

OUR GLOBAL GRASSROOTS CONSTITUTED A THREAT TO ISRAEL'S ENTIRE COLONIAL, APARTHEID PROJECT

Huwaida Arraf

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Huwaida Arraf (1976) is a Palestinian with American and Israeli citizenship. She received her Bachelor's degrees in Political Science, Arabic, and Hebrew and Judaic Studies from the University of Michigan, and her Juris Doctor from the American University Washington College of Law, where she focused her studies on international human rights and humanitarian law. In 2001, she co-founded the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), which has twice been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. She is co-author of the book *Peace under Fire: Israel, Palestine, and the International Solidarity Movement*.

From 2007-2008, Huwaida Arraf taught in a human rights law clinic at Al-Quds University in Jerusalem, the first legal clinic in the Arab World. She was one of the initiators and organizers of a delegation of American lawyers to Gaza in February 2009, and co-authored the report on their findings, *Onslaught: Israel's Attack on Gaza and the Rule of Law*. She is currently the Chairperson of the Free Gaza Movement. Since August 2008, she led five successful sea voyages to the Gaza Strip, and was one of the organizers of the Gaza Freedom Flotilla.

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

I was part of the first efforts to break the sea blockade on Gaza back in 2008. I was on the two small fishing boats (“the Free Gaza” and “the Liberty”) that sailed into Gaza’s port on August 23, 2008—the first international boats to do so in forty-one years. It was a very important show of power of the people to confront injustice. That one success did not break the siege however, so we promised the people of Gaza that we would repeat our sail over and over until we opened a sea route to Gaza, effectively breaking the siege. We managed to successfully reach Gaza by boat again four more times between August and December 2008. Then two days after Israel began bombarding Gaza, commencing a 22-day military campaign that killed over 1400 Palestinians, we—the Free Gaza Movement—tried to sail an emergency mission to Gaza, carrying with us medical supplies, doctors and journalists. In the middle of the night on December 30, 2008, an Israeli warship rammed our small vessel (“the Dignity”) in international waters causing significant damage. We didn’t reach Gaza. We tried again two weeks later, and the Israeli warships nearly caused our boat (“the Spirit of Humanity”) to capsize, and again we didn’t reach Gaza. In June 2009, we tried a third time to sail to Gaza, this time aiming to bring in construction supplies so the people of Gaza could rebuild their homes, businesses and institutions after Israel’s brutal December 2008-January 2009 assault. The Israeli Navy attacked us and commandeered our vessel (“the Spirit of Humanity”) arresting everyone on board. After being violently intercepted by the Israeli Navy three times, we decided that we needed to escalate. Instead of sending one or two small boats, we would need to send a flotilla. So, from July 2009 we started working to build this flotilla. When the IHH learned of what we were trying to do, they pledged their support.

To me, the Freedom Flotilla is more than just about Gaza; it’s about the power and responsibility of the global civil society to collectively organize and to stand up to brutal regimes. It’s about what average civilians can do to defend freedom and human rights when our governments are shamefully silent.

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 was optimistic that we would make it to Gaza, but we did prepare for the possibility of attack by reviewing different scenarios. Israel's threats were not new; Israeli leaders had threatened us before in attempts to intimidate us and get us to back down, and I did not think that this was any different. While I did not underestimate the violence that could be used against us, I believed that we were protected by the public and high profile nature of our action, by all of the journalists we had on board, and by the fact that Israeli leaders knew that the Freedom Flotilla was a purely civilian effort and that we did not constitute any kind of threat to Israel's "security". We did however constitute a threat to the legitimacy of Israel's closure on Gaza, as well as its ongoing abuses of the Palestinian people as a whole under the pretext of "security". Undoubtedly, the massive nature of our global grassroots also constituted a threat to Israel's entire colonial, apartheid project.

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

I was on a small boat—the Challenger 1. We were only seventeen on our boat including the captain and crew; we had trained together and therefore were comfortable with and trusted each other. We had reviewed scenarios of how we might try to defend our boats, and therefore we were as prepared as we could be for what might happen. For this reason, we were calm and as relaxed as we could be considering the situation that we were in.

Could you please tell us what happened during the Israeli attack on the Flotilla? I would like to learn your personal experiences and what you witnessed.

At a little before midnight on Sunday, May 30 into Monday, May 31, the Israeli Navy began communicating with the Freedom Flotilla. I was called to the wheelhouse to monitor and respond on behalf of our vessel, as well as the Freedom Flotilla, since in previous missions undertaken by the Free Gaza Movement I have had the responsibility of communicating our political and legal position to the Israeli Navy. As such, I was at the VHF radio the entire time there was communication between the Israeli Navy and our vessels.

After asking the routine questions, the Israeli Navy began issuing a warning. I responded on behalf of the Freedom Flotilla, stating that we were unarmed civilians aboard six vessels carrying only

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humanitarian aid headed for the Gaza Strip. I asserted that we do not constitute a threat to Israel, and therefore they should refrain from using any violence against us. I repeated this a few times, and then the Israeli Navy stopped calling us at approximately 1:00 or 1:30 a.m.

Sometime between 4:00 and 4:30 a.m., one of the crew who was on the top deck of Challenger 1 on watch, signaled to us that the Israeli forces were approaching. We had our life jackets on and went out onto the deck. The Challenger 1 was traveling alongside (to the left of) the *Mavi Marmara* at a distance of maybe 100 meters. I saw a zodiac filled with soldiers come up along the left side of the *Mavi Marmara*. I heard at least one explosion (I believe a sound bomb), followed by gunfire. Then I noticed a helicopter over the *Mavi Marmara*. Some people on the top deck of the *Mavi Marmara* had water hoses and were aiming at the soldiers in the zodiac below. All these took place before Israeli commandos boarded the *Mavi Marmara*, and that's all I was able to witness, as our boat took off, trying to prevent or at least delay the boarding of our boat.

After about ten minutes of trying to outrun the zodiac(s) chasing us, we were overtaken. I moved towards the side-rear of the boat where the soldiers were approaching to come on board. There must have been at least ten commandos in the zodiac, all wearing green uniforms and black face masks which were never removed or lifted even after our boat was taken over.

I put my hands out and yelled to the soldiers, "Ours is an American vessel; we are unarmed; stay away!" A sound bomb was thrown aboard, creating a bit of a startle. Masked and armed soldiers jumped on board. I was knocked down. I looked over at Grieta Deknopper (from Belgium), who was also down, had blood all over her face. I yelled, "Get off of our boat; stop your violence; get off of our boat!" A soldier tried to open the sliding glass door that led to the inside of the boat, but we had locked it. He used his boot to shatter the glass.



Huwaida Arraf on the Mavi Marmara

I scrambled up to block the ladder that led to the fly bridge, where the captain was steering the boat. I was yanked away from the ladder and wrestled down again. At this time I took notice of the M16 guns that the soldiers were carrying. I worried for a split second that during the melee, their guns might go off, and at that point, I was directly under the nozzle of one of the guns.

I tried to make my way (crawling) back to the ladder at which point a soldier grabbed me, bashed my head against the deck of the boat, and proceeded to step on my head, pressing so hard that I began to scream. My hands were being twisted behind my back in order to cuff them. As a soldier was putting plastic cuffs on my hands, another soldier was searching my pockets. I was dragged by soldiers to the front end of the boat and pinned down, then a sack was placed over my head. I began screaming, "I can't breathe!" but the soldiers wouldn't listen. After about ten or fifteen minutes, with two of my friends' request, the soldiers relented; took the sack off my head and cut off my cuffs. I joined the rest of my friends inside the boat.

You were all taken captive on the boat, and then forced to sail to Ashdod Port. Could you please tell us your story about what happened in Israel?

When we arrived to the port we were all asked to get off the boat "nicely". Most of us refused, asserting that we had been kidnapped (the journalists cooperated). We were told that if we did not go nicely, we would go with force. One soldier took out his taser, but

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another soldier subdued him. Those of us that refused to leave the boat were carried off by our hands and feet. I was the last one to be carried off the boat and was subsequently separated from everyone else. I'm not sure if I was saved for the last, because the soldiers knew who I was (that I was one of the organizers of the Flotilla and had been organizing nonviolent, direct actions against the occupation for years) or not? In any case, my Israeli citizenship meant that I would be handled differently from the others. Israel could not deport me as they were going to do with everyone else; they would either have to charge me with an offense and prosecute, or release me.

Even though it was obvious that I was in pain and had difficulty in walking, I was marched from one place to another, and passed from one police officer to another. I refused to answer any questions but repeatedly asked for a lawyer and a chance to call the U.S. Embassy. I was not allowed either. At one point I was put in a room with individuals I believe to be of Shin Bet. After about an hour, I was given over to another set of officers who led me outside and told me that I was being released. I believe this was around 5:30 or 6:00 p.m. I told the police officers that I needed my belongings before I left, because I did not have anything—no money, no phones to call anyone, nothing. I was told that I could not take my things. At this point I sat on the ground refusing to go.

Two male officers picked me up and proceeded to try to shove me into a police van. One officer, from inside the van, pulled me in by my hair, then he elbowed me in the left jaw, and hit me across the face, knocking out one of my contact lenses. I was in a lot of pain and began screaming, demanding a doctor, but was refused. Four officers were in the van with me. As they drove out of the port, they proceeded to verbally assault me. At some point they stopped the van, opened the left door and pushed me out. I remember being sprawled across the ground, and then the next thing I knew a medic was opening my eyelids and I was being lifted onto a stretcher. I was in a lot of physical pain, and taken to a hospital in Ashkelon.

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Then after 1:00 a.m. on Tuesday, June 1, I walked away the police station, and waited there until morning for someone to come and help me. At noon, someone drove me to Ashdod Port, but I was not permitted to enter. The driver relayed to me that everyone associated with the Flotilla had been transferred and I could not go into the port. At this point I consented to be driven to the bus station where I caught a bus to Jerusalem, then Ramallah. The International Solidarity Movement gave me a phone so that I could be in touch with the media. Since everyone else, except for Member of *Knesset* Haneen Zoabi, was still detained, I had to do what I could to get accurate information out and counter Israel's propaganda. What Israel had done was confiscating all of our recording equipment, and then keeping us in detention and incommunicado for the first critical hours and days so that they could dominate the media with their version of what happened.

I stayed in Palestine for a while after the Flotilla attack, until I started traveling to work on organizing Freedom Flotilla II. I am not banned from Palestine like almost all of the others that were part of the Flotilla because of the fact that I have Israeli citizenship. I am harassed by the Israeli authorities every time I leave or enter the country, but that is something I have long ago become accustomed to.

You know, Israel claims that only passengers ("terrorists") on the *Mavi Marmara* resisted while people on other boats did not resist at all but complied. As a passenger of Challenger 1, what do you think about that?

In an attempt to deflect criticism from their illegal attack on the Freedom Flotilla, and to cover the fact that Israeli forces murdered nine unarmed human rights workers, Israeli officials tried to draw a distinction between the *Mavi Marmara* and the other six vessels that made up the Freedom Flotilla. They played on the Islamophobia that plagues much of the Western world in order to say that there were

WE WERE AND ARE POLITICALLY MOTIVATED. WE ARE NOT INTERESTED IN SIMPLY DELIVERING AID, BUT AIM TO END THE POLICIES THAT LEAVE PALESTINIANS IN NEED OF AID. THE PALESTINIANS WANT THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS RESPECTED SO THAT THEY CAN WORK AND PROVIDE FOR THEIR FAMILIES, AND LEAD A LIFE WITH DIGNITY.

Muslim “terrorists” on the *Mavi Marmara*. The main difference between the *Mavi Marmara* and the other vessels that comprised the Flotilla is the size of it. The *Mavi Marmara* was the largest passenger vessel in the Flotilla, carrying 577 of the more than 700 volunteers. As such, that vessel had more Muslims on it than the others. However, we were all part of one effort, with one plan.

The plan for all the vessels was to resist attack by the Israeli Navy. We planned to use various forms of nonviolent resistance, and we did. Some people on the *Mavi Marmara* used sticks and poles, which we had not planned on doing. However, this was a small number of people, and I can never blame them for trying to defend themselves in the face of a full military assault by one of the most powerful militaries in the world. Israel launched its attack on us in a way calculated to cause the greatest level of fear, chaos and confusion in people. Israeli forces attacked us at approximately 4:00 in the morning when it was still dark, coming up along the ships shooting incessantly while their military helicopters hovered above. We were still approximately ten hours away from Gaza. They could have waited a few hours until daylight. They could have approached in a different manner, communicating with the people on the vessels with their voices instead of their weapons. They didn’t do these but wanted to terrify the people. When you do this, you cannot always predict how people will act.

We were only seventeen on the Challenger 1 but we used our bodies to try to keep Israeli commandos from taking over our vessel. We put up as much resistance as we could, but Israeli commandos with their guns, tasers, sound bombs and attack dog beat us down until they were in control of our boat.

There were injuries on all the vessels. Bleeding and bruising on our vessel, and gunshot wounds and broken bones on some of the other vessels. The *Mavi Marmara* bore the brunt of Israel’s assault, but Israeli forces used violence on all of our vessels.



Huwaida Arraf on the boat, the Humanity, that set sail for Gaza in 2008

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

Unfortunately the Flotilla was not my first direct exposure to the Israeli aggression. I have lived in the West Bank for many years, especially during the period of the Second Intifada, and have seen Israeli soldiers shoot at unarmed civilians, raid Palestinian homes, demolish homes and other buildings, massively detain Palestinians and hold them in inhumane conditions, purposely abuse and terrify Palestinian children, and the list goes on.

Israel is a modern-day colonial, apartheid state. For the purpose of creating and maintaining a Jewish state, Israel has razed and burned Palestinian villages, and exiled hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. It continues to steal Palestinian land and resources, and when Palestinians resist—whether using arms or nonviolent resistance—Israeli forces attack, arrest, maim and kill. Israel tries to justify its policies using the guise of “security”, and has sadly convinced most of the Israeli people that Palestinians just hate Jews, despite the fact that you cannot steal from and continue to oppress an entire people, and expect them to accept this. If Israel is truly interested in its security, it should end the occupation, and its racist and colonial policies.

Israel also claims that the activists on the Freedom Flotilla were politically motivated, and that there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza since they have already been sending food, medicine and other humanitarian needs. As a person who went to Gaza before, what do you think about it?

The United Nations Human Rights Council’s Fact Finding Mission concluded that a humanitarian crisis did exist in Gaza at the time

AFTER THE FLOTILLA ATTACK, THE MAJORITY OF THE ISRAELIS BECAME MORE IRRATIONAL AND FASCIST, AND THOUSANDS OF THEM DEMONSTRATED CALLING FOR DEATH TO ARABS AND DOWN WITH TURKEY; WHEREAS THE PALESTINIANS WERE EXTREMELY SUPPORTIVE OF OUR FLOTILLA, AND HAPPY TO SEE A STRONG GLOBAL CIVILIAN FRONT STANDING UP TO ISRAEL.

our Flotilla set sail. Israel has a very sophisticated, heavily funded propaganda machine working to whitewash and justify its illegal policies. All one has to do is to look at reports from the United Nations and the World Health Organization regarding Gaza to understand the severity of the situation there. It's true that people are not dying of starvation, but the situation has severely deteriorated as a direct result of Israel's near hermetic closure. There has been a steep rise in the rate of unemployment, malnutrition, and aid dependency among the people. International aid organizations have warned of a possible outbreak of water-borne diseases because Israel does not let Gaza import the materials they need to fix their sewage system or treat their water. Only 5-10% of the water in Gaza meets the minimum global health standard. Gaza barely has an economy as Israel has destroyed the basis for an economy in Gaza, and the list goes on.

People being forced to live on humanitarian aid is nothing to stay silent about. In that sense, Israel is right. The organizers of the Freedom Flotilla were and are politically motivated—we are not interested in simply delivering aid and contributing to a cycle of aid dependency (a situation that Israel is more than content with); we aim to end the policies that leave Palestinians in need of aid. Palestinians do not want to live on handouts from the global community. We, as Palestinians, want our human rights respected so that we can work and provide for our families, and lead a life with dignity.

**How was the atmosphere when you returned to your country?
How did people react to the Israeli attack on the Freedom Flotilla?**

This is a difficult question for me to answer because I am a Palestinian with American and Israeli citizenship. After the Freedom Flotilla, I was in Palestine. The Palestinian people in the West Bank were extremely supportive of our efforts. They were happy to see a strong global civilian front standing up to Israel. They were also thrilled with the strong stance that Turkey took against Israel. Eve-

rywhere I went in Ramallah I saw the Turkish flag flying side by side with the Palestinian flag.

Since the attack on the Flotilla, I have also spoken at different venues in different states in the U.S. Most people saw Israel's brutal attack on the Flotilla and thought that was wrong. However, many also fell for Israel's misinformation—believing that we attacked the Israeli soldiers and this was the reason for the casualties we suffered. I explain that Israel was the initial aggressor, and so we cannot blame the individuals that tried to defend themselves from the violence of the Israeli commandos. Also, we cannot let our reaction to Israel's assault deter us from the bigger issue—the illegality of Israel's closure on Gaza and its ongoing colonial apartheid policies throughout Occupied Palestine. This is the root cause of the violence.

If we are ever to see a better situation in the region for all people, we have to unite to force a change. Collectively we have to stand up to illegal, unjust and immoral policies, and this is what the Freedom Flotilla is. The Flotilla represents the power of international civil society to act in defense of freedom and human rights. And I believe that together we are stronger than all of Israel's weapons.

As far as Israeli society is concerned, unfortunately it seems that the majority has become more irrational and fascist. After the attack on the Flotilla, we saw thousands of Israelis demonstrating calling for death to Arabs and down with Turkey. Sadly, instead of recognizing how their government's actions are contributing to Israel's isolation in the world, most Israelis choose to believe that everyone is against them because they are Jews. This victim mentality irrationally justifies extreme policies aimed at maintaining ethnic superiority. History has shown that such a regime cannot last.

Notwithstanding the above, there are Israelis that see past their government's propaganda and are opposed to Israel's ongoing occupation, discrimination and ethnic cleansing policies. These Israelis are in the occupied West Bank everyday standing with Palestinians against the confiscation of their land, the uprooting of their trees, the building of the wall, the demolition of their homes, the violence of the settlers, the expansion of settlements, etc. It is with these Israelis that we work for a better future.

Are you hopeful of the ongoing international legal proceedings?

Even though I am a lawyer and I believe in seeking legal remedies, I realize that in the short term, we might not succeed in the

courts. Nevertheless, we have to keep trying. We have to pursue every avenue we can in our struggle. We can use legal cases to educate people and to mobilize the streets, and we can use the people in the streets to support our efforts in the courtroom. We may have setback in both along the way, but we don't give up. We must continue to look for creative ways to move forward... I believe that eventually Israeli war criminals will face justice, whether in the courtroom or in another public forum.

What does the *Mavi Marmara* mean to you?

From the grassroots efforts that procured such a ship to the diversity of people on board, the *Mavi Marmara*, as the other six vessels in the Freedom Flotilla, represents the power of global civil society to stand up to tyranny and injustice. I believe that the *Mavi Marmara* is more powerful than the force of the entire Israeli Navy.