

**PEOPLE WORKING TOGETHER
CAN CHANGE HISTORY**

Sarah Colborne

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Sarah Colborne (1967) is British, lives in London, and is the director of Palestine Solidarity Campaign in Britain. She studied at Queen Mary College and the Institute of Education in London.

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

I believe that it is my responsibility, and it is the responsibility of everybody to act to end the siege on Gaza, and to free Palestine. Particularly as a British citizen, – with the role the British government has been playing historically, and also its failure to support the Palestinian people – I think I have more responsibility to end the siege, to explain to the world what is happening there in order to build support for the Palestinian cause, and to show the Palestinians that there is a very strong international support for them – the majority of the world supports peace and justice for 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.

I didn't expect the violence that the Israelis showed against us. I thought they might try to stop the boats using non-lethal means, they might try to pull the boats into the port. But I had never ever thought that they would shoot to kill, which was what they did. All of the Israeli soldiers came on the boat with weapons right over their bodies. They did not just have one weapon but covered in weaponry, and they were clearly there to kill.

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

Before, it was very beautiful, very well-organized. Everything was running smoothly like clockwork from organizing the food to the cleaning... Yesterday night [26 December 2010] we returned to the ship again, and talked about the *kofte* (meatball) party that was organized. What was fantastic was that every day there was something different, and there was always a surprise for people on board. The feeling of solidarity and the international support was very moving, very inspirational. The days I spent on the boat were the best days of my life: talking to people, meeting new people right across the world, etc.

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.

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When the call to prayer started, I went upstairs to the broadcasting deck where the TV cameras broadcasted from. As I came up to the top and looked out, I could see the Israeli big warships and the smaller boats. Because it was dark, all the lights could be seen, and the lights coming from the *Mavi Marmara* were shining on the smaller boats full of Israeli soldiers. The soldiers on these boats were trying to board the *Mavi Marmara*. Then I saw the helicopters and the Israeli soldiers trying to rappel down onto the top of the *Mavi Marmara*. I was in shock. Although I could hear the shots, I did not really realise that they were using live ammunition and killing people, until I saw Cevdet [Kılıçlar] shot on the side of the boat. He was brought to the back where we used to have coffee and tea [Café Gaza]. At that moment I realised what was happening.

Then you were all taken as captives on the ship by the Israeli naval commandos. What did happen after that?

I went downstairs and sat in the hall. Repeated calls for help were made from the tannoy to the Israeli commandos who had taken over the ship. The calls started at 5:15 in the morning, and it was only at about 7:00 a.m. that the Israelis allowed the first of the seriously wounded to be evacuated. I was sitting and hearing the announcements: “We have dead, we have seriously wounded, please help...” That was really bad for me, because I knew people were dying. Then, when the Israelis started to allow the wounded to leave, I thought that the doctors, who were also passengers on the ship and who had been caring for them, would go with them. While the first person who was seriously wounded was evacuated, the Israelis pointed at me and wanted me to carry the drip; since I have no medical experience, I asked someone else with medical experience to go with him thinking that he would stay with the wounded. (But then the Israelis started talking to me, asked my name, and wanted to know the number of the wounded on the ship. So, I walked from the back of the ship to the



After dinner at Miniaturk, Istanbul: Sümeyye Ertekin (TVNet correspondent), Alexandra Lort Phillips, Fatima El Mourabiti (Belgian activist), Cristina Soler (mother of David Segarra), Paveen Yaqub and Sarah Colborne (26 December 2010)

front where the wounded were staying to see how many people were able to be taken out...) I did not realise that the Israelis were taking the doctors away from the wounded. But when I went out at the end, I saw all of the doctors, the first-aids and helpers in handcuffs as well. I remember the people, while being taken out to the helicopters, were very very seriously wounded; but the Israelis refused to allow the doctors, who were caring for them, to stay with them.

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

I think they were quite careful with most of the women. Once we were in prison, they realised that there was an international scandal, and so for the women they were careful. For example, when officials of our consulates finally arrived, thirty-six hours after we were attacked by Israel, suddenly we had hot foods. In front of the consular officials, they wanted to show that they were treating us well. They even brought in a camera crew in the prison to show the consular officials meeting the prisoners. However, we complained saying, “No, this is illegal; you can’t show prisoners like that”; because, you know, we were taken hostage, we were kidnapped, we were handcuffed and dragged to prison against our will. They were parading us. As for psychological torture, I think a clear example was their treatment to Çiğdem [Topçuoğlu]. She had seen her husband killed by the Israelis, and they put her into prison and treated her terribly.

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Could you please share with us the most striking event that you experienced or witnessed on this journey, and will never forget throughout your life?

I think seeing Cevdet's body.

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

We have to. I think the Flotilla was very important, and it put Gaza on the world stage and raised awareness. People, who had never been interested in Palestine before, became interested because of what the IHH and the other organizations did. So, yes, I will. There are so many people in Britain who say to me that they want to join the next flotilla. Israel has lost its credibility and public support; because people worldwide are witnessing Israeli violence, occupation and siege, and they want to end this injustice.

Was this your first attempt to go to Gaza, or did you go there before?

I tried to go once before on the Lifeline 3 convoy that the IHH, Viva Palestina and Palestine Solidarity Campaign were involved in December 2009. But I was trapped in Egypt, and spent three days at checkpoints. The Egyptian police did not let us join the rest of the convoy in al-Arish. We would be told, "Okay, you can travel," and then we would go to the checkpoint and wait for hours. Then they would say, "No, you can't travel; go back," and so on... So, we could not get through, we just stayed in Egypt.

How was the atmosphere when you returned to your country?

While we were in prison, there was a big demonstration. It happened at three hours notice, outside the British Prime Minister's residence in Downing Street, London, and people were very angry



Press conference in Antalya, Turkey: Haneen Zoabi (MP in Knesset representing the Palestinians in Israel), Bülent Yıldırım (president of the IHH), Archbishop Hilarion Capucci, Faruk Ünsal (president of Mazlumder), Kevin Ovenden (member of Viva Palestina in Britain) and Sarah Colborne

that Israel had massacred humanitarian aid activists. When we returned on Saturday [5 June 2010] there was another demonstration. It was a larger and a very very moving demonstration showing the breadth of support for Palestine right across British society. Opinion polls and the work we do in Britain shows that people are very supportive for Palestine. People want to make a change, want to bring peace and justice.

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

What happened on the *Mavi Marmara* was just a small, tiny part of what happens to the Palestinians every day. I had been involved in organizing demonstrations and actions in Britain, not just against Israeli aggression in Gaza during Operation Cast Lead, but also in Lebanon in 2006, in Jenin [West Bank] in 2002, etc. Israel has committed a long catalogue of massacres. So, the attack on the *Mavi Marmara* is not the first, and sadly will not be the last one. But there is a difference between knowing about it, and being there directly experiencing. When I was there under the attack, I felt like I was watching a film. Because it was so unreal, it was so outside what I thought was possible. Because I thought the Israelis would not be so stupid; they would not attack a boat that had no weapons, no arms at all – otherwise it would be a disaster for them politically. But they

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attacked us to try and scare the international community away – and as we showed, it had just the opposite effect, with people even more committed to helping end the siege on Gaza.

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

Israel always claims such things. Whenever they kill the Palestinian children in Gaza and in the West Bank, they claim that they are just targeting terrorists. So this is nothing new. The people on the boat ranged in age from an eighty-nine-year-old man to a one-year-old child, but still Israel said that the boat was full of terrorists. We know Israel lies, but the world is seeing through those lies.

Israel also 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. What do you think about it?

Well, it is clearly a lie. There is a humanitarian disaster in Gaza – deliberately created by Israel to collectively punish 1.5 million Palestinians. Israel also made propaganda that there was no aid on the *Mavi Marmara*. However, the *Mavi Marmara* was not a cargo ship but a passenger ship, and the humanitarian aid was carried on the cargo ships... I remember when we were sitting on the *Mavi Marmara* someone had brought some decorations, some butterflies to give to the children of Gaza. Israel would not consider these as humanitarian aid, but I do, since it is about giving some children hope. Israel does not count children's toys as humanitarian aid, but that just exposes the cruelty of what is happening in Gaza. So Israel can say repeatedly that there is no siege, but the world does not believe this. Israel thinks if it tells a lie enough times, people will believe it; but the problem for Israel is that people know there is a siege in Gaza.



Are you hopeful of the ongoing international legal proceedings?

Unfortunately, legal proceedings can move slowly, and there may be problems in implementation. We have had judgements like the International Court of Justice judgement [2004] against Israel's building of the Apartheid Wall and settlements, but governments including my own did nothing to enforce that ruling. The report of the UN Fact-Finding Mission on the Flotilla is very important; because that explained how people had been killed in cold blood, for example, while just taking photos [Cevdet Kılıçlar]. So legal pressure is very important, because what Israel did was so illegal, and perpetrators of such crimes must be brought to justice. I think this process has to be combined with popular mobilisation and actions, because what the lesson of the *Mavi Marmara* is that people working together can make a difference, can change history. I think for too long, people have sat and said, "The situation is terrible in Palestine, but what can I do?" What the *Mavi Marmara* showed is that these excuses are not acceptable. You can do something, and you must do something. It is up to every single one of us to work together to bring peace and justice.

What does the *Mavi Marmara* mean to you?

It means hope. It means solidarity. It means suffering. The families of the martyrs have paid a very high price, but I think it made a difference, and that is what we all have to live our lives to make a difference, to bring peace and justice. So I remember the *Mavi Marmara* with love and affection, because it was a fantastic achievement.

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For how many years have you been working in the Palestine Solidarity Campaign? And what does this campaign mainly concentrate on?

Although I was involved in the Palestine Solidarity Campaign first as a student during the First Intifada, I became seriously involved ten years ago when the Second Intifada started. The Palestine Solidarity Campaign is a campaigning organization; we do not carry out humanitarian aid programmes. We work to build a movement for solidarity in Britain, and also to change the British government policy.

How have you influenced the British government policy throughout this time?

We work at an individual level with the members of parliament to persuade them to take a positive position on Palestine, and to end Israel's violations of international law. We have had over 200 MPs supporting motions on Palestine in the parliament. The last government issued voluntary guidance in 2009 that products from illegal Israeli settlements should be clearly labelled. That wasn't enough for us but it was a positive step. The Movement for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions on Israel is growing; for example, the Trades Union Congress, which represents over six million workers, voted in September 2010 to boycott companies which profit from Israel's settlements, wall and occupation.

Then what you do is a kind of lobbying, isn't it?

It is lobbying, but also we try to make direct change in government policies. It is not easy, because the British government has played historically a bad role for many centuries in the Middle East. What we do is important, because if we don't put pressure on the British government to change its policies, then who will? They are doing things in our names, so we have to say, "We do not agree with the British government policy."

Nowadays under serious pressure from Israel, the British government is trying to change the British domestic law on war criminals to make it more difficult for the victims of war crime to get arrest warrants. This was in response to an arrest warrant issued against former Foreign Minister of Israel, Tzipi Livni. In a sense it is a sign of our success.

You know, Israel and the Israeli lobby are making propaganda that the IHH is a “terrorist organization”, and the United States is trying to list it accordingly. Are there similar attempts against the Palestine Solidarity Campaign?

First of all, the truth about the IHH is very clear. The IHH is a humanitarian organization working in many countries very busily. Also it manages incredible work for Palestine and Gaza. I have not seen any other organization working with the seriousness that the IHH does to help people in the world. Israeli troops kill civilians all the time, as do the American and British troops in Afghanistan, and then they attack a humanitarian organization like the IHH...

As to our campaign, there is a long and detailed report (“Mapping the Organizational Sources of the Global Delegitimization Campaign against Israel in the UK”) where they call us “delegitimizers”. They take London as a case study, and say that London is a big problem. This report draws attention to solidarity organizations such as the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, and focuses on our work with the trade unions. They attack what they call “the red-green alliance”, the alliance of the left and the Muslim community. However, the solidarity movement is growing, and we will not stop until Palestine is free.