

## Operation Cast Lead: Mother watches as her three sons, husband and nephew burn to death after drone plane strikes their car

*“We are lonely in this world and have nothing except painful memories.”*



Left to right: Brothers Tawfeeq (11), Habeeb (13) and Mohammad (14) al-Kahloutt. Pictures taken some time ago.

**At about 6:00pm on 7 January 2009, Khaled al-Kahlout (44) was driving his sons Tawfeeq (11), Habeeb (13) and Mohammad (14), and nephew Hasan (20), back to his brother's flat in Mashrou' Beit Lahiya, returning from his workplace where they had all gone to bake bread as there was no power at home that day. Khaled's wife Manal (33) was at home with her three daughters. Hani was outside his shop, packing up his fruit, when Khaled drove by, greeting him with a friendly honk. Hani noticed a white Mitsubishi racing in front of his friend's Opel. When he heard an explosion he rushed onto the street and watched as five charred bodies were pulled out of the Opel. Manal rushed to the window and lost consciousness as she realised what had happened. It appears the drone's target was the Mitsubishi, driven by resistance fighters. Manal is ill, and was heavily reliant on her husband to raise the children and for house work.**

Around 6:00pm on 7 January, as Manal al-Kahlout (33) watched the charred bodies being carried out of the burning car she clung to the hope that they were not the bodies of her husband Khaled (44), her three sons: Tawfeeq (11), Habeeb (13) and Mohammad (14), and nephew Hasan (20). When she saw the blood soaked loaves of bread being taken out of the car and placed on the pavement, her hope faded.

Manal al-Kahlout lived with her husband, three sons and three daughters on the third floor of Tower 7 in Sheikh Zayed, Beit Lahiya, North Gaza. She lovingly describes how her husband took on all the household chores, as well as his own job when she was laid up with a back injury: *“My husband gave me a lot of support and help during my illness. I suffer from a cartilage injury in my back. He took care of the children alone without my help. He did all the housework and tutored the children.”* Habeeb (13), a special needs child with learning difficulties, was his favourite. Khaled got an extra task when Operation Cast Lead was unleashed on 27 December 2008: *“He had to work as their guard to stop them going out onto the street and becoming a target of attack.”*

With the ground invasion of Gaza on 3 January, life was growing increasingly more dangerous. Fearful that the nearby area of Makibo Mountain would be invaded, as had been the case in the past, the family took the decision to seek refuge elsewhere. On 4 January 2009, they moved to Khaled's father's house, on Kamal Odwan Hospital Street in Mashrou' Beit Lahiya, Beit Lahiya. They chose to stay with Khalil (50), Khaled's older brother, his

wife and four children, including Hasan (20). Manal explains: *“Khalil loves us very much. He loves the children very much and he insisted that we stay at his flat, so we stayed.”*

On 7 January 2009, at around 5:00pm Khaled had prepared dough to bake bread for his family but there was no electricity to work the oven. He called his work colleagues at al-'Alami Sewage Pump who told him that their electricity was working fine, and why didn't he come and bake his bread in the oven they had there? When he decided to bring Mohammad and Tawfeeq, Habeeb begged to be taken too. Then Hasan arrived and asked to go as well. Khaled set off with his three sons and his nephew.

His long time friend, Hani (35), went over to talk to Khaled when he pulled up outside his fruit shop 150 metres down the street from Khaled's father's house. When Khaled told him where he was going Hani was worried; the 2:00-6:00pm cease-fire was nearly over. He advised him to hurry and go back home quickly. He must have been relieved when, at 6:00pm Khaled sped past in his white Opel, honking at Hani on his way home, just in time to beat the 6:00pm curfew. He noticed a white Mitsubishi in front of Khaled's car tearing up the street. Hani turned back to his fruit, that he was packing up for the night, when suddenly a huge explosion rocked the area. *“I looked out onto the street and saw a white car on fire, and heard a drone plane roaring above. I assumed the drone plane had targeted the car.”*

Hearing the explosion from Khalil's second floor apartment, Manal joined her brother-in-law and family at the window to see where it had been. She listened in disbelief to the screams of her family around her, as she processed the scene: *“The car was similar to my husband's white Opel car. ‘Is this his car or not?’ I wondered. In the meantime, I heard Khalil shouting from the other window: ‘My brother Khaled!’ At the same time, Khalil's wife shouted: ‘My son Hasan! Oh my son Hasan!’ I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I didn't know whether it was my husband's car. How did they know it was his car?”*

As Hani ran to the burning car he saw the loaves of bread lying on the pavement, and knew it was Khaled's. Ambulances arrived and paramedics lifted the bodies from the car: *“They were charred and torn apart because of the fire.”* From her brother-in-law's window, Manal also realized it was Khaled's car. *“I couldn't bear it. I lost consciousness for a few minutes.”* When she came to, she pulled herself to her feet to look again. *“At that moment I hoped that my husband might have left the children baking at the pump and taken the car to pick up passengers. He used the car as a taxi. However, I saw the bread on the ground.”* She knew then that the bodies were those of her husband, children and nephew.

Hani followed the ambulances the short distance to Kamal Odwan Hospital. *“When I reached the hospital, I was told that Khaled, his three children Mohammad, Habeeb and Tawfeeq, and his nephew Hasan had died.”* He heard the next day that the white Mitsubishi speeding in front of Khaled had been a combatant's car. That had been the target of the attack. Hani can't understand why Khaled was also bombed: *“What was Khaled's crime? What was his three children and his nephew's crime?”*

Manal, and her daughters: twins Mariam and Nuha (6) and little Samia (4), went back to the flat in which they used to live in Sheikh Zayed City with their brothers and father. Manal's words to DCI are heart wrenching: *“The blood of my children, my husband, and Hasan was mixed with the bread. I lost my husband and my three sons' lovely smiles. I miss them very much. I now live with my three little girls without their father and three big brothers. What was Habeeb's crime? What did he do to die and be killed in cold blood? Mohammad and Tawfeeq are my eyes, through which I see the world. What did they do to be bombed like this?... We are lonely in this world and have nothing except painful memories.”*