

# Introduction

*Ramzy Baroud*

Chaos wrought by Israeli armored vehicles and snipers enforcing a curfew trapped a young Palestinian journalist. Mae Shaheen had entered the camp at dawn and paced the dusty streets for hours. She spent her day meeting people and recording their testimonies. But her interviews took longer than planned. Now the light was growing dim, and she found herself walking alone through abandoned lanes. There were no taxis to carry her back home. Residents who might have helped had sealed their doors. They did not trust knocking strangers. The only sound she could hear was the roar of the tanks' diesel engines in the distance. Everything else was silent.

As she walked, Mae saw a neighborhood in ruins. Where were the men, women, and children who had lived here just days before? Cinder block houses and apartments were smashed. The scene was surreal. It was like a Hollywood production set. By now the sun had set and a desert chill settled in. The electricity was off, street lights were dead. The neighborhood waited in darkness. A curfew had been imposed at dusk, and Mae Shaheen knew that she was in trouble.

Mae could hear the tanks closing in. She could hear the loudspeakers. "Those who violate the curfew will be shot!" they announced in Arabic. Mae found a place in the rubble and hid in fear. In a few minutes the tanks turned and the sound of their engines grew more distant. She could hear single shots, then bursts of fire. The shots were on the other side of the camp. The sound of the tanks grew more distant. Still, Mae waited.

Two hours after midnight, Mae's colleague, Ali Samudi, called Mae on her cell phone, took down directions, then defied the army's orders and stole into the camp. He raced through the abandoned streets in his battered 1988 Fiat, protected only by his velocity. He was able to retrieve Mae, and the two fled to safety outside the camp. The following

morning, Mae Shaheen returned to the Jenin refugee camp with a crew of five journalists who carried tape recorders, cameras, and a long list of questions.

Mae's story was typical. The team of Palestinian journalists had close calls, overcame obstacles, and endured hardships while collecting material for *Searching Jenin*. They sought to record a segment of the Arab-Israeli conflict, an event that has become a symbol of the uprising known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada.

The Israeli invasion of Jenin is remembered by Palestinians as a massacre whereas Israelis recall a fair battle. To Israelis Jenin is an example of soldiers fighting "terrorists." The international community can't make up its mind about Jenin. Some accuse Israel of war crimes, while others advocate Israel's "right to defend itself."

Television, radio, and print news outlets presented the opportunity for Israeli soldiers and officers to spread their version of the events in Jenin. Yet the residents of the camp—those witnesses to whatever atrocities occurred, the ones who pitched tents on the ruins of their homes—could not amplify their voices to the same level. *Searching Jenin* documents their perspective. It is the chorus of Jenin's Palestinian refugees. In this book their words bypass the mass media filters, described by Chomsky, that normally would twist or frame their meaning. Their voices dodge the denials and exaggerations of politicians. Their emotions are immune to political sensitivities that ensnarl the United Nations and other international organizations.

When Scott C. Davis of Cune Press approached me about a book on Jenin, I was skeptical—the cards seemed stacked against us. Some warned that it would be impossible to penetrate Jenin, which was under an extremely tight curfew. With the world's attention focused on the region, Israelis would restrict those entering the camp. To add to the difficulty of obtaining interviews, the invasion and the ensuing destruction drove many Jenin residents from their homes and scattered them throughout towns and villages in the West Bank. Most daunting of all, the Israelis were tightening their iron fist around the entire West Bank. It would be a dangerous place for journalists. In truth, it would be nearly impossible for them to gain entry to this war zone.

The start of *Searching Jenin* was anything but promising. I traveled to Jordan and tried for a full month to enter the West Bank. But Israeli officials refused to acknowledge my American citizenship. To them I

was a Palestinian—end of story—and they denied permission to enter.

I countered by assembling a team of Palestinian journalists who were already in the West Bank. The team included Mahfouz Abu Turk and Ali Samudi, who were two of the first journalists to enter the Jenin refugee camp in the final days of the Israeli invasion. Abu Turk, a Reuters photojournalist, snapped some of the first photos from Jenin, and Ali Samudi recorded much of the footage aired by Qatar's Al-Jazeera television and other leading news agencies around the world.

*Searching Jenin* examines the April invasion through the eyes of those who lived it. The book presents a missing link in the drama known by many as the Jenin Massacre and by others simply as the Battle of Jenin. It narrates the story, not by a third party, but by the survivors.

## **Problems and Solutions**

*Searching Jenin* doesn't answer every question regarding atrocities in the refugee camp. While eyewitnesses openly described their own plight, they did not generalize. Yet this book presents information that can be used to draw larger conclusions. One question that this book *can* help to answer: How did the Israeli army and the Palestinian resistance conduct themselves toward the civilians of Jenin?

A question that this book cannot answer: How many Palestinians were killed in Jenin in the two weeks of fighting, bombardment, and home demolitions? Israel still holds hundreds of Palestinian men from the Jenin refugee camp in its prisons in the West Bank and in Israel. Most of these prisoners are confirmed alive, yet the fate of others remains unknown. There is still rubble to be removed. There are still names to be accounted for and missing to be found. Some fighters reportedly rushed to Jenin to help defend the camp prior to the Israeli invasion in early April 2002. These fighters might be reported missing in Tulkarm and Ramallah, but they actually went missing in Jenin. Because Israeli soldiers vandalized and destroyed Palestinian records in hospitals, schools, and government buildings, this question may never be answered.

Most of the work on this book was done during fierce fighting later in the summer when the IDF had reoccupied Jenin. As problems arose, we found creative solutions. For example, when military curfews put the lives of our reporters in danger and made it unwise for them to move, we recruited reporters based in Jenin. These reporters knew the camp intimately. They could avoid the army and gain quick, safe access to

residents' homes.

Our local reporters aided us greatly by earning the trust of Jenin's residents. The residents were more at ease relaying experiences to our reporters, rather than to foreign journalists. We had the opportunity to interview families of Palestinian fighters. These were people who often refused to speak about their lives and loved ones with foreign journalists or even with the Arab media. I am especially proud of interviews with people such as the widow of Mahmud Tawalbe, the Islamic Jihad leader who was recognized (along with Abu Jandal) as the leader of the resistance in the camp. Both Tawalbe and Abu Jandal were killed in the fighting. We also managed to interview the only Palestinian who witnessed Abu Jandal's execution.

Although the testimonies of Jenin residents were translated from Arabic, we minimized edits to preserve the character of the interviews. We aimed to reveal the victims as they were and are—innocent, angry, grieving, proud, spontaneous. Our goal was to uncover the lives and emotion behind the casualty figures. Little Rund al-Shalabi shared her grief and inability to comprehend the Israeli soldiers who broke her toys. We preserved Rafidia al-Jamal's emotions when she described how she lay wounded in the street clutching her dead sister while snipers prevented her from reaching her husband who beckoned from their doorway. We waited patiently as some of the witnesses wept through their stories. We asked little children what they wanted to be when they grew up.

In the end, we gathered scores of interviews. We were forced to discard some that were duplicates and those that were cut too short by circumstances beyond our control.

To rebut claims that the testimonies are exaggerations and lies, we included eyewitness accounts from internationals who visited or sneaked into Jenin just after the Israeli army redeployed to the outskirts of the camp. Americans, Europeans, Israelis journalists, international observers, and aid workers bear witness to the atrocities committed by the Israeli armed forces.

## **Perceptions**

It is not Jenin's size or the number of its inhabitants, but rather the events that unfolded in Jenin that make it significant. According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the camp was established

in 1953 within the municipal boundaries of the town of Jenin on 373 *dunums* of land, roughly one square kilometer. The camp's inhabitants, an estimated 13,000 registered refugees, were expelled from villages that are still visible from the camp. These villages are now located within the so-called Green Line in today's Israel. The camp is in the northern stretch of the West Bank. It fell under Israeli occupation with the rest of the West Bank in 1967. The Jenin refugee camp's status changed in 1995 when it was put under the administrative control of the Palestinian Authority (PA), as dictated by the 1993 Oslo Accords.

The Jenin refugee camp is densely populated. Women, children, and elderly constitute nearly two-thirds of its population. Forty-two percent of the camp residents are under fifteen years of age. Half of the population of the neighboring town of Jenin also consists of refugees who have overflowed from the camp. The population of the camp is generally poor with 307 families registered by UNRWA as "special hardship cases." Since the beginning of the uprising, poverty in the camp has increased with the result that food and water are in short supply during military closures and curfews.

We asked a young man about Israel's perception of the impoverished camp. "Israel calls us the house of bees, but we think of our camp as the home of resistance," he said. In fact, for quite some time Israel has considered the Jenin refugee camp a place where "terrorists" thrive. The contrast between Israel's perception of the camp and the perceptions of the camp's residents shaped events. Another factor was the history of interaction between Jenin and Israel since 1967. The Israeli invasion of Jenin is not an isolated effort to tame "bees" or crack down on "terrorists."

When Palestinians staged an uprising against the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in September 2000, Jenin was at the forefront. The residents of the camp suffered many casualties. Israel often claims that fighters from Jenin were leaders in suicide bombings and attacks on Israeli soldiers, armed settlers, and civilians. To understand the invasion of Jenin requires a look at certain events that occurred before the invasion.

## **The Violence that Preceded**

The year 2002 began with violence as Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon promised new tactics to crush Palestinian resistance. When Israel