

**IT IS SAD, NOTHING HAS CHANGED;
I EXPERIENCED ON THE *MAVI MARMARA*
WHAT MY FATHER HAD EXPERIENCED
TWENTY YEARS AGO IN PALESTINE**

Osama Qashoo

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Osama Qashoo (1982) is a Palestinian living in London. He is an award-winning documentary filmmaker, a Palestinian peace activist, and a founding member of International Solidarity Movement, Solidarity Movement in Britain and the Free Gaza Movement. He worked in Palestine for five years for Palestinian radio and television companies, as a photographer for *Reuters*, and a translator for European journalists in Palestine.

His story of filmmaking began in Palestine with a broken camera of his friend. When he pretended to film the checkpoints, street demonstrations and military-enforced curfews, the Israeli soldiers reacted to his camera. He realised that filmmaking is a powerful medium for protecting human rights and bringing Palestinian life to an international audience. So he graduated from the National Film and Television School in England in 2005 and became a filmmaker. Some of his documentary films are *Inside Outside*, *My Dear Olive Tree*, *No Choice Basis*, *Choking Life*, *Interruption*, etc.

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

I wanted to go to Gaza because I'm a Palestinian, and have friends and an extended family living there that I've never seen throughout my life. I was denied entry into Gaza and see them. I think it's enough; I have the right to insist on going to Gaza. Besides this, seeing the injustices and seeing the ugliness of what my friends and my people go through is enough to give me a motivation, since I lived most of my life in Palestine and encountered injustices there on a daily basis. I was arrested twenty-seven times and put in Israeli jails; what is more, I was shot six times. And every time I asked myself, "Why?" Also, I know the feeling of loneliness since I've been there. So I just don't want the Gazans, who are under siege, to feel or think that they are alone. Being completely cut off from the world and left alone is the worst in this situation.

Did you expect an Israeli attack before setting off?

It was something that we had in mind since we know that Israel has always been violating the international law, and I have seen much worse attacks on my family and my people. So what happened on the *Mavi Marmara* was expected, but we didn't think it's gonna happen in that brutal, selfish and inhumane way. Actually we had in mind that death might be one of the prices that we have to pay, and we didn't fear from death at all. However, we didn't want to die since we weren't there to die, but to give life to Gazans.

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

I don't think a festival would be enough to describe what was happening on the ship. It was a multinational ship; we had different people from all around the world, from thirty-seven countries. People with different languages i.e. Arabic, English, Turkish, Indonesian, Italian, Spanish, etc. were together in a very small and confined place for many days. We had people singing, playing, enjoying, laughing, fishing, cleaning and debating each other. It was like an interesting and beautiful international festival in which everybody was meeting each other, networking, making sense of who we were, etc. Although on the first day people were a bit anxious, the more we got to know each other, the quicker the atmosphere changed. So on the next days, the only words that you would hear on the ship were basically how wonderful it was to be there altogether, how great

a freedom it was, how much we were looking forward to going to Gaza. And suddenly the whole idea of Israel disappeared. We were not talking about Israel anymore, because it was the ugly and dark side of that beautiful journey that we didn't want to remember at all. It was really interesting; the kinds of questions and answers completely changed from the first day to the third day.

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.

I was doing some media coordination on the ship and taking some pictures. Being a journalist as much as caring about what's going on around, I saw some soldiers trying to get on the ship from the zodiac boats. They couldn't, because the guys threw their ladders back to the sea, and also used sticks, chains and water hoses to try to prevent them from boarding the ship. I heard the sound of explosives and gunshots. I grabbed my camera from the broadcasting deck and started filming the continuous attempts to board from the side.

Then we saw the helicopters arriving. I encountered one of the soldiers flying over my head. He slammed my head and I knocked down. I was shocked and did not know what this was. Then I saw him with three guns: one of his guns fell down, the other gun he was trying to reach was a laser pistol in his leg, and the third one was an Uzi which he took from his vest and started shooting immediately. Of course at that point I caught his hands, and with some other brothers we disarmed the soldier and then took him downstairs where he was treated. After our doctors treated him, he was taken back to be turned over to the Israeli side. The minute the paramedic opened the door and took him outside, the Israeli soldiers shot him in his hand. This is clear evidence that the Israelis basically don't care about whatever is happening around them or whoever is saying whatever...

While disarming the soldier, I was caught behind my head by something, and then I vomited, was out of breath and fell over. My instant reaction was to run away from this scene. I was trembling, and I think I passed out since I cannot remember what was happening. I was carried away to a bench on the live broadcasting deck. I don't recall how I made my way to the main stairwell. It was my intention to find onions to help people that might have been affected by gas.

MAVI MARMARA IS WHAT TURKEY
MEANS TO ME. EVERY TIME I HEAR A TURKISH
WORD, IT TAKES ME BACK TO PALESTINE. SO
WHEN I SAW THE *MAVI MARMARA* TODAY, I FELT
AS IF I HAD GONE TO PALESTINE AGAIN.

On my way to the kitchen, I was shocked by the amount of blood I could see on the stairs and on people's clothes. We were slipping in blood, there was blood everywhere. But I was not aware of anybody dying at this point, since I thought the blood might be because of injuries from falling or rubber bullets, etc.

Cevdet [Kılıçlar], who was working in the IHH office and one of the friends that I admired, was with me just literally the minute before he was shot in his head while just taking photographs. It was really very painful for me. He was shot, and couldn't move or respond when I was calling. I and another man started pulling him back. As I was pulling him with my hands, under his head and neck, I could see that his eyes were popped-up. I stayed with him for one or two minutes, I don't remember; he caught my hand, then released and he's gone. I realised that my hand underneath his head was warm as if I had some material in it: it was some of Cevdet's brain in my hand. It was completely a very sad moment in which I didn't know what to do. Shall I wash my hands, shall I put it in the sea, shall I...? I didn't know whether that was the right decision or not, but I took his *keffiyeh* around his neck, wrap the pieces of his brain in it and put in my pocket, and after some time I took his *keffiyeh* where Cevdet was lying and tied it around his neck again with the pieces of brain in it... It took me twenty years back to Palestine when similar things happened. When I was seven years old, I saw my dad with my neighbour's brain in his hands. It was a kind of similar story that happened twenty years later. It's sad, because nothing has changed. It's like the same story happening to different people in my lifetime.

Who was that person killed like Cevdet Kılıçlar, and why he was killed?

He was our neighbour Yousef. He died in the same way as Cevdet; he was killed by the Israelis in Nablus, in the West Bank while harvesting olives. Just like me, my dad was helping him when he was shot dead.



Nur Fitri Taher, Osama Qashoo, Alexandra Lort Phillips and Jamal Elshayyal (Al Jazeera news reporter)

Later on you were all taken captive on the ship. Could you please tell us your story about what happened during your captivity?

I was with Haneen Zoabi [a *Knesset* member representing Arab-Palestinian people] and Jamal Elshayyal [*Al Jazeera* reporter], and we were all trying to speak with the soldiers. They said that we all needed to evacuate onto the decks, and if not, they were willing to use force. Then everyone was moved out of the ship onto the decks, except for three medics (two doctors performing operations on two wounded, and one nurse running between patients to change bandages), myself (to help for translation), Haneen and the wounded. Later they wanted us to evacuate all the wounded within five minutes, which was impossible, since there were around forty wounded people, fifteen of which could not even move. (Other wounded people walked out by themselves.) But the soldiers insisted on the evacuation of the wounded against the advice of the doctors, including a man with internal bleeding, another who had a fractured leg, and a third one having tubes inserted into his lower abdomen. All these people were moved onto blankets by the soldiers; Doctor Hamdi Osmanoglu and I objected that, but we were pushed to the floor. I was blindfolded, handcuffed with cable ties, and had a piece of fabric put in my mouth.

SEEING THE INJUSTICES OF WHAT MY PEOPLE GO THROUGH IS ENOUGH TO GIVE ME A MOTIVATION, SINCE I LIVED MOST OF MY LIFE IN PALESTINE ENCOUNTERING INJUSTICES. I WAS ARRESTED 27 TIMES AND WAS SHOT 6 TIMES. ALSO I KNOW THE FEELING OF LONELINESS OF WHAT GAZANS SUFFER FROM NOW. BEING COMPLETELY CUT OFF FROM THE WORLD IS THE WORST IN THIS SITUATION.

Then you personally experienced abuse and torture on the ship...

Yes. I was snatched and dragged onto the upper deck where I was beaten by several soldiers; my handcuffs were tightened, and I was dragged by my hands down the steps. I was forced on my knees over two metal bars on which they rolled my legs. Fifteen minutes later, I could not balance myself and fell onto my side; I was rolling like a trolley. Then two soldiers sat on me, using me as a sofa. One of the soldiers spat on my head as he was drinking water. After that they poured water on my head repeatedly. I was next to the stairs, and each time a soldier went up or down the stairs, they kicked or trod on me. They also blindfolded me by putting a plastic bag and a jumper over my head; I was nearly suffocating. My trousers were ripped, my t-shirt was wet, I felt cold and disorientated. I was handcuffed very tightly for more than thirty-six hours, so that my hands felt completely numb.

What was the reason for all this torture?

There were a few reasons for that. First of all, I had a Palestinian map as a necklace [the map of pre-1948 Palestine], and they wanted me to take it off myself, with my own hands. I said, "If you like, you can take it with your own hands, but I'm not taking it off." So it was a kind of challenge. Secondly, I was talking to people about how to answer the soldiers back. For example, while approaching Ashdod, I heard the soldiers talking about immigration, and I knew they were going to ask us to sign immigration papers although we had been kidnapped in international waters, and forcibly taken to Israel against our will; therefore I announced publicly that I did not advise anyone to sign papers. They didn't like me provoking people, so immediately I was dragged out onto the upper deck. It was a retaliation. Thirdly, when I saw the doctor, who was performing an operation to a wounded guy on the ship without anaesthetics, being beaten by the



Osama Qashoo talking to two Belgian activists, Kenza Isnasni and Fatima El Mourabiti, on the Mavi Marmara

Israeli soldiers, I attacked them; because I hit the soldiers they hit me for the rest of the journey.

What about your experiences in the prison of Israel?

By the time I reached the prison, it was 4:00 a.m., and I had been without food, water and access to toilet for twenty-four hours. During custody I neither ate food nor drank water. They brought us a sack of cucumbers, a sack of carrots and dry bread, and we were told to help ourselves. We were given no soap, no clothes and no sheets. I was denied any medical access. Also, we had no access to the embassy, no access to a telephone and no information on the dead or wounded. All of these were a kind of abuse of course.

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

Israel always claims one thing: terrorists-security, terrorists-security. It’s bullshit. We published the names, the pictures and video clips of every participant on the ship. If we had terrorists, I don’t think any terrorist would be willing to put himself forward. Besides, the people on the ship were normal citizens who mainly live in Europe, and I can’t imagine a European government hiding a terrorist. But of course according to Israel everybody who is standing in front of it is a terrorist.

I WAS DRAGGED ONTO THE UPPER DECK WHERE I WAS BEATEN BY SEVERAL SOLDIERS. THEY BLINDFOLDED ME BY PUTTING A PLASTIC BAG AND A JUMPER OVER MY HEAD; I WAS NEARLY SUFFOCATING. I WAS HANDCUFFED VERY TIGHTLY FOR MORE THAN 36 HOURS SO THAT MY HANDS FELT COMPLETELY NUMB.

What do you think about the IHH?

I think the IHH is an excellent example of how to be a very honest non-governmental organization (NGO) caring about human beings. An NGO is not a real NGO if it doesn't have the freedom of action and if it receives conditional funds from people and organizations, since these conditional funds will determine the way it works. The most important success of the IHH is that it gets its strength from its support groups (normal volunteers), not from the leaders who are elected. IHH completely operates by the people's *zakat* (alms) and charity, and achieves a complete independency from the political views and political pressure, so that it has an emotional strength to determine by its own how to operate. At the same time, its volunteers don't mind to put their lives on the risk, to put their lives on the line, and I don't think any other international humanitarian organization actually does the same. IHH operates in the most dangerous areas of the world, and that's why they pay the highest prices. Let's remember that the nine people who died on the ship are not the only IHH members or volunteers who died during their mission. We know people who died in the airplane crash in Afghanistan that went there for an orphan project. I think they should be saluted, celebrated, appreciated and remembered all the time.

What does the *Mavi Marmara* mean to you?

Mavi Marmara is what Turkey means to me. It's amazing, because now every time I hear a Turkish word, it takes me back to Palestine. So when I saw the *Mavi Marmara* today, I felt as if I had gone to Palestine again. It's a very curious complex feeling that I can't imprison in one or two words. It's an ocean of emotion. It cannot be described.