



# A Journey of Conviction

## My Voyage on the Global Sumud Flotilla

*By Dr. Zaheera Soomar*

It was Sunday, 24 August 2025 — an ordinary day that would soon become extraordinary. I was at home, surrounded by lesson plans and notes, preparing for my university lectures for the week ahead. My children were starting school the next day — a new school, in a new city, and a new country. Life felt full and structured.

Then my phone rang.

The call was from the Global Sumud Flotilla (GSF) team — a group I had spoken to months earlier. They were calling to confirm my spot on the 2025 flotilla and asking me to be in Tunis in just five days.

At first, I froze. My children were settling into a new school year, my work commitments were lined up, and the timing felt impossible. I told myself, not this time.

But over the next 24 hours, the feeling in my heart would not let me rest. A quiet but insistent voice kept whispering that this was my duty. I performed istikhara — a prayer for guidance — and the feeling only grew stronger.

Within two days, I spoke with my husband, my three children, and my mother. Their reactions were mixed — my children were supportive but scared, my husband was understanding but cautious, and my mother was adamant that I shouldn't go. She couldn't bear the thought of me risking my life while my children were still so young.

Yet, deep down, I knew I had to go.

### Who I Am

I am Dr. Zaheera Soomar — a daughter, sister, wife, and mother of three. I was born in South Africa during apartheid, a time and place that shaped my understanding of justice from a very young age.

Over the years, I have worked in corporate spaces and as an adjunct professor. My professional life has always been intertwined with human rights, social justice, and international development. I have lived in multiple countries — South Africa, the

UAE, Canada, and now the Middle East — constantly adapting and finding purpose wherever life takes us.

Outside of work, I am an avid traveller and mountain climber, aiming to visit 100 countries (currently on 76!) and summit the seven global peaks (three down, four to go). But among all these adventures, joining the Flotilla was unlike anything else — it was not about achievement or adventure, but about standing up for humanity.

## **Setting Sail**

I arrived in Tunis on 30 August 2025, joining around 300 people from over 40 countries. The mission was clear: to sail towards Gaza as part of a peaceful flotilla, drawing global attention to the humanitarian crisis there.

Those two weeks in Tunis were spent training, preparing, and building trust among the group. We had to learn to work as one, because soon, our survival and success would depend entirely on that unity.

What was supposed to be four days turned into two weeks due to logistical delays and bureaucratic interference. This mission was not government-backed or funded; it was a grassroots effort built on conviction, not convenience. Under normal circumstances, such a mission takes two years to prepare. We had three months.

Finally, on 14 September 2025, we set sail. The fleet included boats from Spain, Greece, and Italy — around 50 in total. By the time we reached open waters, only 46 remained. Some had suffered significant impacts on the water due to damage from storms or the drone attacks.

The days that followed were some of the hardest of my life. The sea was rough, the boats overcrowded, and fear was a constant companion. We were tossed by storms, had limited privacy, and often wondered if the boats would even hold together.

Yet, amid the fear and exhaustion, there was unity. Our shared belief in justice and love for the Palestinian people gave us strength. Every hardship became bearable because we knew why we were there.

## **Interception and Captivity**

After 18 gruelling days at sea, on 1 October 2025, we were intercepted in international waters by Israeli forces. What followed was chaos.

All 400 of us were taken hostage, blindfolded, beaten, and subjected to psychological and physical abuse. We were transported to Ktziot Prison in the Negev Desert. Our rights were stripped away — literally and figuratively. We were denied access to lawyers, our hijabs were forcibly removed, and we were ordered to strip naked multiple times. For the first three days, we were refused access to the South African consulate.

The conditions were harsh, but we reminded ourselves constantly why we were there. They could strip us of our clothes and freedom, but not our purpose.

On 7 October 2025, after seven long days in captivity, we were finally released and deported to Jordan. From there, we made our way home to South Africa — physically safe, but emotionally changed forever.

## Reflections

Returning home was bittersweet. While I was grateful to be reunited with my family, I knew I wasn't the same person anymore. None of us who were on that journey are.

We saw the truth — not from a distance, but up close. We witnessed the depth of injustice that so many endure daily. And now, we carry a responsibility: to tell their stories, to keep their struggle alive, and to never be silent.

For me, this mission was not just about Palestine — it was about humanity. It reaffirmed my belief that our freedom is bound together. As Nelson Mandela said, "We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians."

I pray for a free and liberated Palestine. I pray for justice everywhere. And I pray that my children — and yours — will grow up in a world where courage, compassion, and conscience always triumph over fear.

## The Duty to Continue

This journey was an honour. It challenged me physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It reminded me that life is more than comfort, convenience, or certainty — it is about courage, conviction, and standing up for what is right, even when the stakes are high.

I now see this fight as a sense of duty — a duty to continue spreading the truth, a duty to never be silent, and a duty to sacrifice so that others can be free.

Our world needs witnesses, voices, and action. And I am committed — as a Muslim, a mother, a human, and a believer in justice — to remain steadfast in that mission.