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News

Palestinian doctor's tragedy prompts plans for women's college in Gaza

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¹ Tel Aviv

The Palestinian doctor who lost three daughters in the Israeli attack on Gaza last year talks of the future

One of the most unforgettable events of last year's war in Gaza was the killing by the Israel Defence Forces of three daughters of a Palestinian gynaecologist who worked in Israel but lived in Gaza and who was a long term supporter of Arab-Israeli coexistence (*BMJ* 2009;338:b213, doi:10.1136/bmj.b213).

Now Izzeldin Abuelaish has spoken to the *BMJ* to describe how he feels about last year's events and what he is planning for the future. Revisiting Israel from his present home in Canada, he said that he thought his daughters' deaths had been of crucial importance in ending the war. "The blood of my daughters was a price that saved others' lives," he said.

Dr Abuelaish thinks that the attack put Palestinian suffering higher on the Israeli and the international agenda and had an immediate effect. The next day Israel's then prime minister, Ehud Olmert, announced a unilateral ceasefire. Israel has never said that the announcement was connected to his tragedy, but Dr Abuelaish is sure that it had an effect.

He said, "Olmert announced the unilateral ceasefire after he saw what happened, so it saved lives." He has set up an international foundation in memory of his daughters to enable women in the Middle East to attend a liberal arts college, which he hopes to set up in Gaza.

He is planning to sue the Israeli Ministry of Defence in a case that may end up in Israel's Supreme Court. Any compensation will go to his foundation.

On 16 January 2009 the world learnt of Dr Abuelaish's tragedy in dramatic fashion. Long involved in medical work in both Gaza and Israel, he called a journalist acquaintance who was broadcasting live on Israeli television to tell him that the army had just attacked his home.

During the attack viewers heard Dr Abuelaish describe the death moments before of his three daughters, Bisan (aged 20 years), Mayar (15), and Aya (13). "They died on the spot, on the spot . . . Oh Lord, God, God, God!"

A fourth daughter, 17 year old Shadah, was badly injured. On hearing the man's cries of anguish, Ehud Olmert said he wept.

On Tuesday 19 January this year Dr Abuelaish took a taxi ride from Tel Aviv to the Israel-Gaza border, part of the final leg of a journey to visit his daughters' graves in Gaza. He said that his Muslim faith had taught him that God planned everything and that even if you did not like something it might be for good.

He now lives in Toronto and is a professor of global health at the University of Toronto. The journey back was his first since he left Gaza in July.

Dr Abuelaish said that moving to Toronto had provided a much needed chance to "get some rest" from the reality he faced in Gaza: the hardships of the blockade, the difficulty of living in the shadow of his tragedy, and his difficult work patterns.

"The most important thing is to be always with my children," he said, referring to his five surviving children, whose mother died shortly before the Gaza war. He explained that when he used to travel from Gaza to work in Tel Aviv he would stay there for several nights, causing him to be apart from his family.

However, he sees his move to Toronto as temporary and said that he plans to return to Gaza within five years.

Even before the interview began it was clear that his warmth for Israelis was still intact. A few moments before getting into the taxi he saw a pregnant Israeli woman, and although he was in a hurry he stopped to ask her when she was due and how the pregnancy was going.

As the taxi set out, Dr Abuelaish voiced concern about what sights were in store for him in Gaza, envisaging homelessness and poverty resulting from the military campaign. Daily life is difficult under the comprehensive blockade imposed by Israel and Egypt and under the continuing governance of Hamas, which many Israelis consider a terrorist organisation.

He went on to state a belief that his daughters were chosen by God to die because of their good attributes and because they had campaigned for peace and taken part in peace camps with Israelis. The death of such people drove home the point that it was not only militants who were killed by Israeli fire, he said.

The Israeli army, which conducted a two and a half week investigation into the incident, said last February that it considered the Abuelaish girls to have been casualties of Hamas's tactic of fighting from among civilians (*BMJ* 2009;338:b523, doi:[10.1136/bmj.b523](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.b523)).

The army claimed that soldiers saw suspicious figures on the third floor of the building, which is where the girls were, and believed the figures were fighters observing Israeli forces in order to direct sniper fire from another building—a method that they say Hamas used during the operation. It also emphasises that the family was urged to leave its house, which was in the combat zone, days before the incident.

But Dr Abuelaish said at the time that he had nowhere else to go and insisted that no snipers were in the area. He has maintained ever since the attack that the army should admit it made a mistake. He believes that the Ministry of Defence has a moral obligation to give him an apology. He also thinks it has an obligation to compensate him financially for his loss, and his lawyer is starting to put together a case that may end up in Israel's Supreme Court.

If he is successful, Dr Abuelaish said, any money he is awarded will go to an international foundation that he has established, called Daughters for Life, which is raising funds to enable women from the Middle East to attend university. He hopes that the foundation will award its first grants within a year and has an ambitious five year plan to open the equivalent of a US liberal arts college and a high school for academically gifted young women from Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt.

He hopes that it will be possible to locate the campus in Gaza so that Palestinians who have been denied so much will have access to education and ultimately the means to give back to society. His dream is for the school to educate a new generation of "enlightened" women, graduates who can one day negotiate a lasting peace for the region.

Meanwhile, life in Toronto is busy for Dr Abuelaish. In addition to his academic responsibilities and his work for Daughters for Life, he takes care of his five surviving children. At the time they lost their sisters they were still grieving over the death of their mother, Nadia, who had died from leukaemia just four months earlier.

But all are coping well, he says, including Shadah, the seriously injured 17 year old. Beaming with pride, he said that she returned to school after three months in recovery, and just three months later she sat the Palestinian equivalent of A levels. Shadah scored 95.5%, he notes proudly, and is now studying engineering at the University of Toronto.

Dr Abuelaish is also raising funds for an Israeli institution. At the end of January he will travel to Germany to seek money to build a conference facility at Sheba Medical Center, near Tel Aviv, where he used to work. He envisages a project that will be named in memory of his daughters. For several years Dr Abuelaish worked part time at Sheba on fertility research and treatment projects.

Asked whether it was difficult to start raising money for an Israeli institution after his experience, he replied that humanitarian cooperation across national divides is the essence of his message. "This hospital is the place where everything melts," he said. "There is diversity, and everyone is equal: Palestinians, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Druze. All are equal, and that is a message we can learn from medicine—the message of equality and justice.

"In the end [the conference facility] will help human beings there, it will help sick patients, and this hospital serves Palestinians and Israelis and we must promote more collaboration, more partnership," he explained.

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