

Independent Media Coverage of Middle East War: From BAFTA to the Border

By [Felicity Arbuthnot](#)

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"Man's inhumanity to man Makes countless thousands mourn." Robert Burns (1759-1796)

On 16th June, Mohammed Omer (24) became the youngest journalist to be presented with the prestigious Martha Gellhorn Prize for journalism, 2008. Omer and Dahr Jamail, two independent correspondents, were co-recipients, for their extraordinary coverage of Gaza and Iraq, respectively. Alone, in dangerous and difficult regions, their writings have towered, dwarfing many household names with mega-media backing. As their colleagues (especially other independents) have been murdered and shot, often by security forces and frequently by unknowns, they ploughed a lone, courageous furrough.

The Awards were presented at the BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) in London's Piccadilly, by John Pilger. The two joined Robert Fisk and Patrick Cockburn of the Independent, Chris McGreal and Ghaith Abdul Ahad of the Guardian, The Sunday Times' Hala Jaber and Michael Tierney of the Glasgow Herald for distinguished and courageous coverage. Mohammed, who has spoken eloquently across fifteen American cities as a guest of The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, in 2006 and in Sweden, France, the U.K. and The Netherlands, this June, on the plight of the Palestinians, lives in Israeli-occupied Gaza, in the Rafah refugee camp where he was born. His twenty four years have brought grief and hardship under which most would buckle, yet those who meet him are struck by his lack of bitterness. His passion for his people and for Justice shines in his talks and his writing (<http://www.RafahToday.org> which grew from his newsletter : "We Are Getting Killed.)

The eldest of eight children, he began work to support his family, aged six, working at odd jobs, then in a factory. Aged seventeen, he landed a job translating for Global Exchange, working with foreign delegations and dignitaries and began filing copy on Gaza's plight. Since then, his voice has been heard and published from South Africa to Norway, Sweden to Scotland; Germany to Australia. In 2006, he was honoured by the New American Media as the "Best Youth Voice" of the year, for his dispatches in the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs. He has worked through a barrier of pain. On 18th October 2003, his seventeen year old brother Hassan was killed by an Israeli sniper whilst walking to school. Nine days later, an Israeli D-9 bulldozer "... crushed Mohammed's family home without warning whilst his family were inside. As the walls buckled and the roof collapsed" the family managed to scabble out, through a window. His mother was severely wounded and still suffers from her injuries.

Over the years, almost all of Mohammed's siblings have been severely maimed or injured by Israeli military forces. Between his journalism and the weight of the suffering around him,

Mohammed graduated with dual Bachelor degrees in English and Literature from Gaza's Islamic University in June 2006.* As Benjamin Heine wrote in *Desert Peace*, it seemed impossible that Mohammed Omer would be able to receive the Martha Gellhorn Prize, in person. The endless obstacles conjured up by the Israeli authorities to prevent him travelling (ironically, as Israel's new Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Ron Proser, travelled the country berating his audience that Britain was a hotbed of anti-Israeli sentiment, towards "the only democratic country in the Middle East".)

It was through the diplomacy, commitment and humanity of the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Tel Aviv, that Mohammed finally stood on the stage to accept the honour and to dedicate it to: "The Voiceless People of Palestine". Whilst in London, he also met with politicians Jeremy Corbyn and George Galloway, the day before he was to leave to return to Gaza, via Jordan. Even his overwhelmingly hard won, short time in the sun was clouded. He remarked at one meeting: "I am not even sure I will be let back in to my own country." His concerns were well founded. He was refused entry to his country and home and returned to Limbo in Jordan's capitol Amman. That the Netherlands Embassy, under whose auspices he had travelled, had courteously sent a car to meet him, on his return, counted for nothing. Diplomacy in the "only democracy ..." is clearly a one way affair, summed up succinctly, by M.P.s George Galloway and Jeremy Corbyn: "That the winner of the Martha Gellhorn Award can be refused re-entry to his own country speaks volumes about the plight of the Palestinians and the arrogance of their criminal occupiers", said Galloway. "I met a great and fearless journalist and a hope for the future (of Palestine.) The fault is the occupation", said Corbyn.

In this year, that the State of Israel celebrates its sixty years of destruction of lives, homes, towns and villages and Palestinians who commemorate their Nakba (catastrophe), it seemed that Mohammed Omer was to become yet another with no "right to return". "Democracy" determined to silence the "Voice of the Voiceless". Last night, this publication received a call from Bernard Dekker, spokesman for the Royal Netherlands Foreign Ministry. "The good news is that he is back in Gaza, via the Allenby Bridge. The bad news is that the Israeli Forces took off all his clothes." He was so badly treated that: "He vomited, lost consciousness and had to be taken to hospital in Jericho", by the Embassy car which was again waiting for him. The Netherlands Embassy has also protested to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Further: "The Netherlands expects Israel to live up to its responsibility as a democratic country. Therefore the Foreign Minister has decided to speak to the Israeli Ambassador in the Netherlands." As Mohammed was in Jordan, refused entry to his land, by Israel, Ambassador Proser was speaking in the Welsh Assembly (Parliament). He talked again of Israel: "a democracy under fire".

When a number of Parliamentarians used their democratic right of protest and the Assembly's Presiding Officer, Lord Daffyd Ellis-Thomas refused to attend, Proser, the invited guest, berated his hosts and His Lordship, saying of the latter: "Although a Lord, is statements are not very noble."

Diplomacy (Oxford dictionary) is 1: "conduct of the relations of one state with another by peaceful means"; 2: "skill in the management of international relations" and 3: "tact and skill with dealing with people".

As with democracy, Israel's Ambassadorial representatives, it seems, need a crash course. "Mohammed has experienced more pain, death, fear, destruction, hatred and despair in his

(short life) than most people experience in a lifetime. He rises each day and in spite of the pain, grabs his camera, pen and paper and heads out in to the war zone he calls home." "Words are my weapons against injustice, hate, starvation and oppression", he explains. "With his bulletproof vest and Cannon D20 in hand, Mohammed is on the front lines", wrote the Washington Report. Indeed. God speed Mohammed. Way to go Israel. And a huge debt of gratitude from many: to The Royal Netherlands Embassy, Tel Aviv and The Foreign Ministry in The Hague, whose actions have been a blueprint for the meaning of diplomacy and humanity. A shining light in the "only democracy in the Middle East".'

*Washington Report on Middle East Affairs: http://www.p4pd.org/mohammed_omer_bio.pdf

Felicity Arbuthnot Felicity Arbuthnot is a journalist and activist who has visited the Arab and Muslim world on numerous occasions. She has written and broadcast on Iraq, her coverage of which was nominated for several awards. She was also senior researcher for John Pilger's award-winning documentary, "Paying the Price: Killing the Children of Iraq". <http://www.johnpilger.com/page.asp?partID=4> and author, with Nikki van der Gaag, of "Baghdad" in the "Great Cities" series, for World Almanac Books (2006.)

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