



The Ordeal of Mohammed Omer

By Kenneth Ring

We are used to hearing about the hazards, often fatal, of being a journalist these days. Everyone is familiar with accounts of courageous Russian journalists who have been assassinated and of course with stories of war correspondents who have been killed or gravely wounded in the course of reporting from Iraq and Afghanistan. But what about the dangers of just being a Palestinian journalist who is simply trying to return to his own hometown in Gaza after being abroad?

Consider the case of a twenty-four-year-old reporter named Mohammed Omer.

Some background first: For the past six years Mohammed has been covering and reporting on the situation in Gaza and has published his articles in various periodicals in Europe, for the Inter Press Service News Agency and The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs. His articles have received much recognition and several awards, including, most recently, the prestigious Martha Gellhorn Prize for Journalism, which was presented to Mohammed in a special ceremony in London in June, 2008 – about which more in a moment.

Mohammed and his family, like many Palestinians, have suffered greatly because of the circumstances under which they live in Gaza. He himself was nearly killed by a bulldozer in the course of photographing the demolition of a neighbor's house and one of his brothers did lose his life as a teenager as a result of being shot by Israel Defense Forces on his way home from school. Another brother was shot in the leg, which had to be amputated. Mohammed's father has spent eleven years in Israeli prisons where torture, as is well known, is common. And in March, 2003, Mohammed returned to his home after school to find that he had it been demolished by an Israeli bulldozer. All his family's possessions – books, photographs, all his own notebooks, everything – were obliterated, and he and his family suddenly found themselves homeless.

It is not an unusual family story for people living in Gaza; on the contrary, one hears accounts like this all the time from the lips of Palestinians.

Now fast-forward to June, 2008. Mohammed has recently received word that he is to be a co-recipient of the Martha Gellhorn Prize. For this, he must get to London, but, as you know, it is not easy for any Gazan to leave the prison that Gaza has become under the unrelenting Israeli siege. Only after strenuous diplomatic efforts over several weeks by Dutch officials and a prize-winning Australian journalist living in England was it possible for Mohammed to leave Gaza to receive his award. While in Europe, Mohammed also spoke in Sweden, the Netherlands and Greece about his work, in addition to making a very moving acceptance speech in London during the ceremonies for the Gellhorn Prize.

The return to Gaza was, however, also fraught with difficulties. According to various reports in the press, as soon as Mohammed had arrived in Amman, the Dutch diplomats who had facilitated his trip informed him that the Israelis did not want him to return. However, after further negotiations by his Dutch sponsors, Mohammed was finally allowed to enter Israel via the Allenby Bridge on the morning of June 26th.

That's when the trouble began.

According to all the accounts I have read in the press including several interviews with Mohammed himself, there he was interrogated, strip-searched and brutalized by agents of the Shin Bet for several hours. Mohammed says that his interrogators made fun of him saying, "Oh, so it's you who won the journalism award," and repeatedly asked him where he had hidden his prize money. After that, he was continually

threatened at gunpoint, forced to remove all his clothes leaving him completely naked, and then beaten and kicked for more than ten minutes until he lost consciousness. He awoke to find himself being dragged around the room by his feet, his head banging on the floor, after which another Shin Bet officer pressed his boot upon Mohammed's neck while another painfully jabbed his fingers into his face. At this point, Mr. Omer says, "I thought I was dying. I remained in a state of unconsciousness for up to 90 minutes until a medical doctor who was carrying an M-16 performed an electrocardiogram on me."

This bare summary of Mohammed's ordeal hardly does more, however, than give a kind of overall impression of his treatment and the rank and wanton humiliation that was inflicted on him that seems to have been motivated only by malice. Reading Mohammed's own testimony, one can't help being reminded of the unchecked and unmonitored torture that was visited upon Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib. To illustrate this, I will present some excerpts from a recent interview with Mohammed conducted by Amy Goodman on her Democracy Now! Program. At this point, a Shin Bet officer named Avi has taken Mohammed into an empty room to continue his "interrogation:"

Avi took me inside a room, where he asked me—in an empty room, where he asked me, "Take off your clothes." I told him, "I'm not going to take off my clothes, because I have the Dutch embassy waiting for me outside." After some time, I had to take off my clothes. He said, "Take off your T-shirt." I take it off. I took off my jeans. I took off my shoes and my socks. And then he's coming to me—he's getting closer to me, and then he says, "Take off your underwear." I said, "I'm not going to take off my underwear. There is an embassy waiting outside for me." He said, "I know that there is an embassy waiting for you. Take off your underwear." I said, "I'm not going to take it off." Then he was putting his hand on his revolver and kept looking at me. "Mohammed, take off your underwear," he says. And then I said, "I'm not going to take it off, because this is a humiliation. You're trying to humiliate me. It's not security checking, because I went through the security system like anyone else, and you are treating me differently." And then he said, "Take it off." And then I said, "I'm not going to take it off."

So he went down to my knees, where he pulled down my underwear to make me totally naked. I looked at him, and then I told him, "OK? So what are you trying to do here?" And he said, "Go right, go left." I said, "I'm not going to move right or left. I'm totally naked." And then he started humiliating me and laughing. And I continued explaining to him, "Why do you treat me that way? I'm a human

being, and I don't deserve this kind of treatment." Then he said to me, "Well, still, you have seen nothing. You will see more." He continued to interrogate me and...search me, stripping and searching me while I was totally naked. And then he told me, "Go and get your clothes on." I put my clothes on, and I went back to the hall where the travelers are coming.

There was of course "more," as Avi had threatened. Later on, after more ridicule, taunting and other forms of verbal intimidation, it starts to get physical:

I collapsed during the interrogation. I fainted and...I started vomiting everywhere. And then the soldiers, they started gathering around me. I estimate nearly one hour and a half vomiting on the ground. And one of the Shabak officers—I was unconscious for most of the time, but I can remember one of the things that they were doing to me. He was using his [fingernails] and pinching me all the way, trying to cause me pain under my eyes and under the soft part of my eye. I thought what these people are doing is basically they are trying to torture me. And one of them who was trying to do that, the same thing, pinching me using his [fingernails] under my ears, and then one other of them...put his shoes on my neck. I could feel actually the outline of his shoes on my neck, moving right and left.

I started vomiting again and again, especially after one of the soldiers had both his two fingers inside the hole between my neck and my chest. There is a little hole, and he put it all the way inside and tried to grab my bones, to grab me from my bones different times. That was the most painful thing. And then, [the] other one who was trying to put his hands on my chest and all his weight on my chest. He was—it was actually meant to break me and to break my ribs, because he put all his weight. And the man who continued...to put his feet and his shoes on my neck, that can't be first aid at all. When I told the doctors here in Gaza what happened to me, they said that can't be first aid, it can't be something like that, that's torture.

Mohammed's account of his treatment goes on, as I indicate in my summary account above, but you have read enough to get the flavor of this "interrogation." In any case, eventually Mohammed was dragged off, still only half conscious, to an ambulance and taken to a hospital in Jericho following which he was transported by Dutch diplomats to a hospital in Gaza where doctors determined that several of his ribs had been cracked. Mohammed was hospitalized for five days after his assault

and is still recovering from his injuries and trauma. His voice remains weak and hoarse, and he still seems emotionally broken from the incident. As he told one interviewer, "I'm emotionally destroyed. I have nightmares. I have never experienced such humiliation. They stripped and made fun of me....If I weren't a Palestinian, if only I had a different passport, they would never have done that to me."

The latest word I have heard from those who are close to Mohammed is that he needs an operation. It is not clear exactly for what, but one of his friends has written that it is because of where they had kicked him. He said it was in a sensitive area so I am assuming it is in the groin." I think we can surmise just where Mohammed was kicked.

Of course, the Israelis deny that any unusual security procedures were involved in Mohammed's interrogation, and that "the person in question received decent treatment and no extraordinary measures were taken against him. After the body search...the person in question lost his balance and fell for some unknown reason...."

Needless to say, no one, and certainly no one who has talked with Mohammed, believes this. Such denials are standard practice and are risible on their face.

As you can imagine, there has been a widespread sense of outrage over this incident and various protests have already been lodged by friends of Mohammed and concerned journalists everywhere. Dutch MP Van Baalen has demanded an investigation and an open letter has been sent to the Israeli ambassador to the U.K., Ron Prosor, asking him to launch an investigation into the matter. Meanwhile, in America, The Washington Report for Middle East Affairs has circulated a petition on Mohammed's behalf, which has already garnered thousand of signatories demanding redress, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's office has agreed to a meeting. In addition, the Consul General of the San Francisco Israeli consulate has been advised of this matter and has offered to meet about it. At the very least, if the results of these inquiries establish the veracity of Mohammed's claims, as few doubt they will, then the Israeli government should be required to issue an apology to Mohammed and to compensate him for his injuries, although of course none of that will repair his broken ribs or his damaged "groin," much less undo the trauma and humiliation that he suffered as a result of the thuggish actions that its operatives perpetrated on him.

Even though Mohammed has been deeply wounded, physically and psychologically, by the ordeal that I have described, he is determined not to allow the insults he has suffered at the hands of these Israeli agents to

intimidate him or keep him from his work, no matter what the consequences. As he told Amy Goodman:

Well...they can kill me. I thought that the fact that I'm being given this international prize was going to bring me protection, but who cares? Israel doesn't care....I mean, will Israel care [about] killing a journalist? Of course not....Will they care [about killing] Mohammed Omer? Of course not.

As long as Mohammed lives, they will not succeed in killing his voice either. He will continue to speak out against injustice and to report the facts in Gaza, once he is able to work again. As it states in his Gellhorn Prize citation, "Every day, he reports from a war zone, where he is also a prisoner. His homeland, Gaza, is surrounded, starved, attacked, forgotten. He is a profoundly humane witness to one of the great injustices of our time. He is the voice of the voiceless."

Mohammed told another interviewer that he was calling on his colleagues around the world to condemn in the strongest words the "criminal and disgraceful Israeli behavior," which "only befits criminals and thugs, not states, let alone states that claim to be civilized, western and democratic."

As is well attested by human rights organizations and many witnesses, flagrant abuses like those which were inflicted upon Mohammed occur routinely to Palestinian citizens at the hands of Israeli soldiers and have been going on for many years. Most of the victims of this kind of brutality, which can only inflame hatred because of its capricious cruelty, are ordinary people who have no one to speak up for their defense, so reports of this sort of thing often leave no trace except on those who are the victims of it. But in this case, Mr. Omer is a highly respected journalist who has many friends throughout the world, and because of that, there will rightly be a "stink" made about this incident, and it will not be forgotten, any more than it will by Mohammed himself.

In fact, in the last communication I have received from one of his close friends, Mohammed made it clear that he wanted his friends and allies around the world "not to give up fighting for the safe passage of Palestinians" and that his own case not be forgotten since it provides such a clear instance of what can happen to any Palestinian, especially one who has a record of speaking out against injustice, when such routine protections can no longer be counted on.

Which is why those of us who have been especially concerned with this incident want to do all we can to continue to publicize it until justice

is done, both to Mohammed and to all Palestinians. In this effort, we hope you will also see fit to make your voice heard.

Kenneth Ring, Ph.D., is a professor emeritus of psychology, University of Connecticut, who currently resides in the San Francisco Bay Area.