

**WE EXPERIENCED WHAT THE PALESTINIANS
HAVE BEEN EXPERIENCING FOR MORE THAN
A HALF CENTURY**

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Fatima Mohammadi (1979) is an Iranian-American lawyer and activist. She previously served as the U.S. national coordinator of the Chicago-based Viva Palestina U.S.A. for two aid convoys to Gaza in July 2009, and December 2009-January 2010.

Why did you join the Gaza Freedom Flotilla?

I had the fortune of being the organizer of the two previous U.S. convoys into Gaza – the first in July 2009, and the other in December 2009 which entered Gaza in January 2010. After the July convoy, nearly three quarters of a million dollars worth of vehicles were still being held in Egypt, in addition to thousands of dollars which was fundraised for the July convoy. The U.S. volunteer team was able to use the leftover funds to purchase medical aid for the December convoy, and was able to negotiate a release of the vehicles to the IHH to be used in accordance with their intended purpose. However, a small amount of aid left from those two convoys made it necessary for someone from the United States to take them to Gaza with the new donations from the people who supported the Flotilla. I had the good fortune of being that person.

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.

Not at all to the extent that they actually did attack us. The Israelis are enforcing an illegal blockade of Gaza as a furtherance of their entirely illegal occupation of greater Palestine. In order to legitimize themselves and in order for the blockade to have meaning in the eyes of the international community, they had to put up some show of force. They felt like they had to stop us; otherwise the blockade wouldn't be respected by other groups or states. In that, I expected there would be a standoff in the sea, and that we would attempt to negotiate a diplomatic resolution similar to the resolutions of previous aid convoys to Gaza. Also I don't think anybody expected such flagrant and unnecessary violence against our Flotilla.

Could you please compare the atmosphere on the *Mavi Marmara* before and after the Israeli attack?

Before the attack, the atmosphere was fantastic. People were praying together, reading together, getting to know one another, sharing stories about their families, talking about what they were doing in their countries, and telling stories about how they got involved in the Palestinian cause, etc. Everyone was becoming more and more excited as we approached Gaza, and since we were literally hours away when the attack occurred, it was an especially jarring experience. The attack and its results were tragic but also very symbolic, since we actually experienced something that the Palestinians have been

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experiencing for years. Before the attack, everyone was very hopeful, and afterwards there was still hope, but with a more realistic understanding of the brutality of the Israeli government and military.

Did you witness the Israeli attack?

I witnessed a great deal of the attack that occurred on the upper decks—the fourth [boat deck] and the fifth [bridge deck]—but not where most of the murders took place—the sixth [navigation] deck. I remained upstairs while the soldiers fired their weapons at us from the zodiac boats, and while they were landing from the helicopters onto the ship until they overwhelmed the fifth deck. Suddenly, one of the Turkish brothers [Erkan Bayfidan] was shot a few feet from me, so I attended to him and took him downstairs. When I tried to return to the upper deck minutes later, the soldiers had surrounded the stairwell, and met me with guns pointed at my face. I returned to the medical deck to assist with the wounded, and from that point remained between the third and fourth decks.

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?

There were so many; but the most striking was when I was downstairs, assisting the many who were wounded. There was one brother, Süleyman [Söylemez], who had been shot in front of the head, and had fallen backwards where he was then punctured through the back of his head. He was lying on his side, and one of the other brothers was holding him up. The doctors said that if he were to recline fully, the blood would rush to his lungs, and he would surely die. Several brothers were fanning him with cardboard pieces as we tried to keep him alive. Blood and vomit were pouring out of his mouth. I just kept wiping his mouth, holding his hand, changing the towels on his wounds, and speaking to him. We went through dozens of towels in



fifteen minutes trying to stop the bleeding. *Subhan'Allah* (glory be to God), he made it through. The Israelis transported him, and the other wounded to the helicopters in a totally barbaric way. Brother Süleyman is with his family now in Ankara, though in a very serious coma. I will absolutely never forget him. I will also never forget the care and consideration of everyone on the ship towards one another despite the chaos that was happening around us.

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 the ship and in Israel? Did you experience or witness any torture or abuse, either psychological or physical?

I got into a little bit of a fight with one of the soldiers on the ship while we were being taken to the port in Ashdod. They took one of our men [Osama Qashoo] outside, and were mistreating him needlessly. I insisted that he needed some water, which they wouldn't allow, and so I got into an argument with a bit of pushing and shoving. Then in Ashdod, the soldiers put their hands on me when we were getting off the ship to the processing centre, and they hit me a couple of times with their guns and slammed my head up against the wall, because I wouldn't let them take my *keffiyeh* from me. Lastly, as we were leaving the prison and going to the airport in prison vans, I got into a fight with nine male guards and one female guard. I was insisting that the women should be allowed to use the restrooms since we had been held in the prison van for several hours before departing to the airport, but they wouldn't allow it. So when they opened the door at one point, I jammed myself in the door and refused to move.

The ten guards came and started beating me with their batons and fists, and kicking me. One female soldier tried to choke me, pushing me back into the van. I was able to punch her in the face, and she fell back with some of the male guards, who continued to beat me more frantically. I finally let the door off, because the women inside the van with me were extremely frightened and started yelling. There was so much tension, and I was too frustrated to calm down. However, they were instigating the violence and using it against other women as well, especially those of Palestinian origin.

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

The definition of terrorism has been manipulated by the Western media and by the Zionist PR system. If we use the most accepted definition of “terrorism” as acts of violence upon a civilian community for political goals, then the terrorists are obviously the Israelis. The Israeli and imperialist Western governments have done a spectacular job converting the idea of “resistance to terrorism” to “terrorism” itself. Our Flotilla was a group of ships of humanitarian aid workers and nonviolent activists who do not participate in random acts of violence upon any innocent civilians.

You are one of the five passengers that the Israeli army blamed for being involved in terrorist activities, and accused of attempting to smuggle forbidden electronic components into the Gaza Strip. What do you think about it?

Honestly, when I was first asked this question by others, I refused to even dignify the question with a response; it was that ridiculous. For those who must know, however, I was carrying personal electronics in my luggage that were no different from any of the electronics on the ships—a camera, a video camera, a mobile telephone, and their respective chargers. I’ve left nothing in Gaza except for friends and medical aid.

Do you think the Freedom Flotilla was successful, and achieved its goals? Because some people think that nothing was achieved, and many people were killed and wounded in vain. What are the most important achievements of this Flotilla?

In order to answer this question, we have to look at the stated priorities of the Flotilla: 1) to break the siege of Gaza, and to take the supplies that are badly needed in the region, 2) to draw worldwide condemnation of the ongoing siege which has been lasted for nearly

four years, and 3) to create an atmosphere of solidarity with the Palestinian people. Two out of three of those were absolutely achieved beyond our wildest hopes. Had we just sailed to the Gaza without any problem, yes, we could have broken the siege, but the media would not have covered it; yes, we could have delivered the aid and shown solidarity, but without the world even paying any attention. The way that everything happened, *subhan'Allah*, was a victory. It just goes to show that if you have good intention, anything that is used against you for evil, will turn into a glory. The Flotilla was a success. The entire world is talking about it. Many countries severed or at least minimized their relationships with the Zionist regime as a response to the attack. Recently, I was speaking to a couple from South Africa, who has been living in Jeddah/Saudi Arabia, about the *Mavi Marmara*, the IHH, the blockade of Gaza, etc. and they had heard about everything. Unfortunately, the United States is not fully conscious yet, but the rest of the world is talking about it. That is the biggest achievement. Secondly, we have shown solidarity with the Palestinian people against their oppression. The people in Gaza with whom I have spoken since the attack overwhelmed us with compliments and gratitude. They look at us as if we are their heroes, although we know that the opposite is actually true. *Insha'Allah* (if God wills), within due time and with adequate international pressure on the Zionist regime, the last goal will also be achieved and the aid we sought to take to Gaza will reach its destination.

What does the *Mavi Marmara* mean to you? You saw it today, how do you feel about it?

I was joyful on the one hand, and disappointed and upset on the other. It was really very exciting to be reunited with most of my brothers and sisters who were on the Flotilla, and to spend some time with them remembering the events on the ship. I felt as if we were preparing for another mission to Gaza again on the *Mavi Marmara*. At the same time, it was disappointing to see what had happened to the ship over the six months when it was in the Zionist regime's possession. I would have liked to see it in the same state that we left it, not just to commiserate with one another, but also to learn the extent of the actual attack. As we all saw, Israel did a fantastic job of patching all the holes and making the ship look like as if nothing had happened, because they know that it would just incriminate them. I hope they will be prosecuted in the International Criminal Court for their violations, for the crimes against humanity, and the war crimes that they have committed.