

Operation Cast Lead: Five children killed as they chat on the street during ceasefire hours



Left to right: Fatima Ma'rouf (14), Maha Ma'rouf (15), Haitham Ma'rouf. Picture taken some time ago.

Sahar (16) and Khawla (15) Ghaben were happy to see their friends and neighbours: Haitham (10), his sister Maha (15) and cousins Hanan (15) and Fatima Ma'rouf (14) as they returned to their houses in al-Amal in Beit Lahiya during a ceasefire. Like most of Beit Lahiya, the Ma'rouf and Ghaben families had evacuated their homes and moved to an UNRWA school. When Ahmad, Sahar and Khawla's father, heard about the

morning ceasefire on 11 January, he decided to go home to collect some essentials; his daughters insisted on going with him. Maha, Fatima, Hanan and Haitham Ma'rouf made the same decision that day, left the school at 9:30am, went home, packed what they needed and ran into the Ghaben family, their neighbours, on their way back. As the children stood there chatting, a drone was circling overhead, getting closer. It launched a missile that landed amidst the children, blowing them to pieces. Only Hanan and Ahmad survived.

The following information is based on affidavits taken by DCI-Palestine from Sahar and Khawla's father, Ahmad Ghaben, on 7 January 2010 and Hanan Ma'rouf, on 7 January 2010:

Sahar (16) and Khawla (15) Ghaben lived with their parents and two siblings in al-Amal, Beit Lahiya. Their father Ahmad explains that the family were terrified during Operation Cast Lead. When the ground offensive started on 3 January and Israeli tanks invaded the areas of as-Salatin and al-'Atatra, 500 metres away, *"It was a tough and long night because of the constant bombing and shells that landed everywhere in the town, in addition to random gunshots."*

Their friend Hanan Ma'rouf (16) lived in a similar house in the same area with her parents and five siblings, including Fatima (14). Her cousins, Haitham (10) and Maha (15) Ma'rouf also lived close by. The neighbourhood was surrounded by farmlands. *"Our house is a fragile old building. Whenever planes fired a missile in Beit Lahiya near or far away from the house, we would feel that the roof was about to fall down on our heads"* Hanan remembers.

Like most of Beit Lahiya the Ma'rouf families decided to look for shelter in an UNRWA school in Jabalia after the terrifying first night of the ground offensive. The sound of tanks moving in was accompanied by heavy gunfire, bombing and shelling each explosion shaking the house to its foundations. On 4 January Hanan and her family gathered up some basic provisions and left to look for a school that could accommodate them.

That day, Azeeza Ghaben begged her husband Ahmad to take their son Mohammad to a safer place, as she was afraid they would be arrested by Israeli soldiers if they stayed; men were frequently rounded up and detained by Israeli soldiers. So Ahmad and Mohammad also headed to Jabalia Camp; they decided to try the Abu Hussein School; an UNRWA school; not realising that this was where the Ma'rouf families had also finally found shelter. Ahmad and Mohammad spent the night in an overcrowded classroom calling their family in Beit Lahiya; every time they called they could hear the bombing was getting heavier there. As he talked to his wife Ahmad could hear gunshots, explosions and his daughters screaming in the background. Anxious for his wife and daughters he insisted they leave their home the next day and come to the school.

Conditions in the school were very harsh: *“We had no hot water for bathing. We didn’t even have water to drink. The toilets weren’t clean. There wasn’t enough food. Everyone had just three small loaves and a can of yoghurt per day. The food barely filled us.”* Hanan describes the same experience: not enough mattresses, blankets and no shower for a week. When Ahmad heard of a ceasefire between 9-12:00am on 11 January, when movement in the streets was supposedly safer, he decided to do like many other refugees: return home to collect some essential provisions for life in the school. His daughters Sahar and Khawla demanded to go with him.

Hanan, Fatima and Maha also decided to take advantage of this ceasefire to collect some essential items, and maybe even shower with hot water at home. Maha convinced her parents that they would be safe, after all they were young girls, who would target them? They left at 9:30am, walked home, cutting through the farmlands near the house. Ahmad left with Sahar and Khawla a half hour later and met the Ma’rouf children who were returning by a dirt road they used as a shortcut through the farmlands. As the girls talked Ahmad looked at the scenes of destruction around him, he noticed there were many families carrying bags, salvaging as much as they could from their homes during these “safe hours.” He saw a house being demolished as he stood there: *“I looked west to as-Salatin and al-‘Atrah neighbourhood and saw two Israeli tanks and a bulldozer there. The bulldozer was destroying a house about 700 metres away from me.”*

Ahmad heard the drone plane overhead getting louder: *“the sound of the drone plane became different as if the plane had increased its speed. I looked to the sky and saw the drone plane flying down gradually. I immediately ran to the eastern side of the street. As I ran there was a huge explosion which shook the entire area. I felt the air pulling me up and then I fell to ground on the side of the street. When I looked behind me to check on the girls, I saw thick smoke rising from where they had been standing. Everyone was lying on the ground. I was terrified and felt my body shivering; I was so scared that I couldn’t stand up.”* He took a minute to come round, then struggled to his feet to look for his daughters; he was faced with a horrific scene.

“There was a pool of blood in the street. I saw my daughter Sahar. Part of her head and her right shoulder had been blown off. Her face was covered in blood. Then I saw my other daughter, Khawla. The back of her head was bleeding and she was unconscious. Sahar was unconscious as well. Fatima’s head had been blown off and she wasn’t moving. Maha’s left leg was blown off and her head and entire body were bleeding. Haitham was on the ground on his face and his entire body was covered in blood. Hanan was about five metres away from them. She was unconscious and her entire body was covered in blood also. Describing the scene as a massacre he remembers how he broke down, shouting and crying over his daughters. He blames himself for having allowed them to keep him company on his journey home that day and told DCI: “Why did it happen? They are all young girls; young children”.

Hanan remembers flying through the air when the missile hit, she lost consciousness to wake up in hospital a few days later. She didn’t want to believe what had happened: *“They all died and I was the only one left. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing although I had seen them all on the ground, but my parents’ tears made me believe it.”*

Hanan can’t forget those last moments with her siblings and cousins: *“I still remember that day; each second of it and each step my sister Fatima, Maha, Haitham, and I made. I still remember each laugh we had on the road.”* Without Fatima, she doesn’t want to live anymore: *“I miss Fatima very much and wish I had died with her in the incident.”*