

ALL THE INJURIES WERE FROM LIVE AMMUNITION

Laura Macdonald Stuart

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Laura Stuart is British who converted to Islam eleven years ago. She is a housewife, has three children, and is now active as a human rights activist. Before the Freedom Flotilla, she went to Gaza twice in February and December 2009 with the Viva Palestina, and also joined the land convoy in October 2010.

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

I have been to Gaza twice before. I was together with the IHH on the previous land convoy to Gaza in December 2009-January 2010. I admired the way they work and how organized they were. So when they said they were going by sea, I wanted to join the Flotilla and go to Gaza again. The reason why I go to Gaza is because I want to stand against injustice taking place against Palestinian people which our governments seem to be completely unable to change the situation in any way.

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 knew that they had threatened. They had talked obviously in the press a lot about how they were going to do something to prevent us. But I did not anticipate that they would actually land on the ship, immediately using live ammunition against unarmed civilians. So we could not have expected such a vicious attack.

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

Early hours of that night, at around 23:00, the captain announced that we were being surrounded by Israeli ships; they showed up on the radar. We knew that on this day we were going to reach Gaza. So if anything was going to happen, it would be on this day. Because of that we went to bed early to sleep as much as we could. The atmosphere was really quiet, serene and tranquil, but we did know that we should expect something.

What happened during the Israeli attack? I would like to learn your personal experiences.

We heard the *adhan* (call to prayer) and prayed *fajr salah* (dawn prayer) very quickly. At that moment, the attack suddenly started. Most of the injuries and casualties took place in the first minutes. I was with the women on the lowest deck of the ship. I actually could not hear anything, but somebody came looking for anybody who could help first-aid. So I went upstairs to the middle deck where the wounded were brought. I stayed there trying to help the wounded until the Israelis took control of the ship.

How was the atmosphere at that time?

The atmosphere was unreal actually, because there was so much blood. They were bringing in the wounded and the dying. All the injuries were related with live ammunition, and all of them were bullet wounds. We were obviously not prepared for this situation. Some people were lying on the floor, and we were trying to resuscitate them. Others were lying on the benches. We were just trying to stop the bleeding from their wounds, and put bandages on them and drips in some. The atmosphere was extremely busy.

Then you were all taken captive...

I did not actually realise that Israeli soldiers had come to the middle deck, because I was so busy with the wounded. They must have taken all the men from the hall that I was in, but I did not even notice that. I suddenly realised that somebody was talking to me. When I looked, there was nobody around, only the Israeli soldiers were standing in the doorway at the other end of the hall, and they had their guns pointing at me saying, "If you do not come now, we are going to shoot you." So maybe they spoke to me before, but I had not even heard them... I looked around and noticed that everybody had gone. So I said to them, "I have seriously wounded people here, I cannot leave them." And they said, "You must come now, or we're going to shoot you. Don't worry, we'll bring a doctor. We have a doctor with us." So I had to walk towards them. They did not shoot me, but they searched and handcuffed me. I had to go to the deck.

How did they treat you and other passengers when you were taken captive?

Towards some passengers they were very very bad. For myself, in some way, I was very lucky. They treated me slightly better, I think because they must have known that I was with the wounded people. When we went upstairs onto the deck, they took my handcuffs off. They got three wounded, and judged that they were not severe enough to go by helicopter and allowed them to be with me. They actually allowed me to walk around, get them blankets and water. They even handcuffed the wounded from behind. When I requested, they changed them – I mean they took off the handcuffs of the wounded and put them in the front. However, when the other people stood up or slightly moved, they pointed the gun at them and ordered them to

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sit down. They kept them on the floor for a long long time. So I was just very lucky to be allowed to stand.

Then you should not have experienced any abuse or torture both on board and in Israel...

It was very subtle. After they searched everywhere they took us down to the middle floor again, and it was so hot. They did not put the air-conditioner on, so we spent many hours on the way to Ashdod like in a sauna, and they always pointed their guns at us. They did not allow the people even to go to the toilet for a long time, and then when they allowed, there was only one toilet allocated for men and one for women. These cannot be called torture, but they made everything very uncomfortable for us. We had been so hot all day on the ship, and then when we arrived in Israel, they took us in prison vans and put the air-conditioner on high, so that we were absolutely freezing. The air even hurt when hitting our faces. They were driving madly, they kept hitting the brakes and going fast. You know, these seem like little things, but they did them to make us as uncomfortable as possible.

Then you were put into prison...

Yes, it's crazy. They took us to Israel by force. When we got to Israel they asked us to sign a paper saying that we entered Israel illegally so that they can deport us. How? It's crazy. Some people signed the form. I think they were afraid or confused, or they did not understand it, maybe they found a flight home, I don't know. But many of us refused to sign such a ludicrous lie that we entered Israel illegally. Then they said, "Okay, if you do not sign, you have to go to prison," and so we went to prison.

What happened in prison?

In the beginning, although they did not hit us or do anything like that, they were quite harsh towards us. The next day, their attitude



changed suddenly, because the world media was looking at what had happened. So they started to bring us clean t-shirts and food; some lawyers and people from the consulates arrived... In the beginning, they were telling us that we were criminals, and I was arguing with them saying that, “We are not criminals, we did not come here by our free will.” Over the next day, they realised their mistake and started to change their attitude and stopped treating us as criminals.

What about the way back to Turkey?

What happened was that the Turkish government sent airplanes to bring everyone that wanted to come. Already some nationals who did not have consulate representation, I mean many Muslim nationals, left prison the previous night to go to Jordan. The rest of us were just told in the morning, “Okay get up, get up, get up; you’re going, you’re going.” We said, “We did not sign any paper, we do not want to go,” and we refused to leave. They said, “No, no, no, everybody is going, everybody is going.” So we thought, okay let’s see what’s happening. They checked and gave our passports back, and they put us in vans and took all. But we sat many hours – all afternoon and evening – in the airplane. Of course the logistics of knowing who were missing, who were in hospital, who were there, who were already left was difficult. We were all about seven hundred people. So we did not actually leave Israel until about midnight.

The leadership of the Turkish government was very good. They sent officials from Turkey to greet and meet us in the airplanes in Ben

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Gurion Airport. When we arrived in Turkey, got off the airplanes and got on the buses, the consulates of different nations were waiting for us to tell that the Turkish government and Turkish Airlines prepared our flight free of charge, and provided hotels and everything... *Al-hamdulillah* (praise be to God) everything was done for us.

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 obviously will never forget all the wounded people. Also I will not forget the courage of the Turkish men, *masha'Allah* (God has willed it) they were so strong. Even though they had some very serious wounds, they were not crying. They were really very strong and beautiful people. On the other hand, Israeli soldiers were very afraid. A few soldiers were taken hostage, you know, and put in the place where we were treating the wounded. They looked very afraid. However, I did not see any Turkish men looking afraid.

What about the foreign passengers who were wounded?

There was one Australian and one, I think, Indonesian that was wounded. They were okay. But I think it was the Turkish men who did most of the defence, and obviously took the most fatalities and the most wounds. I admired them, because although the Turkish men did not have any guns, some of them just had sticks, they were not afraid of defending the ship. On the other hand, I realised that if you take the gun from an Israeli soldier, you'll see he is just a coward hiding behind the gun.

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

Israelis are the terrorists! The people on the ships were from many many different nationalities, and different religions, Muslims

and non-Muslims... There were people who just wanted to do something against injustice. There was no terrorist of course. But Israel would say that, because they just lie.

What were you delivering to Gaza on cargo ships?

From the United Kingdom, we loaded a lot of medical equipment and aid on the ship “Rachel Corrie” which sailed from Ireland. We also donated money to the IHH to help them buy the cement and other necessary material. And then we brought one truck, full of medical equipment and toys for the children of Gaza, to Istanbul in order to load them on Turkish cargo ship. All was just humanitarian aid. But it’s nothing new that the Israelis are calling us terrorists, as they called the Palestinians, the Lebanese, the Iranians terrorists. Everyone who does not agree with them is labelled a terrorist.

Israel also claims that they were attacked by the activists...

It is normal and logical, because this was our ship, and we were in international waters. Surely we had a right to defend ourselves when the Israeli helicopter came. Actually I did not see with my own eyes but I do understand that from the helicopter they started shooting, before they even landed. They did not actually give any other chance to us. They just started shooting right away. Thus some of the activists resisted with their sticks against them. People have a right to defend themselves if they are under attack. They attacked us, and we were defending.

What does the *Mavi Marmara* mean to you? How did you feel when you saw it again in Istanbul?¹

In December, I travelled to Istanbul to participate in the welcoming ceremony for the *Mavi Marmara*. This was a very emotional time for all of us. For myself, I was very happy to see many of the wounded brothers who had suffered from bullet wounds, and the lack of suitable emergency medical equipment and attention on the ship. I was with them at a very difficult moment in their lives, and this shared experience now binds us very closely together. I was so happy to see those who have overcome their physical injuries, but at the same time I was troubled to see that some are still suffering from the effects of their wounds. I saw two men walking with crutches, and

¹ This question was asked to Mrs. Stuart in March 2011, and her answer was added to the interview.

another who still needs surgery. We remembered of course those who could not be with us that day, the nine martyrs and the brother still in a coma, but we had the chance to meet the families that they left behind. Onboard the ship, I met the little boy [Türker Kağan Çetin] who travelled with us and his mum [Nilüfer Çetin]; they were both smiling and full of life – this is exactly as it should be. We are all continuing on our path of life exactly as Allah has ordained for us. One of the Turkish brothers got married in December, and a Spanish couple that was onboard the ship got engaged – great reassurance that “Life Goes On”.

The *Mavi Marmara* is now a very famous piece of history. Thousands of people wanted to come and look around her. For me the most positive aspect of the Freedom Flotilla is that all the participants are a big family now. We have great solidarity with each other, from all corners of the globe, to continue in the struggle for justice and freedom for all the oppressed people, primarily in Palestine.

Since the *Mavi Marmara* attack, I have been on another aid convoy to Gaza. We left London in October 2010 and travelled through Europe and North Africa. Sadly on this occasion I was not able to reach Gaza, as I was refused entry to Egypt. The reason for this ban was not made clear to me; however, the Egyptian authorities who detained me in Cairo said that my name was black listed by Security Services. The aid and vehicle I brought was taken to Gaza by another convoy member *alhamdulillah*; but I realise that reaching Palestine now is becoming increasingly difficult rather than easier. After the *Mavi Marmara* incident we each received a ten-year ban from entering Israel which means that I have no access to the West Bank and Jerusalem. Now being banned from Egypt means I now have the sea as my only option to reach my besieged brothers and sisters in Gaza.

However, I am very active on the subject of Palestine, and I use social media to inform people about the situation there. I have also become much more active in public speaking, and especially I am invited on the television channels often to talk on a range of issues about Palestine, the Middle East and even women in Islam. I have continuous dialogue with my local Member of Parliament who passes my reports to the relevant government departments for their comments on the issues of life under occupation in Palestine.