

“The Surgeon of Gaza”: Providing Care to the Wounded of Palestine

Dr Christophe Oberlin

By [Hassina Mechaï](#)

Global Research, December 29, 2018

[Middle East Monitor](#) 28 December 2018

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Intelligence](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

French surgeon Christophe Oberlin has spent 17 years travelling to Gaza. He tells MEMO about the evolution of wounds throughout the years as a result of the changes in weaponry

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He is nicknamed the “surgeon of Gaza”. It was in 2001 that Dr Christophe Oberlin began to travel to Gaza regularly. He operates on disabled people and patients with war wounds and also teaches Palestinian surgeons microsurgery and reconstructive surgery. He was against the support given by French President Francois Hollande to the [Israeli offensive in Gaza](#) in July 2014, and was a candidate in the European elections in June 2004, running for a party called the Euro-Palestine.

For this doctor, providing care involves teaching and witnessing, hence quite often he ends up going on missions outside France. From sub-Saharan Africa where he performs surgery on patients with leprosy, to the Maghreb countries where he practiced and trained doctors for decades.

“I’m an expert in microsurgery and hand surgery, known as neuro-orthopaedics, i.e. paralysis surgery, and I have taught in Paris, Algiers and Gaza,” Oberlin explains. His work has advanced limb surgery techniques. The surgeries include those on injuries which result in the destruction of tissue. One operation is named after him, “La Technique Oberlin” (the Oberlin procedure).

Since 2001, he has been going to Gaza at least three times a year: “Gazan surgeons perform the operations alongside me and this is how they are being trained. You can’t imagine how we are welcomed there.”

According to Oberlin, NGOs and the UN are increasingly worried about the medical situation in the [besieged](#) Gaza Strip. Cancer remains the primary health problem in the area.

“Doctors are always missing the medication needed to offer complete chemotherapy treatment; radiation therapy is prohibited by Israel. Dialysis also becomes, in the context of the blockade, a real tragedy, because people die silently. It raises the issue of drinking water.”

Once, I brought up this issue of water quality for dialysis to a minister of health who replied: ‘I don’t even dare thinking about it’.

Water is rare and unfit for consumption in Gaza. The population has access to it for only 12 hours a week, in addition, they experience never-ending power cuts. Only five per cent of Gaza's water is drinkable and the polluted groundwater is drying up.

In 17 years, Oberlin has observed the evolution of wounds that say something about the evolution of the weapons used against Gaza's population. "In 2001, a gunshot wound resulted in an entry and exit wound, a projectile that cuts the tissue clean. These are conventional weapon injuries. Since then new weapons have been developed with unstable trajectory bullets. These bullets do more damage to the tissue."

"There is also the use of [explosive bullets](#). Before they were used every so often, but they have been widely used during the [Great March of Return](#) protests. I've seen these new wounds on the patients in Gaza that I have operated on. These bullets are only allowed for hunting large animals, and they are prohibited in military practice."

The time he has spent in Gaza has stirred controversy, Oberlin says. "I am accused of taking sides and told to stick to practising surgery only. But when you've seen young people coming in maimed since the age of 17, you can't just provide care without talking about the reasons behind these injuries. The need to testify, to report becomes vital," he says.

A need that almost cost him his career, or at least his professional reputation. A Professor of Medicine at the Denis Diderot University in Paris, Oberlin taught anatomy and hand surgery for 30 years. In 2012, as part of his courses in humanitarian medicine, he gave his students a real case: "You are at the Rafah hospital in the Gaza Strip during the 2008-2009 winter war. Ambulances bring you 22 bodies, all with the name Al Daya. Paramedics and surviving family members tell you that this was a classic bombing. Each of them was found dead. How do you qualify the crimes perpetrated: war crime, crime against humanity or genocide. Argue your position based on the definitions of the different crimes."

Detailing the legal mayhem he found himself in as a result of the case study, Oberlin says: "I have respect for people who resist and don't let themselves be crushed. I am also in favour of total freedom of expression."

He won the case.

Under siege

Oberlin doesn't see Gaza as an isolated territory, he sees it in view of the wider global geopolitical context.

"To get out of Gaza from Egypt, the fees required can amount to €3,000 [\$3,383]. Until recently, there were nearly 30,000 people on the waiting list to get out of Gaza. Those who really have to go out and have the means to do so, pay. A whole system has been put in place at the Rafah crossing."

The fall of Mubarak meant a little break and oxygen for Gaza. But now the crossings are closed, and that's catastrophic. Egypt is now a very violent dictatorship, even worse than Mubarak's.

He is even more critical of the Palestinian Authority (PA) which “is participating in the siege of Gaza; when [cutting](#) the salaries of civil servants, for example, by [reducing electricity supplies](#) or not paying electricity taxes.”

“Why does the PA want to get a hold of Gaza’s weapons if not to give them to the Israelis? They are completely not in touch with Palestinian realities.”

“Mahmoud Abbas is old and has never set foot in prison. How can he govern a nation where 700,000 people have been imprisoned in the last 15 years? I have respect for those who govern in Gaza right now. For instance, the number one spent 23 years in prison, the Minister of Interior 21 years. These are people who have paid for their beliefs and educated themselves in prison.”

This age gap and the price officials have paid for their cause is of great importance Oberlin. While Abbas is surrounded by the old guard, “I’ve noticed that in Gaza, the renewal of executives is taking place, on average they are 45 years old, very well trained and speak perfect English. But in the West Bank, Abbas is 81, those around him are all over 60.”

The changes in Hamas’ political stance brought about change to its charter in 2017. “Hamas realised the need to communicate in a language understood by Westerners. It also realised that the International Criminal Court is not only a Western organisation but can be very useful. Hamas now knows that there is something that can be done in terms of criminal law.”

“What Hamas is asking for is a single state where everyone has the same rights, it is the only solution. As for Hamas’ inclusion on the European list of terrorist organisations, whereas it has never been on the UN list, it is a measure of the West that fully participates in the siege of Gaza.”

The Great March of Return protests, have also given him food for thought. “I am shocked to see these young people being killed. I thought it would stop at the [Nakba’s anniversary](#), yet it continues. I see how hard Gazans struggle, how hard they work; health workers are not paid but they come to work.”

“Gaza has been under siege for more than ten years, few talk about it. But with the Great March of Return, Gaza is making itself heard.”

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