

Operation Cast Lead: Cousins blown apart in front of their family as they cut wood in front of their house

“The missile hit my brother, his children and my son. Where they had been was immediately filled with dust and dirt and everyone flew in all directions. I stood up and started running towards them.”



Left to right: Musa (16) and Yousif (14)

In the morning of 4 January 2009, Yousif was sitting outside his house in ash-Shawkeh village, Rafah, watching his son Musa (16) and nephew Yousif cut wood for cooking. His brother Abed lived nearby with his wife and six children. Abed was showing his sons Mahdi (21), Mohammad (19) and Yousif (14), and his nephew Musa how to cut wood properly when a drone plane fired a missile at them. Abed and Mohammad were blown to pieces. Musa’s leg was blown off. Yousif and Mahdi were critically injured. All five died. Yousif now takes care of his brother’s wife and daughters. He reports that the girls are traumatized, having witnessed the scene. He himself cannot get over his grief.

Yousif Barbakh (52) describes his and his brother’s family as having been very close. Their homes in the south-east of ash-Shawkeh village, in Rafah City were surrounded by farmlands. In this rural setting he lived with his wife and children Hamasat (~25), Mahmoud (~23), Khawla (~22), Hasan (~19), and Musa (16) 100 metres east of the destroyed Gaza International Airport. His brother Abed’s was the closest house to him in this sparsely populated part of Rafah. He lived with his wife and children Mahdi (~21), Mohammad (~19), Yousif (14), Ameena (~11), Shireen (~9) and Ali (~9 months) 40 metres from Yousif. He explains that the two families are extremely close: *“We are one family. My house is his house and vice versa. We are the closest that families can be. My children and his children more like brothers than cousins.”* Yousif explains that their proximity to the farmlands on one side and airport on the other made their area a dangerous one: *“My children and I used to wake up at night to the sound of terrifying explosions targeting the agricultural empty lands near the house or Gaza International Airport.”*

On the morning of Sunday 4 January, 2009, the second day of the Israeli ground offensive stage of Operation Cast Lead, Yousif and family woke up around 8:30am. Hearing the sound of sawing, he went outside to see his nephew Yousif, (14) cutting wood 30 metres from the house. As he was alone, Yousif’s son Musa (16) went to help him. Yousif sat outside watching them, as his wife prepared coffee. As he sat, Yousif saw Abed, with his sons Mohammad and Mahdi, marching over to Musa and young Yousif to give them a lecture on how to cut wood correctly. Shouting followed as Abed scolded his son, Yousif, for doing the job badly: *“Abed started shouting at his son Yousif because he wasn’t cutting it properly. He started to show him how to cut wood. He grabbed the saw and asked Mahdi to hold the other edge of the saw, while Mohammad held the big trunk to keep it steady so his father could saw it. Musa and Yousif were standing beside them, watching and learning how to cut wood.”*

Yousif explains that during the blockade and war they had to rely on wood as a fuel due to the lack of electricity or gasoline for generators. *“We started cutting down wood because*

there was no cooking gas in the area because of the siege and war. We use the wood to cook and bake.”

The drone plane circling overhead got louder and louder. Then, Yousif heard a huge explosion as his family were blown apart in front of his eyes. *“The missile hit my brother, his children and my son. Where they had been was immediately filled with dust and dirt and everyone flew in all directions. I stood up and started running towards them.”*

Yousif vividly remembers the scene that met him: *“Once I approached them, I saw Mahdi on the ground. He wasn't moving. His entire body was covered in blood because of the shrapnel. Musa was lying beside him. His right leg was blown off and there was a gaping wound in his abdomen. His eyes were open. Then, I saw Yousif beside him on the ground. His eyes were open as well. All his body was injured. His abdomen was also severely injured. Abed was blown into pieces, as well as his son Mohammad”*

This was too much for him to bear. He became hysterical: *“I started screaming, crying, grabbing sand and throwing it over my head because I was in hysterical state. I wasn't aware of what I was doing.”* Abed's wife came running out, screaming and crying to see her children, nephews and husband lying in a pool of blood. Yousif managed to stop a passing car in order to send Musa and his nephew Yousif to hospital. As their eyes were open he felt there might be some hope for their survival. When his cousin, Mohammad Barbakh drove up, they loaded Abed, Mohammad and Majdi into car and headed to the hospital.

All five were pronounced dead on arrival. Yousif couldn't accept this news. *“I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I grabbed them and started shaking them, hoping one of them would wake up or move.”*

None of them did.

When Yousif spoke to DCI in October the family had not got over the loss. Yousif cannot move on: *“I still live the worst days of my life ever after losing my brother Abed and his eldest sons.”* His nieces, are traumatized after seeing their father, brothers and cousin blown apart in front of their eyes; *“My youngest nieces Ameena and Shireen witnessed that massacre. They still wet their beds and experience nightmares. Their school grades have dropped significantly.”*

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