

**IN LESS THAN JUST FIFTEEN MINUTES,
EVERYWHERE FILLED WITH THE WOUNDED**

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Shatha Barakat Bint Abdullatif (1965) is a Syrian, and a mother of three children. She received her Bachelor's degree in Arabic Language and Literature from the University of Damascus, and worked as an Arabic teacher for more than twenty years. Currently, she is the director of *Al Maaref Academy*, which provides foreign languages and computer training. She is also a writer, and has story books for children. Currently, she is working on a book that is made up of the stories of the prophets. She has participated in numerous activities to support the Palestinian cause and Palestinians, and is a member of the National Association for the Struggle against Zionism, which focuses on supporting the Palestinian and Iraqi people, and fulfilling their needs.

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

In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. We are all following the news on television, and watching the hardship experienced by the Palestinian people, the crimes committed against them, the policies of Judaization, the massacres, the expulsion from their homes and lands, etc. The expulsion of the Palestinian people from their homelands, which started in 1948 and continued in 1967, and the policies of Judaization are still being enforced. It is not possible to remain silent to the crimes being committed against our brothers and sisters. It is our duty, as people who witness and are aware of all these things, to help the Palestinians; we cannot just sit and wait for help to come.

Did you foresee 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.

We had heard Israel's threats. They had made military manoeuvres using live ammunition in territorial waters of the Occupied Palestine. Nonetheless, we were determined; we had no intention of giving into their threats, even if these threats were to kill us. Because we are people who believe in Allah. We knew that those who died among us would be *shaheeds* (martyrs) while the rest would be victorious *insha'Allah* (if God wills). After all, both possibilities were good for us.

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

There was an atmosphere of brotherhood and love among the passengers of different nationalities and religions. Citizens from thirty-seven countries participated in the Flotilla. Jews, Muslims, Christians and atheists were all together. We had come together for a matter which concerns all humanity: a nation has been living under siege for years. Every day, Israel has been bombing, launching missiles and threatening them with death; destroying their agricultural land; preventing them to use their right to work and travel. The people in Palestine have been deprived of even the most basic human rights, and even the lowest standard of living. They don't have the freedom to live an honourable life. All of us on the *Mavi Marmara* were thinking about them. Gaza brought us together, and became our honour.

Could you please tell us what happened during the Israeli attack? I would like to learn your personal experiences and what you witnessed.

The Zionist soldiers started to fire during the *fajr* (dawn) prayer. It could be seen from the open seas that we had lined up for prayer. However, the Zionists are used to killing people who are praying, as part of their old habit.

The women were taken down to the second deck for their safety while on the upper decks, some of the men undertook the defence of the ship and the passengers. The attack started without any prior warning. Usually, when you enter a country's territorial waters, that country's coast guards cut off your route and say, "You have entered our territorial waters without permission. Identify yourselves or you will be stopped by force." However, we did not hear such a warning. Actually we were in international waters and very far away from the territorial waters of the Occupied Palestine [Israel]. We were surrounded by four battle frigates, two submarines, thirty zodiac boats and three helicopters. They began to spray bullets both from the air and the sides of the ship. By the way, I would like to mention a very important point. None of us, neither the men nor the women, were afraid at all. *Alhamdulillah* (praise be to God), our morale was very high.

Later, it was announced that medical help was needed, and women who were doctors, nurses, or who could help the wounded were called upstairs. I went outside to help. As I walked up the steps, I saw that the walls and stairs were red in blood. There was chaos in the narrow corridor. Two or three wounded passengers were lying on the floor, and a group of young people was struggling to revive them. When I entered the men's hall, I saw that every part of it had been filled with the wounded. All of this happened in less than fifteen minutes. This was an unprecedented brutality. There was only humanitarian aid on the ship, and no weapon of any sort. How that hall could have been filled with so many wounded within such a short time..! (In the meantime, I saw two Israeli soldiers that had been taken hostage by the young people. They were brought to the hall, where the wounded were waiting, for medical treatment.) The right arm of one of the wounded lying on the floor had been severely broken, and even the bone was showing. I tried to make a temporary splint for the broken arm, since there wasn't a splint in the medical supplies of the ship. I took empty boxes of medicines trying to make

WHILE EXPERIENCING ABSOLUTE FREEDOM AND LOVE ON THE FREEDOM FLOTILLA, SUDDENLY YOU BECOME A CAPTIVE! NEITHER FOOD NOR WATER WAS GIVEN. EVEN GOING TO THE BATHROOM AND SPEAKING WAS FORBIDDEN... I THOUGHT HOW THE PALESTINIAN SISTERS ENDURE BEING HELD PRISONERS FOR SO MANY YEARS IN ISRAELI JAILS!

a splint with their cardboard and, with the help of one of the sisters, I tied it as a temporary splint on the broken arm.

When the soldiers began to go downstairs from the top deck, the young people yelled to the women, “Go downstairs, go down to the lower deck” in order to protect them. I didn’t want to go downstairs immediately. Because I am forty-five years old, and had only seen the Israeli soldiers on TV screens for many years; just once, I wanted to come face-to-face and see them with my own eyes. I had no intention of missing this opportunity. So I went out to the upper deck, and started to look at the sea and the sky thinking, “I wonder if any help might come from the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan... I wonder if he will send a helicopter or a plane, or if he will mobilise the Turkish army in order to protect the Turkish citizens on the Freedom Flotilla...” I prayed to Allah the Almighty, “You should have invisible armies that nobody knows except You.” Later a young Turkish man with a bottle in his hand came and threw it at the soldiers on the zodiac boat below in an attempt to prevent the soldiers from boarding the ship... The young Turks proved their strength and merit. *Masha’Allah* (God has willed it), I’ve never seen anyone like them before. They were just like their ancestors, Sultan Mehmed II “the Conqueror”, and Süleyman I “the Magnificent”.

While I was helping the wounded, the life jacket I was wearing began to bother me; it was very thick, and I was wearing an overcoat underneath it. Fearing that the ship might sink and we might fall overboard, I had dressed warmly, and put my passport in my pocket. At one point, I took my overcoat off, but lost both my overcoat and my passport in the turmoil. We did not know what we were going to encounter, but would probably need our passports. For this reason, I went back to the hall, where the wounded were being treated, to look for my passport, but I couldn’t find my overcoat. There I saw the conditions of the wounded once again; they were deteriorating, and some had even died.



Later we went down, to the women's cabin, and waited there until approximately 8:00 or 9:00 a.m. Finally they called us, and after searching us one by one, they took us to the outer deck so that the Israeli soldiers could search inside the ship.

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

My heart shattered since we were not able to enter Gaza; I felt great pain and anguish. While experiencing absolute freedom and absolute love on the Freedom Flotilla, suddenly you're handcuffed and become a captive! While the sky and the sea are stretching out endlessly before you, and your friends show great interest in you, suddenly there is nothing left! Everything changes all of a sudden. All the beautiful feelings that you had, are taken away in a moment. All of the cameras, mobile phones and even the small memory cards that were found on the ship were confiscated. Even going to the bathroom was forbidden. Neither food nor water was given. You were put under great pressure. Even speaking was forbidden. If you talked to the people next to you, you were yelled at to remain silent...

At that time, I thought of the Palestinian sisters that are kept prisoners in the Israeli jails; how do they endure being held for so many years in Israeli jails? In fact some of the sisters are put in jails while they are pregnant. They have to put up with being held in

A SOLDIER STEPPED ON A LIFE JACKET ON THE SHIP, AND ITS LUMINOUS BANDS STARTED TO FLASH. THEY RUSHED DOWNSTAIRS YELLING, "BOMB, BOMB!" WHILE AN OFFICER AT ASHDOD WAS SEARCHING ME, SHE PULLED OUT A PEN FROM MY POCKET AND FLUNG IT, SCREAMING AS IF SHE HAD FOUND A BOMB. CAN YOU IMAGINE HOW AFRAID THEY WERE?

prison, giving birth and raising their child there. They can see the sun and take in fresh air for only one hour each day. They are subjected to torture and beatings. And all of these naturally affect their psychology. Also think about what happens to a child who grows up without affection from his/her parents... If there is someone who says that these things do not happen in the "free world", I would like to give them an example: A woman named Ahlam al-Tamimi was imprisoned in 2000. She must be thirty-two years old now. She was sentenced to sixteen life imprisonments. Can you imagine what kind of hate this is? How can sixteen life sentences be given to a girl in this age?

When I was in prison, I was very tired. I had severe pain in my heart and chest. I couldn't sleep for three days because of the excessive stress. The first night I stayed awake spending all my time praying; I prayed for Allah the Almighty not to leave us alone. The second night I couldn't sleep, because I felt great sorrow at not being able to complete our journey to Gaza, and set foot on the Palestinian land. I couldn't sleep on the third night, because we had been thrown into jail by the Zionists, and weren't given any food or water. Due to a severe state of stupor, I could only drink a little water. I was taken to the doctor on a stretcher. However, praise be to Allah for putting us through this experience. From now on, we need to think about the predicament of the captives and prisoners held in the prisons of the Israeli Occupier, and find solutions for these prisoners.

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 will never forget the scene when the *shaheeds* were brought in and put in front of us. I felt as if they were my own children or my brothers – one of them was old enough to be my father. I sat in front of them. Removing the clothes covering the faces of two *shaheeds*,

I began to cry asking, "Have you seen that Allah's promises to the *shaheeds* is true?" and added, "*Alhamdulillah* that you have been able to leave this cruel world, and *insha'Allah* reach Heaven."

I experienced another event in prison that affected me very much. A female and a male soldier came calling, "Shatha Barakat, Shatha Barakat!" "That's me," I said, and they told me to come. We went downstairs, and they took me outside for interrogation. I was the only woman interrogated from the Flotilla. The officer asked me a lot of questions like, "Why did you come to Israel? Why are you helping the Palestinians? Why...? Why...?" Since they were a democratic state, and were going to take me to the court! For what? For bringing aid to the Palestinian people! This was nothing less than a comedy... While the officer was saying to me, "There was a tall, strong, muscular man on the ship deck that attacked and tried to kill the Israeli soldiers," I immediately said, "No, I didn't see anyone like that." The officer asked the same question over and over shouting at me, and each time I gave a negative answer. The officer asked once more, "There were bulky men there. They were beating the Israelis. I saw you with them..." This means that certain things "appeared" to the Israelis that I could not see, *subhan'Allah* (glory be to God)! I said to him, "You say you saw me; that means you were among the Israeli soldiers, you were one of the Israeli soldiers who killed us. Yet, you know very well that we didn't have any weapons. You know very well that we had not even entered the territorial waters of Palestine when you hijacked us in the middle of the sea." He wanted to change the subject and said again, "I saw you with them." In response I said, "There were no such men as you have described. All of the people were like you and the soldier next to you." He said, "You're lying. So what, all of them (pointing with his hand) were that short and stocky? No, they were tall and bulky." With these words, it was as if he was trying to say that there were trained soldiers in civilian clothing accompanying us, and they would use this accusation against us when we went to the international court. *Alhamdulillah*, with inspiration from Allah the Almighty, I mocked them: "Yes, maybe there might have been men on the ship that grows bombs in their muscles. Look at me carefully. There may be ultraviolet rays in my eyes that can kill you." He stared at me in fear and amazement. I don't know how it happened, but he told the soldier next to him to remove me from the interrogation room. You can't imagine at all the extent of their fear of us. When talking to us, they resembled chickens, trembling in fear. Earlier, I

turned to the soldier standing next to me and said, “My mouth is dry. I want a glass of water.” He was just getting up to bring me a glass of water when the officer shouted at him. As far as I understand, he shouted, “Don’t leave me alone with her.” I was in prison and had nothing with me; how could I kill him, or blow myself up?! What a strange fear this was!

It is worth talking at length about the fear that existed in the hearts of the Zionist soldiers. I want to give two examples of this. There were luminous bands on the life jackets that we put on onboard. After we were taken captives, we all took the life jackets off. We were all handcuffed, and the men were made to kneel down. The Israeli soldiers surrounded us; behind every one of us was a soldier, waiting with his rifle pointed at our heads. When one left, another would come. At that moment, one of the soldiers stepped on a life jacket, and its luminous bands started to flash. Almost going mad with fear, they started yelling, “Bomb, bomb!” and rushed downstairs. I started to laugh at them with the Turkish woman next to me. They were afraid, and we were laughing at them... Once again, the female officer at Ashdod Port wanted me to take my overcoat off. She was going to search me, and be sure that nothing – even the smallest thing such as a memory card – was left on me. She put her hand into my pocket and pulled out a pen; screaming as if she had found a bomb, she flung the pen on the ground. Can you imagine how afraid they were? We know that their hearts are empty and weak. Because of this, they could not dare coming face-to-face with us; they even fought us with masked faces. They were afraid, because they were aware of their crimes. They were afraid, because they do not have faith; they do not feel that Allah is with them. We, on the other hand, clung tightly to the lifeline (*hablullah*) offered to us by Allah. We knew that our strength was from Allah and was in His hands alone. Only He is to be feared and not anyone else.

What does the *Mavi Marmara* mean to you?

It is not possible for me to put into words the feelings that the *Mavi Marmara* ship awakens in my heart. It has a very great place in our hearts. For us it means soul, love, brotherhood and altruism. It means a way leading us to Palestine. The *Mavi Marmara* is almost like the *buraq*, the creature that carried Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him) from Mecca to the Masjid al-Aqsa in al-Quds. *Insha’Allah*, the *Mavi Marmara* will be a *buraq* to conquer the Masjid al-Aqsa and help the oppressed.