

## INTRODUCTION

On the day of 31 May 2010, when conscientious people of the world were attacked in international waters, killed, wounded and taken captive, and when this mobilised the global conscience by taking the masses to the streets to protest the vicious attack, the idea of conducting interviews with the participants of the Gaza Freedom Flotilla to make the incident go down in history was conceived. However, after their arrival to Istanbul, I could only make four interviews since the participants were very busy at that time with medical checks, judicial process and so on. When the welcoming ceremony of the *Mavi Marmara* – on her arrival back from Israel seven months later – brought most of the Flotilla participants together in Istanbul in December, this work could be taken up once more. I began to make interviews first during the dinner for foreign guests – after the welcoming ceremony held in Sarayburnu, Istanbul, on 26 December 2010 – and then at the head office of the IHH for the next two days. By the end of three days, I was able to make interviews with thirteen foreign participants.

While editing a total of sixteen interviews conducted in June and December 2010, I got in touch through e-mail with some other noteworthy participants who were mentioned in the interviews. Every new interview led to new ones, thanks to the help of my friends in the IHH. I also had an opportunity to make a face-to-face interview with the leader of the Palestinians in 1948 territory (Israel) who happened to be in Istanbul for a programme at the time. Thus, I was able to make thirty-five interviews with the foreign participants of the Freedom Flotilla from all around the world, seventeen of which were face-to-face<sup>1</sup> and the rest (eighteen) through e-mail<sup>2</sup>.

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1 Face-to-face interviews are conducted: on 4 June 2010 with Laura Macdonald Stuart, Maryam Luqman Talib, and Paveen Yaqub; on 26 December 2010 with Dimitris Pleionis, Fatima Mohammadi, Haya Al Shatti, Laura Arau Crusellas, Manuel Espinar Tapial, and Osama Qashoo; on 27 December 2010 with Ahsan Shamruk, Alexandra Lort Phillips, Baboo Adem Zanghar, Nadeem Ahmed Khan, Nur Fitri Moeslim Taher, and Sarah Colborne; on 28 December 2010 with Shatha Barakat Bint Abdullatif; on 18 March 2011 with Sheikh Raed Salah.

2 Written interviews through e-mail are conducted with: David K. Schermerhorn (5 March), David Segarra (10 March), Edda Virginia Manga Otalora (2 March), Gadija Davids (29 March), Gene St.Onge (4 March), Hassan Ghani (12 February), Huwaida Arraf (18 March), Iara Lee (7 March), Inge Hoeger (15 April), Ismail Ali Nashwan and Mustafa

As I was about to finish editing the Turkish version of this work in May, upon the recommendation of the IHH, four more interviews with the Turkish citizens were added, all of which have very significant and remarkable details about the Flotilla attack. While Ayşe Sarioğlu, the reporter of a Turkish daily, *Taraf*, responded to my questions by e-mail; the interviews with Doctor Hamdi Osmanoğlu, the wounded activist Mehmet Ali Zeybek, and the wife of a martyr Çiğdem Topçuoğlu were prepared by transcribing the footage that the IHH recorded previously for a documentary, and by revising them to fit in the context of the book.

Thirty-five of the thirty-nine interviews in the book are with the *Mavi Marmara* passengers while the other four are with passengers of the Greek boat, *Sfendoni*, and the American boat, Challenger 1. In these four interviews, you will read not only the stories of the Freedom Flotilla and the resistance methods used against the Israeli naval commandos on these boats, but also the little known stories of the first sea voyages to Gaza that began in August 2008; thanks to Dr. Paul Larudee (the person behind the missions of breaking the siege of Gaza by sea), Huwaida Arraf (the chairperson of the Free Gaza Movement that has been organizing these sea voyages since 2008), David K. Schermerhorn (who joined or supported most of the sea voyages to Gaza), and Gene St. Onge (who has been directly contributing to the rebuilding of Gaza through his engineering company) who made valuable contributions to the book with their interviews. Especially Dr. Larudee's account of his capture and imprisonment, which he wrote on 19 June 2010 for legal purposes, is a very interesting and important example of non-violent resistance... If you like to comprehend the process that led to the Freedom Flotilla chronologically, it would be advisable to begin reading the book with the interviews of the *Sfendoni* and Challenger 1 passengers.

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In this book, you will see interviews with the activists from all around the world – from Arab countries to Europe, from Indonesia to Australia and New Zealand, from Venezuela to the United States and Canada, from the Republic of South Africa to Pakistan and Turkey – as well as with participants of various occupations – such as member of parliament, municipal councillor, academician, philologist, lawyer, doctor, engineer, journalist, documentary filmmaker, writer, imam and preacher, student,

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Ismail Nashwan (17 March), Jerry Campbell (12 March), Kenneth O'Keefe (3 April), Kevin Neish (16 March), Nicci Enchmarch (21 March), Paul Larudee (16 March), Surya Fachrizal Aprianus Ginting (12 March), and Ouassima Ibn Salah (14 March).

housewife, peace and human rights activist, volunteer etc. You will read the stories of the Freedom Flotilla through the eyes of individuals representing the global conscience. You will find not only personal experiences of the participants but also their emotions and thoughts; in other words, “the harmony of action, emotion and thought”. This actually is the secret behind the success of the Freedom Flotilla and how it became a source of inspiration to so many people around the world.

The Gaza siege and the Palestinian issue – which gathered people from all walks of life, i.e. from different cultures, religions, nations, ideologies, occupations and ages – have created such a harmony of thought and emotion that it could be easily noticed by the similarities of the responses to questions. Presumably none of the problems that the world has gone through could ever bring such different people so close together.

The voice of this global conscience that has risen all around the world against the siege, occupation and injustice cannot be silenced and suppressed anymore by the methods Israel used to apply – i.e. defamation and violence. The inhumane and illegal methods Israel and its soldiers used against the participants of the Freedom Flotilla, – rather than intimidating and terrorising the organizers and passengers – appear to have encouraged them to set sail to Gaza much more enthusiastically once more. A clear sign of this is that a short time after arriving back to their countries, most of them began the preparations of the Freedom Flotilla II.

In this era of globalisation, Israel cannot continue its way by conducting policies leftover from the Cold War and by leaning on the Big Brother. Since the world has undergone a deep transformation, those states that cannot keep up with the changes have no choice but to either collapse or oblige to change sooner or later. Just as the Freedom Flotilla has become a source of inspiration in terms of “the power of the masses”, and thus, prepared the psychological ground for the mass uprising of the peoples in the Middle East against their warn-out and corrupt oppressive regimes, it will also be a driving force that undermines the “realpolitik” of Israel, that isolates it from the world, and thus, that obliges it to change in the mid to long run.

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While asking questions to the Flotilla participants and preparing this book, there was only one motive aside from personal curiosity: leaving a mark in history. This is mainly because the history that we read and learn today is not the history of the righteous people but those of the

powerful; it is a history written down by the victorious. Keeping this fact in mind, we thought it is important to induce the Flotilla participants to write their own history, especially when Israel, the Israeli lobby and pro-Israeli circles do their best – or rather worst – to defame the Freedom Flotilla.

While transcribing, translating and editing the interviews, I worked on them with utter care in order to avoid any shift in the meaning of what the interviewees said and wrote, to preserve their styles, characters and world views, and to keep their emotions and emphasizes as expressed. Also the concepts and words the interviewees preferred to use while responding the questions, especially the Islamic terminology, were kept intact. In this respect, I would like to attract your attentions to a remarkable detail: The verse of the Qur'an "*Inna lilaahi wa inna ilayhi raaji'doon*" (*Surah al-Bakarah*, 156) that Nicci Enchmarch wrote while mentioning Cevdet Kılıçlar's martyrdom reflects the emotional harmony among the participants of the Freedom Flotilla perfectly... While editing the interviews, apart from giving the literal meanings of the Islamic terms in brackets once in every interview, I tried to find out and specify all the originally unstated details such as names, occupations or dates, or other things that needed detailed explanation, and added them in square brackets or footnotes for their clarification.

Our main goal with this book is not only presenting it to the benefit of the curious readers, but also preparing a document for legal proceedings, a reference book for future academic research, and above all, a work recording the details of the Flotilla incident for the next generations. This is the reason why we worked on the book quite meticulously. And again this is the reason why we preserved every detail about the martyrs and the wounded activists narrated in the interviews, despite our worry that they may offend the families of the martyrs and also the wounded. We apologise to everybody and especially families of the martyrs for refreshing their sad memories by keeping the narratives that have heartbreaking and tragic details.

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I asked the interviewees a lot of questions on various matters from *the reasons why they joined the Flotilla* to *whether or not they expected an Israeli attack*, from *the atmosphere on the vessels while sailing towards Gaza* to *what they witnessed or experienced during the attack*, from *the incidents they witnessed under captivity for three days* to *abuses and misbehaviours of the Israelis*, from *the most striking and memorable events that they will never forget* to *the reactions they received in their own coun-*

tries after their return, from what the Flotilla achieved to what they think about Israel, from their expectations of international legal proceedings to the meaning of the *Mavi Marmara*, and to their views on the propaganda of Israel and pro-Israeli circles about the Freedom Flotilla, participants of the *Mavi Marmara*, and the situation in Gaza. Apart from all these, I asked questions to some of the interviewees about their personal stories, their institutional works for the Palestinians, their experiences in previous sea voyages to Gaza, their observations about the life of Gazans and the impact of the siege on the region, and also – to the Palestinian interviewees – about their own experience with the Israelis. There was another question I asked to all of the foreign interviewees: “What do you think about the IHH?” However, – except for a few remarkable ones that are more theoretical rather than sensitive – I have omitted the responses to this question while preparing for publication, upon the recommendation of third persons who read the interviews and shared their objective comments beforehand, and also upon the recommendation of the IHH itself, in order to avoid any misinterpretation that the book contains elements of propaganda.

Also, it is worth mentioning that during the face-to-face interviews, while responding to the questions of “What do you think about the IHH?” and “What does the *Mavi Marmara* mean to you?”, the interviewees’ state of mind suddenly changed; with smiling faces, sparkling eyes, and at times their hands on their hearts, they gave very emotional responses. It can quite easily be understood from all these responses that the IHH has deeply impressed all of the foreign activists by both its activities and its volunteers, despite the fact that most of them were acquainted with the IHH for the first time on the *Mavi Marmara* while others met with it just six months ago in the land convoy to Gaza (Lifeline 3).

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If the responses given to the questions asked are to be assessed, here are the points worth mentioning:

Aside from Israel’s siege of Gaza, Operation Cast Lead – the twenty-two day attack of the Israeli armed forces on Gaza starting on 27 December 2008 – apparently became a milestone for many of the Flotilla participants’ involvement into the Palestinian cause and a motive for their setting off towards Gaza as part of the Freedom Flotilla. That attack even led Jerry Campbell, one of the young participants, to change her area of study at university, from international relations to nursing; and motivated Alexandra Lort Phillips to become a student again after many years, in International Dispute Resolution Law.

Before setting off, all the interviewees were aware of the risks of this voyage and the possible difficulties and problems Israel might have created. Even though all of them had various scenarios in their minds about what Israel might have done to block the Flotilla, and even some knew what the Israeli Navy had done to the vessels that tried to reach Gaza and break the siege since Operation Cast Lead, none of them had ever foreseen a violent and bloody raid that would result in the death and injury of the peace activists while the whole world was watching the attack on TV screens, over and above, while they were still in international waters. In this respect, the Israeli attack on the Flotilla was just a shock for all the interviewees... The major evidence that such an attack was not being foreseen was the lack of adequate medical equipment on the *Mavi Marmara*, especially necessary for the treatment of those wounded by gunfire, by live ammunition, as the medical staff mentioned in their interviews. If the organizers of the Flotilla had ever expected such an attack, most probably they would have taken many more doctors and medical personnel onto the ship, and procured the medical equipment that would be needed in the event of an armed attack.

The interviewees have very nice memories about the three-day voyage. It is evident that they took great pleasure in this voyage that they initially had set off on, in great excitement and hope – although the Israeli attack suddenly spoiled everything... Most of the interviewees referred the time they spent in the Freedom Flotilla as the best days of their lives. The spirit of cooperation and solidarity in the Flotilla seemed to have deeply affected all the participants, despite the fact that they were of different religions, ideologies, languages, cultures and nations, and that most of them met each other for the first time in that voyage.

The witnesses of the incident shared with us the striking stories that they had personally experienced or witnessed both during the attack and afterwards – on vessels, at Ashdod Port, in prison vans, in Israeli prisons and at Ben Gurion Airport. They narrated many incidents in detail from the massacre on the ship to the inhumane and illegal practices, from the abuses and misbehaviours to the beatings of peace activists nearly to death, from the theft of personal belongings and ship equipment to the endless lying. They mentioned sometimes terrible and humiliating, and sometimes childish behaviours of the Israeli naval commandos and officials towards not only the activists but also the wounded. Some of these stories – especially that of the wounded Turk's, Mehmet Ali Zeybek's, and of the Palestinian wounded living in the United Kingdom, Ahsan Shamruk's – are of such a nature as to make one's blood run cold. On

the other hand, the witnesses also mentioned how they continued their non-violent resistance and disobedience, despite all kinds of intimidation, and physical and psychological pressure of Israel.

The participants of the Freedom Flotilla also shared with us the most striking events during this mission that they experienced or witnessed, and will never forget throughout their lives. In this respect, the racism of Israel seems to have affected them the most. The interviewees especially of the Western origin were very disturbed by the outrageous behaviour of Israeli commandos and officials towards the Muslim men, especially the Turkish male citizens. Also, the killing of Cevdet Kılıçlar, who was one of the IHH staff, by gunfire while only taking photographs and his martyrdom is the event that affected the interviewees the most; while the person that deeply influenced most of the participants is Çiğdem Topçuoğlu, the wife of one of the martyrs (Çetin Topçuoğlu who was shot dead while only carrying the wounded downstairs for their treatment). The interviewees were astonished a lot by the immense fear of the Israeli soldiers, despite the fact that they had taken all the Flotilla participants captive and left them defenceless, while they themselves were armed to the teeth. Another unforgettable point mentioned by the interviewees was the global solidarity and unity among the Flotilla participants, which they had never experienced the like of before and had ever longed for; and now, this shared experience has brought them together just like a family and bound them close to each other. The last point worth mentioning here is that the moments of attack were perceived surreal by the witnesses, just like a film they were watching.

While reading the interviews, you will also see how this violent and bloody attack has reverberated either positively or negatively in different parts of the world; not only on political and social levels but also on individual level... For example the story, Edda Manga narrated, of a Palestinian who would be able to see his mother after nine years thanks to the re-opening of Rafah border crossing by Egypt after the Flotilla attack was a very important detail in this respect. Also, – although he did not mention this detail in his interview – one of the Flotilla participant's Jewish wife – because of the support and help she gave to her husband during this mission – was alienated by her own daughter, and now is only able to see her grandchild when her pro-Israeli daughter is not in her house, according to an anecdote in the long account he had written earlier and shared with us... These short stories are a few examples of the fact that the Flotilla has not only directly affected the lives of its

participants, but also of so many individuals all around the world, either positively or negatively.

As first-hand witnesses of the Israeli aggression, the interviewees' comments on Israel are very remarkable and significant. These comments include much information that would break the mold, the popular images in minds of both those who are very sympathetic to Israel and those who are very unsympathetic. I hope this book contributes to the perception of the true face of Israel. In that sense, Israel is neither "an innocent state fighting only for its survival, and a victim of the aggressive anti-Semites who bent on its destruction" as people who are sympathetic to it believe, nor "an invincible, indestructible powerful state capable of shaping the Middle East and the whole world" as people who are unsympathetic to it and especially those who have a habit of interpreting everything as "Zionist conspiracy" believe. The interviews clearly uncover that if you take away the high-technology of this structure, which was established upon fear and still lives on fear, it would quite easily be seen that, in fact, it is a very shaky and weak one, and behaves irrationally and childishly; but on the other hand, this feeling of fear promotes every kind of inhumanity and immorality, and works as a "legitimizing" of all its unacceptable policies.

Another important point worth mentioning here is that some of the interviewees draw attention to the difference between the state/government of Israel and the people of Israel, as well as the difference within the Israeli populace. After all, there are many conscientious Jews both in Israel and around the world who reject and stand against the racist policies of the Zionist regime and its occupation of the Palestinian lands. In this respect, Gene St. Onge's remark about how Rabbi Lerner of Berkeley, who supports justice for the Palestinian people, encouraged them to urge the U.S. government to change its heavily pro-Israel position is an important contribution to this book.

Although the participants of the Freedom Flotilla directly witnessed the Israeli aggression, all of the interviewees stated their desire to join new flotillas and convoys to Gaza. Some of them even emphasized that they were eager to join the Freedom Flotilla II with their families. At the end of both the oral and the written interviews, some of the interviewees told that they would like to sail to Gaza on the *Mavi Marmara* in the next flotilla that was planned to set sail in mid-2011, and even asked me to convey this to the presidency of the IHH. Also some of those who joined the Flotilla only as volunteers told me that they quitted their

jobs and devoted themselves to the peace and human rights activism after what they had witnessed on this mission. This by itself is evidence that Israel did not and also will never be able to turn these volunteers into “well-behaved children” by neither its intimidation and suppression policy against the participants nor its violent and bloody attack on the Flotilla – just as it failed to do so in Palestine for more than sixty years. It is high time for Israel to comprehend that its violent attacks are not making it any safer, but have the contrary effect of strengthening and increasing the efforts for peace and non-violent resistance in global conscience.

Nearly all of the interviewees are convinced that the Flotilla was successful beyond their dreams, despite the fact that it was not able to reach Gaza. Some of them emphasized that despite the incredible success, it was not enough; this struggle needs to continue with new convoys and flotillas since the illegal siege on Gaza is still ongoing. They also evaluated the outcome of the Freedom Flotilla on personal, national, regional and global levels in detail.

What is more, it can easily be understood from the responses that both participants from Turkey and the Turkish government gained exceptional reputation and respect during this mission. Many of the interviewees emphasized, during and after their interviews either orally or by e-mail, that they are indebted to the Turks and the Turkish government for their survival from the Israeli attack, release from prison within a few days, and return to their countries safe and sound. It seems that the kind of treatment they were subjected to both on board and in Turkey impressed all foreign participants deeply.

As to their views on the ongoing international legal proceedings, almost all of them are doubtful about the applicability of any court decision although they stated the importance of legal struggle. Thus, the general conviction is that while legal struggle goes on, it is crucial to continue the struggle, as people of conscience, on individual level.

Lastly, the *Mavi Marmara* evokes great meanings to the Flotilla participants: a home, a family; a symbol of justice, freedom, solidarity, honour, humanity, courage, non-violent resistance, and the power of the masses; a hope, a dream that came true; a blessed ship, a *Buraq*...

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While conducting, transcribing, translating and editing these interviews with the thirty-nine Flotilla participants, and preparing two books – one in Turkish and one in English – within just seven months, many

people made various contributions. In this respect, I would like to thank especially the following people:

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My brother Mehmet Zahid Kor, my niece Ayşe Alacacı and my nephew Ahmet Alacacı with whom I consulted whenever I needed while editing the interviews...

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Salih Pulcu for designing the cover, and Erol Polat for application of the cover design...

All of my family members who did their best to help and support me from beginning until the end of this work...

And of course to the thirty-nine people, the real heroes of this book and the Freedom Flotilla, who responded my questions so sincerely...

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Hoping for a world where each and every person lives in peace and dignity...

Zahide Tuba Kor

1 August 2011, Istanbul

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<sup>3</sup> The translated ones are the interviews with Ayşe Sarioğlu, Çiğdem Topçuoğlu, Hamdi Osmanoğlu, Ismail Ali Nashwan and Mustafa Ismail Nashwan, Mehmet Ali Zeybek, Shatha Barakat Bint Abdullatif and Sheikh Raed Salah.

TO THE PEOPLE OF GAZA UNDER SIEGE FOR YEARS

FOR ALL THE CONSCIENTIOUS PEOPLE OF THE WORLD  
WHO DEVOTE THEMSELVES  
TO WORLD PEACE

IN MEMORY OF THE MARTYRS  
OF THE FREEDOM FLOTILLA

Ali Haydar Bengi  
Cengiz Akyüz  
Cengiz Songür  
Cevdet Kılıçlar  
Çetin Topçuoğlu  
Fahri Yıldız  
Furkan Doğan  
İbrahim Bilgen  
Necdet Yıldırım