

Ihab Ayadi

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During the invasion in April, all the rescue teams in the area gathered. From the first until the fourth day of the invasion, we were notified of many casualties. We managed to enter the camp to help in the rescue and recovery efforts. Despite the Israeli army blockades and harassment, it was possible to enter the camp. Although Israeli tanks and airplanes kept targeting us, God was watching over us.

In only the first two days we recovered thirteen martyrs and fifty wounded. The wounded were suffering from very serious injuries, especially to the head, chest, and neck. The martyrs we recovered were civilians and resistance fighters.

At one point, I was taken out of my ambulance by Israeli soldiers. They humiliated and insulted me. Most of the harassment we endured during these days came from the “special forces” that took over people’s homes. In the following days, we began facing serious problems reaching the wounded, especially in areas that were besieged and where heavy shelling was taking place. The panic people felt was also a problem. Some people would call, but they were so terrified and in shock that they could not explain what they needed. I used to park the ambulance near where we knew there were wounded, and then I would start running from home to home on foot to find the wounded. It took a long time to reach people’s homes because of the firing and the blockade. We would finally arrive to find the wounded had bled to death.

Nidal Abu al-Hayjah was one of the people who bled very badly, and we could not reach him even though he was only a few feet from us. Nidal was wounded and was left to bleed behind his house. Around him were snipers. Anyone who attempted to help him was shot.

I received a call that there was a wounded person hit in the head by helicopter fire. They said he was bleeding very badly. Once I got close to the scene, I found him covered in blood from a terrible wound on his head. He was dead. I put him in the ambulance and we headed to the Jenin hospital. Along the way I looked in the rear view mirror, and I saw the Jenin hospital’s ambulance behind me. He got closer

and shouted to me that there was a bleeding man near the elementary school. I turned around and headed to the scene. I later learned that the ambulance driver who informed me of the wounded man came under fire, and had survived an Israeli attack thanks to a miracle. Anyway, I got close to the elementary school and found myself in an area that had been heavily attacked. I started walking through very small and narrow alleyways. One of the residents whispered to me from a window to watch for special forces that were hiding in that area and shooting at anything that moved. I looked to the sky, wary of any airplane that might have an easy shot at me. I couldn't find any. I managed to reach the wounded man. I proceeded carefully. On my hands and knees I touched his neck to look for a pulse and realized that, although he had lost a great amount of blood, he was still alive. I grabbed his arms and started to drag him to safety. As I was doing this, a man came running toward me very fast. The moment he was behind me, I heard a bullet. Then he fell and groaned, "I am wounded." I took him with me to the ambulance. I tore off his shirt and realized that blood was pouring out of his chest. My team and I tried to do all we could until we reached the hospital. On the way, I figured out why that man was running towards me: he had realized that I wasn't able to help the wounded man on my own and ran out of his house to help me. The bullet hit his heart. Two hours later he died. I can never forget this—not in all my life. I was in a state of shock for a long time. These two people who died with me were the last that I was able to attempt to rescue during the invasion.

The Israelis began blocking our way and firing at us. For example, on the third day of the invasion we worked under fire from three to five in the afternoon. Around five in the afternoon, I arrived at the *Zahrah* to rescue wounded, but there were some tanks blocking the ambulances' way. I thought that we were in the middle of a clash between Israeli soldiers and resistance fighters and tried to proceed, however, the tanks opened fire directly on us. You know, since the killing of Dr. Khalil at the hands of the Israelis, we have been very careful not to be on our own—we only travel in groups. This way, if one of us is shot, the other can rescue the injured. I didn't know what to do, there was a wounded man lying ten meters away from us and the Israelis were opening fire on the ambulance. Bullets were flying all around us. It was a very difficult thing to do, but we fled to the Jenin hospital. As we pulled in front of the hospital's gate, we received news that the Israelis took over the house

of Dr. Malik Masoud, a physician who works at the Jenin hospital. His house was located beside the hospital. The army stationed itself inside his house, and whenever the ambulance would pull up to carry the wounded into the hospital, the army would open fire. Once we realized this, we opened the hospital doors and stormed into the hospital with the engine left running, the lights on, and the siren blaring. Just seconds after we stepped into the hospital, we turned around and found about twenty Israeli soldiers hiding near the gate of the hospital. They shouted at us, “Stop!”

I was nervous. I looked at their commander and said, “Hi, how can I help you?”

“Were you inside the camp?”

“Yes.”

“Have you brought anybody with you?”

“I couldn’t because the tanks started firing at us.”

“Why? Haven’t you coordinated with the Israeli forces?” I explained to him that the Israeli army was refusing to coordinate with the Red Crescent and the Red Cross Society. He ordered his troops to search the ambulance thoroughly. “You have brought this on yourself,” he muttered.

“I am a paramedic and an ambulance driver,” I replied. “All I care about is to rescue whomever is in need of help: a Jew, a foreigner, or a Palestinian. I was taught this.”

He took my ID and brought me to the corner and said, “I want you to listen to this carefully. You are not allowed to move in or out of the camp, or to send one single ambulance anywhere without the prior permission of the army. Whoever disobeys these orders will be shot. Any breaking of the rules and we will hold you responsible.”

“But sometimes there are critical cases where we cannot wait for written consent,” I said.

“These are the orders,” he said. “Obey them or bear the consequences.”

For two days, the soldiers held us in the hospital. People would call us, reporting wounded all across the camp, but we could not move. If we dared to leave, soldiers would immediately open fire, and we had to go back to the hospital for cover. Then they started shelling the hospital. They bombed the oxygen room. They bombed the day care. We began running out of food and medicine. This was very difficult on us and on



Ihab Ibrahim A'yadi and his clearly marked vehicle

the people of Jenin. On one occasion, we were told that a house caught on fire after it was attacked by an Apache helicopter. A whole family burned inside, but we couldn't get to them.

I love my job. It is so rewarding when you feel that you can save lives. But answering telephone calls from people screaming that their loved ones are bleeding to death, while you cannot go to help, left me in a state of shock. I was one of many who wept those days because of the helplessness I felt.

On one occasion I wanted to test the soldiers. I took one of the crew and moved toward the ambulance. We heard a few shots in the air but we didn't run, we stood there. Suddenly the commander of the unit that raided the hospital two days earlier came to me. He came with a smirk on his face and said, "What's going on, Ihab?"

"What are you so happy about?" I asked. "We have people dying and we cannot reach them." I implored him and finally, we reached an agreement allowing us to move within a limited area specified by the soldiers. At that point, we were not aware of anything happening in the camp. We did know that there were many wounded and many deaths, but we didn't know where exactly. Those who had been calling and begging us to come and help had stopped calling.

In any case, we decided to enter the camp. According to the agreement, we went to the checkpoint. The soldiers searched our ambulance for two hours. But just as we entered the camp, bullets flew all around the

ambulance. We fled. The army claimed that the Palestinian fighters were firing at us. Nonsense. The Palestinians had wounded who they wanted to evacuate. The army prevented me from using the siren. When we used to do that before, the people of Jenin would come out with their wounded. But now they didn't know we were in the area, and it was too dangerous for anyone to step outside to look for us, so we came back to the hospital. I went back to the soldiers stationed near the hospital.

"We have thirteen dead bodies in the hospital," I told them. "The refrigerator only has the capacity for three bodies. The bodies are decomposing and the smell is horrid." Eventually the number of martyrs went up to fifteen. Still, they wouldn't allow us to bury them. So we asked permission to bury them in the back of the hospital in the garden. We were told that as long as we stayed within the boundaries of the hospital property, we could bury them. But as we stepped out carrying the bodies, soldiers started firing at us. We ran back inside and decided that all of us should exit together, doctors, nurses, maintenance staff and pharmacists. We all wore white. We put the martyrs in plastic bags and found a few bricks to mark the graves. We wrote a name and number on each bag and we buried them—just temporarily we thought. The director of the hospital was the one who drove the machine to dig the graves. We rested a little, and I went back to the soldiers and begged, "For God's sake, allow us entry into the camp."

"You can send three cars," the commander finally said, "but you have to coordinate every move with us." We loaded three ambulances with a crew and volunteers. But as we reached the Zahrah School, a tank blocked our way. There were a number of tanks and many soldiers. One of the soldiers stepped toward the ambulance I was in.

"Come over here," he said.

I stepped out of the car and he ordered me to take my clothes off. I told him in Hebrew, "I am going to rescue the wounded."

"Forbidden!" he replied.

I looked around me and I realized that there were over a thousand people just down the street: men, women, and children. The men were all stripped naked, blindfolded, and handcuffed. They were being dragged one by one to a place out of sight behind the brick factory. The children and the women looked hungry and exhausted from the heat. Most of them were barefoot. Seeing them reminded me of the Palestinians who were driven from their homes in 1948. Once the people realized I was

an ambulance driver, it was like I was their gift from heaven. Many started weeping all at once, saying, "Please come over here!" They said, "There are people bleeding here!" I told the soldier, "Listen, this is beyond inhumane! I am a respected medical worker, don't humiliate me like this. You can either tie me and drag me into the brick factory with the others or let me go." He finally said, "Okay, put your clothes on and leave."

I realized what they were doing. They were trying to get all of the women and children out of the camp, so that they could topple the entire camp on the heads of the men. They wanted to kill them all. On my way back to the ambulance I shouted at the soldiers, "You cannot let thousands of innocent people walk out like this! The town of Jenin itself is under military curfew and the soldiers will definitely open fire on them!" They wouldn't listen. They didn't care. Immediately, I phoned the hospital administration. I told them that we had to find a way to shelter these people. I told them that we would have space for hundreds of people at the Red Crescent Center. Then I rushed back to the hospital. I took most of the volunteers, and we went to the Red Crescent to get things ready. When the volunteers saw the scene of people leaving the camp, they all started weeping.

We had some milk and water at the Red Crescent Center. I got things as ready as possible and sneaked back to the camp where I located three wounded. They had their hands and legs blown off. Some of them had been bleeding for three days. It was very painful. The soldiers caught us as we left the camp and held us for an hour and a half. Finally, they allowed us to take one of the wounded to the hospital. They left the two others in the blazing sun. Once we got to the hospital, I rushed the wounded man in. He was also bleeding from his head. Fifteen minutes after we got there, soldiers came running in, shouting at me. I was no longer afraid. "Let them do whatever they want to me," I thought. There were ten soldiers shouting at me all at once, and I shouted back. They were trying to seize the wounded from the hospital. I thought I would rather let the wounded die with me in dignity than to die in a military jeep, humiliated and abused. The soldiers have no regard for God's law.

Finally, the soldiers were distracted with something, and I managed to hide the wounded in a room where they could not find them. Two hours later, the other two wounded, who were left in the sun, were brought to the hospital in another ambulance. Just as they pulled into the

hospital's emergency parking lot, soldiers came running. They arrested the wounded. They pulled the medical workers out of the ambulance. They beat them and threw them on the ground. By the time I came running out they had my colleague Ghassan in handcuffs. I also saw other people from the neighborhood handcuffed and sitting in the army jeeps. They even ordered one of the volunteers to strip other people. It was as if I completely lost my mind. Their commander, who refers to himself as Captain Jamal, is one of those responsible for the Jenin area. I looked at him and said, "What do you think you are doing?"

"Didn't we have an agreement to search all ambulances before they enter the hospital?" he said.

"You are supposed to be an educated man," I said. "What kind of logic is this? How can I leave people to bleed to death in the ambulance while your soldiers interrogate them and strip them naked? If you have a bit of humanity, you will release these poor people you have arrested."

"How can I tell who is wanted and who is not?" he said.

"For goodness sake," I said, "these are old women and children!" I also told him that we were already understaffed, "How can you use our volunteers to strip people?" Eventually, he gave me my ID and gave my colleagues their IDs back.

"Take your ambulances and staff," he said, "and leave this area—and don't let me see you again."

Some days later it became easier for us to work because the Red Crescent and the United Nations managed to coordinate with the Israelis. Our ambulances, however, still could not reach the hospital. We had to take the wounded to another clinic, and from there the wounded would be put on a cart and pushed all the way to hospital on foot. Women giving birth would have to give birth in the street. The soldiers stood and looked at us from afar.

Later I was stationed at the Red Crescent Center. Since we were not allowed to move about, we slept in the Center. We would sleep in our clothes after a very hard day of work. We had no water, and the situation was growing dire. There were over 200 families trapped with us. One day the soldiers came and surrounded the area. They asked about the driver of the ambulance, which was me. I came out. They searched the ambulance very thoroughly. They took my ID and said, "You are not allowed to carry any wounded in this ambulance."

The families inside the Center wanted to leave badly. There was no

food or water for anyone. Around eight in the evening, when the Israelis finally allowed them to leave, people started running out of the Center with no sense of direction. They poured into the main street, but the Israeli forces wouldn't allow them to move. The commander came and he said, "They need to walk in a line, two by two."

Finally, the Red Crescent was able to bring some bottles of water. We gave the people some water and milk, and we instructed them how and where they should move. Al-Qade mosque in the town of Jenin opened its doors to host as many families as possible. Just as we managed to temporarily resolve the problem of those hundreds of homeless, the process started all over again as more than 800 people came pouring out of the camp. This time the shelters included charities, schools, and the municipality.

I was so consumed in this process that I did not realize what was happening in the background. The Israeli soldiers were arresting all of my colleagues. A soldier ordered me to approach. He shouted, "You are under arrest, take your clothes off!" All of my colleagues were also handcuffed. They took us to a detention center, where we were tortured for a whole day. We were left in the sun and dust, handcuffed and exhausted. In the middle of the night, they tied us together in large line, like a chain gang. They took us to Salem to be interrogated. In the interrogation, I kept telling them that they could not treat us this way, for we were medical workers. Finally, they released us, but they said we were forbidden to go back to Jenin. They said we could go to the villages on the outskirts. We went there for four days until the Red Cross came and escorted us back. This is our story.

**The Head of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society Emergency Medical Service (EMS) in Jenin, Dr. Khalil Sulieman, 58, was killed by tank on March 4, 2002 while he was evacuating an injured girl in his ambulance from the Jenin refugee camp. He was alive for an hour and a half after having been shot. Israeli forces prevented him from receiving medical attention.*