

What happened in Khuza'a

*Testimony of
Mohammed Omer*

Mohammed Omer is a Palestinian journalist from Rafah refugee camp in Gaza. He writes for The Nation, Al Jazeera, and New Statesman, among many publications. In 2007, he was awarded the Martha Gelhorn Prize for Journalism, and the Ossietzky Prize by Norwegian PEN, in 2009.

My focus is generally on one of the most hard hit areas, Khuza'a, east of Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip. I was the first to get into Khuza'a during a ceasefire to find massive damage. My contribution focuses on three main cases.

The first is Mohammed Tawfiq Qudeh, a 64-year-old, who used to live in Khuza'a before Israeli troops invaded his area. The Qudeh family was among those survivors I met during the first ceasefire. I have focused my investigations on the execution of Mr. Qudeh. His home had come under constant bombardment, while bulldozers tried to break into one side of his house. Mr. Qudeh told his family he would open the door and talk peacefully with the Israeli soldiers, explaining to them that there were only civilians in the house. He spoke to them in English, Hebrew, Arabic and Spanish. He told his family that using these languages would help to avoid any misunderstandings. He moved closer, speaking softly and politely in all four languages.

'Please don't shoot me,' he said to the Israeli troops.

Suddenly, a muffled shot came from a short, blonde-haired, blue-eyed soldier holding an M-16 in his shaking hands. He was only about 20 years old. Raghad, 20 years old, and Buthina Qudeh, 35 years old, told me the details of what happened to her family. Raghad Qudeh stood outside her uncle's home in Khuza'a where she says an Israeli soldier executed him on 25 July.

The second case is that of Khalil Al-Najjar, the Imam of the mosque of Khuza'a, who was at his brother's home with his mother, siblings, in-laws, and

children. There were 15 family members in all. They were under constant Israeli artillery fire all night, not knowing what would happen with each passing second, apart from bombs raining around them.

‘A tank shell hit, and there was heavy black smoke in the building, so we ran under the staircase to hide and rest for a few minutes,’ Najjar told me. As the bombing continued, automatic gunfire was heard outside. ‘We shouted out that we were civilians. But more bullets were fired after we declared ourselves as civilians,’ said Najjar who, at 55 years old, is a well-known and highly respected imam in his community.

A few minutes later, a military dog rushed into the house, terrifying the children – the imam shouted out in Hebrew to the soldiers behind a wall riddled with bullet-holes: ‘We are civilians, we have children and babies with no medicine or milk.’

The soldiers shouted back, in Hebrew, ordering him and the family to: ‘Get out, one by one.’

‘In front of all these women, I was forced to undress until I was naked, at gunpoint,’ recalls the imam, while walking through the destruction in his neighbourhood. The imam was soon ordered to dress and was ushered outside at gunpoint, along with his brother. Najjar was then told to walk ahead of the soldiers down the centre of the street, while calling on all young residents to come outside and surrender.

The third case is that of Dr. Kamal Qudeh, a doctor serving this small village near Gaza’s border with Israel. His story begins when the initial Israeli attack started; when it came, it was unexpected. On 17 July 2014, Israeli F16s dropped leaflets ordering people to leave their homes before a ground offensive started on 20 July.

‘The day [20 July] came, but all seemed normal in Khuza’a. So people returned, thinking the leaflets had been a false alarm. Then, on 21 July, in the afternoon, an Israeli F16’s missile hit the main road connecting Khuza’a with neighbouring villages,’ Dr Qudeh told me.

This left him the only doctor in his area who could offer health care. He told me

‘We had to make a decision to go by ourselves, without protection, and get to the village entrance. There were around 2,000 of us, walking toward Israeli tanks ... I told the Israelis, “We are civilians, unarmed, and we need safe shelter, we have women, children and elderly and we want to evacuate peacefully”.’

The Israeli troops replied through loudspeakers that there was no co-ordination and everyone should return home. ‘We stayed there, standing,

hoping they would have compassion and let us through,' Dr Qudeh said.

While Dr Qudeh was treating victims inside, the outside area of his clinic was hit by two Israeli drone missiles – window glass shattered on those receiving treatment, and scores more people were injured outside.

At this time, his own brother, Ahmed Qudeh, and many family members including his sister sustained injuries. Dr Qudeh himself suffered shrapnel injuries to his leg and arm.

At 6am, Israeli troops fired tear gas, leaving people stunned and in respiratory distress. They had to help each other breathe using mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. At 7am, an Israeli missile hit the basement.

'The door was blown off and we had to escape. I shouted out: "All of you, come this way to get out of here, come on!"'

About 2,000 people were outside on the street and were met by Israeli tanks. This time, they were allowed to pass, though only for about 500 metres before being led onto a sandy road full of holes and tracks left by Israeli bulldozers.

'The road was covered with cactus thorns and stones crushed by heavy machines, and we were mostly barefoot and naked from top to bottom, showing Israeli troops that we were unarmed and just civilians,' he told me. "We are peaceful men, women and children, young and elderly, who want safety"— this was what we told the Israeli troops.'

Dr Qudeh and others carried some 130 injured people on their shoulders. On the way, an elderly man, Ismail Abu Rejela, was killed by random fire. Other patients were pulled on donkey carts as they made their way to Nasser Hospital, in Khan Younis, about two hours walk to the west.



Mohammed Omer