

**I WILL NEVER FORGET THE COURAGE OF
OUR BROTHERS WHO SACRIFICED THEIR LIVES
TO SAVE US AND THE GAZANS**

Paveen Yaqub

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Paveen Yaqub is a British citizen of Pakistani origin, and was a senior manager for local government in Greater Manchester (England). After joining the Freedom Flotilla, she left her previous employment to become a full-time peace activist.

Why did you join the Gaza Freedom Flotilla?

The reason why I wanted to be a part of this Flotilla was to contribute to the humanitarian aid that was being taken for the people of Gaza; to provide healthcare and educational resources for people that are desperately in need, i.e. children, widows, sick people, etc. Instead of just sitting in the United Kingdom, I wanted to do something practical, to be a part of this experience, and to promote greater awareness of Palestine.

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.

Israel had made threats previously, but to be honest, I did not take it that seriously or as serious as the outcome. What I anticipated was that we would have some difficulty – perhaps they would try to block us; perhaps they would climb on the ship, check and find that what we had was actually humanitarian aid, and therefore they would not be in a position to prevent us. This was my worst case scenario. As for the violent attack on our humanitarian mission, I did not expect that, not even in my wildest dreams!

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

The atmosphere on the ship was of solidarity and unity. It was friendly and exciting. We were full of hope. People from every part of the world came together for a single purpose and for one destination which was to help the people of Gaza. So I think we were very blessed and privileged to be a part of that, because it was such a historic, monumental and symbolic journey to Palestine.

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 actually awake for the whole night, because I was waiting to make a live interview. Maybe I was becoming more anxious because of visually seeing the warships in sight. During one interview that the IHH was making on TV, helicopters started circulating. The lights were cut, so the interview could not take place. I went into the pressroom in order to send a couple of messages to my friends on facebook saying what was happening. Somebody came in just shortly before the attack, and said that we were being surrounded by

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the warships. I could feel the panic in his voice. I was about to send another message to say please help us and do something, but they cut the communication system.

When I went out on the deck, I heard firing and the sound of bombs. Then I made peace signs to the soldiers holding cameras in the helicopter, and waved my hands making “stop” gestures. It was just very chaotic.

Then somebody called me in to keep me safe. I did not realise until that time that they were actually firing live bullets. I ran up the stairs to the next floor, and saw a man with blood on his head and another guy bandaging him up. Then the wounded person stood up, and I realised that it was an Israeli soldier. He was very panicked, and I said to him, “It’s fine, it’s okay, no one is going to hurt you.” He was taken to the medical area.

It was crazy, but I was thinking, “This is not happening, this is just a movie.” But at the same time I was trying to remain calm, because it was such chaos. I was trying to help the wounded people. Then I took the duty of making announcements and began sending messages to the armed forces saying, “Please stop firing, people are dead,” “We need to get medical assistance.” I pled with them continuously to stop for maybe an hour, maybe longer, and then they cut the system.

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 do not think that I will forget any of what I saw. However, there are perhaps three things worth mentioning here: One of them was that when they surrounded us, I had to walk towards the soldiers with machine guns with a message of peace, asking for them to stop firing and help us, because they cut the tannoy system. It was just something that I had to try in order to stop more people from dying.



Paveen Yaqub in the welcoming ceremony of the Mavi Marmara in Istanbul

The other thing for me was just being among deaths, seeing people breathe their last breath, seeing people helplessly trying to preserve their lives. When I finished the announcement, I came across one individual who was just wounded and was bleeding; it was brother Uğur Süleyman Söylemez¹. He was shot in the head. Sinan Albayrak [a Turkish actor] was praying gently (it sounded like a lullaby) into Brother Süleyman's ear, and another sister was nursing him. I held his hand like he was my father, and that's when I went for a second time to the Israeli side with the message for medical assistance again. The first time I went, they pointed the guns and said, "Go back." I tried again, and maybe five or ten minutes later, they started to communicate asking for their own soldiers and their weapons. Then very very slowly our wounded brothers were taken. I wanted to go with this wounded brother and walked out to the door towards the soldiers. When they opened the door, they put their guns in my face. I looked to the guy who seemed to be in charge and said to him, "Please, this man is dying. He has a serious head injury, and needs urgent medical assistance. Please take care of him," and he said, "You take care of him." I asked, "Can I go with him?"; he replied, "No." I asked again, "Please, can I go with him?"; he said, "No." He put the gun at me, and said "Go back, go back." I had to walk away.

The third thing that I will never forget was the courage of our brothers who sacrificed their lives to defend everybody on the ship. The bravery to defend the ship and the dignity with which they were dying was absolutely immense. I know I am here now because of

¹ Uğur Süleyman Söylemez was shot by the Israeli commandos, and he is still in coma.

them; because they gave their lives in order to save our lives, the lives of the women on the ship. They were trying to save the lives of the people of Gaza, because we were taking hopes of life to the Gazans. We knew that the people of Gaza were critically in need of the medicine and the medical equipment that we had. So there were more lives at stake than just the people on the ship, and that is what I will never forget... Also I will never forget the widow [Çiğdem Topçuoğlu] of one of the brother who was shot and martyred [Çetin Topçuoğlu]. That sister's, *subhanAllah* (glory be to God), dignity and her patience... I have never seen anything like that. When she was here at the funeral yesterday [3 June 2010], I went to her; she smiled to me and did not let me cry, because her husband, you know, is a martyr. Her son was there, and he was the same, smiling. I thought how I can cry when they don't...

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?

We stayed on the ship for at least eighteen or twenty hours. At first, it was very cold and windy, because it was early in the morning, and the helicopter was just above us. When the helicopter moved away, it was getting hot; and when they brought us down, we were very hot and humid since they turned off the air-conditioning. People were fainting and feeling dizzy. The elderly men, when it was so cold, had their coats on; but when it was so hot, they could not take them off because of their handcuffs. So we were trying to help our brothers, and take water to their side. We struggled to go to the toilet, and we insisted to go alone, because they did not want to let us go. People were just bewildered of not knowing where to and what's next.

When we actually arrived at Ashdod Port, it was light, but they did not let us get off the ship until it became dark. It was a very long and enduring process to get off the ship. I was one of the last people to get off. There were hundreds of people there, including the police, the army and other security personnel. They were laughing as if there was a big celebration, parading us like they had hunted us and showing what they caught. It was humiliating, and they were obviously feeling pleasure from humiliating us. I began to get more and more frustrated for everybody else, and especially for the brothers who were treated much worse.

By the time I went out, I was really scared; but I refused to walk out like a victim and let them see the fear on my face. So I walked out with a lollipop in my mouth and stood with it when they made me stand at the exit door, so that everyone could stare at me – just like the other passengers endured. They were in a shock, and looking at me like “What’s she doing?” This made some of them mad. Actually I was in shock and acting strangely... Before that, on the ship, I had an incident with one of the guys in charge. Because when I came back from toilet, I saw some of the new security people who were so happy like they had won a football match, and this made me very upset. So when I walked out, I made a peace sign with my fingers on their camera and said, “Free Gaza!” They all turned the machine guns immediately, maybe about nine or ten men, and said, “Shut up, shut up.” I said, “No, I won’t be quiet.” They said, “Be quiet and sit down.” I said, “No, I won’t be quiet. Why? What you gonna do? Shoot me?” One of the officers said, “Try me,” and I said, “Come on soldier.” And then the soldier that had guarded me outside the toilet said, “Just go and sit down,” and he moved me away. The same guy, who threatened to shoot me on the ship, was at the ship exit when I was going out. And when he saw me with lollipop, he was nodding at me in a mocking way as if to say “I’ll show you,” but luckily nothing happened.

Did you experience or witness any torture or abuse, either psychological or physical, both on the ship and in the prison?

The abuse on the ship was that we were all captives. We were denied food, and we had to struggle to go to the toilet. While searching us, they were just making fun and trying to humiliate us. They were threatening us every time we moved. They even hit some people. Anybody who talked to each other, and anybody who looked at them in a wrong way, they just slapped or pushed them around. For example, because one of the brothers [Osama Qashoo] was protesting, they beat him, put him outside onto the deck, tied his feet and hands behind his back, and did not give him any water for hours. His thumb became numb, and he cannot feel it anymore. So there was abuse in that sense.

Personally my abuse started when I got off the ship. Actually I knew that I was going to have some difficulty. They kicked me, pushed me, and pinched me. They were trying to make me fall by kicking my chair, coughing in my face, swearing at me in Hebrew, mocking at me and all laughing. They did not give me a bottled wa-

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ter, but only a very little bit of water, saying “Have it” and laughing. I thought they had done something to the water, so I did not drink it. When they searched me and made me remove my trainers, they just kept showing them to each other saying “eeuuw” as if they smelled bad; so when they gave the trainers back, I said, “Hmmm, nice smell,” and put them back on, so they were getting more and more mad. This was my way of resistance to their humiliation, and it prevented me from getting too emotional. To tell the truth, I did not want to cry in front of them, so instead I kept acting in a way that surprised or confused them – and maybe myself! Once I had disembarked from the ship, I did not want to make eye contact with them anymore, because otherwise their psychological gain would be much more. Also, all the time I just chanted to myself saying, “*La ilaha illallah, Muhammad rasulu-llah* (There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His Messenger).” So one of the policewomen who was guarding me began singing over my voice, and laughing at me with other officers.

They continued to try to make me fall, and I knew if they succeeded I would get very angry and maybe go crazy, because the humiliation was just too much. I didn’t think I was able to hold back if they made me fall at that point in front of hundreds of Israeli personnel just constantly staring and mocking us all. If I did lose my composure and react, they would probably beat me severely or maybe shoot me. But Allah protected me; despite their best efforts, they were unable to make me trip and fall, and get the reaction they had been hoping for!

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

Absolutely, I would like to go to Gaza now with even more determination. There was not a single second in the whole process where the others and I felt that we had made a mistake. On the contrary, we felt we were privileged for what happened, because we saw first-



Jasmin Redjepi (Macedonian activist), Paveen Yaquub and Hakan Albayrak (Turkish journalist and activist)

hand the terror that the Israeli government and their military forces are capable of, even on citizens of the world from different states and organizations, including dignitaries. So this experience gave us a very tiny insight to what the suffering of the Palestinian people actually is. It made us feel and realise more the extremities that they are experiencing, and the urgency of their situation. We felt more determined to uphold justice and human rights. It has become more of a responsibility because of what we personally experienced. So yes, I would go to Gaza again tomorrow!

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

First of all, I would like to ask Israel what their definition of terrorist is... All I saw on the ship were people like me that came together for the same purpose: to take humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza, to break the siege, and to challenge injustice. There were individuals of all backgrounds on the ship; elders, men, women, young people; also academics, diplomats, dignitaries, and so on. I am not sure what constitutes a terrorist, but if you ask me whether there was anybody carrying guns, and shouting jihad or speaking of violence, I will say, “No.” As I said before, there was such a sense of peace on the ship. So for Israel, to make such a statement and use the word “terrorist” in this context, I find very ugly.

Do you think the Freedom Flotilla was successful, and achieved its aims? Because some people think that nothing was achieved,

and many people were killed and wounded in vain. What do you think about it? What are the most important achievements of this Flotilla?

People are dying everyday in Gaza. So death is something that was part of why we were doing what we were doing. Yes, people died and that's tragic; but they died honourably, and they died for the sake of their values and principles. I feel really sad and grieve for them, and also admire the patience of their families. Whilst talking to some of their relatives, I could sense through their pain how proud they were of what their loved ones have been party to, what they have achieved. This sense was very overwhelming.

In terms of the question "Was it a success?," when else can anybody remember the issue of Palestine being discussed globally in every corner of the world? When else was Israel and its regime of inhumanity questioned in the way it is now? When else have we seen globally the plight of the Palestinian people being talked about like it is now? We have generated more support, more sympathy, more concern for this issue. So how can it not be a success? In history great prices were paid, and much more blood was shed to attain success. We would not have the rights we have today if people before us had not shed blood for us. So I cannot even imagine the extent of the success we attained.

When the *adhan* (call to prayer) was being heard on the ship, as we were being attacked, I thought this was symbolic. When we were under siege I said, "There is something bigger than what we are seeing now. We don't know what Allah's plan is, what Allah's answer is to this now; but this is bigger than we can imagine right now." We had patience and we continued to pray. And despite the terror we were subjected to, there was still a sense of peace that I carried throughout the whole experience.

I would like to add something else. The first thing the Israeli forces did when they came on our ship after the firing had stopped was to break the cameras and the CCTVs. So the world would not be able to see what they were doing. They confiscated all our evidence, our cameras and recordings. They broke law upon law; they had no regard for international law and international humanitarian law. Despite concealing and destroying evidence of so many journalists and so many individuals, they cannot silence the testimonials of hundreds of people. So the world slowly and surely would hear the truths of hundreds of people *insha'Allah* (if God wills).