

ISRAEL HAS BECOME A COLONIAL POWER, AND IS DOING THE BIGGEST HARM TO ITSELF

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Dimitris Pleionis (1954) is a Greek from Athens. He received his Bachelor's degree in Business Administration from the American Deree College in Athens. He was the head slot coordinator for the Greek airports. Currently he is an elected municipal councillor in his home municipality. Also he is a member of the Ship to Gaza-Greece, and represented his organization in the Gaza Freedom Flotilla coordination committee.

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

I am a member of the Ship to Gaza-Greece. As you know, the Ship to Gaza-Greece was one of the six initiatives¹ that organized the Gaza Freedom Flotilla, and I was representing the Ship to Gaza-Greece on the *Mavi Marmara*.

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.

We were expecting that Israel would try to prevent us from going into Gaza, maybe by a naval blockade or something like that, but not an armed attack complete with commandos and shooting. They could try to stop the ships, but not in this militaristic way, attacking with helicopters, and killing and injuring people.

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

The atmosphere was very good of course. I joined the ship in Antalya, and we travelled together for three days. People were happy that they were going to Gaza. We were having discussions and press conferences; we were speaking with our people on internet. We were having discussions with people from different faiths and political views. It was a ship for people who were determined to break the siege of Gaza under the common denominator of universal humanistic values, regardless of any faith, political views or philosophical beliefs.

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.

It was really horrible. The Israeli commandos tried to get on board in the beginning using small boats, but very quickly, they understood that they could not do it in this way. So they used helicopters in order to descend the naval commandos from above. Of course we witnessed the killings, the maimings, the bombs, the attack with all the means the commandos had. It was horrible. I really wouldn't like to remember too much. They were shooting and killing

¹ The six initiatives that organized the Gaza Freedom Flotilla were: "The Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH)", "The Free Gaza Movement", "The Ship to Gaza-Greece", "The Ship to Gaza-Sweden", "The European Campaign to End the Siege on Gaza", and "The International Committee to End the Siege on Gaza".

THE ISRAELI SOLDIERS ACTED IN A RACIST WAY. AS WE HAD EUROPEAN PASSPORTS, THEY DIDN'T TIE MOST OF US, BUT MADE ESPECIALLY THE ARABS AND THE TURKS KNEEL DOWN AND TIED THEIR HANDS. WE DECIDED TO DISOBEY. SO WE STARTED TO GO DOWN ON OUR KNEES, AND TELL THESE PEOPLE TO GO UP AND SIT INSTEAD OF KNEELING DOWN.

people. We saw their laser lights around. Blood was everywhere in the lower deck. It was a tragedy, and a big crime of the Israelis.

Did you experience or witness any torture or abuse, either psychological or physical, when you were all taken as captives on board?

Of course there was abuse. I didn't have personally, I believe because I was a Westerner, but I saw it around me. What I want to say is that the Israeli soldiers acted in a racist way. As we had European passports, they didn't tie most of us, but just told us to sit down at the back of the ship. However, they made the others, especially the Arabs and the Turks, kneel down and tied their hands. We decided to disobey, so we started to go down on our knees, and tell these people to go up and sit instead of kneeling down.

Then you were sent to a jail in Israel. What happened there?

We were captives on the ship, and then taken into Ashdod Port. They interrogated us in many ways in the interrogation centre. We arrived there very late, you know, *Mavi Marmara* was the last ship to come. At about 3:00 or 4:00 a.m., they sent us to Beersheba Jail in military buses under custody of the police. As I was on the *Mavi Marmara* ship, I was not with the other Greeks in the jail, but with our brothers from Turkey, England, Sweden, Malaysia, and so on. There they did not torture us at least, but of course it was a jail, and jails are not good places to be in.

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?

The killing of the passengers is the most tragic one of course. I saw at least two or three dead people. The first that comes to my mind is our brother Cevdet Kılıçlar who was shot in the forehead; I saw his body while being brought down.



Press conference in Antalya, Turkey: Doctor Abderrazak Marki (head of the Algerian delegation), Dimitris Pleionis, Mattias Gardell, Lubna Masarwa (Palestinian activist and member of the Free Gaza Movement)

Israel claims that there were “terrorists” on the ship. What do you think about it?

Of course they are lying. There were no terrorists on the ship, but were people of conscience; there were priests, doctors, members of parliament, plain activists, women, etc. So of course what Israel says is a big lie.

Can this experience be a step for rapprochement between the people of Turkey and Greece?

Yes, I believe we represent a common goal: the lifting of the siege of Gaza, and the freedom of Palestine. Actually this is a common goal for many people around the world. I think this common goal can bring many Greeks and Turks together. This is something very important for our countries.

Do you think the Freedom Flotilla was successful, and achieved its goals? What is the most important achievement of this Flotilla?

Although we did not reach Gaza, I believe, we achieved very important goals which were to arouse world consciousness for the Palestinian cause, reveal once more who the perpetrator is, and make all the governments of the world take a stand. The world cannot let things go by having the biggest jail of the world in Gaza, and do nothing or pretending that nothing is happening by looking the

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other way. The Flotilla made them look there and that is, I believe, the biggest achievement of the Flotilla. It brought the Palestinian issue once more to the forefront on the agenda of the international community.

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

We were thirty-eight Greeks who were detained, and were the biggest group after the Turks. The day after we arrived in our country, there was a very big demonstration in Athens, about fifteen thousands people were demonstrating with us. The Greek people, to a large extent, are very pro-Palestinian, because they know how it is to be under oppression. Only the Turkish people can be more pro-Palestinian than us.

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

I believe that Israel is doing a very bad job by oppressing the Palestinians in the name of protecting itself and its people, and not going back to pre-1967 borders. Israel has become a colonial power, and is doing the biggest harm to itself. If Israel wants to be a normal state it should dismantle ALL settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and leave there immediately. Also it should stop at once the siege of Gaza. At least Israelis can start discussions from that point with the Arabs and the Palestinians.

What does the *Mavi Marmara* mean to you?

I feel very strong about it, and that's why I am here today to meet the *Mavi Marmara*. I have spent four days there, and I want to commemorate its return. Tomorrow we will be inside and see.