

Gaza Freedom Flotilla: Is the Mavi Marmara Trial Political Expediency or a Real Quest for Justice?

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Image of the Mavi Marmara by Laura Stuart

The name Mavi Marmara is known to millions around the world because of the heroism of ordinary civilians in resisting the supposedly elite Israeli soldiers of unit Shayetet 13 who attacked the Gaza Freedom Flotilla in 2010. Within minutes of the soldiers rappelling onto the ship from a helicopter nine civilians on board the ship were martyred (a tenth died recently after being in a coma for four years) and passengers captured four soldiers of the world's fourth most powerful army.

Photos of the captives are available widely on the Internet and one can't help noticing that they don't look quite so "elite" after being disarmed. The captured soldiers were protected by and received medical attention from a Turkish doctor.

I would expect this from the Turkish charity IHH with its Islamic humanitarian ethos. In fact, one of the captured Israeli soldiers was held by a Turk in the area where I was busy treating the wounded. Did I think of giving him a kick as I walked past while treating the 50 passengers with gunshot wounds? Yes, I did; but I didn't do it. There was a big difference between the behaviour of the flotilla's passengers and the degrading humiliation and cruel treatment we received as prisoners of the Israelis.

What would happen, I wonder, if the US was to stop giving the State of Israel \$8.5 million American tax dollars every day in military aid?

The Israelis use the US military and financial aid to strengthen their occupation of Palestinian land and the ever-increasing number of illegal settlers who steal land on a daily basis. The US Senate has just passed a law guaranteeing US aid to make sure that Israel always maintains its qualitative military edge over the Arab states (including Saudi Arabia and the UAE); this is no longer subject to political whims, it is law. An article published by the "Foundation for Protection of Democracies" explains everything; everything that is, except how the US declined to protect democracy in Egypt.

The Obama administration still refuses to call the overthrow of the democratically-elected Mohamed Morsi by the Egyptian army a coup. Can we expect anything else but such rank hypocrisy from the people who coined the term "enhanced interrogation technique" for what is clearly torture?

Britain isn't much better; the British government covets the revenue it gets from selling weapons to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE, all of which are well-known for the use of force against their own dissenting citizens. The Brits have no qualms about turning a blind

eye to the oppression of civilians in the Middle East; it's business as usual, as if the states in question are paragons of democratic virtue. Indeed, not only was King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia met personally at the airport by Prince Charles on his last state visit to Britain in 2007 but he also got to ride in a golden carriage with the Queen.

Presumably Her Majesty had been well briefed not to mention Al-Yamamah.

We must be talking huge arms deals to be pimping out our royal family to such an extent. The Saudi royals repaid British hospitality by dressing Prince Charles up as Lawrence of Arabia and having him do a sword dance on a visit to Arabia earlier this year.

Am I being cynical when I ask whether there is a clause in the arms sale agreements that prohibits the Saudis and Emiratis from using military hardware bought from the US and UK to attack the State of Israel? Too far-fetched? Perhaps. The Gulf monarchies may be so busy trying to hang on to their own thrones and spending billions on the military coup in Egypt to worry about using their armed forces to defend Arab land, particularly around Al-Aqsa Mosque, the first Qibla of the Muslims. One could speculate for ever about the reasons for the absence of any mobilisation of Arab armies to liberate fellow Arabs instead of oppressing them. The US, of course, has the additional weapon of a veto at the UN Security Council with which it protects the State of Israel, and very effective it is, too, in making sure that Israelis are not held to account for their illegal actions.

In such circumstances, along with the current chaos in Syria and Iraq, the State of Israel's future on the land of Palestine seems assured. Personally, though, I believe that the demise of the racist entity that wishes to be known as the "Jewish State" is very near. The Qur'an relates how nations in the past exceeded the limits only to be destroyed; this is, it seems, a lesson that the Israelis refuse to reflect upon despite the shameful history of pogroms against the Jews. The Israelis place so much faith in their military supremacy in the belief, perhaps, that there is no price to pay for their arrogance and breaches of the Commandments given to Moses (peace be upon him), that their downfall will likely come at their own hands.

Autopsies on the Mavi Marmara martyrs showed that five of them were killed by gunshots to the head, apparently after being wounded in other parts of their body; witnesses said that soldiers shot them in the head while they were lying wounded on the deck. Witnesses also insist that shots were fired by soldiers from inside the helicopter; the autopsies showed that some of the bullets did indeed hit the victims from above. Many of the shot were fired at close or very close range; it is reasonable to say that these weren't just murders, they were assassinations. One passenger was shot between the eyes as he tried to photograph the soldiers. It should be remembered that the Israeli attack on the flotilla took place in international waters, well outside Israel's territorial limit. The Israeli authorities refuse to hand over the many video recordings of the attack taken by CCTV cameras and journalists on board the ship. Self-defence is the normal response to an attack at sea, and those on board, surely, had every right to fight back against the Israeli soldiers, not least because women and a child were among the passengers.

The attack took place in May 2010 and last week, more than four years after the incident, I was in court in Istanbul before a new judge to give my testimony as a passenger on the Mavi Marmara. The previous judge, Umit Kaptan, had issued arrest warrants for four Israeli military and intelligence leaders after the sixth hearing in June. The issuing of the warrants,

it is widely believed, led to Judge Kaptan being demoted from his role as President of Istanbul's Seventh High Criminal Court (First degree); he is now a judge in the second degree criminal court, on the orders of the Justice Ministry.

My testimony was to recount what I saw on board the ship and what happened to us after we were kidnapped on the high seas by the Israelis. Another passenger from London, a Palestinian with dual Israeli/British citizenship, and I stood before the new judge to explain why we were on the Mavi Marmara and if we had suffered physically or psychologically.

How could we answer such questions honestly without taking hours or becoming emotional and angry? We have every right to be both but was our appearance in court the time and place for anger? We were on the ship going to Gaza precisely because international justice has failed the Palestinians. We civilians were on the ship because political leaders around the world have not held Israel to account for its many violations of international law. We were on the flotilla taking cement and other building materials to Gaza because the Israelis keep destroying civilian homes but refuse to allow building materials to enter the besieged territory.

All of these cruel actions continue to be carried out by the State of Israel with full confidence that it is immune from facing justice; the Istanbul court case hopes to end such immunity. The majority of flotilla passengers have vowed to continue finding ways to break the siege and take humanitarian aid to Gaza. We will continue to fight for justice through every possible avenue open to us.

There were 34 British passengers on the flotilla. Following our release from an Israeli prison we flew back to Britain via Istanbul in 2010 and met at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in Whitehall. The parliamentary under-secretary of state advised us not to go to Gaza because it is "dangerous". Alistair Burt forgot to say that all of the danger comes from the State of Israel and not the Palestinians. Are Burt's and his successor's hands tied because of the pro-Israel lobby's influence over the government? Do the likes of the Henry Jackson Society and Conservative Friends of Israel have so much influence that the government will not take action against Israel? It is reasonable, again, to conclude that politicians place more value on donations for their parties from pro-Israel supporters than the lives of British citizens on a humanitarian mission and the plight of the people of Palestine. Our political system must be rotten when it depends on donations with strings attached and can succumb to pressure from powerful lobby groups.

As Prime Minister (he's now President), Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan set out three conditions for the resumption of relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv. The first was that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should apologise for the murder of the nine Turkish citizens and one US National of Turkish heritage killed on the Mavi Marmara. The second was for the families of the martyrs to be given compensation by Israel; and finally that the siege of the Gaza Strip be lifted. Netanyahu stuck on number one for years, as he believed that an apology would be an admission of guilt; with Obama's prompting, though, he apologised in early 2013. The families of the martyrs are much less interested in monetary compensation than having the siege of Gaza lifted since the whole purpose of the flotilla was to break and, hopefully, end the blockade. The nine widows, orphans and families of the martyrs continue to hope that their loved ones did not die in vain and the objective of the flotilla will be realised. Rapprochement between Turkey and the State of Israel seems as unlikely as ever, though, following Israel's slaughter and destruction in Gaza over the summer and the ongoing violations against Al-Aqsa Mosque, actions which Erdogan

has condemned vociferously.

As interesting, disturbing and distressing that our experiences on board the Mavi Marmara and later in custody inside the State of Israel were, it is not my intention to go into the details of our testimonies. Needless to say, the whole experience was extremely traumatic for us all, especially those who were wounded and injured. All of the flotilla passengers were kidnapped on the high seas, taken to Israel at gunpoint, and imprisoned for refusing to sign a form stating that we understood that we had “entered the State of Israel illegally”. Such typically arrogant Israeli lunacy would be funny if events surrounding it had not been so tragic.

At the close of our day in court the new judge gave his summing up. In brief, he advised the lawyers for the Mavi Marmara victims to instruct the Ministry of Justice again to send the arrest warrants for the four senior Israeli officials to Interpol.

Why are the warrants that were issued in June this year still sitting on the Justice Minister’s desk? I asked a number of Turks about this and the general opinion is that the lack of action on the arrest warrants is due less to pressure from any pro-Israel lobby than to the instability in the region and constant attempts by outside forces to create division and unrest within Turkey. Manipulation by unseen hands has caused secular Turks to be pitted against their religious fellow citizens, followed by friction between the government and the Gülen movement,

which was once on board with Erdogan but appears to have been steered into opposition; most recently we have seen the potential for division between Turks and Kurds. Just a few years ago Turkey was on excellent terms with all of its neighbours and travel was possible without visas between Turkey, Iran and Syria. Is the growing influence of Turkey within the Muslim world regarded as a threat to and by Israel? I believe that the democratic movements in Turkey and Egypt, in particular, were resulting in a degree of unity across the region that Israel and its supporters in the West could not accept. What could be stronger than a Middle East united against Israeli oppression?

It is a very sad and unjust world in which we live when political expedience trumps justice so often and so publically without any redress. Cases of injustice are revealed in the media but still governments and their political “interests” prevent the perpetrators from being held to account. This is not only true in international relations but also on domestic issues. Look, for example, at the allegations against those in Westminster and the British security services that there is a cover-up to ensure that no politicians are in the dock for child abuse. The revelations about Jimmy Savile were followed by claims that the late Cyril Smith MP was also involved in the abuse of young people; the facts only emerged long after they had died, but other politicians named as abusers are suddenly “too ill” to testify. Complaints about the alleged cover-up are getting louder. Moreover, most British citizens will not be too shocked to learn of the government’s involvement in the “extraordinary rendition” of “terror suspects” and the revelation that MI6 asked for its agents’ involvement in CIA torture be redacted from the recent expose of such practices. Our political system exhibits all the symptoms of being rotten to the core.

Now more than ever before the world needs to know that justice is available for the victims of injustice wherever they may be; that there is a proper, transparent process in place. This is not only in the best interests of ordinary people but also their governments; social media means that there are fewer and fewer hiding places for those who do wrong, and politicians

dependent on public votes are fully aware of this. As such, despite all the negative aspects and the slow progress of the court case concerning the victims of Israel's attack on the Freedom Flotilla in 2010, we have to be optimistic that the legal process in Turkey will deliver justice in the end and not simply go through the motions as an act of political expediency.

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