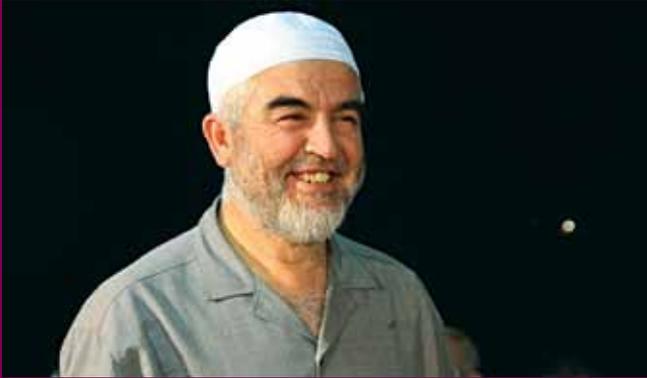


THE FREEDOM FLOTILLA IS THE FIRST STEP OF LIBERATING THE ENTIRE PALESTINIAN LAND

Sheikh Raed Salah

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Sheikh Raed Salah (1958) is the leader of the Islamic Movement in Palestine '48 (Israel). Having won the local elections three times successively, Sheikh Salah was the mayor of Umm al-Fahm, his hometown, throughout the 1990s. Although he had the opportunity to be elected as a member of *Knesset*, the Israeli Parliament, and represent the Palestinians there, he preferred to leave active politics, and dedicated himself to the Palestinian cause, the struggle against the occupation, the protection of the al-Aqsa Mosque and liberation of al-Quds (Jerusalem). He is a pioneer of passive resistance against Israel. In addition to humanitarian projects and social programmes, he carries out projects for the self-sufficiency and economic independency of the 1948 Palestinians. He was arrested by Israel several times since 1981, and was repeatedly banned from leaving Israel. In 2000, he survived an assassination attempt by Israeli forces unharmed. During the attack on the *Mavi Marmara*, the Israeli soldiers killed a Turkish citizen, İbrahim Bilgen, taking him for Sheikh Raed Salah.

What does the Freedom Flotilla mean for Palestine and Gaza?

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. The Freedom Flotilla represents a universal consensus of all people in every part of the world, despite all the differences in language, religion and nationality. With the Freedom Flotilla, everybody wanted to put an end to the Zionist occupation and to break the blockade of Gaza, which is the first step of liberating the entire Palestinian land with al-Quds as its capital.

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

If I said that the days I spent on the Freedom Flotilla were the best days of my life, I wouldn't be exaggerating. Even though our languages, religions and nationalities were different, we were all united against all possible difficulties, and were part of an atmosphere of love and patience. We knew that we had set out not for personal benefit but for the benefit of all people of the world, and this benefit was to put an end to the Israeli occupation and oppression. Because of this, everybody had a smile on his/her face; everybody was ready to give everything he/she had to achieve this goal.

On the *Mavi Marmara*, there truly was a most sincere atmosphere. We cooperated with each other in every step we took. We gathered around a single table for meals, and we were all together during the evening celebrations. We all looked at one another with a sense of respect and appreciation. None of us ever felt as if there were strangers among us. Every one of us was aware that we had taken on an important mission in the name of all free peoples of the world; we set off on this journey not for pseudo-freedom, but rather in pursuit of true freedom. We all were aware that we were trying to contribute to universal peace.

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

The attack began during the *fajr salah* (dawn prayer). At that moment I was praying. Suddenly I heard the gunshots. The Israeli battle frigates and helicopters were spraying bullets at us from the sea and the air. The Israeli pirates didn't come to seize the *Mavi Marmara* ship, but to kill us. The whole world should know that their purpose was to "kill". The evidence for this is the list of names found in the bag of one of the pirates. Next to every name on the list was that person's photo, and they planned to kill all of these people. Among those listed

were – not only myself but also – the names of many important individuals from the Arab and Muslim world to Europe and the United States, from Bülent Yildırım, the president of the IHH, to Archbishop Hilarion Capucci. This shows that the Israeli pirates had come to the middle of the sea to commit a massacre. They had intended to kill more people than they actually martyred, and to shed more blood of the passengers than they actually wounded. However, *alhamdulillah* (praise be to God), Allah protected us.

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 both on board and in the Israeli prison?

After unexpectedly attacking with their weapons and seizing the *Mavi Marmara*, they handcuffed us. They hijacked not just us and the *Mavi Marmara* ship, but also the other ships of the Flotilla and their passengers. They broke and threw away most of the equipment, computers, cameras and video cameras that we had. They tore our suitcases to pieces. Nothing was left untouched. I had been writing in detail my personal experiences on the Freedom Flotilla. I had written down every moment, from our first days in Istanbul to the ones in Antalya, and especially every day and night we spent on the ship. I had also recorded minute by minute whatever happened during the attack. However, the Israeli intelligence confiscated the notebook that I had written everything in, and still has not given it back.

After we disembarked from the ship, we were taken to the Shikma Prison in Ashkelon straight away. They charged me, the Member of Parliament Haneen Zoabi and the other activists that we were together on the ship with having committed more than ten crimes, and wanted to give us a ten to twenty year sentence for each crime. They charged us with wanting to kill the Israeli soldiers, whereas they were the ones who had killed and wounded our brothers. In reality, we were the victims of the Israeli attack, but they declared us guilty. In fact, they were the ones that raided and seized the ship, and kidnapped us, not to mention in international waters. Moreover, they also committed international war crimes against all humanity. Despite all this, according to them, we were the alleged criminals.

Unwillingly they had to release us, first of all thanks to grant of Allah, the Lord of the Worlds, and then to the Turkish government, and particularly thanks to the brave stance of the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. If it had not been for this brave stance of Mr. Erdoğan, I would still be in the Israeli prison, and the trials

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would still be going on. We probably would have been sentenced for at least ten to twenty years. However, thanks to the Turkish government's stance, they had to release us within the first forty-eight hours of our arrest. *Alhamdulillah* to He Who saved us from prison.

How did the Israelis treat you while you were captive?

When they saw me for the first time on the *Mavi Marmara* ship, I remember very well that they were shocked; because they thought they had killed me in the first moments of the attack. Even during the attack, they reported to the Israeli authorities that they had killed me, and this news was immediately broadcasted in the Hebrew media. So, when they first saw me, they were shocked. Astonished, they asked me, "Are you Raed Salah?" I replied, "Yes, I am." They filmed me, handcuffed me, and took me out to one of the decks. I sat there with the other brothers who had been kidnapped. Later on a soldier came and asked me the same question: "Are you Raed Salah?" I replied, "Yes, I am Raed Salah." Then another soldier came and asked again: "Are you Raed Salah?" I said, "Yes, I am Raed Salah," to him as well. He took me to one of the cabins, and there someone from the Israeli intelligence came and asked, "Who are you?" I replied, "I am Raed Salah." He examined my ID cards. Later, I returned to where the other brothers were, and sat with them.

When the ship docked at Ashdod Port, which was a Palestinian city before the *Nakba* of 1948 [the day of catastrophe, referring to the displacement of Palestinian people from their homelands that accompanied the creation of Israel], another intelligence officer came and took me to a different room. Once again I was asked if I was Raed Salah or not. I answered, "Yes, I am Raed Salah." During the interrogation, the sun was about to set. When it was over, I prayed the *maghrib* (prayer at sun set) and *isha'a* (evening) prayers in *jama'ah* (congregation) with our brothers. As we finished praying, we saw the Israeli Chief of General Staff, Gabi Ashkenazi, coming towards



Bülent Yıldırım (president of the IHH) and Sheikh Raed Salah in the farewell of the Mavi Marmara in Istanbul (22 May 2010)

us. He came within a few metres of us, and then left. Then he came back, and was looking at me carefully in order to determine if I was indeed Raed Salah or not, or to be sure if they had killed me or not. Then he left. They took us straight to prison. Then, by false accusations against us, they started investigation and the first legal steps to sentence us to imprisonment for long periods of time.

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?

The scene that affected me most was seeing people over the age of seventy being taken prisoner [such as Hadji Ismail Ali Nashwan, Hilarion Capucci]. They were handcuffed, and made to kneel down with us on the floor of the ship deck. This scene upset me very much. I was upset, but didn't feel too much sorrow; because I was sure that our elders, without exception, were performing a heroic role on behalf of all humanity. At that moment all mankind was shouting, "Freedom for Gaza, down with Israeli occupation!" And these elderly people were paying the price for this honourable and historic role.

I wonder about your experiences, and also those of the other Palestinian and Israeli passengers of the Flotilla, after you were released from the prison. How was the reaction of Israelis towards you?

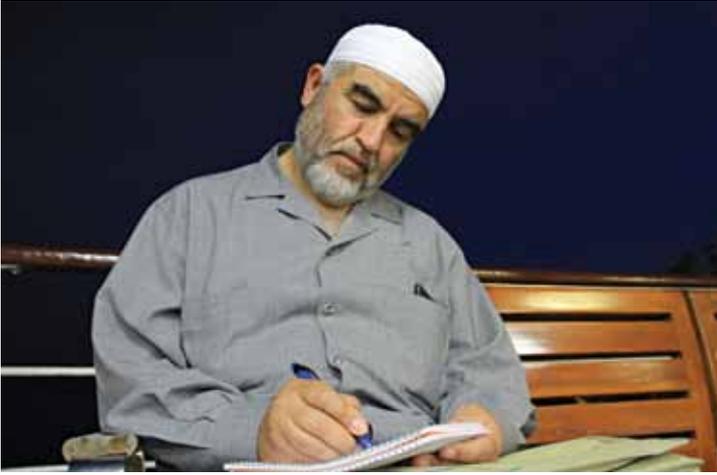
There was such hatred and hostility in the eyes of the Israelis that I had never seen before. When we were being taken from the *Mavi Marmara* ship to the prison, everybody was looking at us in a very hostile manner. The Israeli prosecutors wanted to sentence us.

IF IT HAD NOT BEEN FOR MR. ERDOĞAN'S BRAVE STANCE, WE WOULD STILL BE IN PRISON. WE PROBABLY WOULD BE SENTENCED FOR AT LEAST TEN TO TWENTY YEARS. HOWEVER, THANKS TO THE TURKISH GOVERNMENT'S STANCE, THE ISRAELI AUTHORITIES HAD TO RELEASE US WITHIN THE FIRST 48 HOURS OF OUR ARREST.

The Israeli people present in the courtroom were also staring at us in the same hostile manner. Even the crowds gathered outside the courtroom were swearing repeatedly and shouting offensive slogans at us; and also wanted the Israeli court to sentence us to heavy imprisonment. The female judge, who was looking at our files, seemed to be more threatening both in her appearance and address than that of the prosecutor who was trying to imprison us. Without any exceptions, everybody was collaborating against us. They thought that this was a good opportunity to sentence us to heavy imprisonment. But it was Allah's decisions, not Israel's plans that prevailed. Two days later, despite their pride, with the will of Allah, Lord of the Worlds, we were released from prison. I remember getting into the car of one of my relatives; the car was only able to move slowly down the street at snail's pace. We were freed by pushing our way through the hostile crowds that had come to provoke the court against us. Because Allah, the Lord of the Worlds, willed for us to live free and to die free, and only prostrate to Him.

After the *Mavi Marmara* incident, have the Palestinians/Arabs living in the 1948 territories (Israel) encountered any difficulties? Has Israel's pressure on the Palestinian/Arab population increased?

Without doubt the pressure on us has increased recently, and we have put up with oppression and a number of prosecutions. They have been trying to enact a series of laws which include racist discrimination against us, and which stipulate religious oppression. For instance, they want to enact a law that does not accept Arabic as an official language. Yet the population of the Muslims living inside the 1948 borders is more than 1.2 million today. Likewise, they want to enact a separate law that requires the removal of all signs written in Arabic. They insist on a law which prohibits talking about 1948 Palestinian *Nakba*, and commemorating of the *Nakba* Day; this law stipulates imprisonment of those who commemorate the *Nakba*. In addition, they are working on another law by which they can ex-



Sheikh Raed Salah writing his personal experiences on the Mavi Marmara

ile those people who are found guilty of acting contrary to “the security”. With another law, they are trying to completely sever our ties with all Muslim and even non-Muslim associations, and to stop their activities, which want to lessen the suffering of the Palestinian people, and to help the orphans, the sick and the poor. If I said that today the establishment known as Israel is acting as if it has got mad cow disease, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration. However, we are an *ummah* (the Muslim nation) that doesn’t fear anyone except Allah; so we will never fear this type of mad behaviour.

Are you hopeful of the ongoing international legal proceedings?

Today the official international conscience is being tested. I think that the conscience of international public opinion has already passed the test with success and got full mark. When the conscience of international public opinion has sent its representatives to the *Mavi Marmara* ship, and when these representatives have accomplished the mission thoroughly, the official international conscience has begun to mention the International Criminal Court in Hague and other courts, as well as the United Nations Human Rights Council and various agendas. We are following all developments carefully, and wonder if, this time, the official institutions will be on the side of humanity, or submit to the pressure of international Zionism. If they prefer to be on our side we will shout together in the face of the racist Zionism: Since when have you had the right to enslave the people that their mothers bore free!

THANKS TO ISRAEL'S ARROGANT AND FOOLISH BEHAVIOUR, THE MESSAGE OF THE *MAVI MARMARA* REACHED NOT ONLY GAZA, BUT THE ENTIRE WORLD. ALL THE CONSCIENTIOUS PEOPLE IN THE WORLD HEED THIS CALL. IT HAS BECOME ONE OF THE MAJOR CAUSES OF THE ARAB PEOPLES' REVOLUTIONS IN TUNISIA, EGYPT, LIBYA, AND YEMEN.

Could you please evaluate the Freedom Flotilla in terms of its local (Palestine and Israel), regional and international consequences?

The two most obvious characteristics of the Israeli occupation are arrogance and foolishness. These characteristics motivated them to attack the *Mavi Marmara* and to commit war crimes. Thus, they declared war not only against Turkey but against the whole world, and committed crimes against humanity. Thanks to their arrogant and foolish behaviour, the message of the *Mavi Marmara* reached not only Gaza but the entire world. The *Mavi Marmara* put the hearts of those people with a free conscience in relief, and all the conscientious people in the world heed this call. I personally know from my kith and kin that at the moment of the attack, from men and women to children... everybody was crying. One of them said to me word for word, "When my mother died, I swear I didn't shed even a single tear, but I couldn't hold back my tears when I heard what happened on the *Mavi Marmara*." This was precisely the situation of many people. So, what does this mean? As passengers of the *Mavi Marmara* ship, we had hoped to reach the port of Gaza; however, in a way unknown to us, we reached the ports of Gaza, Europe, America, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the ports of the entire world. We more than fulfilled our mission. The most obvious proof of this is the race among tens of thousands of people all around the world who have applied to take their place on around twenty ships, as far as I know, that are making preparations to set sail as part of the Freedom Flotilla II. Everybody wants to be among the people who board these ships in order to reach Gaza. Also, I want to clearly state that the Freedom Flotilla, with the grant of Almighty Allah, has become one of the major causes of the Arab peoples' revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. Because these peoples are no longer willing to be bounded by these invalid regimes. They are convinced that it is necessary to break their chains. Thereby the revolutions have begun and now, the current regimes that have been



Sheikh Raed Salah leading a prayer in congregation on the *Mavi Marmara*

the reasons for these chains are being overthrown one by one. These people that are emancipated are now preparing for new roles: to support the causes of Palestine, al-Quds and Masjid al-Aqsa, and to help all the oppressed people of the world.

What does the *Mavi Marmara* mean to you? How did you feel when you boarded the ship again last December in Istanbul?

I feel that the *Mavi Marmara* is one of the most precious ships ever built by human hands. Only Noah's ark or the ships that other Prophets and their devoted companions boarded may be more meaningful than the *Mavi Marmara*. The *Mavi Marmara* conveyed the true freedom and honour of humanity; it set out to take this freedom and honour to Gaza which is under siege. For this reason, I absolutely believe that every plank on the *Mavi Marmara* ship has made history. On the Day of Judgment, the Almighty Allah will make the *Mavi Marmara* ship talk. We ask Allah that this ship may bear witness in our favour, and also against the Zionists, on the Day of Judgment – a day when no one will be oppressed, and no oppressor will sustain his oppression. The oppressor will receive the punishment he deserves, not only in the presence of the Lord of the Worlds in the Hereafter but also in this world. Allah the Almighty commanded: “*And those cities – We destroyed them when they wronged, and We made for their destruction an appointed time.*” (Surah al-Kahf, 59)