

MEMO exclusive interview with IHH spokesperson Omar Farooq



Since the Israeli massacre of humanitarian aid civilians aboard the Mavi Marmara, the Turkish Charity the IHH (pronounced Ee Ha Ha) has been thrust into the headlines in a way they never could have predicted and for a reason they never would have wanted. The IHH (their full name in English is the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief) was one of the main groups in a coalition of five that organised the Freedom Flotilla. The Flotilla set out collectively carrying around 10,000 tons of relief for the besieged (1.5 million) people of Gaza. The flotilla was illegally intercepted in international waters by Israeli commandos who killed nine civilians, (all Turkish) severely wounded many more and kidnapped the hundreds of remaining internationals.

Following that event, in which Israeli clearly showed itself to be the aggressor, they have now embarked on a propaganda campaign to divert public attention away from their actions and onto the charities and NGOs that were part of the Flotilla. The IHH in particular has been accused of being an extremist Islamic organisation, a supporter of Hamas and a funder of terrorism.

In order to explore the other side of the story MEMO went to the IHH headquarters in Istanbul this week to ask them for their perspective on events. A very different picture was presented. It turns out that the IHH is a charity, not obsessed with the liberation of Palestine, as the pro-Israeli media would have us believe, but a very broad and inclusive humanitarian organisation. The IHH work in over 120 countries worldwide including Chad, Somalia, Cameroon, Vietnam, the USA, Haiti and Georgia to name but a few. They are involved in a vast number of campaigns including orphan assistance programmes, the digging of water wells in Africa, cataract operations, food assistance, housing and clothing allowances provisions. Their work in Gaza is only one very small part of what they do.

I sat down with IHH spokesperson Omar Farooq to find out more.

HC: Could you please begin by explaining a little bit about what IHH is?

OF: IHH was established in 1995 in Turkey. It is a Turkish registered organisation. Its operations are regulated and checked by the Turkish authorities. Its goals are very clear and transparent. Everybody knows what is going on in this organisation. We work in several areas. We work with orphans, we work in war affected countries and natural disaster areas. In the last few years we have also started working on cataract projects in African countries. Of course we work for Muslims and non Muslims, for whoever is affected by these natural disasters or in these areas, we work for them. We work extensively in Iraq for orphans; we work throughout Afghanistan because there are a lot of orphans there. We worked in Haiti; we worked in Sri Lanka and in many non-Muslim



countries as well. We worked in Bosnia of course and still work there with some orphans; we work in these general areas.

HC: If IHH has so many projects in so many regions of the world why did you also want to focus on Gaza and why attempt to break the siege on Gaza?

OF: This is a very good question. As I told you we established this organisation in 1995 and so we have been working for more than 15 years now. The Palestinian issue was not even on our agenda in the beginning but later there were a lot of requests coming from the Gazan people and Palestinian people and they visited us here in our Headquarters so we started to work for the Gazan and Palestinian people in general as well. But we are not only working in Gaza, although we do have a branch there, we are working also in Ramallah and the 1948 area as well. In order to work in these areas, in any country, we have to co-operate with local organisations. First of all, any organisation that we want to help must be a registered organisation in their country. Secondly we have to take permission from the authorities. We wanted to work in Israel so we tried to get permission from the Israeli authorities but they did not grant us. That is very important. Then we wanted to open an office in Ramallah and the Fatah movement (which is not Hamas) allowed us to operate in Ramallah officially but later on the Israeli authorities took our brother Izzat Shaheen to prison and kicked him out of the country. As far as Gaza is concerned, yes we have a branch there. The Gazan authorities, which is led by Hamas, have allowed us to work there.

HC: How do you respond to critics who say that by going to Gaza the IHH are supporting Hamas and, according to Israel, are therefore supporting terrorism by extension?

OF: First of all we are not supporting Hamas, we are supporting the people of Gaza. Just because you live in Gaza does not mean you are automatically a supporter of Hamas. If oppressed people are living under an embargo, we do not ask their political trends, we don't ask them about their political background, we are just trying to support the people. There are many organisations in Gaza who have been contacting us for donations and we are trying to help them.

HC: What would you say is the primary motivation of IHH? Would you say that it is more political, religious or humanitarian?

OF: We are purely a humanitarian organisation. Of course we are Muslims and are living in a Muslim country but we are working for all of humanity. This is a humanitarian [mission] against the oppression in Gaza and Palestine. In the latest Flotilla for example, we were working with Christians, Jews, Atheists and secular people. Even from within Turkey people from all different backgrounds are participating in this campaign. So being a Muslim does not mean that you are an extremist and the definition of extremism will depend on the country and the people who are defining it as well.



HC: Is the IHH independent from the Turkish government? Are you an NGO?

OF: Of course. We are trying to keep our independence as it is because when you are not independent or when you co-operate with any government a hundred percent it means you have limits. NGOs must be independent. It doesn't mean that when you are in a difficult position the government does not support you, that's something else, as they did when we were kidnapped by the Israeli authorities in the Mediterranean sea. They tried to save us from Israeli aggression. That is something different. But other than that we are an independent organisation. Of course we make our decisions independently. We were not the only independent group to take part, many European parliamentarians, many European NGOs participated in this campaign independently also.

HC: In terms of funding, is the IHH funded by the Turkish government or private donations?

OF: As I told you, when you are getting money you may also be getting orders. We are not getting money from the government we are getting our money from the people.

HC: In terms of the Israeli attack on the Flotilla, how do you respond to criticisms that the people on board the Mavi Marmara were violent extremists and activists and were not peaceful volunteers on a humanitarian mission and also that there were weapons on board?

OF: First of all, the Israelis were caught in front of the international community on a live stream broadcast. Everyone now knows how brutal their attack on the ships was. So now they are trying to study the background of IHH (to try to deflect blame) to find even a single point to attack IHH but it will not work. First of all there were more than 32 nationalities on the Flotilla and there were many journalists, the majority of them were probably not Muslims and were from many nationalities. All of them saw the brutal attacks so when they go back to their countries their Prime Ministers, their Foreign Ministers and their other important figures will get first hand information from these journalists. How will Israel hide that information? That is why even Jewish citizens within Israel believe that their government made a great mistake and so they are protesting their own government. Even they have seen what happened over there.

The Israeli authorities say that our friends on the ship provoked the Israeli Commandos and that this is why they attacked. I'm telling you, when the Israeli government withdrew its 12,000 settlers from Gaza (in 2005) many of them attacked the Israeli army but the Israeli army did not kill any of them. Why didn't they kill the settlers?

In terms of weapons (as to whether there were any on the Mavi Marmara) they could not show a single one. You know what they did, and shame on Israel for doing it, they collected a few small kitchen knives from the ship's kitchen and showed them to the media as if they were illegal weapons captured.



HC: Did you expect the Israeli army to attack the Flotilla in the manner they did?

OF: We were expecting that the Israelis would oppose us on the Mediterranean Sea. It was expected that we would be opposed in that we might be stopped. But we were not expecting that they would attack brutally like that. We did not think that they would make such a grave mistake in front of the international community. They made a grave mistake and I don't know how they will explain this to the international community. We were expecting that once we were stopped by them we would have a right to discuss and solve the problem. We were expecting to solve the problem peacefully through Egyptian waters or to be sent back but not to start a war against the Israeli army! They sent 5 war ships, around 20 Zodiacs, and helicopters. We were not expecting that they would attack like that.

HC: In terms of going back to Gaza is it over for IHH or will you be sending another Flotilla or land convoy.

OF: IHH were part of a larger coalition. We did not organise this Flotilla alone. This is the first time the embargo has been discussed in international law. Even the American government has said it is intolerable and the Israelis are greatly oppressing the Gazan people and the embargo must finish. So this is a great gain for humanity. Now is the time for governments to do something, not just IHH. People should not expect from IHH more than it can deliver. We did our jobs so now governments have to play a role, the Turkish government, the American government, the British government and governments all around the world must play a role. It is not logical just to focus on IHH. IHH is not a government, it is not an army, it is not going to be able to solve all the problems, but in case the governments don't solve this problem of course humanity from different parts of the world, with or without IHH, will react again and the embargo will be broken.

HC: Do you have any thing you would like to add?

We are ready to meet with anyone. Even with the Israelis. We are that transparent.

IHH is a registered organisation within the United Nations. It has Consultative status in the United Nations. IHH is cooperating with many European NGOs like the Red Cross and Oxfam and many others. We share a humanitarian platform with European NGOs. None of those NGOs will believe the Israeli propaganda. They are even starting to visit us to give us their condolences.

First the Israeli forces attacked our ships, they attacked civilians and they did not know that we were broadcasting live and strategically they could not solve that problem. Secondly, they did not only attack the ships but they also attacked our websites. They stopped our websites internationally so we are very thankful when people come to us directly to get first hand information otherwise Israel is spreading very wrong information and we are ready even to discuss these matters openly on British television. We are very ready to discuss. Even the Israeli side is welcome to come and discuss it with us and we demand from the Israeli authorities to give back our stolen cameras. Everything was recorded by our friends but the Israelis, after



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kidnapping our brothers, stole all the cameras and everything. If we can get back our recorded material we can show the world what they did to us but Israeli will not have the courage to do this

I request also that the British authorities who implanted Israel to this region help to resolve this problem as well.

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