

**CREATIVE AND NONVOILENT ACTIONS ARE
THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY OF CREATING CHANGE**

Iara Lee

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Iara Lee is a Brazilian of Korean descent who lives in the U.S.A. She is an activist, filmmaker, and founder of the Caipirinha Foundation – an organization that promotes global solidarity and supports peace with justice projects. She has directed short and feature-length documentaries including *Synthetic Pleasures*, *Modulations*, *Architettura*, and *Beneath the Borqa*.

She is currently working on a variety of initiatives, grouped under the umbrella of CulturesOfResistance.org – an activist network that brings together artists and changemakers from around the world. She has dedicated herself to the pursuit of a just peace in the MENA region (Middle East & North Africa), and is an enthusiastic supporter of those initiatives which strengthen adherence to international law in enforcing human rights.

Her crew (Srdjan Stojiljkovic) recorded the events on the *Mavi Marmara*, and was able to successfully hide and retain most of the raid footage. Iara later released the footage to the world.

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

I have long been a supporter of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. However, it was my time in southern Lebanon in 2006, and witnessing the carnage brought by the Israeli military there that spurred me to take more direct action about issues in the region. I believe that creative and nonviolent actions are the most effective way of creating change—in this case of altering Israeli policy. I felt the Gaza Freedom Flotilla was an ideal opportunity to take that type of action.

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.

Some of the previous efforts to break the siege had been attacked by the Israeli military. An Israeli naval vessel had rammed a Free Gaza ship a couple of years ago. I remember reading the passengers from that vessel feared for their lives. I think everyone taking part in the Flotilla knew that there was potential for an attack, but not murder, execution style. What took most of us by surprise was the fact that the attack occurred 4:00 a.m., deep in international waters, with disproportionate force, and with total lack of regard for human life and law.

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

From the time of boarding to the hours leading up to the attack, there was a feeling of hope and pride aboard the *Mavi Marmara*. Everyone felt very strongly about her or his reasons for being aboard, and we all felt the unison in the commitment to justice. Prior to the attack people were talking, sleeping, praying or working on their computers. After commandos invaded the ship, you would see men running about, the dead and wounded being hurried to the lower decks, away from Israeli gunfire, and groups of men huddling together with whatever makeshift items they could find, including broom handles, pipes, and sticks.

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

In the pre-dawn hours of May 31, we knew that there would be some sort of confrontation. When it was clear that Israeli comman-



Iara Lee at a press conference on the Mavi Marmara

dos were going to board the ship, most of the ship's passengers were ordered to go to lower deck, which I did. Just before that we heard shots being fired on deck; knowing that the ship had undergone a thorough inspection before our departure, I realized that it must be my fellow passengers who were being shot at. At first I assumed the guns were loaded with rubber bullets or were being fired into the air, but soon I saw several bloody bodies being carried down below, some of whom appeared to have been shot in the head.

We all watch the video footage that you recorded during the attack. How did you manage to take the video footage out of the ship?

Before the Israeli commandos boarded our ship, I had asked my cameraman [Srdjan Stojiljković] to switch to small SD cards since I could anticipate that the Israeli Navy would confiscate our gear, hard drives, memory cards... He did, and to avoid getting the SD cards taken, he hid them behind the stitches of his underwear. In case they discovered SD cards, I instructed him to tell them that he was requested by me to hide them, and that he was just doing his job. Since Israelis at the jail facility had to body search hundreds of people and were focusing more on Muslim men with long beards, my white cameraman was searched in a less meticulous manner, and Israelis did not detect the hidden SD cards.

How was the atmosphere when you returned to your country? How did people react to your participation to the Flotilla?

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When I returned to the United States, I experienced the predictable contempt from ardent supporters of the Israeli government. However, there was also a flood of attention to the footage that we had smuggled, not only from solidarity groups but also from totally impartial organizations. The United Nations Correspondents Association invited me to release my footage at a press conference at the UN. The Israeli delegation groundlessly attacked the Association for their commitment to showing our raw footage and question&answer session with the reporters in attendance.

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

Based on the effectiveness of the Gaza Freedom Flotilla, I believe that only more actions from committed, organized social justice defenders will bring an end to the siege of Gaza. My solidarity on this issue certainly continues. This coming week [March 12] I am jumping for Gaza, a skydive fundraising for the Irish Ship to Gaza. Since we don't use weapons, we need to use extra creativity.

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?

Because of the lethal attack that left nine of my fellow passengers dead, the Freedom Flotilla brought an unprecedented wave of condemnation from the international community against the Israeli government. Despite all of the evidence that reputable organizations had provided long before, the Flotilla attack was the first time many people heard about the horrible truth of Israel's blockade of Gaza. In response to pressure, the Israeli government even had to slightly loosen its blockade policy. Because of the attention it directed to-



Iara Lee with the footage of attack (Israeli commandos on a zodiac boat) that her cameraman recorded

ward the human rights crisis in Gaza, the Flotilla proved to be an enormously effective act of nonviolent protest, even acknowledged by Hamas that we raised more awareness about the Palestinian plight with our Gaza Freedom Flotilla than Hamas with their rockets in retaliation for Israeli missiles.

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

Israel is run by murderous, intractable and illegal leaders. We must implement international law so that no governor feels entitled to be above the law, like Israel does and gets away with it.

Are you hopeful of the ongoing international legal proceedings?

I am very supportive of international legal attempts to hold Israeli officials—and those of any other nation—accountable for their actions. As the United Nations Human Rights Commission report details, the Israeli Navy broke “international humanitarian and human rights law”. The same report concludes that the blockade of Gaza is “unlawful”. The legal grounds for prosecution are there. In the end, it comes down to whether prominent officials from countries like the United States and Israel are accountable before international law, as are officials from other nations. Having success in the courts will be difficult, but I am glad that legal teams are persevering. We have been supporting the legal team in the United Kingdom, under the direction of Daniel Machover.

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What do you think about the media smear against the IHH?

I think that the slander of the IHH, particularly in the United States and Israeli media, was truly irresponsible. In response to baseless accusations, in which the IHH was called a terrorist organization, I wrote an opinion piece at *the Huffington Post* to try to set the record straight (see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/iara-lee/slandering-the-good-guys_b_649604.html). I stand proudly behind IHH's work. Basically, I think their ability to access regions that other NGOs cannot reach is of great importance. I think we should approach a media smear against the IHH just the same as an attack on any other respectable humanitarian group, no matter where they are from or whom they assist. Anyone who evaluates the IHH based on their record in the field knows that their actions speak for themselves.

What does the *Mavi Marmara* mean to you?

The *Mavi Marmara* was a terrifying personal experience. Seeing bodies carried past me that had been shot from close range and who ended up dying was horrific. Nearly as awful were the subsequent arguments that blamed the unarmed passengers for the deaths of nine fellow activists. Nevertheless, the *Mavi Marmara* for me will always be a symbol of effective nonviolent resistance.