

A Very British Affair

The Viva Palestina convoy

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I'VE never been a huge flag-waving fan of the Union Jack because to me it was largely a symbol of the old British Empire and all the bad things it once represented in terms of occupation, slavery, tyranny and imperialistic wars.

1966 changed my view to a certain extent when 'we' won the World Cup. It was one of those defining moments where we were all proud to be British.

As young as I was, I remember my mum remarking with glee: "Two World Wars and one World Cup" as she jigged around the front lounge with my late father – the old black and white box in the corner flickering monochrome scenes of jubilation from Wembley Stadium. In the final, almost agonising moments of extra time Geoff Hurst had just powered home his third goal to give England a 4-2 victory over Germany.

Apart from that historic occasion, I can't really remember the urge to pick up the Union Jack again declaring to the world: "I am proud to be British".

As Leo Tolstoy once remarked, such patriotism in its simplest form is nothing more than a "means of obtaining for rulers their ambitions" as well as a sign from us lesser mortals as our "slavish enthrallment to those in power".

So it was rather a peculiar feeling when I watched several members of Viva Palestina cloak themselves in the Union Jack for the final stages of our 5,000 mile journey from London to Gaza.

In truth, the British flag was flown throughout our marathon journey across nine countries and the message was loud, proud and clear at each border crossing: "We are British, the convoy is British and we support the Palestinian people."

The last time a convoy bearing British flags had crossed North Africa in such a size, was the Second World War when the Nazis were being chased by the noble Desert Rats.

Our arrival in Morocco, and throughout the Maghreb, attracted the same initial reaction from the powers that be – all assumed the Viva Palestina Brits would be white, fair-haired and clean shaven so imagine their surprise when they saw in large numbers olive skins, hijabs, long black beards and Islamic dress. We might have looked more Tora Bora than Twickenham, but every one of us was a British passport holder, and proud to be so because what we were doing was exceedingly British.

If being British is about promoting equality, justice and fair play with the stronger person

going to help the weaker then our convoy was red, white and blue through and through. We were representing the very best of British and on those grounds I felt proud to join in the flag waving. As I said before, I really can't remember such a burst of spontaneous patriotism since 1966.

Viva Palestina was never just about 100 vehicles laden with humanitarian aid and 300 people led by George Galloway, MP. The reality is tens of thousands of British people were stakeholders in Viva Palestina having invested anything from a few pounds, to a shed load of money to help those living in war torn Gaza.

And so, when our very British convoy arrived in Gaza, we were also carrying the hopes, expectations and salutations of countless British people, of faith and no faith, who wanted to show the world that good, humanitarian things come out of the UK for Palestine.

The bombs and bullets and other weapons the British Government gives to Israel to use on the women and children of Palestine is not done in our name.

We cannot stop Gordon Brown from helping to arm the fourth largest army in the world, a military force which is currently being investigated for war crimes following the deaths of more than 1400 civilians.

But we can help repair the view the outside world holds on what it is to be British.

And just a few days ago 300 citizens, waving their Union Jacks, rolled in to Gaza to show the people of Palestine the real face of Britain.

What we did and what we achieved was done in the name of millions across the world.

The welcoming smiles on the faces of the Palestinians made me proud to be part of the Viva Palestina convoy, proud of every man and woman on that convoy.

And that is something Gordon Brown will never be able to experience about his own convoys to the Middle East. Perhaps it is he who needs a lesson in what it is to be British.

Now pass me that Union Jack, please. Viva Palestina!

British-born journalist Yvonne Ridley and Scottish award-winning film-maker Hassan al Banna Ghani were on board the convoy from the beginning and are making a documentary charting the historic event.

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