

***SFENDONI* WAS A MICROCOSM OF THE WORLD
COMMUNITY THAT WE DREAM ABOUT LIVING IN**

Gene St.Onge

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Gene St.Onge (1946) is a U.S. citizen, and a consulting civil/structural engineer. He is the founder and principal of St.Onge&Associates, has over forty years experience managing civil and structural engineering projects in the private, public, domestic and international arenas. Also, he is involved in a Middle East based international effort to rebuild Gaza. He and his wife, Jan, have been contributing to the rebuilding of houses and schools demolished by the Israelis in Palestine. He was the Free Palestine Movement representative on the Greek ship, the *Sfendoni*.

Why did you join the Gaza Freedom Flotilla? What were your motivations?

I have to go back in order to explain my motivations. When I traveled to Lebanon in 1973, I observed the squalor of the refugee camps. The stories of Palestinians there gave me a new perspective on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. I developed a real concern for their plight but did nothing about it, until I met Rabbi Lerner of Berkeley, over ten years ago, who is a well-known intellectual and political activist and speaks of the need for justice for the Palestinian people. Rabbi Lerner encouraged us to get involved with our congressional senators and representatives to try to change U.S. policy on the issue, from heavily pro-Israel position to a fair and equitable one... Then I, with Paul Larudee who is very active with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), put together a group called Middle East Policy Advisory Committee (MEPAC) which is a coalition of fifteen peace action groups. Its mission is to bring U.S. policy in the Middle East, with special emphasis on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, into compliance with international law and human rights.

In late 2007, Paul Larudee suggested that the so-called liberation of Gaza in 2005 by Israel should be tested at sea, since Gaza remained the “largest open-air prison in the world”. With the election of Hamas in 2006, the amount of travel, as well as the quantity and diversity of goods allowed into Gaza, was scaled back drastically. Meanwhile, no government entity anywhere in the world was doing anything to challenge this blockade. These were the conditions that set the stage for a series of humanitarian voyages that were to follow, breaching Israel’s blockade of Gaza since 1967.

My basic motivation for joining the Freedom Flotilla was that I cared deeply about the fate of the Palestinian people, and was willing to help them for an end to their suffering. Also after living under a militaristic, neo-fascist [Bush] government for eight years—that had destroyed our economy, and practically ruined my business—this journey would renew my nearly broken spirit. Since I was unable to join any of the previous journeys, I sensed that I must either seize this opportunity or forever regret not being part of a historic event that would be very important for the issue of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

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.

Despite four flotillas successfully breached the Israeli blockade since 2008, following Operation Cast Lead, which began in the last few days of 2008, no more flotillas were allowed into Gaza. Four flotillas were turned back, with one of the flotilla boats, “the Dignity”, attacked and nearly sunk, highlighting the brutality of the Israeli military force. But to stop the Freedom Flotilla, a much larger mission with 10,000 or so tons of goods and about 700 citizens representing 37 nations, by using its navy seemed like a foolhardy decision. So, although there was a probability of intercepting this Flotilla, if cooler heads prevailed in the decision-making circles, then the Flotilla could go through. But unfortunately, except for being rescued by the Turks and the nine deaths, events unfolded pretty much as expected in my worst case scenario: being captured by the Israelis, roughed up a bit and then imprisoned for a few days.

How was the atmosphere on the boat you boarded before the attack?

I was on the Greek boat, the *Sfendoni*. Despite some difficulties, the five days I spent there were some of the best days of my life. There was the time, we all decided to jump in the water and have swim in the heat of the Mediterranean. It was beautiful! I found myself in the midst of an extraordinary group of people from twelve different countries who shared the same commitment of helping to relieve the suffering of the people of Gaza and, in a larger sense, all united in commitment to human rights. This was microcosm of the world community that many of us dream about living in—free of preconceived biases based on religion, political persuasion, race or any of the many other senseless reasons for dividing people to which we all fall victim at one time or another.

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.

At around 0:15-0:30 a.m., we received our first radio contact from the Israeli Navy, while I was steering the boat. The radio operator asked who we were, who was on the boat, where we came from and where we were going, etc. Our captain readily provided for basic information, but since we were clearly in international waters—about 75 miles [120 kilometers] from Israel’s shore at that time—he was not entitled to any more information and so we stopped answering. The operator then notified us that we were violating Israel’s “Security Zone” and must turn back, and if we refused to do so, he threatened,

the Navy would have no choice but to take any and all measures necessary to stop us. The captain asked the Israeli operator twice to define the coordinates of the so-called “Security Zone”, but instead of responding, he repeated his warning. We made it clear that we were in international waters and, therefore, had a right to free passage without interference from the Israeli Navy. We even began to steer farther away from the Israeli shore.

At about 4:15 a.m., we were roused that Israeli helicopters were circling above the *Mavi Marmara*, which was just ahead of us about 200-300 yards [183-274 meters] or so. We raced to the top deck to see what was going on. Within 10-15 minutes, 25-30 zodiac boats arrived with about 8-10 commandos in tight formation on each one, screaming at the top of their lungs... They immediately began shooting at us paint pellets, in order to intimidate us into submission and to allow about 20 of the commandos to board the boat with little or no resistance. Nevertheless, we went to our nonviolent resistance actions like shutting down the engine, filling the wheelhouse to protect the captain and delay the commandos taking over the wheel, surrounding the wheelhouse to slow down the commandos, etc. A melee ensued, with a lot of screaming, pushing and shoving. The commandos, dressed in full military gear with M16 rifles and black stockings covering their faces, used tasers, sound grenades—and even their rifles—to contain us. We, on the other hand, simply tried to stand in their way.

For our efforts, some of us were injured, with the captain needing hospitalization afterwards. I witnessed one the crewmembers, an Arab gentleman named Al Mahdi Alharati, being struck by the butt end of a commando’s rifle. I watched him fall to the deck writhing in pain. Still, the commandos paid no attention to him, and continued to kick him while he lay on the deck. I screamed to leave him alone and, as I tried to reach him, was knocked down repeatedly. As I finally tried to crawl over to him to cover and protect him, I was hit in the head, probably by a rifle as well, and began bleeding. I was then tied up in handcuffs and made to sit down away from the action. Also during the early part of the takeover, Paul Larudee decided to jump overboard and evade the commandos for a while as his expression of resistance, and he managed so for over an hour.

Within about a half hour, or less, the commandos had taken full control of the boat. They rounded up all forty-six of us and made us sit on the top deck, in the heat of the sun, for a good portion of

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the eight-hour journey to Israel's Ashdod Port. What is more, they confiscated all of our property.

Could you please tell us your story about what happened during your captivity in Israel? Did you experience or witness any torture or abuse, either psychological or physical?

When we arrived at Ashdod, in the early afternoon, we were subjected to a number of interrogations and security checks. The security concerns of the port personnel and later of the prison officials reminded me of a determination made by the Reut Institute, an Israeli think tank, that activists like me posed an existential threat to Israel. My experience with the Israelis during the three days that I was held captive proved that they were very serious indeed.

The first interrogator I met in Ashdod told me that I was in violation of Israeli law by breaching the "Security Zone". I asked and insisted him to quote the actual law and to provide a reference to me. He finally admitted that there was no such law. What he was really saying to me was that Israel was the law where I was sitting now, and didn't have to answer to anyone, least of all to me.

During interrogation they told me that, should I admit to violating Israeli law—to entering Israel illegally—then I could go home, at Israel's expense, immediately. I requested to see an attorney. The interrogator told me that I would have to go to prison before I would be able to talk to an attorney. This was another of many violations of international law that we would be subject to throughout our experience with the Israeli authorities.

When we arrived at a prison in Beersheba, in the Negev Desert, we were again subjected to security check after security check. We were also interrogated a couple more times, in an effort to establish some links with Hamas or even al-Qaeda. Such abusive treatment that we all received can only be explained by the authorities' determination to teach all of us, through collective punishment, a lesson to never again consider doing what we did. This, in fact, is the best



Passengers linking arms together to prevent the entrance of the Israeli soldiers into the wheelhouse (Gene St. Onge is the third one from the left)

explanation for why we were attacked, robbed, and harshly treated, both physically and emotionally, throughout the ordeal.

We weren't allowed to sleep very soundly at all, since there would be messages blasted in Hebrew on speakers located within each cell, and also periodic head counts, where the guard on duty would come to each cell and ask for our names. This was clearly a pointless exercise but part of the collective punishment.

When we insistently demanded to be allowed to contact our families, attorneys and our consulate officials, the local governor promised to allow the phone calls soon, but this was a lie, too... Since the international pressure was having an effect, things began to change dramatically. They allowed us to meet the consulate representatives and attorneys, and after our meetings with them the first and last time they gave us prepared meal, apparently with the intention of showing how well we were being treated by the prison officials.

By the way on the second day of our imprisonment, I heard about the beatings, torture and generally humiliating treatment that the Turks on the *Mavi Marmara* had to endure at the hands of the commandos. I later learned that the nine people recorded dead were shot a total of thirty-one times in the head and chest. This confirmed what I suspected from the beginning—that the Turks were singled out, that they were shot at, with live ammunition, before the commandos landed on the ship, and that those killed were executed in cold blood.

Also a number of Arab and Turkish Flotilla participants were robbed at gunpoint by the commandos. To this day, none of estimated one million dollars worth of valuables confiscated by the

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commandos from the Flotilla participants has been returned to its rightful owners!

What about the way back to Turkey?

At about 3:00 a.m. they started to clear us, country by country, for deportation. But we were never told what was happening or going to happen with us... Once we reached the airport, the display of security was much worse than the one in Ashdod. There Paul Larudee was beaten along with a number of others, for refusing to be sent to Istanbul with the rest of us, after there had been agreement to have him sent to Athens.

We began to board the three jumbo jets, donated by Turkish Airlines, in groups. As each group entered, it was given a hero's welcome. Some of the Turks were heavily bandaged or were in wheelchairs, the result of beatings by the Israeli guards. We had to wait to takeoff since there was a hostage crisis to be resolved. We heard that the Turkish government insisted upon the release of all Flotilla passengers and made clear that Israel's refusing to release them would be considered an act of war. For about twelve hours later Israel finally agreed to let them leave. Finally, we were on our way to Istanbul and freedom!

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?

I would have to say that I will never forget the great people I met, both on the boat and in prison, during the entire experience. They were inspiring to me so much, so that, once we were released from prison I felt a certain sadness, even cried, knowing that I would likely never see most, or maybe all, of them again. Of course, I will never forget the commando raid on our boat with the pandemonium that ensued. That part of the adventure still seems somewhat surreal to me.

THE FREEDOM FLOTILLA INCREASED PUBLIC AWARENESS OF ISRAEL'S ROLE IN THE OCCUPATION.

ISRAEL HAS LOST ITS INFLUENCE IN WORLD AFFAIRS, AND IS INCREASINGLY BEING VIEWED AS A "ROGUE STATE". IT SHOWED TO THE PALESTINIANS THAT THERE ARE MANY PEOPLE AROUND THE WORLD THAT CARE ABOUT THEM—EVEN TO THE EXTENT OF RISKING THEIR LIVES.

How was the atmosphere when you returned to your country? How did people react to your involvement, and also to the Israeli attack on the Freedom Flotilla?

My country greeted me and my cohorts very coldly. Clearly, my government felt it was put in a very uncomfortable position by our involvement. Those that did speak out about us individually did not show support. Rather, they threatened to prosecute us for treasonous activities under our so-called Patriot Act (for indirectly assisting a "terrorist organization", Hamas), and that threat still remains. The mainstream media never has been interested in a serious discussion about the cause of the Palestinian peoples' suffering, and as for the Flotilla story, they reported Israel's version of the events trying to leave the general public completely misinformed.

On the other hand, people, in general, reacted very positively to what I had done, and were quite aware of the Israel's crimes against the passengers on the *Mavi Marmara*—especially with regard to the deaths of the nine Turks. And even those who didn't particularly agree with the mission, told me that they were relieved that I came back unharmed.

How was the attitude of your government to the American citizens that joined the Flotilla?

Our government clearly has shown no interest in fighting for our interests. Although we are American citizens who were illegally kidnapped on the high seas, illegally held captive in a foreign prison, robbed of our personal valuables, and illegally denied access to counsel and to our families, the U.S. government will not pursue justice for us.

On the second day in prison, the consulate officials were allowed to visit us due to international pressure. At first, I was so relieved to see my official, thinking that she would rescue us from this terrible situation. But then I noticed that she was none too pleased with this particular assignment and seemed disinterested in our story. When

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I complained, she replied that she did not know international law, and added that 52 miles [84 kilometers] away from shore is close enough to fire a rocket! I was shocked. From that point on, I knew that I could not count on my own government for help, and my heart sunk.

We were rescued by the Turks and, at their expense, flew to Istanbul. Then we were put up in a first class hotel, with meals, for a reasonable time for us to recuperate. Finally, they did pay for our flight home... When we had arrived in Istanbul, there were consulate officials from all the other countries waiting, but none from the U.S.! The Israel lobby's influence on our Middle East policy was evident everywhere we went. The message was very clear—you did this on your own, against our wishes, so now you can fend for yourselves. Good luck!

When I, with my fellow Flotilla mate Janet Kobren, landed in Chicago to change flights, suddenly we discovered we were on a watch list because we had been deported by the U.S.' close ally, Israel. As such, we had to be searched and interrogated to determine what, if any, links we may have had to any terrorist organization. To this day, it has been very difficult for me to accept.

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

I would definitely like to join another mission to Gaza, but fear that I won't be able to afford the time nor the expenses for the next one planned right now for May 2011.

Do you think the Freedom Flotilla was successful? What are the most important achievements?

The Flotilla was a success because it increased public awareness of Israel's role in the Occupation tremendously. In my country, I feel that it finally laid to rest the fantasy of Israel as a poor and defenseless victim surrounded by tens of millions of anti-Semitic Ar-



In a meeting of solidarity with the Egyptian and Tunisian people held in the U.S. on 5 February 2011, Gene St. Onge is carrying a photograph of a Palestinian family (Children in the photograph are holding a photograph of Rachel Corrie, who lost her life under an Israeli bulldozer while trying to protect the Palestinians) (Photo by Güler Özgenç)

abs bent on its destruction. People—even those that still support the notion of an all-Jewish state—know better at this point. Along with this, the Flotilla experience also gave the BDS Movement (Boycott-Divest-Sanction) a huge boost in the world. Many that were either not knowledgeable about the situation, or for some reason had not supported such actions before, jumped on board once the Israelis attacked our boats.

Israel's formal ties with Turkey have to a large extent ended, leaving it without a powerful Muslim ally in the world. The geopolitical implications of such a split will be felt for quite some time to come. Israel has lost a great deal of its influence in world affairs, and is increasingly being viewed as a “rogue state”.

The pressure to end the embargo of Gaza led to an easing of restrictions by Israel. However, many critical items, like construction materials and medicine, are still forbidden. Finally, the Flotilla was a success in showing the Palestinians that there still are many people around the world that really care about them—even to the extent of risking their lives. This, in the end, may be the greatest achievement of the Flotilla.

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

This is hard to answer for me, because I don't have the luxury of constantly demonizing Israel. You see, my wife, who supported me wholeheartedly during the mission, is Jewish and, despite all its crimes, Israel is still important to her. Furthermore, I know that carrying anger around constantly is burdensome and, in the end, self-defeating. So, while I had trouble getting over my anger at the Israelis and Israel, particularly after the way I was treated, I continue to make an effort to see Israel and its people as increasingly frightened and desperate. Understanding Israel and Israeli Jews this way allows me to have sympathy and to sincerely hope for their salvation from the curse of the Occupation as much as I pray for that for the Palestinians. Of course, this doesn't lessen my resolve to pressure Israel as much as possible, in any way possible, to liberate the Palestinians. But, as we do so, we should remember that Israelis are people too, with the same fears and dreams as the rest of us.

Are you hopeful of the ongoing international legal proceedings?

No, I don't have much hope for legal proceedings, at least ones that will secure any sort of justice for us. As far as I'm concerned, however, my justice will be served when the Palestinian people's justice is served.

What do you think about the IHH?

Although I am not a Muslim—nor am I religious at all—I have nothing but the highest respect for the IHH, not only for what the organization has done for me and for the Palestinian people, but for what it has done as a humanitarian agency worldwide. I continue to be very grateful to the IHH for rescuing me (and my friends on the Flotilla) from Israeli prison, treating me so well in Istanbul and flying me home in business class, at its expense. I wish nothing but the best for the IHH in the future. Also I only wish my own government was just as grateful for what we attempted to do, instead of being so horribly tied to Israel through its lobby here in the U.S.

What does the *Mavi Marmara* mean to you?

The *Mavi Marmara* will always be a symbol of the tragedy of the Israeli Occupation. But it will also remain a symbol of the hope that refuses to die, and that the Occupation and its consequent suffering will, one day, come to an end.