

THE TREATMENT OF ISRAELIS REMINDED ME GUANTANAMO AND THE ILLEGAL PRACTICES OF THE “WAR ON TERROR”

Edda Virginia Manga Otalora

2 March 2011 / Sweden



Edda Virginia Manga Otalora (1969) was born in Colombia, and lives in Sweden since 1986. She is a historian of ideas working at Uppsala University in Sweden. She is also a political editor of the newspaper *Feministiskt Perspektiv*, and a member of Clandestino Institut in Gothenburg, Sweden. Currently she is writing a book on the post-colonial racism in Colombia. She joined the Gaza Freedom Flotilla with her husband Mattias Gardell (1959) who is a scholar and chair of Comparative Religion at Uppsala University, and a member of the Ship to Gaza-Sweden that was one of the six initiatives organizing the Gaza Freedom Flotilla.

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

The injustices suffered by the Palestinians have concerned me for a long time. I am a historian specialized in the history of colonialism and racism; and comparing with the cruelty of European colonialism, I cannot see the policies of Israel against Palestine as something different from colonial violence. It needs to end. But because the “global order” is in many aspects a continuation of colonial power relations, this violence is allowed to continue, and even considered as necessary for “stability” and survival of “democracy”. Sweden and the European Union, where I am a citizen, have contributed to sustain Israel’s illegal actions. While the attack on Gaza in late 2008 and early 2009 was going on, the people of Gaza were unable to escape from the air strikes, and the UN-schools were targeted with white phosphorus on the same day the Secretary General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon was visiting Israel, I felt that change will not come through the institutionalized organs. No help was coming from the states or from the UN. People must do it themselves. And when I realised that, I felt a moral duty to personally engage.

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 knew that the Israelis had attacked previous boats that attempted to break the blockade, and that the politicians in power are former military and have a militaristic mentality. When the news came that they would use “any necessary means” to stop the Flotilla, I thought they might use military force. Before departing I started a campaign asking the Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs to protect our right to travel in international waters. He responded to it by stating that he supported our goal, that he presupposed we would be non-violent, and that he expected the Israelis to act accordingly.

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

It was a wonderful experience. People from all over the world, from very different political and religious backgrounds were sharing hope for a better future through concrete action. The moment when we started to move, six boats together, in the blue Mediterranean water, that sunny afternoon was one of the greatest experiences in my lifetime.



Süleyman Çakmak, Edda Virginia Manga Otalora, her husband Mattias Gardell (scholar and member of the Ship to Gaza-Sweden) and Dror Fleir (Jerusalem-born Swede activist)

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.

I was at the pressroom, and suddenly many went out when information came that we had been surrounded by fourteen speedboats. I heard bombs falling on deck so loudly that I thought the walls [bulkheads] would fall apart. People were running outside trying to hinder the soldiers climbing aboard. I saw a man who got hit with some kind of projectile in the eye. A comrade came in and told us that we shouldn't go out, because they were firing live ammunition, and two men had been killed. I tried to think calmly and sat down on the floor waiting for the firing to stop. I wasn't sure if we would survive the attack.

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

We were attacked as if we were an enemy army, and we were treated as enemies. I saw the military when taking the people that had been outside the pressroom. Some of them were treated very violently; two of them were kicked down, handcuffed, and then they were put a head cover. That scared me, because I recalled that kind of treatment from Guantanamo, and the illegal practices of the "War on Terror". I was shocked by the treatment of the male passengers

I REMEMBER A YOUNG MAN AT THE AIRPORT
IN SWEDEN WHO HAD BEEN WAITING US FOR MANY
HOURS. HE EMBRACED ME, AND TOLD THAT HE
WANTED TO THANK ME; BECAUSE EGYPT HAD OPENED
THE GAZA BORDER, AND SO HE WAS GOING TO BE
ABLE TO VISIT HIS MOTHER AFTER 9 YEARS.

that were perceived to be Turkish or non-Western. They were handcuffed, obliged to sit down on their knees for long hours, and not allowed to go to toilet. Some were wounded and fainted because of this treatment. When we were on deck, water from the sea was continuously pouring on us because of the helicopters above us. Sometimes it seemed intentional. Then, during the rest of the journey we were confined in a hot room with no ventilation and food. People that protested all these or reminded us of our rights were exposed to violations. I remember a young man, a British citizen [Osama Qashoo], who rose up and reminded us that we had not infringed any law, so that there were no legal grounds to imprison us. They took him out of our sight, and we could only hear him screaming. He was never allowed to come back to us. The soldiers destroyed everything inside the boat; our belongings were piled up as garbage... Prison was by comparison better. We were treated as criminals with some kind of rights; but still, we were not allowed access to lawyers and to phone calls as prescribed by law.

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

As I told you before, the moment when the six vessels started course to Gaza is the event that I'll never forget. At that moment I could see – impossible as it may seem – the situation of Palestine may change. Change is possible if people are determined... I also remember many tragic things, but there is a danger that these tragic things might produce hate, and overshadow the love and the possibilities that the Flotilla made visible. That's why I mentioned here what I choose to remember.

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



Edda Virginia Manga Otalora, Mattias Gardell and Dimitris Pleionis in Kepez Sport Hall in Antalya, Turkey

There were two kinds of reactions: One was gratitude and love. I remember a young man at the airport in Sweden who had been waiting us for many hours. He embraced me, and told that he wanted to thank me; because Egypt had opened the Gaza border, and so he was going to be able to visit his mother after nine years... Most people found the attack on the *Mavi Marmara* outrageous. Other people, many of them journalists, were aggressive, and insinuated that we had been on a boat together with a bunch of “terrorists” who were not at all peaceful, but attacked the Israeli soldiers. Some of the “friends of Israel” still defended the attack as necessary for Israel’s “security”. The Swedish police labelled the actions of the Israeli Navy as “armed robbery” and “kidnapping”.

After all these experiences, would you like to join another mission that sails to Gaza?

Yes. No doubt.

Do you think this Flotilla was successful and achieved its aims? Because some people think that nothing was achieved, and many people were killed and wounded in vain.

I think the Flotilla was successful in its political aim of highlighting the illegality and absurdity of the blockade of Gaza. Some symbolic changes were achieved, the power of non-violent resistance was noticed and discussed by Palestinian groups, and the image of Israel changed; but we couldn’t arrive in Gaza, and the blockade still continues. It means that what was achieved is not sufficient; the actions must continue.

THE SOLDIERS WITNESSED HOW WE WERE DISPOSSESSED OF ALL OUR PROPERTY BY THE ISRAELI AUTHORITIES. LATER, IT WAS REVEALED THAT SOME OF THEM HAD TAKEN PROPERTY OF THE PASSENGERS FOR THEMSELVES, AND EVEN USED THEIR CREDIT CARDS. IF THE AUTHORITIES ORDER THEM TO DISPOSSESS PEOPLE, HOW CAN THEY RAISE A YOUTH THAT IS NOT INCLINED TOWARDS THEFT?

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

I think Israel is destroying itself. I was very sad to see so many young masked men, armed to the teeth, committing crimes against unarmed civilians. All boys and girls in Israel must do a long military service early in life. There they are taught to kill enemies, and they are taught to establish subjection through humiliating, lying to and torturing dissenters: This is a knowledge in which they need to unlearn to be emotionally responsive to other people's suffering, morally unresponsive to the idea of equality and justice, and antagonistic to democratic ideals as the right to integrity and freedom of expression. So I think this system is obviously destroying its future. I'll give you an example: The soldiers who kidnapped us witnessed how we were dispossessed of all our property by the Israeli authorities. Later, it was revealed that some of the soldiers had taken property of the passengers for themselves, and even used their visa cards. But if the authorities steal, and order them to dispossess people, how can they raise a youth that is not inclined towards theft?

This is not an exclusive problem of the armed forces. You know, we were held in prison on the charge of entering "illegally" into the Israeli territory. Of course this is absurd, because we were kidnapped by them in international waters. Nevertheless, they imprisoned us, did not allow us to contact with legal representatives, and then deported us with a ten-year ban to enter the country. What does it say about the rule of law in Israel?

I think democratization of Israel goes hand in hand with solving the Palestinian question. Israel has been ruled by state of exception, and doesn't even have a proper constitution. By the way, with democracy, I mean equality of all citizens, not an ethnocracy.

What does the *Mavi Marmara* mean to you?

I cannot describe it. I left a part of my heart on the *Mavi Marmara*.