

THE BABY ON BOARD WAS UNNERVING THE ISRAELI SOLDIERS

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Gadija Davids (1985) is from Cape Town, the Republic of South Africa. She is a journalist working for *Radio 786*. Her radio station sent her to cover the voyage and the aid getting into the Gaza Strip, and also to speak with Gazans about living under occupation.

What happened during the Israeli attack, and afterwards, when you were all taken captive? How was the atmosphere on the ship? I wonder about your personal experiences and what you witnessed.

While the Freedom Flotilla was in international waters, Israeli soldiers illegally boarded the ships during the *fajr* (dawn) time. I remember dozing off on Sunday night and waking up to the sound of the *fajr adhan* (call to prayer), and then the sirens going off repeatedly. We were told to put on our life jackets, and women were told to remain in their quarters below.

Those of us in the women's quarters sat and waited for any kind of news about what was happening on the ship. We heard voices of people we had joked with just the day before, telling us that armed soldiers had shot and wounded several activists on the ship. We heard the announcement of "Stop shooting, we are unarmed civilians" several times over the intercom – from the background noise we could make out shouting and gun fire. After about three hours of sitting and hearing those screams, we were told to go upstairs.

The steps were covered in blood. Blood smears clung to the walls. I saw three bodies wrapped up in cloth lying on the floor – their blood seeping through, while others were being tended to by medics. We were told to remain seated and not to make sudden movements.

We found a booth, and I managed to get a window seat. Staring through the window directly opposite me was an Israeli soldier, only his eyes were visible, with the tip of his rifle peeking past the window-sill. I took a look at the soldiers that were lined up outside watching us through the window – they looked like teenagers. And I remember thinking that these teenagers probably saw the attack as a training mission, but I couldn't understand the hatred that these soldiers exhibited, even through the windows, even as they stood there armed to the teeth with all kinds of weaponry at their disposal.

Soon the wounded were allowed off the boat – they were taken out on stretchers, and the doctors had to raise their stethoscopes to show the soldiers that they meant no harm. Men with wounds on their backs, chests and heads were carried out. And then the dogs started barking.

The chopper noise filled the tense air. The window I was seated by couldn't be closed properly, so the force from the chopper's rotors forced sea water and cool air into the cabin, and splashed my face – a welcome relief as the Israelis had disabled the air-conditioning.

We were then told to leave the cabin one at a time, and were only allowed to take our passports, money and medication. We were searched from head to toe; I wasn't even allowed to keep my phone's

sim card, and then we were bound with black plastic ties – some more tightly than others.

I was directed upstairs to the top deck to sit in the sun – we weren't allowed to speak, and we had to plea for water and for a tarp to be lifted over our heads. A pregnant woman had to ask repeatedly if she could go to the bathroom, and it took several entreaties before they would let her. Throughout the journey we would have to negotiate with soldiers on the conditions of going to the toilet.

One of the men [Mustafa Ismail Nashwan] recited the *adhan* for *dhuhr* (noon) prayer, and soon after we were taken down to the hall. There the women were uncuffed, but the men would remain bound until we arrived at Ashdod.

The cabin was ransacked. I saw my microphone and my battery packs strewn across the floor, and when I tried to pick them up, I was shouted at to leave everything.

We sat while the Israelis lined the cabin watching us. Some of us dozed off while others sat in silence. The chief engineer's wife [Nilüfer Çetin] and his one-year-old son [Türker Kağan Çetin] were allowed down from the bridge. And as we played with the baby to keep him busy, the soldiers looked on, the baby unnerving them.

What had become clear about the Israeli soldiers and the occupation of Palestine is their funding and how they operate. One of the soldiers standing nearby had a black cylinder that was attached to something that looked like a rifle. On the cylinder were the words "made in the United States of America"; the relationship between the U.S. and the Israeli regime proven in black and white – quite literally.

We sat like that for several hours until we arrived at Ashdod, where Israeli officials boarded the ship and told us that we would be home soon. We would undergo medical checks, be given something to eat, be allowed to call our families, have our belongings returned, and be deported... At that time one of the activists, Osama Qashoo, got up from his seat, and started berating the Israelis for what they had done, calling them cowards, pirates and kidnappers, and shouting Palestine liberation slogans. We didn't see Osama again – he was pushed outside in the blazing hot sun and made to kneel there until the soldiers saw fit to release him. One of the activists demanded that Osama be given water while he was outside, and after much complaining, Osama was taken inside and then we heard punching noises and cries of pain. The activists' calls for mercy were rewarded with a different torture!

Could you please tell us your story about what happened when you were taken to Ashdod Port? Did you experience or witness any torture or abuse, either psychological or physical?

BEING HELD IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY, AGAINST YOUR WILL, WITHOUT ANY CONTACT WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD WAS A NERVE-WRACKING AND STRESSFUL EXPERIENCE. WE DID NOT KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT; WE HAD ALREADY UNDERGONE THREE BODY SEARCHES, HAD OUR BELONGINGS STOLEN, AND SUBJECTED TO SEVERAL KINDS OF TORTURE.

I eventually left the boat at around midnight. We were met by teenage girls dressed in t-shirts with the words “Israeli Navy” on the back. They wore big combat pants and army boots. I was hooked in by one on each side and escorted to a tent to be searched. Some women were asked to strip while others weren’t – nothing about their methods was consistent. They checked the hems of our clothes, in between our toes and our hair. And when that was done, we were taken for a medical check and then “processed”.

There were several desks underneath this huge tent, equipped with computers, printers and a camera. I asked the officials – two men – if I could speak to a member of my embassy, and I was told, “This is Israel, you don’t get to see your embassy.” Then I asked for a lawyer, and they said, “You get a lawyer in Europe, this is Israel.” And then they asked questions like, “Did you know that you were threatening Israel by being on the boat at ... (I can’t remember how far from the shore)?” When I said, “I’m not a sailor, I don’t know,” the one told the other to put down “Yes.” But while all of this was going on, one of the officials was flirting with my teenage escorts. So that was the kind of “interrogation” we underwent. I was given a blue form which basically said that I admitted to being a threat to the Zionist state. I refused to sign it.

We were corralled in a waiting area, and then sent to be fully searched again. I was put into a van with no windows, and the door was slammed shut – I had no idea where I would be taken. I sat like that for a few minutes when someone else from the Flotilla was put in next to me. I don’t know for how long we drove, because I fell asleep. When I woke up, we were outside a prison. We were put four to a cell, and told that we were lucky, because it was a new prison.

Being held hostage in general I’m sure is no picnic, but being held in a foreign country, against your will, without any contact with the outside world is probably one of the most nerve-wracking and stressful experiences I’ve ever had. When we arrived at the prison it was around two o’clock in the morning on Tuesday, 1 June, we did not

know what to expect; we had already undergone three body searches, had our belongings stolen, and subjected to several kinds of torture.

The air-conditioning had been turned off with no real ventilation and – it being a prison – the windows were sealed shut, and we weren't allowed to call our families. Later that morning, we were served with raw vegetables and bread. One of the Turkish women [Çiğdem Topçuoğlu] sat in silence without eating or speaking – I later found out that she had witnessed her husband being shot and killed by an Israeli commando. Some women were concerned for their husbands' safety, as we had no contact with them since we left the port. When they asked the wardens, they were told, "Everything would be sorted out soon" with no indication of when that would be.

Later that afternoon the embassies started trickling in, and being the only South African I was concerned that my embassy wouldn't know that I was there. But they arrived, and I was told to agree to be deported, which basically meant admitting a crime that I had not committed. I sometimes wonder what would have happened to me if I had not signed – I hear the Israeli legal system is not foreigner-friendly.

What about the way back to Turkey?

The next morning, we were told to get dressed; we were all going home. We were loaded into a prison van. Since we couldn't see out, doubt started creeping into my mind as to whether we were really being deported, or just transported to another prison. We sat in the van, along with small cockroaches that scurried across the side-panels, and were driven to Ben Gurion Airport.

There we had our passports stamped, and found out that the Turkish government would ensure our safe passage to Turkey. Three Turkish airplanes stood waiting for every person that was on the Freedom Flotilla before we left the Occupied Palestine. And so we waited until about midnight before take off (we spent about twelve hours on that airplane), as members of the Flotilla trickled on board – some with minor injuries, some with more serious ones. One man came on board, and said that they were attacked at the airport as well, showing us his broken finger; and another man had to be carried up by his friends, because his legs had been reduced to spaghetti.

We later found out that we were delayed because they were waiting for the president of the IHH, Bülent Yıldırım, to be released. While we were waiting, armed soldiers started surrounding the planes, and I thought we may be in for another encounter. But we eventually did leave Israel, and arrived Istanbul the following morning.