

## Remembering Mavi Marmara

The Palestinian crisis is one of the most important political and humanitarian issues in the contemporary world, and maybe the most long-standing one.

Due to the Israeli occupation which started a century ago, hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, wounded and sent into exile, and their lands were confiscated. Today, two-thirds of the Palestinian population live in refugee camps or in exile. One-third of the Palestinians who reside in Palestine, on the other hand, live constantly under Israeli occupation. The Gaza Strip is a small part of the Palestinian lands in which more than 1.5 million people live. Most of them are refugees living under direct Israeli blockade which has been continuing for years. Gaza, as the most populated place in the world in terms of persons per km<sup>2</sup>, is literally an open-air prison.

The Israeli containment policy resulted in a tremendous humanitarian catastrophe and agony. Living in a besieged area, the Gazan people cannot import or export anything, even the basic goods that they cannot reach -80% of the factories in Gaza are closed- to be able to sustain their lives. They are actually in need of all sorts of humanitarian supplies, and needless to say that the situation in Gaza has been terrible and unbearable for a long time. Not only the Gazans but also the people in West Bank are being treated badly by the arbitrary and inhuman policies of the Israeli occupation regime, and even lack the very basic human rights.

So the Palestinian issue has become more of a humanitarian crisis than just being a political conflict. Accordingly, this humanitarian aspect of the issue holds all sensitive and mindful world citizens responsible for helping the Palestinian people to be free. People all over the world did and do many things for the sake of the Palestinians, but this phase of the crisis requires being much more assertive.

One of the most important manifestations of the Palestinian solidarity activities having been conducted in recent years is Freedom Flotilla. From all over the world, hundreds of people gathered for the sole purpose of helping the Palestinian people in Gaza by not only delivering humanitarian aid but also showing solidarity to them and drawing world's attention. The large public, awareness-raising, and attention-drawing activities are sometimes more effective than directly providing humanitarian aid. So, the idea of a flotilla was born out of this consideration to achieve the end of helping the Palestinians through these two means of humanitarian aid and solidarity activity. To this end, the volunteers put the biggest humanitarian flotilla so far in place.

Initially, the representatives of six different organizations from different countries met in Istanbul to detail the project. After a long and challenging process, the organizations from Greece, Turkey, Sweden, Belgium, England, and the USA designed a foolproof humanitarian action plan. The leading organization would be the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH as its Turkish abbreviation) in Turkey because of its field experience and reputation for large-scale humanitarian operations.

Eight months before Freedom Flotilla put out to sea and the stakeholder NGOs started a very big fund-raising campaign for Gaza. While the campaign was ongoing, other infrastructural works were being carried out such as buying ships, determining the participants and even upgrading the Gazan harbor.

During this period, a great number of meetings, conferences, press releases, concert organizations and publications were conducted in different cities and countries.

The flotilla was to (or would) consist of six vessels including a big commercial ship (Mavi Marmara), a yacht and four other cargo ships filled with humanitarian aid supplies. The biggest ship in the flotilla, Mavi Marmara, had about 600 civilians onboard from more than 30 countries. Activists, humanitarian volunteers, political leaders, deputies, journalists, NGO representatives, and the crew had met in the city of Antalya where the ships were anchored before setting sail. The youngest passenger was 2 years old and the eldest 82.

Three of the six ships including Mavi Marmara sailed from Turkey, while the other two from Greece and

one from Ireland. According to the action plan, all the ships would meet in the southwest of the Cyprus island before heading to Gaza.

The ambiance of the camaraderie on the ships was perfect and the spirit of the volunteers was very high. Although they were from different religious and political backgrounds, all people were united around one particular cause. They shared not only their bread but also their sincerity. They were sure that this flotilla would break the illegitimate Israeli blockade.

The daily life onboard was very unusual. The ships did not have separate rooms for every passenger –except for the ladies. So, all people had to share the same place to spend time and to sleep at night. Nobody was actually disturbed by others. While the Muslim passengers were performing prayer, Christians, Jews, and atheists were in their corners, reading, writing or emailing. There was absolute real peace and harmony.

When you looked at the scene, at every corner of the ship, you saw different groups of people talking to one another and exchanging ideas. The main topic of all the conversations was, of course, Palestine. All people from different parts of the world had different ideas about what they would do once the ships arrived in Gaza. During the blessed one-week onboard, the people managed to build a small pluralistic society. They became brothers through their principles.

Thanks to high-tech equipment, a 24-hour broadcast continued from Mavi Marmara. The journalists used the broadcasting facilities by turn. The internet room was always full. While ordinary people shared their experiences of the journey with their friends behind via social media, the journalists were busy with their articles, rushing to meet the deadlines.

The ships were all coordinated and following one another. The most important thing was to make sure that Israeli territorial waters were not being violated. The ships followed the route in the international waters that were parallel to the shore and at least 80 miles away. (Israeli territorial waters border was 12 miles).

Six days after the sailing, that is the morning of May 31, this harmony was literally demolished.

That vicious night, after the first warning, the Israeli war machine began to get closer to the Freedom Flotilla. The Israelis employed four big warships, about 20 attack boats, two submarines, four helicopter gunships (or attack helicopters) and some drones to stop the humanitarian flotilla. It was 4:00 a.m. when the first bullet was fired when the Muslim passengers were performing their morning prayer. The captain of Mavi Marmara desperately informed the Israeli soldiers on the other side of the line that Mavi Marmara was in international waters and filled with civilians, and any military action could irreversibly lead to enormous loss of life. The organizers were ready to negotiate about how the ships could get to Gaza.

Ignoring all these reasonable requests, Israelis got closer to the Flotilla in international waters. After a while, a constant rubber bullet shooting started sporadically targeting the passengers.

People were terrorized and naturally tended to defend themselves. Passengers tried to prevent the Israeli soldiers from boarding the ship. The Israelis knew very well that there were women and children on the ship. If the Israeli soldiers were able to board, the lives of hundreds of people would be in danger. So, people decided to resist the Israeli violent attack in legitimate ways, such as throwing plastic materials, using water hoses to gush water and also trying to build the human shield.

Soon after the Israeli attack started, it was proved that direct shooting from the boats was unsuccessful. In the next attempt, the Israelis tried to land soldiers on the ship from helicopters. The helicopters started to drop soldiers on the upper deck of the ship. These soldiers landed on the deck, the passengers grabbed their guns and threw them into the sea. The soldiers were taken to the captain for confinement. But these legitimate defensive attempts were also misinterpreted by the Israeli warmongers. This time they started to use live ammunition. Their shoots from above showered onto the passengers. At least seven passengers were killed on the spot. Many were wounded. Israeli soldiers began to target more passengers. Two of the volunteers who were on lower decks were murdered in this way.

The innocent civilian people with united hearts in one cause for the sake of humanity were literally in

shock. They just tried either to protect themselves or to help the wounded in some way. Every corner of the ship was drenched in blood and every surface on the decks was littered with bullets. About one hour later, the attack was finally over. But the problem was just beginning when the flotilla was forcefully hijacked to the Israeli ports.