

Turkish Doctor Describes Treating Israeli Commandos During Raid on Mavi Marmara

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In an interview with The New York Times, Dr. Hasan Huseyin Uysal, a Turkish doctor, said that he treated Israeli commandos who were captured and briefly detained during the initial stages of a raid on a ship challenging Israel's naval blockade of Gaza last week.

Dr. Uysal's account seems to be supported by two photographs that show him treating one of the three bloodied commandos whom passengers said they subdued and disarmed at the start of the predawn raid on the main ship in the flotilla on May 31. Both of the images were published by the Turkish newspaper HaberTurk, in a gallery on its Web site showing photographs smuggled off the ship and out of Israel by one of its reporters, Sefik Dinc. One photograph was also posted on Flickr by the Turkish aid organization that helped to organize the flotilla.

The capture of the commandos moments after they rappelled down onto the Mavi Marmara from helicopters to meet fierce resistance from the passengers on the top deck led several Israeli military and civilian officials — including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu — to suggest that the subsequent use of deadly force was justified because otherwise the soldiers would have been “lynched” by the passengers who seized them.

Several of the passengers involved in the confrontation have disputed that interpretation of the chaotic start of the raid. As The Lede noted on Tuesday, Ken O'Keefe, a former United States Marine who told Turkish and Israeli newspapers that he had helped disarm the commandos said, “The lives of the three commandos were at our mercy — we could have done with them whatever we wanted.”

Ali Abunimah, a founder of the Electronic Intifada, argued in a post on his blog that images of the commando being treated by Dr. Uysal, along with other photographs apparently taken during the raid that show bloodied and disarmed commandos in the custody of passengers inside the ship, contradict Israeli suggestions that the aim of the passengers was to kill the soldiers.

In a telephone interview conducted in Turkish, Dr. Uysal said that he had treated three Israeli commandos and argued that this proved that the passengers had no intention of killing them:

First of all it's against logic that these soldiers would not be killed but instead be taken to the medical center if the intention of the activists was to kill them. If people on board were so eager to hurt them, why would they not just shoot them to death once they had taken

their guns? Why bother carting them inside for treatment? It just doesn't add up.

I am a doctor, and the Israeli soldiers were brought to me to check their medical situation and treat them properly. I had our dead bodies and injured people lying in front of me and I was treating the soldiers that actually killed and wounded them. None of our friends in the center approached to harm or hurt them. Our injured people were lying on the ground, but I rested the soldiers on our chairs.

Asked about the wounds the commandos suffered, the doctor said:

None of the soldiers had any fatal wounds that would cause organ loss or defects. There were scratches on their faces, but since facial skin is sensitive and very likely to bleed in any trauma, there was blood on their faces — which I cleaned carefully to see what kind of injuries they had. In the end, they happened to be only scratches.

The third soldier, however, suffered a cut in his stomach that reached his stomach membrane but not the organ itself. It was nothing fatal. As a doctor, I wouldn't want to guess the nature of this injury but it could have been caused by either landing on a sharp pole from the helicopter or a blow from a pipe with a sharp edge. I couldn't tell.

In either case, it was not fatal but it had to be stitched. However, since we did not ever expect such a confrontation, we had not brought any stitching equipment on board. All we had was simple medical material to dress simple wounds, or drops to ease burning in case tear gas was used. If I had stitching material with me, although I am an eye doctor, I would have treated the boy properly in accordance with my general medical knowledge. I couldn't.

Dr. Uysal said the commandos "were very startled and very scared." He added:

With my broken English I tried to tell them that I was a doctor and there was no need to be afraid and that nobody was going to hurt them. They relaxed after a while and watched us running around, jumping from one patient to another in tears, faced with our friends bathed in blood. I also asked our assistants to keep an eye on them so that they would not be threatened.

We could have as well left them to their fate, but this is not the humanity that we act with. We asked photographers not to film in the medical center and I have no idea how and when that picture was taken but God never leaves good deeds unheard. That picture shows the difference between the Israelis and us.

Asked if he could tell how long after sound grenades were thrown at the ship, at the start of the raid, that the gunshots were fired, Dr. Uysal said: "I was in the lower deck, but could hear all the explosions and gunfire. There was no way I can differentiate the gunshots or other sounds — I am only a doctor, after all."

After the Israeli military took control of the ship, the doctor said that he was treated no differently from the other passengers:

They handcuffed all of us with plastic bands so tightly that they could easily cause irreversible damage to our shoulder tissues. They made us kneel on our knees with hands handcuffed as the helicopters caused sea water to splash on us for three hours. I was shouting that I was a doctor and that my shoulder hurt in a very serious way. They

pretended not to hear me. I wanted to go to the toilet; they didn't let me. After I kept yelling about my shoulder they let my hands loose but not those of my friends.

On Tuesday, the Turkish newspaper Hurriyet published an interview with Murat Akinan, the man seen standing next to Dr. Uysal in the photographs of him treating a commando, and bringing the Israeli inside the ship in another photograph.

Mr. Akinan said that the captured soldier had been entrusted to him by Bulent Yildirim, the director of the Turkish aid organization I.H.H., who said: "Murat, take him and make sure that he'll be safe. Be careful, don't allow anyone to touch him."

So, Mr. Akinan said, "I took him downstairs yelling, 'Stop! No one will touch this man entrusted to me.' "

He added: "I called the doctor on board and asked him for treatment. Two more soldiers came. People were reacting. I had all three treated. I said to two to three wise people around me that we would not allow anyone to touch them."

According to Mr. Akinan, during his subsequent interrogation in Israeli custody, he was shown a photograph in which the soldier he was leading inside the ship was hit despite his efforts.

"I told them that I couldn't stop everyone," he said. He also claimed that the interrogator admitted that photographs showed that he had acted "with goodwill" toward the Israeli captive in his care.

Update: A Turkish-speaking friend of The Lede has kindly translated the extensive eyewitness account of the raid from Sefik Dinc, the Turkish journalist who shot the images used in the Turkish newspaper's slide show we referred to above. In the interest of completeness, here is an English translation of that text which was published by HaberTurk alongside Mr. Dinc's photographs:

In the context of the "Our Road is Palestine, Our Route is Gaza" campaign, the Mavi Marmara ship, bringing aid to Palestine, had 16 Turkish journalists on board. Haberturk newspaper reporter Şefik Dinc took his place among them. Dinc's photographs succeeded in being smuggled out.

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Şefik Dinc lived every second the pressure of the Israeli commandos. He explained what he saw this way:

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"Departing for Gaza on May 22, the Mavi Marmara, the flagship of the fleet, set out from Sarayburnu with 16 journalists aboard. I was among them, representing HaberTurk.

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I was on the second floor deck of the ship talking to my journalist friends when we suddenly saw Zodiac boats coming. I called to friends on the other side of the ship that the Israeli soldiers had arrived. Their response was 'The Zodiacs are on the other side.' Approximately

10 to 15 soldiers were on each of the Zodiacs, blockading both the sides and rear of the ship, with two frigates about two miles off.

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From the Zodiac boats, gas, noise and smoke bombs were being thrown on board. Some of the bombs dropped and fell into the sea when they struck the ship and some came on deck on the starboard side. Among those who sat on the deck with gas bombs, there was panic.

One group was spraying water from fire hoses onto the Zodiacs, while others were lighting them with lamps.

Shortly after the attacks of the Zodiacs, the Sikorsky helicopter began to approach the ship. Coming over the ship, the helicopter began to descend slowly, and I moved to a place where I'd be better able to take better pictures.

I had no bulletproof vest, gas mask, or life jacket. And the helicopter was descending toward the pilothouse. When it was about three meters away, commandos began to descend on ropes.

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The three Israeli commandos who descended via rope to the pilothouse began to brawl with the volunteers waiting here on the ship. In the melee, one soldier was almost cast into the sea, but some members of the group were opposed to it. The neutralized soldiers were later taken down to the hall on the second floor.

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Volunteers helped a volunteer injured as a result of the shots fired, bringing him downstairs on a stretcher.

With the Israeli troops disarmed, the sound of the gunfire from the helicopters began to change. The rubber bullets fired by Israeli commandos were now real bullets.

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Most of the volunteers who died was as a result of this firefight. I was trying to both capture what was happening in photographs but at the same time trying to protect myself by hiding somewhere. When I saw two wounded passengers on the ship lying on the ground, I understood that the bullets could reach the deck I was on. Most of those shot were on the top deck of the ship. However, on the lower deck there were also those who were injured and killed. The doctors and some activists who had seen the dead said that two people were killed by bullets that hit their heads.

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