

ISRAEL HAS LOST ANY SENSE OF MORALITY AND BECOME GOLIATH

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Hassan Ghani (1985) is Scot of Pakistani origin. He is currently a correspondent of *PressTV* news channel based in London. He was freelanced, and supplied material to *BBC Scotland* and *Al Jazeera* in the past, and has worked in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Gaza, Egypt and across Europe.

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

As a correspondent for my channel, *PressTV*, it's my job to cover significant events around the world. I'd already been sent on two aid convoys to Gaza that had departed by road from London. Having already been in contact with the IHH, which had been one of the organizers of Lifeline 3 Convoy led by Viva Palestina, it made sense for me to be onboard the *Mavi Marmara* and cover the story.

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 was making all sorts of noises before our departure. They had shown to Israeli press the processing centres they had setup at Ashdod for the Flotilla passengers, and had leaked information about the military unit training to intercept us. However, my feeling was that this was probably just a rouse to scare off the Flotilla – a bluff in the hope that aid workers would back down in fear. If they did intercept the ships, we thought they would disable the engines or find some way of physically blocking the Flotilla's path. We never expected them to murder anyone.

How was the mood of the passengers before setting off, and how was the atmosphere on the ship before the attack?

The atmosphere in the days prior to departure had been very emotional. When we got on the buses in Istanbul to go to Antalya, I remember the families and friends of those getting on board shedding tears as they waved them off – obviously they were aware of the risks involved. But it was also an exciting time; people felt that they were at the forefront of a historic effort: if it were successful, it would herald the end of the blockade.

In Antalya it was interesting to see the friendship being built across cultures and nationalities. There were representatives from all continents and dozens of nations. Differences of religion and politics were cast aside, and replaced with a communal spirit of co-operation and understanding. The demographics was also incredibly wide-ranging, from young men and women to respected elders who were above eighty years old.

The atmosphere on the day before the attack was very positive. Everyone was very excited that we were finally departing for Gaza

from our holding point near Cyprus, and that the following morning we would arrive. After days of anticipation, everyone was really keen on moving. However, when the Israeli frigates showed up on the radar that evening, things suddenly became quite tense. Nobody was quite sure what to expect. But even this tension relented to a certain extent as the night went on, and the Israelis didn't come any closer and even appeared to back off.

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'd gone to sleep around 2:00 a.m., hoping to wake up for the *fajr* (dawn) prayer at 4:00 a.m. and be ready for the next day's live coverage. When I woke, the ship was in chaos. I ran onto the deck, and as I peered over the side, my heart skipped a beat. Although I'd been talking on television about the prospect of a bloody confrontation for days, to actually see armed Israeli soldiers pulling up alongside the ship really shocked me. I ran back downstairs to grab my camera, and began filming everything. I saw the Israelis opening fire with paint pellets into the faces of those onboard the ship, and throwing stun grenades onto the deck. The men on the ship repulsed the attack by throwing anything they could find down onto the zodiac boats, and sprayed water onto the soldiers. After a while, the zodiacs retreated and the helicopters came. At that time, I tried to contact my news station through the satellite phone, but everything was jammed.

I remember the sounds of firing from the helicopters before any soldiers descended onto the deck. I went on-air, speaking in English, describing the situation – journalists were taking turns to talk to the outside world. Someone had been shot in the leg in front of me, and Fatima Mohammadi from the United States was tending to his wound – I'm pretty sure that shot could only have come from a helicopter, and it was a live bullet. As I was on-air, they brought down the body of Cevdet Kılıçlar. I remember saying on-air, "One man has been seriously wounded, we think he may die." But after I handed over the microphone to someone else and went with my camera to see him, it was clear that there was little hope for him. Although he was still breathing, he had been shot directly in the forehead, and stood no chance of survival. I wasn't sure if it was the right thing to do, and I felt ashamed for doing it, but I picked up my camera

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and filmed him as he lay on the floor. Osama Qashoo, a Palestinian, picked up what he said were pieces of Cevdet's brain tissue, and held them in front of my camera. Soon after, Cevdet stopped breathing.

Amid all the chaos – the shouting, the fighting, the bullets hitting the deck – one man continued to pray despite being completely exposed to the shooting. I filmed two soldiers, one after the other, dropping down onto our deck and wrestling with the aid workers on the ship. I filmed Ken O'Keefe and another man restraining one of the soldiers as they disarmed him, and removed his handgun which was loaded with live ammunition. The bullets were separated from the gun so it could no longer be used. Both of the soldiers I saw were taken inside for their own protection.

I ran round to the other side of the ship, hoping to capture more of what was going on. As I made my way down the side of the deck, I heard a shout from above. I looked up, and an Israeli soldier standing on the roof [navigation deck] had his rifle pointed at me, less than two metres from my head. He kept shouting in Hebrew, and I couldn't understand what he was saying. I froze, expecting to die in that moment. But someone opened a door nearby, distracting the soldier, and I ran inside. I made my way back out to the other side of the ship, and as I got back to the top deck, I saw more bodies being brought down. Bülent Yıldırım, the president of the IHH, sensing the aid mission was turning into a massacre, took off his white shirt. The shirt was then attached to a pole, and waved in the air as a white flag – but the shooting continued. Announcements were made on the ship's tannoy in multiple languages asking for the soldiers to halt their shooting and send medical help – but the shooting still continued.

I went inside and was confronted by the lifeless bodies of four people on the floor: One of them was Cevdet; another was the body of Cengiz Songür, who'd befriended me and my colleague Nur Choudhury during our time in Antalya. He'd played jokes on us by hiding our equipment. The sight of him smashed through the emo-



Hassan Ghani describing the attack on the Mavi Marmara to the world on-air

tional numbness that I'd been in (and I was lucky enough to have it until that point), so I struggled to hold my camera steady.

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?

Initially the Israelis didn't know I was a journalist, so I was subject to the same treatment as the vast majority of those onboard the ship. We were taken, one by one, from inside onto the top deck. Like others, I was kicked and punched while the soldiers searched me, and again like others, my hands were tied together so tight that I lost blood circulation in them for some time.

I was walked onto the deck where everyone was held; the scene shocked me: hundreds of people kneeling on the floor with their hands tied behind their backs... Ironically (and with the image of Cevdet still fresh in my mind) it reminded me of a concentration camp. After a while, the soldiers took me up onto the top deck. There I saw more of the passengers tied up and sitting on the floor – completely exposed to the burning Mediterranean sun. I was made to sit down next to a young man who had been shot in the legs and in the back, and he told me the wound in his leg was from a live bullet while the blood still dripping out of his back was from rubber bullets. The soldiers ignored him and the pain he was in, and left him on the floor with his hands tied.

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Eventually, when the soldiers realised I was a journalist, I was taken inside and the cable tie on my hands was snipped off. There was a soldier with a rifle stationed every three or four metres inside, watching us carefully. At one point, one of the soldiers amused himself by repeatedly pointing a taser at my face with its red light turned on, primed to fire. Nobody was allowed to move or even talk. Also nobody was allowed to go to the toilet.

When we left the ship, we were searched again – and this time the soldiers found my tape with the evidence of what happened. They'd gone to great lengths to seize any electronic and media equipment that could have kept a record of what happened, and so they took my tape, too.

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?

The image of Cevdet lying on the floor, a puddle of blood underneath his head.

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

We had undergone an airport style security check prior to boarding the ship, to ensure no weapons or contraband items could get on board. If there were genuinely any terrorists on the ship, it would mean that the security personnel were pretty incompetent. Also the fact that not a single Israeli soldier was killed, despite three of them being held captive at one point, is proof of this.

The *Mavi Marmara* was an international village floating on the sea – there were representatives from around the world, of different faiths and of no faith. There were of course many aid workers, but also award-winning journalists, politicians (including two German MPs), religious leaders (including an elderly Christian archbishop)



Hassan Ghani making an interview with Ahsan Shamruk

and even a housewife from London. Of course, Turkish nationals made up a large percentage of the passengers, but they too included a diverse range of people, including many women.

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?

Sadly, when the Israeli military bombs and kills civilians in Gaza, very few take notice. Its attack on an unarmed Flotilla of aid ships packed with citizens of nations from around the world forced the world to take notice, and exposed the Israeli military's brutality and contempt for international law and the sanctity of human life. Of course, the best outcome would have been for the ships to arrive in Gaza, and a route for humanitarian aid to be taken directly to Gaza to be established. But the deaths were certainly not in vain – the huge numbers of people that came to offer their sympathy and support to the cause upon the ships' return to Istanbul in last December illustrate this clearly.

**How was the atmosphere when you returned to your country?
How did people react to the Israeli attack on the *Mavi Marmara*?**

The British media, particularly the *BBC*, was unsympathetic to the victims of the Israeli attack. They swallowed the Israeli line that the soldiers were simply trying to enforce a naval blockade, and only opened fire when they were under attack. The *BBC*'s documentary "Death in the Med" was misleading, and reinforced Israeli claims

that the Flotilla passengers were only interested in provoking a conflict with Israel.¹ However, from my personal experience, public opinion remains generally on the side of the aid workers.

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

The Israeli military has lost any sense of morality, and the same goes for Israeli society in general which mostly supported the military's actions. Israel has become Goliath in the story of David and Goliath, but it seems blind to this. Its young soldiers appear to view non-Israeli civilians as less than human.

Are you hopeful of the ongoing international legal proceedings? What kind of a decision would satisfy you?

Personally I have little faith in any legal procedures, and can't imagine Israel ever bringing its own soldiers to justice for their crimes since they are considered heroes in Israel. As a journalist, the only thing I want is my footage of what happened that night, but even this is wishful thinking. Of course I can't even begin to understand the pain and suffering of the families of the martyrs, and it's really them who should answer this question.

What does the *Mavi Marmara* mean to you?

I recently had the chance to revisit the ship, and sit on the spot where I spent my days editing news stories and my nights sleeping. The ship, despite the bloodstains and marks of violence, still feels like home. It's no ordinary ship – it's a character in its own right. And, like its passengers, it took a bloody battering while trying to carry aid to the besieged Gaza Strip. Whatever happens, for me at least, the ship will always remain home to a community of individuals who came together to try and help create a better world – people from all walks of life and backgrounds who risked everything for the sake of justice and humanity. While that "utopia" may have only been allowed to last for a few days before being brutally brought to an end, in my mind it will always survive.

¹ On 19 April 2011, the BBC Trust concluded that three specific instances breached the corporation's Editorial Guidelines on either accuracy or impartiality, but found the programme overall as accurate and impartial. For the report published see http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/appeals/esc_bulletins/2011/death_in_med.pdf.