

## THE FREEDOM FLOTILLA OPENED THE EYES OF MILLIONS

**Manuel Espinar Tapial**

26 December 2010 / Istanbul, Turkey



Manuel Espinar Tapial (1974) is a Spanish activist who was on the Flotilla to record two documentary films as a freelance. He is a chef but not practicing his profession for years. He is an activist and a researcher on the rights of Palestinian refugees since 2006. According to what he says, his world of activism started at the age of sixteen when called for compulsory military service, and he declared insubordinate for reasons of conscience. He has participated in anti-war movements in Madrid (1990-94), and various committees of solidarity with Latin America and Palestine in the United Kingdom and Holland (1994-2001). After returning to Spain, he joined the NGO Culture, Peace and Solidarity as a volunteer coordinator, and since 2007, he is the head of institutional relations of this NGO. Currently, he is the coordinator of the *Rumbo a Gaza* initiative that is one of the organizers of the Freedom Flotilla II.

**SEEING HOW THE MUSLIM MEN WERE MADE  
TO KNEEL WAS REALLY HARD TO ACCEPT;  
WE ARE ALL EQUAL**

**Laura Arau Crusellas**

26 December 2010 / Istanbul, Turkey



Laura Arau Crusellas (1980) is also a Spanish activist who was on the Flotilla to record two documentary films as a freelance. She is a video documentalist and camerawoman who has extensive experience in different media since 2002, especially in the *Catalan Public Television* and in *Catalunya Radio*. After nine years of working in media, she has decided to start a new career as a freelance, and devoted to research and portray forgotten conflicts. In collaboration with NGOs, she made various documentaries about the situation in Palestine and Iraq, e.g. *Witnesses of History* and *Iraq, the Destruction of a Country*. Currently she is coordinating *Rumbo a Gaza* campaign with Manuel Tapial.

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

**Manuel:** I have been working with the Palestinian refugees for seven years, and have seen that the problem of refugees cannot be solved if the Palestinian question is not solved. The most extreme situation that we are witnessing now is the siege of Gaza. If our governments do not act to prevent and to recover the situation, then as members of the civil society we have to do it. So as part of the civil society working for the Palestinians, we decided to join the Gaza Freedom Flotilla. Also I am the coordinator of the *Rumbo a Gaza* initiative, and currently we are preparing our own flotilla for the next spring [2011]. We aim to draw two Spanish flag vessels loaded with humanitarian aid to Gaza. Our initiative is included within the framework created by various international organizations that promoted the first Freedom Flotilla.

**Laura:** In my case, I have been working on the Palestinian issues for only two years. I tried to enter Gaza within the Lifeline 3 convoy in December 2009 with Manuel, but we couldn't, since we were blocked by the Egyptian army in al-Arish. Then I decided to try again with the Gaza Freedom Flotilla and boarded on the *Mavi Marmara* ship, but you know, it was impossible as well. I think only with this kind of international action we, as civilian people, can change what's happening in Gaza; because our governments do not represent us, and we need to change the political choices of our governments through such initiatives.

**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.**

**Manuel:** Before boarding the ship, I was reading the Israeli newspapers. The Israeli government was making very hard declarations that they would use commandos to prevent the breaking of the siege of Gaza. So I was expecting this kind of an attack. That's why I made contacts with the Spanish embassy in Turkey and in Israel to see which kind of preventive actions they would take. At that moment Spain had the presidency of the European Union; so we wanted them to act in order to prevent this attack, but they didn't do anything.

**Laura:** I knew that Israel threatened to attack, but I thought that they might push us to Ashdod Port or do something like that. I could not imagine that Israel would do such an attack, killing and wounding civilians.

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

**Manuel:** There was an atmosphere of great brotherhood. There were people from different cultures, different religions, non-believers, communists, socialists, etc. It was just the kind of society that we would like to live in: very plural and full of respect to each other. I think that experience was the best thing we have ever lived.

**Laura:** The most important thing for me, before the attack, was the opportunity to share our experiences with people from all over the world, especially with the women from different religions and ideologies. It was like a big family of women, and was really good. Actually it was my first experience in a community of women.

**What were you doing when the Israeli forces started attacking?**

**Manuel:** We worked freelance. Actually I had participated to the Freedom Flotilla as a delegate of the NGO “Culture, Peace and Solidarity” with the task of preparing a documentary about the 21<sup>st</sup> century activism on the way to Gaza, and of recording another documentary on the situation of education under the blockade and the difficulties the students of Gaza face. However, we couldn’t do any of those documentaries because of the Israeli attack on the Flotilla, leaving nine dead and fifty-six wounded in varying degrees, one still in coma.

We did just one documentary about the Flotilla [*Flotilla de la Libertad*] but totally different from what we wanted to do in the first place. At the moment of the attack, the main issue for us was to record everything. We, as freelance press, recorded all the things happening till someone through the speakers called us to sit down with our passports in our hands and wait for the Israeli army to come.

**You don’t have the footage now, do you? Israel should have confiscated them.**

**Laura:** Yes, Israel confiscated all our materials; but during the days before the attack, we uploaded the materials to internet and so we could save them. The other material that we used was from Iara Lee who was the only one that could take some of video footage [of the attack] out of the ship. Also we used some materials from the Greek boat too, since they recorded all the attack on the *Mavi Marmara* and had a lot of footage. Of course these were not all the footage that we recorded, because Israel confiscated our tapes and other materials.

**Manuel:** We lost like 17,000 euros in material, such as cameras, microphones and everything we had.

IS GOING SOMEWHERE TO HELP PEOPLE WITH HUMANITARIAN AID AN ACT OF TERRORISM? ISRAEL ITSELF IS KILLING PEOPLE EVERYDAY. I THINK THEY HAVE TO BE BROUGHT TO COURT, AND WE HAVE TO ASK FOR JUSTICE, NOT ONLY FOR OUR MARTYRS BUT ALSO FOR THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN MASSACRED BOTH IN THE PAST AND TODAY.

**Could you please tell us what happened during the attack?**

**Manuel:** The Israeli soldiers came down to the top deck from the military helicopters, and began firing. At that time we were recording the people who were killed and wounded by gunfire. One Turkish man was wounded just beside me, and I was shocked at that time and left the camera to catch him. Those forty minutes passed very quickly and intensely, and were full of blood.

**Laura:** It was like we were watching a film on television, because the camera was between the reality and us. Although in reality we lived through the attack, the camera put us in another dimension. I think it saved us from going crazy, because we concentrated on our duty that was something very important to be done.

**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? Did you experience or witness any torture or abuse, either psychological or physical?**

**Manuel:** I was a witness of very bad treatments not in the prison but on the ship. For example, Archbishop Hilarion Capucci was thrown to the floor while just trying to stand up. He is an eighty-nine-year-old man. No one should treat an old person like that. Also I saw how an Israeli soldier was hitting a British citizen, Osama Qashoo, without any reason but just for fun. He was tortured for more than two hours. These are just a few examples of what I saw. Actually I saw the shootings, the wounded people... I really think if one of the biggest armies in the world wanted to stop us, it would not need to shoot, not even one single bullet. If they did what Israel has done, that would be a crime. And everything that we witnessed was a derivation of it.

**Laura:** Since the first moment that we saw the Israeli soldiers, they were violent. They don't have the right to attack a ship full of civilians. They had a lot of weapons while we only had humanitarian



*David Segarra, Ouassima Ibn Salah, Fatima El Mourabiti, Manuel Tapial and Laura Arua working in Kepez Sport Hall in Antalya, Turkey*

cargo. The first step they took was violent, and because of that, the rest was much more violence.

**Manuel:** From the shooting till the end, we were exposed to violence in different manners.

**Laura:** For example, while we were in the pressroom just sitting down with our passports, as it was announced through the speakers, the Israeli soldiers were pointing to our heads with their lasers. We were just journalists, and we had nothing in our hands except for the passports. These are just a few examples of violence we have experienced. Also as Manuel has said there were people tortured on the ship. We all are victims of the Israeli soldiers' violence.

**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?**

**Manuel:** I have three different moments that I will never forget. The first moment was when we got arrested in the pressroom and came out. We saw around three hundred people all down on their knees, heads looking down to the floor, and hands tied behind their backs. All of them were Muslims. We, as Europeans, weren't tied, were seated on the benches outside, and treated in a different way. That was a very big violation for us. I will never forget the racism of the Israeli army. The second moment was when we were inside a hall, all arrested. A soldier ordered me to stand up, tied me, and put me away from the others. From the place where I was, I was

WE SAW AROUND 300 PEOPLE ALL DOWN ON THEIR KNEES, HEADS LOOKING DOWN TO THE FLOOR, AND HANDS TIED BEHIND THEIR BACKS. ALL OF THEM WERE MUSLIMS. WE, AS EUROPEANS, WEREN'T TIED, WERE SEATED ON THE BENCHES, AND TREATED IN A DIFFERENT WAY. I WILL NEVER FORGET THE RACISM OF THE ISRAELI ARMY.

watching how a British citizen, Osama Qashoo, was being tortured on his knees with his head covered. It was a very difficult moment for me, because I thought I could be the next one since I was just put apart. The last moment was when we got all free. I was one of the last people to leave the prison of Beersheba. As I was getting into the airplane, I only wanted to see Laura. I went straight to her, fortunately she was okay, safe and well. At that moment everything was out of the context.

**Laura:** For the first moment that Manuel mentioned here, I have another story. I was really upset for what I saw, hundreds of people kneeling down, and tied behind the back. I started crying. Jasmin Redjepi from Macedonia, who was also tied behind the back, looked at me and said, "Come on." At that moment I stopped crying. But it was really hard for me to see how the Muslim people had to kneel while we were sitting on the benches. For me we are all equal. On the other hand, I also remember very good moments that I will never forget. For example, the moments when all the women met and started talking about their lives were unforgettable for me. All these women are my sisters. It was really a good moment for me.

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

**Laura:** When we arrived at Barcelona Airport, all the Spanish media were there, and hundreds of people were waiting for us just to say, "We are with you." The Spanish people were with us, but we are really angry with the Spanish government since it didn't do anything for us. We were in a critical position, but the Spanish government unfortunately collaborated with Israel.

**Manuel:** Our e-mails were totally blocked. We received thousands of e-mails and messages on facebook from the people supporting us. We wouldn't have expected such a positive reaction. The Spanish people supported us very actively, but the government acted just like an ally of Israel.



*Laura Arua, Manuel Tapial and David Segarra talking to the media on their arrival back to Spain*

**Israel claims that there were “terrorists” on the ship. What do you think about about that?**

**Manuel:** I don't care at all whatever Israel says. None of the people on the ship were the kind that sell weapons, throw bombs to civilians, and impose a criminal blockade to 1,5 million people who live in Gaza. Israel should be brought to justice. Israel accuses all of us of being terrorists, of being criminals, but they can never prove any of their claims. It's high time Israel appeared in a court and stood trial for what it has done to the people from different countries who were victims of the attack.

**Laura:** There were common people on the ship like Manuel and me. When we returned to Spain everybody saw that we were not terrorists, and that there were people like us in the Flotilla who were not terrorists at all. Is going somewhere to help people with humanitarian aid an act of terrorism? Who is the terrorist? Israel itself is killing people everyday. I think they have to be brought to court, and we have to ask for justice, not only for our martyrs but also for the Palestinian people who have been massacred both in the past and today.

By the way, you know, there is news that the United States wants to put the IHH in a list of terrorist organizations. When I heard this, I didn't understand how they could even consider doing so. I think every NGO in Spain would like to be the IHH. There is a big potential; a lot of people are working voluntarily. Every time that I come to Turkey, I visit the IHH; because these people are just like my family now.

WE RECEIVED THOUSANDS OF E-MAILS AND MESSAGES ON FACEBOOK FROM THE PEOPLE SUPPORTING US. WE WOULDN'T HAVE EXPECTED SUCH A POSITIVE REACTION. THE SPANISH PEOPLE SUPPORTED US VERY ACTIVELY, BUT THE SPANISH GOVERNMENT ACTED JUST LIKE AN ALLY OF ISRAEL.

**Manuel:** I would also like to say a few words on this issue. If the IHH at the end is put into a blacklist in the United States, all of us should be in the same list. This also gives us an idea about how the United Nations defines terrorism. The United Nations do not even agree on what is the meaning of being a terrorist. I am very convinced that people who are in those kinds of lists are there because of their relationship with different governments, not because of objective assessment of what they are doing.

IHH is the first NGO that I have ever met in a Muslim country that is mainly formed by Muslim people. I am quite surprised at the human quality of those who work for the IHH. We saw them on the *Mavi Marmara*; their treatment to us is very special. I think in no other country we have passed through, have we had this kind of brotherhood. So they have all my respect and all my support.

**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?**

**Manuel:** I think that on personal, local and international levels, the Flotilla is a success. Personally, it saved our lives. On local level, we were activists in Spain, and engaged in Palestinian issues but just on national level. The Flotilla gave us a guideline to follow up for how to work in the future in coordination with other countries, and in respect to different cultures, different ideologies and individual differences. It opened not only our eyes but also the eyes of millions of people. This is very important. On international level, the Flotilla has become one of those instruments to work and fight for human rights and for justice. Also many people in Spain and all over the world didn't even know where Palestine is or what's happening in Gaza. The Flotilla attack put the Gaza siege on the agenda of the media all over the world for many days, so that now everyone knows

SINCE THE FIRST MOMENT THAT WE SAW THE ISRAELI SOLDIERS, THEY WERE VIOLENT. THEY HAD A LOT OF WEAPONS WHILE WE ONLY HAD HUMANITARIAN CARGO. THE FIRST STEP THEY TOOK WAS VIOLENT, AND BECAUSE OF THAT, THE REST WAS MUCH MORE VIOLENCE.

that hundreds of thousands of people that live in Gaza are suffering due to the blockade. Thus the Flotilla is a real success for us.

**Laura:** I think just the same.

**Today you saw *Mavi Marmara* again. How do you feel about it?**

**Laura:** Today I have been crying all day long. Since I returned from the attack, I haven't cried as much as I did today. It was really hard for me to remember so many moments that we spent on the ship, especially the martyrs, and also to see the passengers of the *Mavi Marmara* that came to Istanbul. We were all crying today because of the memories and the feelings we had. I don't know how to describe it, but I think that was the most sensitive moment that I have ever had in all my life.

**Manuel:** I felt just the same. But it was also a hope for me, because we hope to go to Gaza again on the *Mavi Marmara*.