
Interview: Mohammed Omer

Normal Life Is Impossible In Israeli-Controlled Gaza



Mohammed Omer, 22, is a Palestinian journalist and photographer born and raised in the Rafah refugee camp in the southwest corner of the Gaza Strip. He has personally experienced the effects of the Israeli siege of Gaza. His family's home was destroyed by an Israeli bulldozer in 2003, to make room for the Israeli security wall around Gaza, and one of his brothers was killed by an Israeli sniper. As a journalist, Omer has had his stories and photographs published by the BBC, AFP, and by news services in Germany, Norway, Sweden, and the United States. He is also the Gaza reporter for the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, and maintains his own blog at www.rafahtoday.org. He is currently on a 17-city speaking tour of the United States which began on Nov. 26 in San Antonio, Texas, and which will conclude in Denver, Colorado, on Dec. 12.

On Nov. 28, in a presentation delivered at the Palestine Center in Washington, D.C. and broadcast live on C-SPAN Television, Omer graphically presented what daily life is like for Palestinians in Rafah, under the stress of daily Israeli military incursions and bombings, and shortages of water, electricity, and many other basic necessities of life. Every day, children are among the victims of Israeli attacks, and even if not wounded, are psychologically traumatized.

Omer was interviewed by telephone on Nov. 30 by Carl Osgood.

EIR: Americans have a very poor sense of what daily life is like in Gaza. We have running water, we have electricity, we have doctors we can go to, our kids go to school safely. We take these things for granted, and the impression I got from your talk the other day is that this is not the case in Gaza.

Omer: No, it's not, unfortunately. Well, first of all, I'd like to thank you for your time to do this interview, and let me start by giving a brief about life in Gaza, which is quite miserable for the time being, as a result of the daily incursions and daily attacks which are making life completely difficult. You have no way to live and to create, when you are thinking about how to keep safe, and how to keep surviving from the daily bombings and the daily shellings and the F-16 attacks and the air raids all the time; then you have nothing to think about, but only how to survive and how to keep yourself safe. This is the main concern of a Palestinian man, or a Palestinian

child, or a Palestinian woman, because we are facing all these troubles as a result of daily incursions and attacks and bombings and rockets from helicopters.

What is even worse, is the psychological war the Israelis are playing on Palestinians. Israel is using new methods, new weapons, new techniques in this war, such as choosing fancy names for the attacks that are targeting civilians, like "Days of Penitence," which was in October of 2004. It was one of the most horrible experiences that I have seen. You saw people with blood and flesh, heads, arms, and legs scattered in the streets. . . .

It's also psychological war that Israel is constantly waging over the last few months, like calling the people and telling them, "Evacuate your house, we will bomb your house," or giving messages through phones, through mobile phones. There is a recorded message telling you that you have to evacuate your house. These are the experiences we have had with the Israeli occupation forces.

Tomorrow you might get a phone call in the evening, and this is an Israeli officer telling you you have to evacuate your house. Why? You don't know. You just have to evacuate. If you're lucky, you get a chance to get out. One mother had no time to wake up the children, so they bombed the house over their heads. It's very difficult for a Palestinian mother to wake up the children in two minutes, when you are looking at the sky, and you find Israeli bulldozers and Israeli tanks hovering over your head.

And the same thing about the sanctions. Palestinian Authority employees have had no salaries for nine months! . . . It is time for the world to understand that we are suffering. Palestinians are facing all these troubles, and they want to live. They have the right to be respected. We have the right to live in dignity. We have right for our children to get educated, to drink clean water, not to drink water mixed with sewage. There is no electricity in the Gaza Strip right now—and imagine when there is no electricity, how it is for a mother, or for a hospital. Cooking gas is not available. There are so many things that are not available.

The problem is that there is no media coverage. The world is so blind. It seemed to me for some time before I came to the United States, that the world agreed on this. But I see now, the world is angry about this. There is a big difference between the American government and American citizens.

EIR: When you were at the Palestine Center, you told your own personal story about your house being destroyed by an Israeli bulldozer. Can you go through that for our readers?

Omer: The story is simply that I was coming home at 3:00 in the afternoon, from the university. I got closer to Block O area—I live in the Rafah refugee camp, Block O area, and I got closer to it, and someone asks me, one of our neighbors, when I got close to our house, “Mohammed, where are you going?” I answer him, “I’m going home.” And then, I walk a few meters, and then another person asks, “Mohammed, where are you going?” and I said “home,” and then he told me, “Don’t you know?” And I said, “What?” And he told me, “No, nothing.” I walk another few meters and there’s a third person, which makes me suspicious: Why are these people asking me, “Where are you going?” The third person tells me, “Watch out, be careful.” I turn into the street where our house is, just 20 meters away from me—and I find no house. Two floors, completely destroyed. I have lost my clothes, my computer, my CDs, my furniture, my life, my bedroom. Everything is all gone, erased by the bulldozers; and what is worse, the Israeli bulldozer is parking there, where the house was.

My mother is now in the hospital. Why? Because she had to jump out the kitchen window—because she’s Palestinian and she has no rights, according to the Israelis. She was inside the home, and the bulldozer was coming toward the door, which was closed. Because the bulldozer started attacking the house, getting closer and getting inside the house, she had nowhere to run, with my three-year-old brother, and so she got out; her leg was broken when she jumped out from the window of the kitchen. What is worse, is that my brother got injured. It’s like a nightmare that I cannot believe.

EIR: How many houses have been destroyed this way in Rafah?

Omer: I think every time they destroy hundreds. There are thousands of houses that have been partially demolished and have suffered destruction and damage of infrastructure. Even if they leave you alone, how are you going to live if there is no water and there’s no electricity and there is no infrastructure? . . .

EIR: You’ve said is that no U.S. Congressmen have been to Gaza.

Omer: I have never seen a U.S. Congressman in all my life. I only see them on the TV. They’re not coming to Gaza. No Americans, even American journalists, are coming to Gaza, because the Israelis are not letting them in, because they say the safety of Americans now is important to them. The fact is



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This boy’s home, in Rafah, Gaza, was destroyed—along with the entire neighborhood, by Israeli bulldozers, to make room for the new “iron wall”—the separation wall.

that they don’t want the truth to get out. It’s because they don’t want to let them in to see what is happening there. If an American went there, they would not believe it. I’m afraid that our leadership is very naive.

I would ask Miss Condi Rice to come, and I will take her—not to a press conference where she can see some journalists. No, this is not Gaza. I can take her to Gaza. She’s never been to Gaza in the last three years. If she could come to Gaza, I would volunteer to take her around, to take her to a Palestinian kitchen. I just want to take one hour of her time. I did that before with some priests, some Christians who were very conservative and pro-Israel. They changed their minds completely, when I took them around. I was frustrated until the end of the day, when they said, “Well, we want to do something. We should do something about it. It’s really horrible what the Palestinians are going through.” I would take Condi Rice to all these areas and show her the bombing, take her to a Palestinian kitchen, show her what people are eating, as a result of lack of salaries.

I’m thinking about it more deeply now. What am I doing? What photos am I taking? Am I taking photos of blood and injured people and killed people, scattered flesh? Sometimes I feel guilty if I don’t do more. I want really very much to stop it so people can have peace, so children can live and not have nightmares and psychological problems all the time. . . .

When I’m in action, it’s very difficult. I have problems sleeping, nightmares. I’m not a machine. I have a heart. I have a mind. I have flesh, blood, and bones. . . . Now, I’m travelling by bus for five hours [in the United States]. Here, a bus can

travel five hours, or whatever. The roads are so good. You can just drive, drive, drive. In Gaza, you can't do that.

EIR: What made you decide to come to the United States?

Omer: The fact is that there is no one to tell the Americans what we are facing every day. There's no one. So, I have to do it. I've been waiting for this. I was ready to come here when I was 16.

People here are understanding me—I have had crowds, and the number was quite huge yesterday, and I was live this morning on a radio station. The headline was about me in the Vermont area, today, in the newspapers, and I was also on the TV show, yesterday, in Vermont. And I also have magazines calling me. So, there is improvement. People are starting to understand. They're quite angry and they're quite sad at the photos they have seen as evidence. They were quite shocked. They have never seen this in the American media. And the fact that C-SPAN had me on live with my presentation is quite helpful, also. I'm getting hundreds of e-mails from people. Some are offensive, but the majority are supportive and sympathetic, and they were angry about what they have seen.

We have to think about stopping this madness. Why does your son have to get killed and my son have to live? Why? Why shouldn't they both live? As a journalist, it's worse: Carrying a camera is like a weapon for Israel. I'm just a person who believes in democracy, who believes in human rights, who believes in freedom. I don't believe in any violence at all. I don't want to be a violent person, and I'm not violent, because this is not the right way to be. I'm not willing to carry guns. There is a much better way: to educate people and to make them understand and create understanding between both Palestinians and Israelis; make people understand the conflict, make people understand what's going on.

People have to understand that this is what we are facing. This is what we are going through every single day. I'm quite positive that there will be change sometime, but we have to wait and see. I was really looking forward to meeting with some Congressmen or some diplomats who can understand, to let them know about what we are facing every single day. I wish I could give the message to more people. I'm now on my speaking tour, and I will try my best to tell the truth.

I'm not jumping to conclusions to say Israel is a terrorist state. There used to be Palestinian workers and Israeli citizens together, and it was life and it was peace and they were getting married to each other, and it was something good. But now, with the increased support, the overwhelming support from the United States, it's too much. Sometimes, I think that the tanks parking next to our houses are actually linked with a line of bullets to the United States, unfortunately, because of the large amount of bullets that they are shooting all night. Every soldier who has a small window is shooting from it. You can't believe it. At night, it's like horror. Children can't sleep. I myself get discouraged.

EIR: How do Palestinians see America, knowing that so much Israeli military hardware is coming from the United States?

Omer: Well, many Palestinians do not understand that there is a big difference between U.S. citizens and the U.S. government. Most people say, "Well, this is the U.S., and this is an evil, evil Bush Administration." They think that the Americans agree on that. I have been trying for many years to tell Palestinians, on the radio stations, in many places, that Americans do not agree on this. There is a big difference between American citizens and the U.S. Administration, Bush and his group. They are totally different. People are against them.

Like, for example, I might not like Mahmoud Abbas's policy, and I might not like Hamas's policy, and it doesn't mean that I'm like them, even if I'm a Palestinian. I'm trying to convince people. It's a bit difficult sometimes, because what they see as America is silence—we have an expression in Arabic, which says that silence means that you accept it, or you agree with it.

EIR: I will transcribe our talk and we will run it in our magazine, which will be seen on Capitol Hill by members of our Congress so they will get your message.

Omer: I call on all Congressmen to visit Gaza, by themselves, on the ground. I know that in [their official capacity] they are not allowed to be there, but it is possible to do it on a personal level, and I guarantee that they will be fine, and I promise to take them around and show them what life is like.

Something else that I want to tell you. I had a colleague of mine, she was on a speaking tour in the States, she's working for al-Jazeera English, Laila Haddad. She was not just here for a speaking tour. She was with her husband here, who is studying to be a doctor. Now, she has been stuck at the Rafah border crossing [into Egypt] for three weeks, three weeks sleeping at the Rafah border without bathrooms, without bedrooms, without anything else. Three weeks, imagine! I don't know on the 12th how I'm going to do it.

EIR: You mean, when you go back?

Omer: When I go back, I don't know how am I going to do it. I had this experience, last year. I was invited to attend a conference, and believe me it was a hassle. When you go across the border, you have no food, no water, and no bathroom. I hope that I will be able to get back, because I don't really want to be trapped, and I hope that the American Embassy in Tel Aviv will help me to get permission to travel through Israel to Gaza. I don't know if that's possible; it needs some pressure, and I hope some journalists will help me to put some pressure on the American Embassy to get me back to Gaza, because when the border is closed, it's very difficult. But it's possible to get me back through Israel when there is pressure from magazines or journalist friends.