Renowned Palestinian footballer Suleiman al-Obeid murdered by Israel at aid distribution site

Robert Stevens
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On August 6, the celebrated retired footballer Suleiman al-Obeid, known affectionately as the "Palestinian Pele" in reference to the great Brazilian player, was killed by Israeli gunfire while waiting for humanitarian aid in southern Gaza. He is survived by his wife and five children.

Al-Obeid represented Palestine—including as captain—in 24 international matches and played for the Gaza City club Khadamat Al-Shatea. A forward and winger, he scored more than 100 goals in his professional career, with one of his finest a scissor-kick in a game against Yemen during the 2010 West Asian Football Federation championship.

He began his career with Khadamat Al-Shatea in 2007, later playing for Markaz Shabab al-Am'ari in the West Bank, and Gaza Sport. He returned to Khadamat Al-Shatea and played for the club until retirement in 2023 at the age of 39.

Al-Obeid had plans to become a football coach. Mohammad Abu Aita, a former Palestinian national player and himself a coach, told *Middle East Eye*, "What hurts most is that the career of such a great player came with a tragic end while he was trying to feed his children. He thought his final days would be in the national team's training rooms, not in a blood-soaked street for a few kilos of flour."

Despite the terrible conditions in Gaza since Israel's invasion in October 2023, Suleiman continued to play the sport he loved. His widow Doaa told Reuters, "He used to go training every day and never stopped, not a single day. Even during the crisis of war, in the midst of rockets, shelling and mass killing, he would go play. He used to gather his friends and loved ones and go play with them."

Israel's genocide laid waste to the previous life the family had, with Reuters noting that their "home was destroyed in a bombardment earlier this year. They now live in a tent among the ruins of a neighbourhood of Gaza City."

Doaa told *Middle East Ey*e both she and Suleiman had feared for his safety and life visiting aid distribution centres for more than a month. "Suleiman began to look for aid after all of our stored food ran out. Market prices are skyrocketing and there is no cash available… My husband had to walk into death traps to feed our children…

"He described bullets whizzing past his head like rain. He was sure he would be killed there, and refused to take our eldest son, Naseem, who is 17, with him."

Doaa added, "I begged him many times to stop going. I told him maybe we could survive without food, but not without him.

"He refused, saying he had hungry children to feed and couldn't bear to see them go without."

As to how he met his death, *Middle East Eye* reported, "According to Doaa, Israeli quadcopters deliberately fired on crowds waiting for food on the day Suleiman was killed.

"News of her husband's death reached her a few hours after he had left, but she refused to believe it was true, until his body was brought back for burial from Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis.

"She received him covered in a white shroud, his face unrecognisable under dried blood."

The governing body of European football, UEFA, put out a cursory and callous two-line X posting two days after his death. It read, "Farewell to Suleiman al-Obeid, the 'Palestinian Pelé'. A talent who gave hope to countless children, even in the darkest of times."

This attempt by the football authorities to airbrush the horrific circumstances in which Suleiman al-Obeid was murdered was shattered by a reply to the post from

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renowned Liverpool Football Club striker and Egyptian international Mo Salah. Salah, a vocal opponent of the genocide, replied to UEFA's post with the pointed question, "Can you tell us how he died, where, and why?"

Salah is one of the best and highest profile players on the planet. He is shortlisted for this year's prestigious Ballon d'Or, awarded to the player considered the best in the world during the previous season. His vast social media following (almost 19.5 million on the X platform alone) meant tens of millions were alerted to al-Obeid's death and UEFA's cowardice.

Within three days Salah's posting had been viewed 111.4 million times and attracted 1.4 million likes, 391,000 reposts and 27,000 comments—and rising.

Salah has long demanded that humanitarian aid be allowed into Gaza and an end to suffering of the Palestinians. On October 18, 2023, as Israel escalated the death and destruction it launched in Gaza days earlier, Salah made a donation to the Egyptian Red Crescent for aid to be distributed in the Strip.

He commented on X, "What is clear now is that humanitarian aid to Gaza must be allowed immediately. The people there are in terrible conditions. The scenes at the hospital last night were horrifying. The people of Gaza need food, water and medical supplies urgently." Salah demanded world leaders act to "prevent further slaughter of all innocent souls."

That plea was viewed almost 193 million times.

Salah's voice, like those of tens of million internationally, was ignored by the imperialist powers as they backed Israel's slaughter and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians for the next 22 months.

The obliteration of Gaza, where the destruction resembles that of cities flattened in the Second World War, is so complete that barely a trace of its sports infrastructure has been left standing. Over 90 percent of infrastructure has been destroyed, and the lives of 808 athletes taken.

The *Guardian* cited the Palestine Football Association (PFA)—whose own headquarters were demolished by an Israeli air strike—who revealed, "The number of footballers killed or who died from starvation has reached 421, including 103 children."

The newspaper added, "According to the PFA, 288 sports facilities have been damaged or reduced to rubble across Gaza and the West Bank, from stadiums and training grounds to gyms and clubhouses. The vast majority, 268, were in Gaza, while 20 were in the West Bank, with about half serving football directly."

A September 2024 study by Issam Khalidi, an independent scholar and author of "One Hundred Years of Football in Palestine", noted in the section "Destruction of Infrastructure":

> Airstrikes, artillery shelling, and the ground invasion of the Gaza Strip have completely destroyed an estimated fifty clubs… The headquarters of the Gaza Sports Club and most of its facilities, including a football field, tennis courts, and a multipurpose indoor hall, were completely demolished. Shelling has leveled the headquarters of the Friends Equestrian Club as well as the Jabaliya Services Club. The Sadaqa Sports Club also paid a heavy price, as occupation forces destroyed the club's headquarters, the main stadium, and the indoor hall.

As a result of the IDF's fascistic onslaught, "In addition to clubs, the headquarters of the Palestinian Olympic Committee, the Palestinian Football Association, and the Supreme Council for Youth and Sports have been demolished, as have many stadiums."

The author details further war crimes: "Israel also bombed and destroyed the United Nations Development Program Stadium in Rafah, Khan Yunis Municipal Stadium and Sports City, al-Nusayrat Municipal Stadium and the baseball and softball stadium in al-Shati' Camp."

Khalidi's study notes, "Those stadiums that remain standing have been transformed by the assault on Gaza. The Rafah Municipal Stadium was converted into a field hospital, and the headquarters of the Rafah Services Club became a distribution center for humanitarian aid to the displaced people in Rafah. The Martyr Muhammad al-Durra Stadium has become a shelter for displaced Palestinians."

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