

THE *MAVI MARMARA* INCIDENT IS A HISTORIC TURNING POINT

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Ayşe Sarıođlu (1982) was born in Ankara/Turkey, and has been living in Istanbul for six years. She works as a journalist while also pursuing an academic career. She worked for various national newspapers, and currently is a reporter of a Turkish daily, *Taraf*. She graduated from Bilkent University, Department of Political Science, and is currently writing up her master's thesis on Turkish politics and conservatism at Istanbul University, Faculty of Economics.

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

I joined the Flotilla as a journalist. By making coverage of this historic event, my goal was to attract public attention to the cruel embargo on Palestine imposed by Israel. It was evident that it would be a historic turning point. If the Flotilla was able to reach Gaza, the imposed illegal embargo on the Palestinians would be broken. If it was unable to reach Gaza, it would draw the world's attention to this situation that has been going on in defiance of all reason, conscience and law.

Did you expect 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.

Of course, our ultimate destination was Gaza when we set sail, but we were aware of the fact that the one we would have to get through was Israel. I could guess that Israel would not allow the embargo to be bypassed, or at least would use all means possible to stop the ship. In this context, I thought they might damage the ship's engines, or rappel down their soldiers, and after that they might deport us. In case of an intervention, I expected to experience something like what people experience in demonstrations in Taksim, Istanbul such as brawls, tear gas and beatings. Never would such a scenario involving the death of nine people, the injury of dozens, the unlawful arrest and imprisonment of the survivors, and the looting of personal belongings have crossed my mind.

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

We as journalists spent the day differently from the other passengers. We were rushing to make news. In the pressroom, there was constant excitement and friendly competition. The volunteers were in good spirits. They were continuing their trip in harmony, without causing any problems, without getting tense, without minding the technical difficulties of being on board – such as provision of food, bathrooms and toilets, as well as bed shortages. Everybody was in small groups; in one place those who were praying and reading the Qur'an, in another place those who were talking to each other and singing songs. It was like Noah's Ark: people from every religion, every nation, every disposition travelling together in harmony to achieve a common goal. For instance, there was an Englishman, Peter Venner. He wasn't a Muslim yet, but was trying to compre-

hend Islam. He spoke to everyone separately. He chanted *dhikr* (remembrance of God, repeating His names in rhythmical manner) with those who did, then went and ate food with others, and then discussed the Paris Commune with the Spanish passengers. I said, "Peter, don't you ever get confused? Everyone in a world of their own." He said, "No," quite contentedly.

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.

The attack started during the *fajr* (dawn) prayer. The *adhan* (call to prayer) for *fajr* prayer had been recited, people had performed *wudu* (ablution) and started praying at that moment. It was pitch-dark. We had already realised that we were being surrounded. From 10:30 p.m. onwards, there was increased movement around the Flotilla; we could see Israeli ships. Helicopters were flying overhead. Life jackets were distributed, just in case. Meanwhile, our satellite connection was frequently failing and internet kept disconnecting, since the Israelis were jamming us. The more they jammed, the more we elevated our receivers. When we went outside, we saw a zodiac boat rapidly approaching us with its lights on. The soldiers on the zodiac raised their weapons, and were approaching towards us like savages beating war drums. We concentrated on them. When I zoomed in with my camera, I realised that I could see the face of one of the soldiers in its finest detail. That was the moment I realised they were very close to us. It all happened so fast. They were trying to climb onto our ship from zodiac boats, and fast-roping down from the helicopters simultaneously. They started firing randomly as soon as they set foot aboard. At first, I thought they were using rubber bullets; but when I saw the first person wounded and his injured arm, I realised that they were live ammunition. Inside, doctors and nurses were trying to treat the wounded. The men's hall turned into an emergency room. While the firing was going on outside, the wounded were being brought into the hall.

Cevdet Kılıçlar, with whom I had run out of the pressroom, was shot in the forehead. Seeing the corpse of someone that I highly respected, and with whom I had been together just five minutes ago is a sorrow that I will never forget for the rest of my life.

Realising that there were dead, and the number of the wounded was increasing in a way impossible to cope with, we called for help saying, "We have wounded people. We surrender. Stop firing." The same announcement was repeated again and again in English,

THE KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS POINTED US OUT TO THE CHILDREN SAYING, "LOOK, THESE ARE TERRORISTS!" HOW CAN THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN PEACE BE MAINTAINED WHEN THE HEARTS OF THE CHILDREN ARE FULL OF SUCH HATRED AND FEAR? ISRAEL IS THREATENING ITS OWN SECURITY AND EVEN EXISTENCE BY POISONING ITS CHILDREN WITH SUCH FEELINGS.

Arabic and Turkish. Israel responded to this call by cutting our public address system. Then we began to wait for a long time. We were just sitting inside. Our connection to the world was cut off; we were sitting without knowing how many dead and how many wounded there were, and what happened to our friends. We didn't know whether or not our reserve cameras were still functioning. Nevertheless, some friends wrote the number of the dead on a cardboard and showed it to the cameras. Completely cut off from the world, we were waiting for the soldiers to come in without knowing what would happen to us in the middle of the high seas. Whatever happened next, we were completely at their mercy. Looking at what happened minutes earlier, it was impossible not to worry about what awaited us. No one had the strength to talk or think anymore. The wounded needed urgent medical assistance. Every passing minute was of vital importance. They responded to our calls for help after many hours, and even then, they carried the wounded horribly. They even handcuffed the wounded on stretchers that could not even raise their fingers. A man, who was wounded from his abdomen and had heavy blood loss, died [İbrahim Bilgen]. He could have been saved if treated earlier. He was kept waiting for hours while bleeding heavily. His stretcher was carried by the soldiers very horrendously.

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

It was two hours of waiting; us waiting inside, and the Israeli soldiers outside. No need to tell how nerve-racking this situation was. Dozens of soldiers pointed the lasers of their weapons towards us. Then they called us out one by one, and searched us. After handcuffing us mostly with our hands behind our backs, they took us to the upper deck. Men were forced to kneel down the floor, and



Ayşe Sarioğlu working in pressroom of the Mavi Marmara

women were made to sit on the benches. Men's hands were cuffed too tightly; some of them turned purple, and their wrists sustained blood blisters. I asked the soldiers to loosen the handcuffs of those that were very tight. They loosened up some of them, but not everyone's. This depended on the mercy of the soldiers that I talked to. There was an elderly gentleman who needed to take his heart medication. I told this to the soldiers, and they allowed me to take the old man's medication out of his pocket and help him to swallow it. This was how I managed to help three people to take their medication. Due to the helicopters hovering above us, the sea water was pouring on us; so on the one hand, we were cold, and on the other hand, the sun was burning us.

I needed to go to the toilet. I was waiting for hours. I stood up, and told a soldier, "I need to go to the toilet," without asking any permission; he said, "You can't go." "Why?" I asked; "You wouldn't want to see that area the way it is now. We are cleaning it, there are corpses. You can go there after we clean," he replied. "I've already been in there; I've seen everything," I said; and he yelled, "Shut up and sit down!" I went back and sat down. After half an hour he came and touched my shoulder, escorted me all the way to the toilet, and waited in front of the door until I came out. On the way to the toilet, I saw that the computers and personal belongings were piled on top of each other like in concentration camps. The soldiers were walking muzzled dogs around.

We waited on the deck from 7:30 a.m. to 1:20 p.m. I was constantly looking at the clock. We were sitting under the sun. A helicopter was constantly wetting us; we were getting wet and dry, feeling cold and hot. Some of us were half-naked with bandaged wounds.

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We were very hungry. Just once they gave us permission to drink water. A carboy was brought. One of us took it around, and we drank it by bending and spilling it into our mouths. Later on, they took us inside. We sat in a hall of the ship until we arrived at Ashdod Port – of course without knowing where we were going and what they would do to us. The air-conditioner of the ship was turned off. Windows and doors were closed. The air inside was stuffy and hot. Many people fainted. We arrived at the port around 7:30 p.m. We waited there, too. The waiting dragged on. We did not know what would happen. We thought they might send us back on the first plane. We did not expect to be taken to a prison, arrested and detained. Meanwhile, we did not know whether or not the world was aware of what we were going through. We did not even know how many people were dead, wounded, or what happened to who.

We were made to disembark at Ashdod Port. At every stage and from multiple angles, our photos were taken. Many times we were searched. They searched both the inside and outside of my underclothes both with hands and metal detectors. They even checked in between my toes after removing my socks, at my soles, into my mouth, through the roots of my hair. Afterwards, they started to interrogate us.

I was insulted by the police officer during the interrogation. The police officer was mocking and extremely ill-mannered. I was asked to sign a paper in Hebrew which they claimed was my testimony; I refused. There was neither an official from my embassy nor a lawyer during my interrogation. After all the body searches and interrogation, we were taken to a prison in Beersheba in armoured vehicles. We again did not know where we were being taken and how long we were to stay there. We were not informed about anything during our imprisonment. We were allowed to use our right to make a telephone call at the last minute provided that we did not exceed one minute and spoke in English.



Ayşe Sarıoğlu taking photographs on deck

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?

None of the things we went through on this entire journey were something one could forget. When we were taken to Ben Gurion Airport for deportation, we saw kindergarten children that were brought there by buses. Their teachers pointed us out to the children saying, “Look, these are terrorists!” I was horrified by seeing children being raised with such hatred, assuming everyone other than themselves as enemy. How can the Israeli-Palestinian peace be maintained when the hearts of the kids are full of hatred and fear? After this scene that I witnessed, my hope for a possibility of peace in the Middle East has been deeply shaken. By poisoning its children – who are the future of a society – with such feelings, Israel is threatening its own future and security, and even its existence. Any sane Jew should be extremely uncomfortable with such policy and should contemplate this issue.

Do you think the Freedom Flotilla was successful, and achieved its goals?

Our goal when we set sail was to reach Gaza. If the ship had been able reach Gaza, it would have been a warning to Israel’s inhumane blockade that it has unjustly been enforcing on Gaza and that the entire world has been remaining silent about. The ship was unable to reach Gaza, but it fulfilled its goals more than expected. The attention of the entire world, albeit for a little while, focused on the

situation – on Gaza – that the world has kept blind, deaf, and mute about. Right after the attack, Egypt opened the Rafah border crossings. The embargo was eased a little bit, even if just for show. Of course, this was never enough. Nevertheless, it was very important for this issue to suddenly come at the top the world agenda. In this sense, I think the Flotilla reached its goal, even though it couldn't reach its destination.

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

If Israel can fast-rope and attack a ship carrying citizens of thirty-seven countries in international waters and kill people randomly, God knows what they must be doing to the people of Palestine living under siege with blackout and deprivation of all sorts. And again, if Israel dares to attack a supranational ship in international waters and kill the passengers randomly, it definitely deserves to be punished. Otherwise, no one should sit and live in his/her country in serenity. A serious punishment is required for Israel to regain consciousness.

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

I haven't encountered any negative reaction. On the contrary, my friends and colleagues said, "You did what we couldn't. If only we had been on that ship as well."

Are you hopeful of the ongoing international legal proceedings?

I wish I could be... Even though a year has passed, the prosecution process has not started yet in Turkey. I think the balances in foreign policy overwhelm the legal proceedings.

What does the *Mavi Marmara* mean to you?

For my own part, I can say, as the bird [who carried a beak-full of water to put out the enormous fire intended to burn and kill the Prophet Abraham, according to the story] says, "Let our friendship be known." It is a great honour for me to be a witness of this incident that I believe will take its place in the history books. In the long run, it is evident that the *Mavi Marmara* incident will be regarded as a historic turning point. Knowing that we contributed to peace efforts in the Middle East – even just a little bit – and having personally witnessed what happened has not lessened our responsibilities; there is still much to be done.