

“Our Potential to Create a Better World, a Just World”: Testimony of a Survivor of the Mavi Marmara Massacre

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In-depth Report: [FLOTILLA TO GAZA](#)

Ken O'Keefe, former US Marine, Gulf War veteran, and now survivor of the Mavi Marmara massacre, has issued a remarkable and searing statement from Istanbul.

“While in Israeli custody I, along with everyone else, was subjected to endless abuse and flagrant acts of disrespect. Women and elderly were physically and mentally assaulted. Access to food and water and toilets was denied. Dogs were used against us, we ourselves were treated like dogs. We were exposed to direct sun in stress positions while hand cuffed to the point of losing circulation of blood in our hands. We were lied to incessantly, in fact I am awed at the routineness and comfort in their ability to lie, it is remarkable really. We were abused in just about every way imaginable and I myself was beaten and choked to the point of blacking out... and I was beaten again while in my cell.

In all this what I saw more than anything else were cowards... and yet I also see my brothers. Because no matter how vile and wrong the Israeli agents and government are, they are still my brothers and sisters and for now I only have pity for them. Because they are relinquishing the most precious thing a human being has, their humanity.”

O'Keefe was a human shield in Iraq who formally renounced his US citizenship in protest in 2001; he now has Irish as well as Palestinian citizenship. On the morning of the attack, as he describes it, he was “directly involved in the disarming of two Israeli Commandos. This was a forcible, non-negotiable, separation of weapons from commandos who had already murdered two brothers that I had seen that day.” Subsequently brutalised by the Israeli military, he is defiant: “I challenge any critic of merit, publicly, to debate me on a large stage over our actions that day. I would especially love to debate with any Israeli leader who accuses us of wrongdoing, it would be my tremendous pleasure to face off with you. All I saw in Israel was cowards with guns, so I am ripe to see you in a new context”.

In another context — one that does not involve Israel — O'Keefe's valor would likely be recognized and rewarded by the country whose military he served and whose citizenship he has relinquished. Yet he will be a hero to millions around the world.

Read O'Keefe's statement in full below.

I have for many years understood that we, people of conscience, are the true holders of power in this world. Frustratingly however we have largely relinquished that power and failed to reach our full potential. Our potential to create a better world, a just world.

Nonetheless I have conspired with others of like mind to reveal and exercise our true power. In 2002 I initiated the TJP Human Shield Action to Iraq because I knew that the invasion of Iraq had been planned well in advance, that it was part of a 'Global Spectrum Dominance' agenda as laid out by the Project For A New American Century.

I knew that protests had no chance of stopping the invasion, and that largely these protests were just a way of making us feel better about the coming mass murder; by being able to say I protested against it. With that understanding I argued that the only viable way to stop the invasion was to conduct a mass migration to Iraq. A migration in which people from around the world, especially western citizens, would position themselves at sites in Iraq that are supposed to be protected by international law, but which are routinely bombed when it is only Iraqi, Palestinian, generally non-white, western lives who will be killed. I felt 10,000 such people could stop the invasion, or at the very least, expose the invasion for what it was from the start, an act of international aggression, a war crime and a crime against humanity.

When our two double-decker buses travelled from London to Baghdad through Turkey, it was ever clear that the people of Turkey also could sense the power of this act, and they were the biggest participants in it. In the end we did not get the numbers required to stop the war, with at least one million Iraqi's dead as a result, but I remain convinced that it was within our power to prevent the invasion. A massive opportunity lost as far as I am concerned.

In 2007 I joined the Free Gaza Movement with its plan to challenge the blockade of Gaza by travelling to Gaza by sea. From the moment I heard of the plan I knew it could succeed and ultimately I served as a captain on the first attempt. The Israeli government said throughout our preparation that we were no better than pirates and they would treat us as such. They made clear we would not reach Gaza. And still I knew we could succeed. And we did. Two boats with 46 passengers from various countries managed to sail into Gaza on August 23, 2010; this was the first time this had been done in 41 years. The truth is the blockade of Gaza is far more than three years old, and yet we, a small group of conscientious people defied the Israeli machine and celebrated with tens of thousands of Gazans when we arrived that day. We proved that it could be done. We proved that an intelligent plan, with skilled manipulation of the media, could render the full might of the Israeli Navy useless. And I knew then that this was only the tip of the iceberg.

So participating in the Freedom Flotilla is like a family reunion to me. It is my long lost family whose conscience is their guide, who have shed the fear, who act with humanity. But I was especially proud to join IHH and the Turkish elements of the flotilla. I deeply admire the strength and character of the Turkish people, despite your history having stains of injustice, like every nation, you are today from citizen to Prime Minister among the leaders in the cause of humanity and justice.

I remember being asked during the TJP Human Shield Action to Iraq if I was a pacifist, I responded with a quote from Gandhi by saying I am not a passive anything. To the contrary I believe in action, and I also believe in self-defence, 100%, without reservation. I would be incapable of standing by while a tyrant murders my family, and the attack on the Mavi Marmara was like an attack on my Palestinian family. I am proud to have stood shoulder to shoulder with those who refused to let a rogue Israeli military exert their will without a fight. And yes, we fought.

When I was asked, in the event of an Israeli attack on the Mavi Mamara, would I use the camera, or would I defend the ship? I enthusiastically committed to defence of the ship. Although I am also a huge supporter of non-violence, in fact I believe non-violence must always be the first option. Nonetheless I joined the defence of the Mavi Mamara understanding that violence could be used against us and that we may very well be compelled to use violence in self-defence.

I said this straight to Israeli agents, probably of Mossad or Shin Bet, and I say it again now, on the morning of the attack I was directly involved in the disarming of two Israeli Commandos. This was a forcible, non-negotiable, separation of weapons from commandos who had already murdered two brothers that I had seen that day. One brother with a bullet entering dead center in his forehead, in what appeared to be an execution. I knew the commandos were murdering when I removed a 9mm pistol from one of them. I had that gun in my hands and as an ex-US Marine with training in the use of guns it was completely within my power to use that gun on the commando who may have been the murderer of one of my brothers. But that is not what I, nor any other defender of the ship did. I took that weapon away, removed the bullets, proper lead bullets, separated them from the weapon and hid the gun. I did this in the hopes that we would repel the attack and submit this weapon as evidence in a criminal trial against Israeli authorities for mass murder.

I also helped to physically separate one commando from his assault rifle, which another brother apparently threw into the sea. I and hundreds of others know the truth that makes a mockery of the brave and moral Israeli military. We had in our full possession, three completely disarmed and helpless commandos. These boys were at our mercy, they were out of reach of their fellow murderers, inside the ship and surrounded by 100 or more men. I looked into the eyes of all three of these boys and I can tell you they had the fear of God in them. They looked at us as if we were them, and I have no doubt they did not believe there was any way they would survive that day. They looked like frightened children in the face of an abusive father.

But they did not face an enemy as ruthless as they. Instead the woman provided basic first aid, and ultimately they were released, battered and bruised for sure, but alive. Able to live another day. Able to feel the sun over head and the embrace of loved ones. Unlike those they murdered. Despite mourning the loss of our brothers, feeling rage towards these boys, we let them go. The Israeli prostitutes of propaganda can spew all of their disgusting bile all they wish, the commandos are the murderers, we are the defenders, and yet we fought. We fought not just for our lives, not just for our cargo, not just for the people of Palestine, we fought in the name of justice and humanity. We were right to do so, in every way.

While in Israeli custody I, along with everyone else was subjected to endless abuse and flagrant acts of disrespect. Women and elderly were physically and mentally assaulted. Access to food and water and toilets was denied. Dogs were used against us, we ourselves were treated like dogs. We were exposed to direct sun in stress positions while hand cuffed to the point of losing circulation of blood in our hands. We were lied to incessantly, in fact I am awed at the routineness and comfort in their ability to lie, it is remarkable really. We were abused in just about every way imaginable and I myself was beaten and choked to the point of blacking out... and I was beaten again while in my cell.

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are relinquishing the most precious thing a human being has, their humanity.

In conclusion; I would like to challenge every endorser of Gandhi, every person who thinks they understand him, who acknowledges him as one of the great souls of our time (which is just about every western leader), I challenge you in the form of a question. Please explain how we, the defenders of the Mavi Marmara, are not the modern example of Gandhi's essence? But first read the words of Gandhi himself.

I do believe that, where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence.... I would rather have India resort to arms in order to defend her honour than that she should, in a cowardly manner, become or remain a helpless witness to her own dishonour. – Gandhi

And lastly I have one more challenge. I challenge any critic of merit, publicly, to debate me on a large stage over our actions that day. I would especially love to debate with any Israeli leader who accuses us of wrongdoing, it would be my tremendous pleasure to face off with you. All I saw in Israel was cowards with guns, so I am ripe to see you in a new context. I want to debate with you on the largest stage possible. Take that as an open challenge and let us see just how brave Israeli leaders are.

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