Alexandra Lort Phillips (1972) is a British volunteer who lives in London. She worked as a social worker with young people and teenagers in London for the last ten years. She is now a student in International Dispute Resolution Law at the University of Westminster. Her involvement in the campaign for Gaza has led her to become a student since she is interested in understanding how such destructive conflicts come into being.

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

Actually I haven't been campaigning for Palestine for long. But when I saw the Israeli bombing of Gaza in late 2008 and early 2009, I really felt that I had to do something; I had to travel to Palestine to see what was happening there, to express my sympathy to the people of Gaza, and to find out more about what could be done. So I travelled there with a land convoy of Viva Palestina (Lifeline 3) in December 2009.

I met the IHH for the first time on that journey. When we left London and came to Turkey, we were welcomed by the IHH. It seemed very well-organized and professional. I found out more about the IHH, i.e. the massive amount of the international and humanitarian work that it has been doing, when I returned to the United Kingdom. So I was very impressed with the organization. Then a group of us from the land convoy decided to go to Gaza again if possible. Because of our connection with the IHH from the land convoy, we heard about the Flotilla, and we fundraised in the United Kingdom. My friend Baboo Zanghar and his friend Imran Mallu from Bolton fundraised in that area. In fact, Imran's thirteen-year-old daughter, Rumana, organized a dinner in Bolton raising 5,000£. It was her initiative, a thirteen-year-old girl wanted to support Palestine. I was very honoured when they asked me if I could drive the vehicle – with all the aid that they had bought with that money – to Istanbul to deliver to the Flotilla. So I left work in May, and drove a seven-and-a-half-ton lorry from Bolton to Istanbul carrying the items, medical equipment, and more than a hundred boxes of toys that the children at Rumana's school had filled with.

We went to the port where the IHH was loading all of the donations onto the cargo ships. It was amazing to see the water tanks, the huge generators for the hospitals, the construction materials, the prefabricated homes, the playgrounds, etc. So the amount of aid we brought from the United Kingdom looked very small compared to the huge amount of aid of Turkey; but it was still very important for us to take those gifts, from a small number of children in the United Kingdom to children in Gaza. When I was in Istanbul in preparation for the Flotilla leaving, I found out that I could go with the ship that made me very happy. So that was the story of how I managed to travel with the *Mavi Marmara*.

ISRAEL IS LIKE A PERSON WHO HAS GONE MAD, AND NEEDS TO BE SECTIONED INTO HOSPITAL. IT IS NOT SELF-AWARE, AND IS DOING SO MUCH HARM BOTH TO ITSELF AND TO THE INTERNATIONAL CONSENSUS. IT'S NOT JUST BEING AGGRESSIVE BUT ACTUALLY LOSING ITS WAY, AND BECOMING MORE AND MORE ISOLATED.

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.

I believe that the blockade is illegal, so the idea of taking humanitarian supplies by sea to Gaza is completely legal. I didn't think that the Israelis would take such an illegal action against us. They were saying a lot of things to try to prevent the mission, or to try to present themselves as the stronger party as usually happen among the parties in a dispute. But I didn't believe that they would violently attack the humanitarian aid convoy for many reasons: First, the IHH is a fifteen-year-old humanitarian organization with huge experience in taking aid into disaster and conflict zones. Second, we had publicized the event months in advance, and the agenda was completely open. Third, the aid and the people were fully checked by Turkish authorities before we set sail. Fourth, the media was invited on the Flotilla, and there was a pressroom allocated for them. The ship was filled with CCTVs which covered every step of us. The main point for these was to be as open as we could to the world. There's no way that anything illegal could have been on the ships, such as the weapons that the Israelis alleged. There's no way that anything illegal could be hidden. In short, we had all the right factors for this mission to be successful. So right up until the night of the attack, I still strongly believed we were going to be able to make it through. One example to my sincere belief was that the day before we left Turkey, I spent the whole day in Antalya trying to buy two laptops to take Gaza. I didn't understand why, but my credit card didn't work, so I couldn't buy the laptops (fortunately, because you know, all of our electronics were stolen by Israeli soldiers during the operation). If I thought that Israelis were going to take all of our stuff, I would not have tried so. So, definitely I thought we were going to succeed.



Alexandra Lort Phillips writing letters to the families of the martyrs before dinner at Miniaturk, Istanbul (26 December 2010)

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

The atmosphere was wonderful. It was very optimistic, very unified. A hugely diverse group of people came together to make a big family on the ship. I was so impressed with the operation, and the photographs on the walls of the ship showing IHH's previous missions, handing out aid to people in very different parts of the world. The atmosphere was one of solidarity, humanity and concern; so I'm very privileged to have been part of that. I felt very safe and very comfortable, because both the IHH and the international group on the ship were very reliable. However, a few hours before the attack, my feelings began to change, and I began to feel insecure. The only thing that changed my feeling was the presence of the Israeli forces.

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.

Well, in the time leading up to the attack, we were desperately trying to send during the broadcasts the same messages that we had been sending for weeks: This is a humanitarian aid mission; we are not coming with any intent to harm Israel; we have humanitarian donations; people wish to bring about change in the region in a positive way, etc. Then the lights went off from the broadcasting deck, we couldn't send messages any more. So, I went down to send an e-mail to my group of contacts in the United Kingdom to tell them

THE AMOUNT OF AID WE BROUGHT FROM THE UK LOOKED VERY SMALL COMPARED TO THE HUGE AMOUNT OF TURKEY'S, INCLUDING WATER TANKS, GENERATORS FOR HOSPITALS, CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS, PREFABRICATED HOMES, PLAYGROUNDS, ETC.; BUT IT WAS STILL VERY IMPORTANT FOR US TO TAKE THOSE GIFTS FROM A NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN THE UK TO CHILDREN IN GAZA.

that we were being surrounded by vessels, and the atmosphere was unsafe and dangerous. I wrote half an e-mail and saved into my draft folders, but I couldn't send it. Then I realised that they cut the communication off, and were going to attack us.

People ask me, "Were you scared?" No, I didn't feel scared, because I couldn't believe they would do this to us. But I felt very indignant from what I had seen, thinking about the organization, the number of people and the effort that had gone into this mission. When I went outside, I could see the boats coming alongside. I just shouted at them, "Cowards! Why are you attacking a humanitarian aid ship?" Obviously they couldn't hear me or they didn't take any notice, they were already firing on the ship. There were big thunderous bangs against the side of the ship. I was worried that they might sink it, because they had attacked a previous Free Gaza vessel, "the Dignity", on 30 December 2008 and made a hole in it. I thought they could do the same either by mistake or on purpose.

Then people started coming from the top deck with wounds, but I didn't realise it was from live ammunition. I don't know what I thought, I wasn't really thinking anything, because the situation was so unprecedented. But I just remember seeing the amount of blood coming out of people's limbs, and feeling so helpless because I am not a first-aid specialist or a doctor... I knew there were some medicines downstairs, so I went to try to get them; but there was chaos. Since there were so many wounded people being treated on the floor, I couldn't get the attention of anyone. The only thing I managed to do was to take a stretcher with Ken O'Keefe to the back of the ship where Cevdet [Kılıçlar] was lying. We put Cevdet onto the stretcher, but even then I didn't realise that he had been shot dead; I thought he was wounded and unconscious. I asked, "How are we going to get him to the medical area?" I think it was one of my colleagues, maybe

Nicci, who just took my arm and said, “Don’t worry about taking him to the doctor.” I still didn’t realise that she was trying to tell me he was dead, until the announcement came up: “They are using live ammunition.”

We made our way down the backstairs, and were told to sit down and stop resisting. I just did what I was told for the good of the ship. We were in shock and in disbelief. I sat in the hall that we were held captive, and we saw the bodies of the men that came in being treated with such dignity. Everyone was quiet, and everything just calmed down. It was a very strange and sad experience. I really felt like we got a sense of how this state [Israel] behaves, maybe a sense of how it is to be a Palestinian and live under that military force – because they obviously used similar brutal military force to take over the vessel.

The Israeli soldiers just wanted to stop the mission, and didn’t care about the consequences at all and whether people were killed or not. I still believe that the soldiers were just young men who were put into that position by older and more experienced leaders. It’s the leaders’ fault for putting those young men in that position. The Israeli soldier that I saw when he was being disarmed in the stairwell was terrified. I could see in his eyes that he was very very scared. He must have been told that we were terrorists, and he would be killed if caught or something like that. In contrast, the guy who was standing beside that soldier was telling him, “Calm down, you will be okay, don’t worry.” The women around were saying, “Be careful, no harm should come to him.” He had an injury, just a nose bleed, I think probably from falling to the deck. But it’s the fault of his leaders; they put the armed soldiers into a ship of more than five hundred people in the middle of the night after aggressively attacking them with thunder flushes. We were civilians, not of the military. I didn’t even know what the sound of ammunition was. They didn’t care at all what might happen when they put their soldiers into that situation. They didn’t care about their own soldiers, much less us. They just wanted to stop the mission, that’s all.

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? Did you experience or witness any torture or abuse, either psychological or physical?

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I felt that some people were treated differently. The men, especially non-European men, seemed to be treated more harshly. As a European woman, my shackles were not put on so tightly. So I was able to slip my hands out of my shackles and kept them together, and could move my hands if I wanted. But I witnessed a man asking very very politely if his shackles could be loosened, and the soldier just tightened them. That's a form of torture. His hands were already red from the pressure at the time, and the soldier tightened them even more. When we were on the top deck, they took a lot of persuading to give out some water to everyone, because the sun was beating down harshly. We had to ask three or four times for water, and then they allowed two of us to distribute one cup each to everyone which we had to take around. There was a canvas over some of the captives that protected them from the sun, but the helicopter blades torn the canvas into pieces. *Mavi Marmara* is a long ship, and we were at the back. Why was the helicopter hovering above intimidating people and blowing their shade off? It is evident that they did not care about humanity at all.

The prison where we were sent was a new facility. It was clean, and not uncomfortable. They brought us food and water. But we were woken up regularly for a headcount. What is more, we didn't have any contact with the outside world, even with our families; so we were feeling very low, not knowing anything about what was going to happen. One volunteer, I think Paveen Yaqub, wrote a letter to the governor of the prison and said, "I'm not going to eat anything until you provide us with a phone card or contact with our families." Besides these, people's individual concerns were not being cared for. We were very concerned about Çiğdem [Topçuoğlu] who lost her husband on the ship, and was very quiet and not eating anything. Also the Palestinian woman [Wafaa J. K. Aldahshan] who had been



Alexandra Lort Phillips at the funeral of the martyrs in Fatih Mosque, Istanbul (next to her is Ouassima Ibn Salah) (3 June 2010)

treated for a serious illness in Turkey was there, but was separated from her husband, and nobody was sure whether she was able to take her medicines or not. All these things combined made people more anxious. Then the atmosphere improved when we had access to the counsellor and/or the legal team. This contact with the outside world lifted everyone's spirits.

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

Actually there are so many, but the first thing that came to my mind when you asked is placing Cevdet onto the stretcher.

**How was the atmosphere when you returned to your country?
How did people react to your participation in the Flotilla?**

I still have positive reactions from people. For example, whenever my friends introduce me to someone whom I haven't met before by saying, "This person was on the *Mavi Marmara*," I have a very positive, very supportive response. I have had opportunities to appear and speak about the Flotilla in the media. My friends and I held an event to raise some money in October, and a lot of people volunteered to take part. People are very interested in the subject. New groups have come forward to find out what happened there. I have really had very positive responses.

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

If I personify the state, I think Israel is like a person who has gone mad, and who needs to be sectioned into hospital. The state of Israel as a person is not self-aware, does not seem to be aware of what it is doing. Perhaps some people would argue, “No, they know what they are doing.”; but I think it is doing so much harm to itself, and to the international consensus on how a state should behave as to the human rights and the international law. It’s not just somebody who is being aggressive, but actually who is losing its way, and becoming more and more isolated. I had more faith in the sensibility of Israel before this incident. Perhaps they might have let us through as an international aid flotilla to act as a moderator in the conflict. If they allowed us through, we could have a route, and make it start to find a way out of this situation. However, they didn’t accept it.

Are you hopeful of the ongoing international legal proceedings?

I think that’s what we have to do. We have to seek legal redress on all fronts. We need to use the mechanisms of international law to try to achieve justice. But the difficulty is that we want real justice which is for the blockade in Gaza to be lifted. We won’t be able to get that in the International Criminal Court. I think the people who made the decisions to send the soldiers to intercept the *Mavi Marmara* violently need to be brought to justice themselves. But ultimately all of us would give up that opportunity and any compensation to see the blockade lifted. That’s really the justice we want.

What do you think about the IHH?

I can’t express how much respect I have for the IHH. It is really a great organization. For so long the NGOs in the world have been very careful not to say anything that might be politically controversial. For example, the International Committee of Red Cross is famously neutral in order to be able to go into disaster zones, according to what they say. I can understand their concern, but so many of the humanitarian crises across the world are caused by political matters. So I think it is very important for the NGOs to take a position. There are two options: Either you can continue to supply humanitarian aid to areas in need like sticking plaster, or you can take a deeper action to change that situation – so that they won’t need

sticking plaster anymore; so that the people can stand up, look after themselves, and provide for their families and communities as in the example of Gaza. There are thousands of people in Gaza who are very capable of running their own hospitals, orphan projects, education and food programs, etc.; but when there is a blockade, a siege, then they can't – since necessary equipment cannot be supplied. So I respect the IHH so much for taking a position and clearly saying, "The illegal blockade is the root of the problem." We will continue to provide humanitarian support to the people of Gaza, but everyone needs to know the reason why there is a crisis, and it is a political one.

What does the *Mavi Marmara* mean to you?

It is the symbol of peace and justice on international level. On personal level, it is like a family, it is a very special place. For me it is an amazing opportunity to join an international family that has come together for a common cause. I'm very fond of the ship, and everyone who sailed in it.