

**MAVI MARMARA AND HER PASSENGERS
WILL FOREVER HAVE THEIR PLACE IN HISTORY
AS DEFENDERS OF HUMANITY AND JUSTICE**

Kenneth O'Keefe

3 April 2011 / The Gaza Strip



Kenneth O'Keefe (1969) is an American-born citizen who renounced his U.S. citizenship in March 2001, and now is a naturalised Irish, Palestinian and Hawaiian citizen. He also proclaims himself a "World Citizen". Ken O'Keefe is an entrepreneur, marine conservationist, human rights and peace activist. As an ex-U.S. Marine who served in the 1991 Gulf War and witnessed the abuse of power there, he founded the Truth Justice Peace Human Shield Action in Iraq in 2002 before the second Iraq War and led the human shield action there. In 2004, he founded P10K – a group of Westerners intended to act as international observers in the Occupied Palestinian territories and help bring peace with Israel. In 2009, he and Lauren Booth, sister-in-law of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, founded Aloha Palestine – a social enterprise to conduct safe trade with Palestinians in Gaza. In 2007, Ken O'Keefe joined the Free Gaza Movement, and in August 2008, served as a captain and first mate in the first sea voyage that break the siege of Gaza in forty-one years. In May 2010, he participated in the Gaza Freedom Flotilla, and disarmed two Israeli commandos while defending the *Mavi Marmara*.

Once you served in the United States Marine Corps, and even joined to the 1991 Gulf War. Then you became one of the most prominent peace and human rights activists in the world. I would like to learn your personal story, how and why this change happened.

Nothing was intentional in the beginning; I was just like the vast majority of Americans, I believed my nation was the “greatest nation” on Earth, and it was in that context I joined the Marine Corps at the age of nineteen. For me a shift occurred when I had an experience in the Marines that gave me my first real taste of injustice. When I ended up being punished quite severely for speaking out in an honourable way about abuse of power, it caused me to question not only the Marine Corps but America itself.

I made a serious effort to learn about America, and the world. I studied the environment, philosophy, history, anthropology, and politics; but rather than reading the propaganda fed to us in schools and universities, I sought out alternative views. As my exploration into alternative perspectives developed, I realised I had been lied to my whole life (as are all U.S. citizens), that in fact I had been indoctrinated, and made to be a dupe and a fool. This is the same basic process every decent American needs to face if they really want to know the truth.

Whereas most seem to fear the truth, I have found it extremely empowering. I have looked at not only the darkest of the dark in our world but also the tremendous beauty, and altogether I have been inspired to such a degree that I have moved beyond fear, and wish only what is best for my entire human family. I believe this is a natural evolution, anybody who seriously seeks the truth will conclude eventually that the world is full of illusions, and behind the charade, we are all one. What is good for you is good for me, and when we see each other as one human family, it compels you to act accordingly.

What kind of activities are you engaged in for the establishment of world peace?

I believe in direct action, intelligent and fearless direct action, so most of my activities involve such action. Recently we managed to get the first bag of cement into Gaza since the blockade began; we did so through Rafah Crossing without Israeli approval (<http://Tahrir4Gaza.net>). Currently all other materials have to come through the tunnels or be approved by Israel through Israel’s crossings. This bag of cement was symbolic, but it is also a prelude to bringing in a

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truckload of cement; the ultimate goal is to break the Mubarak era Egyptian blockade of Gaza, and have convoys loaded full of building materials.

I have been the managing director of Aloha Palestine C.I.C. which is a social enterprise that intends to replace charity with viable trade for Palestine, so the people can stop living on handouts, and exercise the beginning of self-determination. With a crippled economy like Gaza's, it is impossible to live a decent life, this must end; Aloha Palestine (<http://AlohaPalestine.com>) is all about speeding up that process.

I am also working with the Samouni family in Gaza, a family that has experienced pure hell at the hands of the Israelis during Operation Cast Lead. When a group of ninety-seven in one home blasted to bits by rockets and mortars, twenty-nine people of this family were killed – children lost their lives in front of parents, and parents lost their lives in front of children. What is more, ambulances were kept away from the blasted home, and so those alive were made to live and survive amongst the mutilated and dead for several days, and some died slowly over hours and even days under ruins. We have built a playground, laid the floor for a classroom, and planted an olive tree orchard; and now we are sending a bus through Turkey with everything to build a proper classroom/community centre on Samouni family land.

Before that I ended up leading the Road to Hope Convoy to Gaza [that departed London on 18 September, and was able to enter Gaza on 21 October 2010] in which we brought £500,000 of humanitarian aid to Gaza, along with thirty donated vehicles.

I was on the *Mavi Marmara* as well, and was also on the first Free Gaza Mission to Gaza [in August 2008] in which two boats managed to sail into Gaza for the first time in forty-one years. I also organized the Human Shield Action to Iraq in 2003.



Kenneth O'Keefe in a press conference at Rafah Border Crossing

Mostly however I am working on a project that truly intends to be world changing. I have not announced the plan yet, but it is unlike anything ever presented, and if we do carry out the plan, the world will be a much better place. I intend to announce this plan in the summer of 2011 (<http://1tjp.net>).

Now turning to our main subject, why did you join the Gaza Freedom Flotilla? What was your motivation?

As I have said, I believe in direct action, and in that interest, I sailed on the Free Gaza Mission in 2008, and we proved that it was possible to sail into Gaza despite Israeli threats. When I joined the Freedom Flotilla in 2010, I was very excited to be together with the Turks, and this experience lived up to my expectations. The Turks are a strong people, with admirable leadership; there was an extremely noticeable lack of political infighting and backbiting that is pervasive in the Western direct actions. It was a joy to be with people who clearly put the mission above themselves, and I shall treasure the experience despite the tragedy it involved.

As to my motivation, over the years I have developed much more than an interest in Palestine, and now the people of Palestine are family for me. My allegiance is to them, and I will do for them what I would do for my immediate family. Knowing the depth of injustice they continue to endure, it would be impossible to do any less. Additionally my wife is Palestinian, and my children have Palestinian blood; but they have never stepped foot in Palestine, and I intend to take them to a free and prosperous Palestine. My motivation for this is very strong indeed.

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.

Having been on the first mission by sea with the Free Gaza Movement in 2008, the Israelis said all the same things about us and our two small boats, as they did about the Freedom Flotilla in 2010. In 2008, they even said, all too ironically, that the Free Gaza participants were no better than “pirates” and they would treat us as such. Despite their threats, we never saw them and sailed into Gaza on 23 August 2008. It was one of the most joyous moments in all of our lives, but a day of joy that has still not yet led to the end of the blockade, and that of course is the ultimate goal.

On the case of Freedom Flotilla, I did not think the Israelis would be so stupid as to attack a ship like the *Mavi Marmara*, even though they said to do so. As we know, the Turks/IHH said what they would do, which was to defend the ship, and of course we did just that. But I was surprised in the end that we needed to do this, and to do it in international waters – no less shows just how insane our world is; if any other nation had done what Israel did, the punishment would have been swift and significant.

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

It was beautiful, uplifting, optimistic, inspiring. It was a real honour to be there, and the feeling of unity was as profound as any I have ever experienced.

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.

When it was evident that Israel would attack us, we got to work on defending the ship. The six person team I was with, was defending the stern. I could see that commandos were fast-roping onto the ship, and I knew this was a big problem. Shockingly, while I was moving about the ship before the commandos boarded, I saw the first man killed in the attack: the Turkish photographer Cevdet Kılıçlar, who was shot right between the eyes while taking a photograph of the helicopter above.

When I went to the deck just below where the commandos fast-roped down, one of the commandos was pushed over the rail from that deck to the one I was on. Literally the first commando fell right in front of me; I saw his 9mm pistol, and immediately went for it. While

I grabbed the pistol, another brother grabbed him, so I took the gun while he and some other brothers took the Israeli inside the ship.

I honestly did not know what to do with the pistol; I did not want to throw it into the sea, as I thought this was evidence of murder on the high seas. I had the pistol in my hands, pointed up at a diagonal angle in front of my chest – I reckon the only reason I am alive is either I am very lucky, or the Israelis had orders not to kill white people. Eventually I ejected the bullets from the weapon, hid the weapon, and gave the bullets (real bullets) to several other passengers/witnesses in order to be able to use it as evidence of murder in legal proceedings.

Not much after that I went back up towards the top deck, and almost the very same thing happened on the other side of the ship. Only this time the commando had a sub-machine gun, and had I been there a second or two later, myself and the other brother close to me would almost certainly be dead. This commando tried very hard to use his weapon, and while I pried his hands away from the weapon, the other brother managed to remove the weapon from him. Again other brothers came and took this Israeli inside.

I saw three commandos totally disarmed, totally at the mercy of the men on the ship; they looked like little frightened children who were about to get a beating from an abusive father. They had such fear in their eyes; you could tell that they thought they were going to die. They thought we would do to them what they had been doing to us. By this point the ship was awash with blood, I had seen dozens of wounded and dead in this time, it was clear we were in the middle of a mass murder, and the Israeli commandos we disarmed knew full well that their lives were in our hands. Of course we ultimately let them go, and I wonder just what they feel inside today, knowing that we set them free.

After the captain came over the public address system and announced, “The bridge has been taken over,” adding the order to stop resisting, we all stopped what we were doing, and started to see the blood and carnage to its full extent. I then saw five martyrs, one of whom died in his wife’s arms [Çetin Topçuoğlu].

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

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It was a long process of surrendering to the Israelis, and courageous pleas were made to have the seriously wounded treated by the Israelis. The medical people on our side were completely overwhelmed, so we were incapable of saving some of them since their wounds were simply way too serious. Some of these people did indeed die, needlessly.

Eventually we were all handcuffed and taken to the Port of Ashdod. This was a miserable trip. Every indignity you can imagine was performed by the Israelis, and the ones with darker skin and bigger beards that looked clearly to be Muslim got the worst of it. We were treated like animals. We were made to sit in stress positions in the sun all day, with little to no access to water and toilets for nearly twenty-four hours. Even one older man wet himself because he could not hold it any longer. Archbishop Hilarion Capucci was travelling with a doctor as he is very old and frail, but he was harshly separated from his doctor. Women were sexually harassed with invasive inspections of their bodies. We were lied to, denied access to the outside world, and also denied food and water. You name it, “the most moral army in the world”¹ acted like barbarians; and the police and other Israelis we came into contact with were all pretty much more of the same.

When we finally started surrendering, I carried some of the wounded to the Israeli side; at one point one of their dogs nearly bit me as its handler did not hold him back properly. Later I was kicked, kneed, and punched for no reason of any merit at all. I saw others treated this way when they, like me, were handcuffed and defenceless. It was true cowardice, the classic bully, picking on people who could not fight back.

I decided, just before we surrendered to the Israelis, that I would hide my Irish passport, and hand over my Palestinian passport

¹ The Israeli army defines itself as “the most moral army in the world”.



David Segarra, Alexandra Lort Phillips, Kenneth O'Keefe and Hassan Ghani

(which I was given for service on the Free Gaza mission in 2008) when we arrived in Israel. Indeed that's what I did, and I can tell you that when I handed over that passport, the Israelis who already did not like me hated me all the more. If I were of Palestinian blood, I have no doubt I would be well dead from the experience.

I did have one Israeli who escorted me through processing, and he was a decent young man; but when others saw him talk to me like a person, he was attacked by them and made to stop any communication with me.

I was later beaten in Ben Gurion Airport for verbally objecting to an American passenger [Paul Larudee] being abused in front of our eyes. I was hit with a baton over the head, and had blood streaming down my head, as I was being punched repeatedly in the ribs, and choked to the point of blacking out. I never in all this lifted a finger or threatened any of these cowards. Although I was brought to the airport along with everyone else to fly back to Turkey, I had a concussion from the blow I took to the head, also was in great pain from blows I took to my ribs, and my voice was significantly changed from the choking. So they must have decided to keep me in Israel rather than fly me back in that state. But this was fine with me since I did not want to go; I wanted to face a judge, and get what we had experienced on record in the Israeli [legal] system as well. As far as I know, I was the last one to be deported aside from the seriously wounded.



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I was later beaten in the middle of the night in my cell; it was after the second beating that I decided that I would not wash the blood off of myself.

I, like everyone else, had all of my valuable personal items stolen; this included a laptop computer, video and still camera with valuable lenses. Of course in the big picture this is nothing, but it reveals that the Israelis are not only murderers but also thieves.

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 will always remember those minutes that I went all over the ship with an Israeli commando's 9mm pistol in my hand, trying to find the right person to give it to for safekeeping until it would be of use to us as evidence – the fact that I was not shot myself is proof that God decided it was not my time to pass.

I will always remember the Israeli commandos after we disarmed them. They went from Israel's elite soldiers to frightened little children. All the bravado disappeared; I looked into their eyes, and saw scared little boys. And I think to myself, to this day, they cannot deny that they owe their lives to us for letting them go. If we had been murdering terrorists, like they are, they would have been dead. I myself could have killed two of them with the squeeze of a trigger, but of course we had no interest in this.

These so-called commandos should thank us for our mercy; they murdered nine good men, and we let them go. I think this single incident says everything about who we are, and who they are.

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

I see that Israel is built on terrorism and lies, and that it still lives on terrorism and lies. I see the way in which so many of the people

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of Israel look at and treat others, not just Palestinians. I see a large section of the Israeli population suffer from a total lack of humanity. They see themselves as "God's chosen ones" and the rest of us as goyim, effectively as sub-humans. I would say that any people, and I mean any people, who see themselves that way are the enemies of humanity. Of course there are many good people in Israel, but they are clearly outnumbered.

To me the death of the Zionist ideology represents part of the end of the age of tyranny. It is an ideology that cannot be reasoned with, and thus the people that buy into it cannot be reasoned with. The Palestinians have been dealing with this for decades, and yet they have not become the demons that attack, occupy and murder them.

I have been to Israel as a visitor in 2004, and while I was there, I made a point of being very open-minded and non-judgmental. I wanted to try and understand the people, and my experience was starkly revealing. The people of Israel were without doubt the rudest and most obnoxious I have ever met while travelling. I did meet some lovely people there however – again I am not saying there are not good people there, there are – but overall it is amazing just how nasty the people of Israel can be to visitors. By mistreating others/outsiders, they actually are becoming their own worst enemies.

On the other hand, Palestinians are the most hospitable and generous people you will ever meet. This is something so very beautiful, the people of Palestine will not be beaten, they will not become the beast that is their oppressor.

Israel 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 aids. As a person who has been to Gaza before, and is now there, what do you think about it? How is life in Gaza going on?

I just do not even want to dignify Israel's claims that all is well in Gaza. I have been here in Gaza for four months now, and what I see is readily reported with legitimate media. People are suffering under a brutal collective punishment policy, and children are terrorized continuously from ongoing Israeli attacks. People who do not know this are the ones that do not want to know it at all.

I have seen first-hand how Israel as a state is a pathological liar. They have said there was a bunch of radical Islamists who were hell bent on killing Israelis on the *Mavi Marmara*, that was a lie. They said we had weapons, that was a lie. They said they were surprised that we resisted their attack, that was a lie. They say they comply with international law, that is a lie. They say they regret loss of life on the *Mavi Marmara* and when Palestinian women and children are killed, that is also a big fat lie.

The Israelis have said that I am a terrorist, that I was going to Gaza to train a commando unit for Hamas. This utterly is a lie of Israel, a state that is so drunk on its own power that it has lost all touch with reality. Its leaders are living in an alternate universe, and the only way they will ever come back to the way of being human, is if it is imposed on them. Just like how the choice in the end was not up to the South African Apartheid state, and just like how they did not give up power out of the goodness of their hearts, but in the end had no choice other than relinquishing power, the same will surely happen to Israel, of this I have no doubt.

Are you hopeful of the ongoing international legal proceedings?

No, I am not. To this day our world is ruled by tyranny, and the way in which international law is applied is nothing but the colour of law. Only when we, the people of conscience, do all that we are capable of doing will this system of tyranny be defeated; until such time we get what we deserve, perpetual injustice and war. We have not done enough, but when we do, we will have justice and ultimately peace.

What does the *Mavi Marmara* mean to you?

Right vs. wrong, humanity vs. barbarism, a better world vs. tyranny. The *Mavi Marmara* and the people involved will forever have their place in history as defenders of humanity and justice.