

Gaza doctor recounts Israeli attack on hospital, journalists

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Max Blumenthal (MB): Dr. Ahmed Alfarra From Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, welcome to The Grayzone.

Dr. Ahmed Alfarra (AA): Okay, first, I'm very happy to be with you tonight. I'm Dr. Ahmed Alfarra, head of paediatric and maternity department in Nasser Medical Complex. I'm here in the evacuated place near Az Zawayda. I lost my first house in Al-Qarara's area, and then I shifted to the Al Sattar area, and also I lost that place. So I shifted here to the evacuated centre of the Az Zawayda area.

MB: Well, we're glad we can speak with you despite the circumstances. Can you describe what happened on the morning of August 25th when Israel attacked the hospital where you work, Nasser Medical Centre, then carried out a double or triple tap strike that massacred the rescue team and the journalists who arrived on the scene?

AA: My friend, what was happening exactly? That morning, it was nearly 8:15, I was in my office, I was treating a case for a child who my colleague consulted me about a case. While I was putting the scope in my ears, I heard a loud voice. It was very or extremely powerful, even at that time, the mother of the child suddenly had a syncopal attack and she fainted. And I was confused at that time; to go to treat the mother or to continue the examination of the child or to get outside or to look from the window to see what's happening. After that, we discovered that the Israelis struck the hospital in a double attack the first time. This is what we discovered later, that it was a double attack at the first [one]. They first attacked the stairs which is on the east side, they killed a journalist, his name is Hussam al-Masri, who was operating a left TV feed for Reuters. You should ask why Hussam is sitting there? This is on the 4th floor, my friend. This area belongs to most coverage of internet eSIM cards. You know the journalists are using the eSIM card, and the eSIM card there is very powerful for the media and to deliver their message or reports for their agencies. Even me, as a doctor, when the internet is not available in Nasser Medical Complex, I used to go to the 4th stairs in this area on the 4th floor, and I try to connect my family through that internet which belongs to eSIM cards.

What I want to mention is that, in this attack, there is another previously unreported blast at the northern wing. This is in the east and there is another attack on the northern wing at the same time, even the journalist and the media couldn't distinguish that it is moments separate from them. It was one voice, but it was two attacks. I think there were two tanks attacking at the same time. One for the northern stairs and one for the eastern stairs. In the northern stair there was something like a balcony on the stairs. The doctors and medical students in the 6th year were used to gathering there and discussing the cases that belong to the ICU because this is the closest to the ICU for adults. So in this attack, Hussam al-Masri, the journalist was killed immediately and also Mohamed Al-Habibi who is a medical student in the 6th level of the faculty of Medicine in Al-Azhar University which is a local university also were killed. And a lot of his colleagues, male and female doctors were injured in this attack. At that time, my friend, the whole hospital was in shock and everyone tried to go there as a rescue team. Journalists who are friends and colleagues for Hussam, they wanted to go upstairs to help, to rescue and even to cover the event and what happened with their colleagues.

AA: And also the doctors and the security guys went to the balcony to evacuate Dr Mohamed Al-Habibi and his colleagues from that area. At that time, nearly within ten minutes or nine or ten minutes separation, there is another attack which is also a double attack, not one attack, by two rockets. When we reviewed the BBC videos and the Reuters videos, we discovered in the sky that there were two rockets in the second attack. So the number of attacks that targeted Nasser medical complex at that time, is four attacks, two in the first and two in second. The first was in two places and the second two attacks were for one place.

But what I want to talk about is that the second attack was extremely horrible. Why is it extremely horrible? Because all the rescue team, all the journalists, all of the medical staff, all the security guys were upstairs and they were on live, and everyone can see that people are there and they want to rescue and want to resuscitate and evacuate the targeted people upstairs. Unfortunately, two rockets, I think, as mentioned by some who were experienced, that two other bomb tanks struck that area at the same time, and really a massacre happened there as five journalists were killed and three security guys were killed and civilian defences were killed and some observers and some men who were there who tried to help also were killed. So it was, I mean, unbelievable. They are talking that there was a camera there and that camera belongs to, for example, for Hamas or something like that. My friend, there are a lot of methods, there are a lot ways to deal with that without a massacre. They have the phone of the director of the hospital, Dr. Atef Al Hout. And the Israeli leader tried to contact him many times. In the first time of the evacuation of Nasser Medical Complex. He can phone Dr. Atef and ask him, please, I don't want any camera to be or any journalist to be in the hospital. It is something easy. Okay, I will make some arguments and I will make the discussion more and more. Firstly, you expire that camera and you kill the men who are carrying that camera. Why are you continuing to do a massacre and kill nearly 20 people in the second attack? That means that you are not targeting one camera or you are targeting all the cameras, you are targeting all the journalists, you want to make it silent about everything happening in Gaza. You don't want the voice of Gaza to get outside. And what supports my belief is that since the beginning of the war, nearly 249 journalists have been killed. If you calculate, my friend, the

number of journalists who were killed since the beginning of the last century of the First World War and Second World War and the Korean War this number is not equal or will not exceed or will not be near the number of journalists who were killed in Gaza.

MB: Can you describe the situation and the conditions inside Nasser Hospital today? And are you able to cope with the heavy load of cases, especially as Israel is ethnically cleansing the North, pushing people out of Gaza City and they're coming in your direction?

AA: My friend, Max, the hospital is in a very critical situation. Nasser Medical Complex nowadays is a hospital instead of four hospitals. You know that the European hospital is completely avoided. Abu Youssef al-Najjar in Rafah city, completely destroyed. The Emirati hospital is evacuated and not working. So Nasser Medical Complex nowadays is serving nearly one million people. You can imagine that one hospital is serving one million people in Mawasi, Khan Younis area beside that. I want to mention that in the last week, the number of admitted cases to Nasser Medical Complex is nearly 1300 patients. My friend, we put the patients in the corridors. We put the patients in the area. We make a field hospital on the ground. Sometimes we put a patient on the mattresses on the ground. In the entrance of the elevator we put some cases. We try to close this area. We try to make some curtains here and there to create more area. And in this time, over the crowdings, there is a severe lack of medical supplies. You get inside the hospital, you can't imagine that normal saline, ringer's lactate, which is something very simple, and it should be supplied for any hospital. Paracetamol IV, Paracetamol oral, even antiseptic like chlorine, like alcohol, like iodine is not available in the hospital. From the main drug list, nearly 85% of the remainder is zero; zero from these drugs. So it is something unbelievable. Sometimes we have the patient and we have the doctor and we have the operation theatre, but we don't have the instrument. Two days ago, I visited the orthopaedic department. I asked them what is the instrument that you need as soon as possible, as critical. They told me, what do we have? You should ask what we have. We don't have anything. The external fixation is unavailable, the internal fixation is unavailable, the intramedullary screw is unavailable, the orthopaedic graft is unavailing. So a lot of operations are delayed or not done because they are overcrowded, and also, at the same time, we are facing something difficult about the situation of malnutrition, the situation of lack of immunity. You know, nowadays we have influenza-like illness. You know influenza, this is the time that we are facing every year, nearly in August, early September, as the weather is changing, we have a flu or a flu-like illness and influenza at that time. What is different this time is that influenza at this time is lasting for nearly 15 days and fever continues sometimes for seven or ten days. Why is this happening? And some elderly patients are dying due to that influenza. This is because of a lack of immunity. This is because of malnutrition. My friend, influenza worldwide needs lemon, needs some ginger, needs some onion, needs some vitamin C. And this is unavailable in Gaza nowadays. So the influenza and the flu-like illness is lasting more and people are suffering more. Even the water, healthy water, is not available in Gaza nowadays.

MB: Israel is denying that hunger is reaching epidemic proportions in Gaza as the United Nations declares famine as a result of Israel's siege and blockade of aid to the Gaza Strip.

What are you seeing from where you are? Are you seeing hunger or outright starvation on a mass scale?

AA: My friend, Israeli leaders are usually used to doing that. And they are talking about propaganda or something like that. But my impression and what we can see on the ground is that we are facing the worst starvation that we have ever seen in our experience. My friend, I studied medicine in Egypt 25 years ago. When we studied the malnutrition and the hypovitaminosis, our doctors and the professors talked for us about marasmus, about Kwashiorkor, about hypovitaminosis, about iron deficiency, anaemia, they told us that unfortunately you will not see these cases because this is more in theory than practical. Nowadays in Gaza we saw everything. We saw marasmus, we saw Kwashiorkor, we saw bleeding tendencies from the gum due to vitamin C deficiency. We saw [inaudible] rickets due to vitamin D deficiency. We even saw a lack of hair, alopecia, change of colour of hair due to zinc deficiency, and due to hypoproteinemia. I swear to God that when I see a case of severe acute malnutrition, I feel myself as something unable to do anything. You feel that that baby is collapsing. Even his mother and his father are collapsing because they are unable to do something simple for their baby or for their child to offer him suitable food. This is unbelievable. I saw a lot of cases of severe acute malnutrition and documented all of them. They were completely healthy and I have videos for all of them. They always have a camera and they have the photo for the child before starvation. He was healthy, he was well nourished, he was blithering, he was active. After starvation, he lost nearly more than 45 or 40% of his actual weight. His senile face, he looks ill, apathetic, irritable, no muscles, no fat tissue, just a skeleton covered by skin. The Israeli media is talking against it, that it is propaganda. Actually, there are some Israeli journalists who were convinced about that starvation and I think Haaretz newspaper made some investigation and made a full report about that and they have documented all the cases of malnutrition. What are the Israelis talking about? They are talking about something that in some cases they have another disease. Okay, I totally agree that in some cases they have another disease, like metabolic disease, like cardiac disease, but we have to convince [people of] something. Is that a chronic disease? Should I let him die? He needs more protein. He needs more calories. He needs more medication. He needs more treatment. This is not an excuse to kill him. This chronic patient also needs more intensive care and needs more calories and needs more feeding for him. But what I want to mention is that nearly 60% of cases are primary malnutrition, they are not complaining about anything. The only thing that has happened for them is unavailability of food and that's what made them starve. And I want to ask the media that they are talking about propaganda; what is the explanation for the number of deaths that is nearly more than 200 patients killed due to starvation? They were killed by what?

MB: Well we're seeing deaths due to deprivation and then the majority of deaths are due to munitions. And it's been reported that Nasser Hospital where you are has treated many injuries and deaths from Gaza humanitarian so-called aid sites. So I wanted to ask you what kind of injuries you're seeing from these aid sites from aid seekers. And what are the wounded telling you about their experiences attempting to get food?

AA: Yes, we received a lot of cases coming from GHF. My friend, GHF, first we thought that this is something good and it will offer food and offer packages for the families. But what we discovered later is that all the people who were there were severely injured. I have received a lot of cases and I saw a lot of cases where they were targeted in the upper part of the body. I saw cases who were targeted at the eye, in the mouth. I think that there is some good sniper and he's interested or he may do something like reviewing his skills about sniping them. Actually this is unbelievable. Someone who's going there to come back with some package of food or package of something for his family and unfortunately he came back as a body. Even my son asked me many times, Dad, I want to go there because we want to get some food from there. I told him, no way because I don't want to lose you. It is unbelievable to go there and I saw a lot of videos from there, they are not dealing with Palestinian people as a human being. They are using something like dealing with them, sorry for my expression, like animals. They put the food in an area which is closed and ask them to get inside suddenly. There is no organisation. There are no orders. Everyone is trying to catch what he can; be the first to catch it. So it is something that does not belong to humanity or morality. I saw the cases which came back from there to Nasser Medical Complex. They were severely injured and again there is no excuse or no explanation to target the upper part of the body. If you are afraid about something or security you can alarm. You can make a voice. You can smoke a bomb. You can do a lot of things. I will go with you, you can shoot the lower limbs. But why are you shooting the eye and shooting the head? All the cases are shooting by snipers. This is unbelievable and it is not consistent with humanity for the people. We have doctors, we have engineering, we have teachers, we have highly educated people. How can they go in that situation, in that crowdedness without an identity card, without civilian records, just like dealing with unhumanity. This is unbelievable and I think we have to convince [people of] the best way to deal with that profile is to recognise UNRWA, UNICEF, OCHA, all the organisations have the civilian record for people, for Palestinian people. They can talk with you. They can send SMS for example. This is your package. You can come on the date, Monday, for example, at time and you receive your package. This is what we used to do and now this is unfortunately not happening.

MB: Because UNRWA has been removed and replaced with GHF. And you spoke about snipers targeting people at these aid sites in the upper parts of their bodies, including their heads, sort of shooting to kill. We've heard many reports of Israeli snipers targeting children across Gaza, including shooting them in the groin area one week, then many injuries will show up with head injuries the next week. As the head of paediatrics, is there any truth to these reports about Israeli snipers and their targeting of children in Gaza?

AA: My friend, we should take care about the statistics of the number of children killed since the beginning of the war. Nearly the number of whole deaths according to the Minister of Health statistics is nearly 62,000. 20,000, we are talking about nearly 33%, are children. So I think that there is an intended targeting for these children. Unfortunately, I saw cases of children who were attacked in their head, in their heart, in their chest. Even though they are not a risk for the Israeli soldiers. They are just being attacked as they are children. If we are talking about the number of targeted children, this is a huge number. When we are talking

that one of three people is a child, it is unbelievable to be a mistake or collateral damage. You mean that you attack these children. I want to give you, my friend, an example of what's happening for Dr. Alaa Al Najjar. Dr. Alaa Al Najjar was one of our colleagues in the hospital. While she was working in the hospital, she heard that a bombing or a bomb strike against her house and nine of her children were killed and it's where an unbelievable massacre happened for her children. What is the explanation for that? They know everything, the air drone, everything. They know who's here and who's there. And they know that they are children in the place. They attacked and killed nearly nine children in one air force strike. So, I think there is an intentional targeting for these children because this is what they believe in their concept about dealing with children who will be, in their opinion, he will be a terrorist from their opinion in the future. And that's what they are talking about in lots of media and lots of interviews.

MB: Are you seeing any new kinds of injuries in this round of conflict, possibly from novel weapons that are being tested on the population of Gaza?

AA: In the last month, for example?

MB: At any point in the last two years.

AA: I saw a lot of cases and I remember a lot of cases. For example, my friend, before the evacuation of Nasser Medical Complex, I was on duty in my room. I was the head of the paediatric department. The room next to me was attacked by a bomb tank. There was a girl who was so lovely and so kind. Her name is Dunia Abu Mohsen. Dunia Abu Mohsen is 13 years old. She was targeted with her family, and she was the only survivor from all her family. She came to the hospital. She was in the paediatric department, and we would care about her. We would make some conversation with her. We tried to make a joke with her. And we asked Dunia many times, Dunia, what you would like to be? She told us, I want to be a doctor. I want to treat the children who have been amputated, because she has one amputated lower limb. She told us that she wants to be an amazing doctor, orthopaedic, and try to reconstruct and treat all the amputated limbs, because she saw a lot of children who were amputated. At that night, and it was documented on YouTube and a lot of media, a bomb tank was dropped on the hospital. The door next to me, the room next to, and unfortunately, Dunia were killed, and even her brain matter was on the wall, near here, and you can see that by a lot of video.

This is one example of a lot of examples. I saw, you know, in my round on the children, I saw a lot of cases of amputated hands, amputated lower limbs. They asked me, Doctor, please, an innocent question, please, will this limb grow again? I couldn't answer, I couldn't answer the question, because I am unable to answer that question, why this child has lost his hand or lost his leg. This is unbelievable. Every day, you know, if this war ends, Max, we will have a textbook, a textbook like Nelson in paediatric, or something like that, which is full of what happened for everyone, every person in Gaza, every child. Even the foetus in his womb, the baby in his uterus, in his mother's uterus, also was killed while his mother was pregnant with him, and we have a lot of cases about that. Pregnant women, who were targeted, and she was

killed, and the baby inside her, inside her uterus, or inside her womb, were injured, either killed or killed later, due to delayed going to the hospital.

MB: And we were one of the media organisations that covered the Israeli murder of Dunia Abu Mohsen. I think we featured comments from you in our YouTube report. She was the lone survivor of her family, and had lost a limb, and was killed by an Israeli tank in her hospital bed, at Nasser Hospital. One of the more shocking episodes out of thousands that are almost difficult to keep track of at this point. I wanted to ask you about reports of a rise in Guillain-Barré syndrome across Gaza. What are you seeing, and why is this happening?

AA: Yes, my friend Guillain-Barré syndrome, for definition, is an ascending paralysis. It's due to something that belongs to the immune system. T lymphocytes, or autoantibodies, are affecting the myelin sheaths of the nerves. It usually follows viral infection, or bacterial infection, and sometimes it follows immunisation. What I want to tell, Max, that in these cases, we send an analysis for them to Israel and Jordan, and in all the cases the results were that enterovirus and campylobacter jejuni, bacteria and viruses, were in those samples. That means that the destruction of the sewage system in Gaza during this war is the main cause of that disease. Again, Guillain-Barré is one of the serious diseases. We used to see in Gaza, one or two cases per year, or three cases at high level per year. But in the last three months, we saw nearly 100 cases exactly, and this is a huge number. We called it an outbreak. The danger of that disease, it sometimes affects the respiratory muscles and causes respiratory fatigue, and the patient needs to be on mechanical ventilation. And it is very serious. We lost nearly ten cases due to that disease. That means 10% were killed due to that disease, the difficulties in that disease that the treatment is not available. The main stem or the main component of the treatment is intravenous immunoglobulin, IVIG, which is bottles given to the patient maybe one time or two times or three times or four times. This IVIG is not available. And the occupational forces do not allow for the Minister of Health and WHO to have this treatment and to give it to the patient. So the patient I have now, at this time, while we are doing this interview, I have two cases in the intensive care unit in Khan Younis Nasser Medical Complex. They are in the intensive care units, and they are waiting for intravenous immunoglobulin. They are on mechanical ventilation. If the intravenous immunoglobulin is not allowed, unfortunately, they have a lot of hazard to be dying due to unavailability of the treatment. So this is one of the challenges for us. We also have challenges in diagnosis. We are dependent on the experience of the doctors. But unfortunately, we don't have CSF analysis, cerebral spinal fluid analysis. We don't have EMG, Electromyography. We don't have nerve conduction velocity. So we depend on the experiences of the doctor. What I want to mention, my friend, is that the distribution of that disease is also due to lack of immunity and lack of vitamins. You know the central nervous system needs vitamin B1 and B6 and B12 to regenerate and to compensate. The loss of these vitamins make the disease more strong and more widespread. And also, the lack of vitamins make the immune system of the patient more low and weaker. So the disease is getting worse.

MB: All the crimes and horrors that you've described are made possible by my government, by Western governments. It feels like there's very little we can do in this country right now.

But what do you think people who are watching this in the United States or Europe across the West can do to help you and to help the people who are suffering so much in Gaza?

AA: Okay, thank you, Max. First, about the event, what happened to the journalists. I have one point here, please. I have followed with deep concern how several major international agencies, like Reuters, like Associated Press, are using terms like we have a contractor, we have an assigned freelance journalist. Those terms are diminishing their professional status and make the Palestinian journalist like someone who's in low-level according to the Western journalist or any journalist outside Gaza. This low-level dealing with journalists, which makes the Israeli and the occupational forces in Gaza to be more and more natural in killing toward these journalists. As I mentioned, my friend, 249 journalists have been killed since the beginning of the war. This is an unbelievable number. If the journalists all over the world will make something about the rights of journalists, about the Geneva agreement, about something according to the organisation of the journalist, I think this will make something to stop the occupational forces about continue silencing or continue try to force the journalist to stop talking and stop covering the crimes happening in Gaza nowadays. This is the first.

Second thing that I want to mention, my friend Max, is that the Palestinian people are in a spot area which is closed by land, closed by air, closed by sea. They can't even try to contact anybody outside. They are human beings who were created by God and they need the right to education, the right to receive medical health supplies, the right to have good food, a very good quantity of healthy water to drink. Those are simple rights for them. Again, they have doctors, they have engineering, they have teachers, they have students, they have journalists. They respect all the nations. They respect all of the people. They want contact with everyone. They have to interact with everyone. We need the world to deal with the Palestinian people, like to deal with the Ukrainian people, like to deal with someone in America. This double strategy that the world is using with the Palestinian is unacceptable. That means that this number, for example, this number of journalists that were killed since the beginning of the war, and that number has not happened worldwide in any war before. The number of children who were killed is nearly 20,000. If this happened in any place, in Ukraine, for example, all European countries will stand in what's happening. The United States would talk. Why is the double strategy theory a concept in dealing with the Palestinian people? So, again, they are human beings. They are not ink on paper. They deserve a good life. They want to live in humanity and morality and deal with them as human beings.

MB: Dr. Ahmed Alfarra, head of paediatrics at Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis. I know you're very busy and have better things to do and more important things to do than speak to us. So thank you so much for your time. Thank you for bearing witness and for the life-saving work you're doing under impossible conditions.

AA: Thank you, Max. It is very nice to be interviewed by you. I know you are a famous journalist and I know that your reports are more accurate and you use to talk about the truth and you try to save and try to help anyone who's feeling that he's not taking his rights. Thank you, Max.

MB: Thank you, my friend. Just doing what we can and we will have you back. Inshallah.

END

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