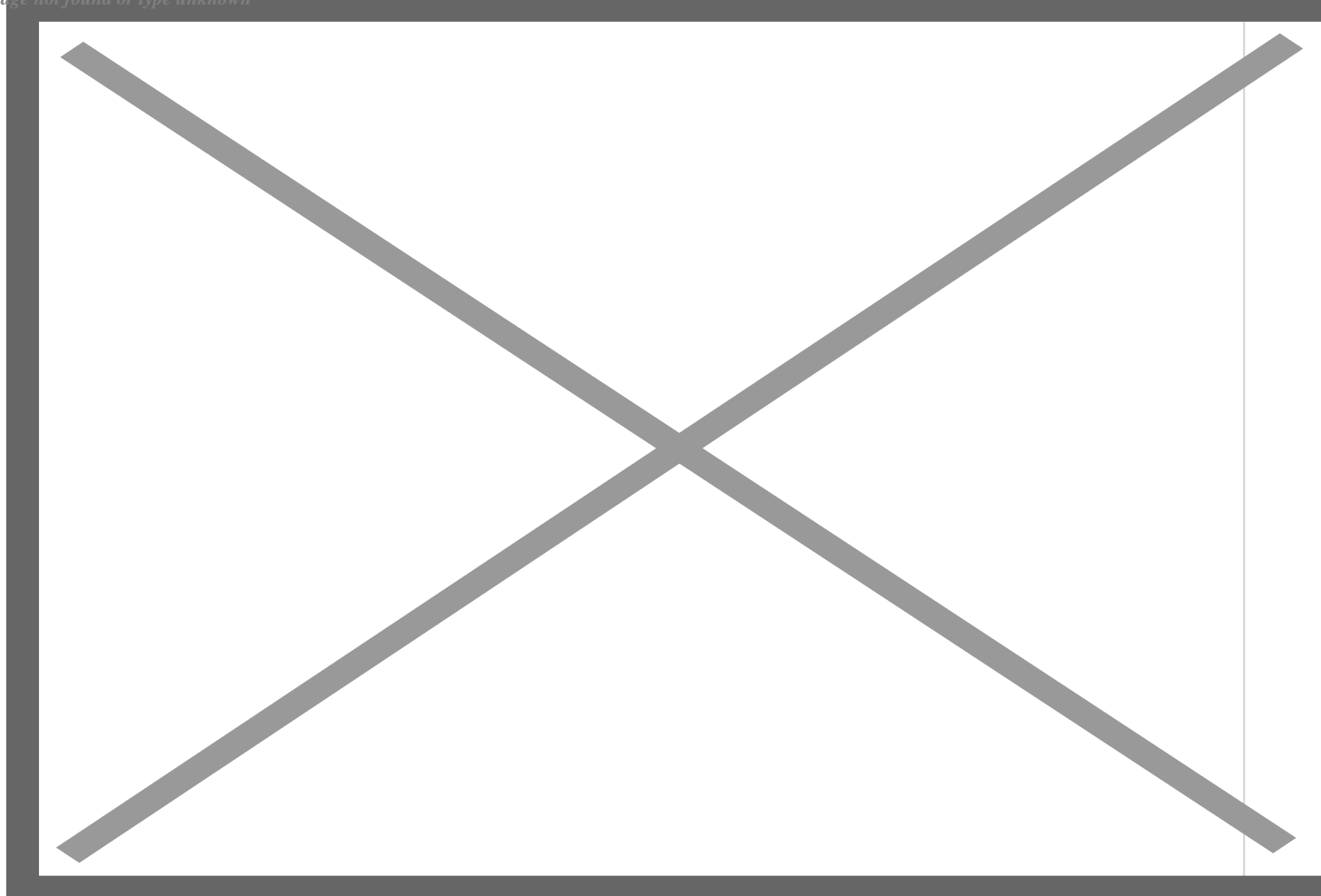


Al Jazeera journalist Samer Abudaqa laid to rest in southern Gaza

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Mourners attend the funeral of Al Jazeera journalist Samer Abudaqa in Khan Younis, southern Gaza, December 16, 2023 [Belal Khaled/ Anadolu Agency]

Khan Younis, December 17 (RHC)-- Al Jazeera journalist Samer Abudaqa has been laid to rest in southern Gaza, with dozens of mourners, including journalists, paying their respects to the cameraman killed in an Israeli drone attack.

The funeral was held on Saturday in the city of Khan Younis. Abudaqa's family, friends and colleagues bid a tearful farewell as his body was lowered into the ground.

Abudaqa, a cameraman for Al Jazeera Arabic in Gaza, was hit in an Israeli drone attack while reporting at Farhana school in Khan Younis. His colleague, Al Jazeera Arabic correspondent Wael Dahdouh, who lost his wife, son, daughter and grandson in a previous Israeli bombing, was wounded.

Journalists in Gaza are carrying a "human and noble message" for the world amid the ongoing war and will continue to work despite Israeli attacks, Dahdouh said in his eulogy. "We will continue to do our duty with professionalism and transparency," he said, as mourners around him wept.

On Friday, Dahdouh was hit by shrapnel on his upper arm, and managed to walk to Nasser hospital alone, where he was treated for minor injuries. He said the network's crew was accompanying civil defence rescuers on a mission to evacuate a family after its home was bombed.

"We captured the devastating destruction and reached places that had not been reached by any camera lens since the Israeli ground operation started," Dahdouh said from his hospital bed.

As the Al Jazeera journalists were heading back on foot because the areas were not accessible by car, Dahdouh said "something big" happened that knocked him to the ground.

After the explosion, Dahdouh said he pressed on his wounds and walked out of the area to get help, but by the time he reached an ambulance, medics said they could not return to the site of the attack because it was too dangerous.

Subsequent efforts to coordinate a safe passage to send rescuers for Abudaqa were delayed, Dahdouh said, adding that one ambulance that tried to reach the cameraman came under fire. "We got in the ambulance, I asked them to go back to where I was because Samer was still there and he was screaming and he was calling for help," Dahdouh said before hearing news of Abudaqa's killing.

"He got injured in the lower part of his body but the paramedics told me that we need to leave immediately and that they will send another ambulance so that we won't be all targeted."

On Friday, the Al Jazeera Media Network condemned the attack and extended its condolences to Abudaqa's family in Gaza and Belgium. It said in a statement that it "holds Israel accountable for systematically targeting and killing Al Jazeera journalists and their families".

"In today's bombing in Khan Younis, Israeli drones fired missiles at a school where civilians sought refuge, resulting in indiscriminate casualties," the network said. "Following Samer's injury, he was left to bleed to death for over 5 hours, as Israeli forces prevented ambulances and rescue workers from reaching him, denying the much-needed emergency treatment," the statement added.

The two journalists worked together with Al Jazeera Arabic since before the war. "[Samer] and Wael make up a very professional, strong team on the ground, documenting everything and bringing all the facts and live pictures of what the Palestinian people have been going through," Al Jazeera correspondent Hani Mahmoud said.

"But particularly with this war, given its intensity in scale and magnitude and the sheer amount of destruction, they have been at the forefront of covering every little detail that one might have forgotten about," he added.

Mahmoud said on Saturday that “there’s nothing to protect journalists across the Gaza Strip”, with an increasing number targeted directly or through their families “just to inflict so much pain on them that it prevents them from continuing”.

“This is a horrific crime – a direct targeting,” said Ibrahim Qanan, a reporter for the pan-Arab network al-Ghad. “The first missile hit Samer and he tried to crawl for 200 metres, but the Israeli warplanes hit him again and directly, so he became a martyr and his body was cut into pieces.

“This is a crime, day and night, against journalists and against the media outlets who are working to reveal the Israeli occupation’s crimes in the Gaza Strip.”

Al Jazeera’s Imran Khan, who is reporting from Ramallah in the occupied West Bank, said he and a number of his colleagues check their phones in the morning first thing after waking up to see if all their colleagues on the ground are still alive.

“This is really the message I have taken away from all of our colleagues in Gaza: They wake up every morning with a determination to continue reporting,” he said. “I am actually in awe of it.”

Abudaqa and Dahdouh are not the first Al Jazeera journalists who have been attacked while covering a story. The first was Palestinian journalist Tarek Ayoub, who was killed in 2003 as a result of injuries he suffered in a U.S. bombing of Al Jazeera’s building in Baghdad, during the Iraq war.

Other Al Jazeera journalists have also been killed in Libya, Syria and Yemen. The network has established a monument at its headquarters in Doha: a steel tree sculpture with leaves carrying the names of the reporters.

“There’s no way around bullets, there’s no way around the bombs,” Al Jazeera’s Mahmoud noted. “But some things need to be documented. The story of Gaza and its people needs to be told to the world, and that’s probably the biggest motivator for the journalist community in Gaza, despite the imminent threat to their lives.”

Abudaqa joined Al Jazeera in June 2004, working as a cameraman and editor. The journalist, born in 1978, was the father of three boys and a girl. He was a resident of the town of Abasan al-Kabira near Khan Younis.

Abudaqa is the 13th Al Jazeera journalist killed on duty since the launch of the network in 1996.

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) said it was “deeply saddened” and called for an independent investigation into the attack. The press freedom group highlighted that the conflict in Gaza is the deadliest for journalists it has ever recorded.

“We’re outraged by the high price, I would say the extreme price, that Palestinian journalists are paying,” the CPJ’s Carlos Martinez de la Serna told Al Jazeera, adding that there was a “clear prevailing sense of impunity.”

“We need international, independent investigations to assess all these killings and those responsible need to be accountable,” said de la Serna. “It’s essential to remember that journalists under international humanitarian law are civilians, and the obligation on all parties involved in the war is to protect them, and what we’re seeing, is that journalists are being killed.”

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) said it was “shocked” by the attack, in a post on X.

An IFJ report published last week found that 72 percent of journalists who died on the job this year were killed in the Gaza war. “We condemn the attack and reiterate our demand that journalists’ lives must be safeguarded,” the group added.

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