

Operation Cast Lead: Two children killed in a direct attack

“When I tried to pick him up I saw that his right hand and leg were hanging off.”



Amjad (15) top and Rafeeq (16) above

Salah ad-Deen as-Sabbagh (54) was returning home from noon prayer at 12:30pm on 6 January 2009. The streets were empty, due to the intense bombing during Operation Cast Lead but he noticed a neighbour’s child, Rafeeq al-Khudari (16) 30 metres away helping a young man fix his motorbike. Just then another neighbour Amjad al-Bayed (15) came down the street and joined them. The sound of a drone plane getting louder alerted Salah ad-Deen to the imminent attack. The young man jumped off his motorbike and fled leaving Rafeeq and Amjad where they were. When the explosion came it filled the air with dust and smoke. Salah ad-Deen ran over to the boys and found Amjad lying on the ground. Rafeeq was engulfed in flames and running up the street. Chaos ensued as neighbours rushed out to the street to help, trying to catch Rafeeq to save him from burning to death. Amid cries of *“Ambulance, ambulance”* Salah ad-Deen found a blanket to smother the fire consuming Rafeeq. It was too late. Both children died later in hospital.

The following information is based on an affidavit taken by DCI-Palestine from Salah ad-Deen al Sabbagh, (54) in May 2009.

On 6 January 2009, Salah ad-Deen as-Sabbagh (~54) left his house, near the Patient's Friends Society in al-Remal neighbourhood in the western part of Gaza City, for the noon prayer. As he stepped outside the usual *“sounds of explosions, shells and missiles”* greeted him. Returning home a half an hour later, he stopped to buy some provisions in a shop near the corner of his street. As he came out of the shop he looked hopefully up the road for one of his children to help him carry the shopping home. He noticed a child from his neighbourhood, Rafeeq al-Khudari (16) helping a young man fix his motorbike.

The streets were deserted. Salah ad-Deen recalls: *“Since 27 December 2008, the beginning of the military operation known as Operation Cast Lead, my neighbourhood had been living in fear and terror because some of the police headquarters and government institutions are located within our area. On the first day of the military operation, 500 metres away from us, the Immigration Building, which is the main police headquarters, was bombed. The Palestinian Legislative Council building, about 700 metres away, was also bombed. This was accompanied by constant shelling all over Gaza, especially in the north and south, keeping everyone in a state of constant fear and dread. F16s and drone planes stayed hovering in the sky day and night. With such an atmosphere, there were few people to be found on the streets of Gaza, particularly in our area.”*

Perhaps this is why Salah ad-Deen remembers noticing Rafeeq and the young man fixing the bike. Just then he saw another child from his street, Amjad al-Bayed (15) walking in his direction. Amjad crossed the street and joined Rafeeq and the stranger.

The sound of a drone plane growing increasingly louder alerted Salah ad-Deen. *“During Operation Cast Lead, it became common knowledge in Gaza that when the sound of a drone plane gets louder, it means it is preparing to launch a missile at a target.”* The young man

fixing the motorbike reacted quickly, jumping off his bike and running away. Rafeeq and Amjad did not react so quickly, perhaps not sensing the danger. *“The young man who was sitting on the bike, trying to fix it, jumped off and ran north trying to cross the street, while Rafeeq and Amjad, who I think were friends, stayed where they were.”*

The explosion which followed filled the air with dust and smoke. Salah ad-Deen noticed that it was thicker where the boys had been. Pulling himself together he ran over to the boys. *“I ran towards them, realizing that they would have been injured. I kept running until I reached them. When I got there I saw a young man on fire running and crossing the street.”* The young man was Rafeeq, unrecognizable as he was engulfed in flames. *“He was running towards a cigarette stand on the corner of the Patient's Friends Society. I looked at him but could not recognize him in the confusion. I did not run after him because a number of young people had left their houses and were running after him to catch him.”*

Instead Salah ad-Deen turned his attention to Amjad; *“When I tried to pick him up I saw that his right hand and leg were hanging off. Most of his body was bleeding profusely. His black shirt was filled with holes because of the explosion, and was almost torn apart. Blood was pumping out of his chest and abdomen and seeping through his shirt. Putting my ear next to his nose, I tried to detect some sign of breathing but could hear nothing.”*

The scene was one of chaos; at this stage many people had come out of their houses, shouts of *“Ambulance! Ambulance!”* could be heard everywhere. Rafeeq had run into the cigarette stand and people were trying to pull him out in order to put out the flames. *“Finally they managed to pull him out and he fell to the ground. Some people threw sand on him, as he twisted in pain in the middle of the street”*

Salah ad-Deen remembered the hospital nearby and ran inside to get help. Meeting someone coming out with a blanket he took it from him and ran over to Rafeeq. *“I wrapped his body with the blanket with the help of some young men and doctors, who had come from the Patient's Friends Society. Once we had wrapped his body and extinguished the fire, the doctors carried him inside. At that moment, an ambulance came and I saw it taking Amjad to the hospital.”* Fifteen minutes later an ambulance arrived for Rafeeq. Salah ad-Deen watched as he was carried out and driven off to hospital. *“He didn't move. His entire body was severely burned”*

Salah ad-Deen later learned that the stranger who had been fixing his motorbike had not escaped unharmed. *“As for the young man I saw fixing the motorcycle with Amjad and Rafeeq, I was told that he had been injured by shrapnel from the strike and carried to the hospital with Amjad.”* He never discovered this stranger's identity but is sure he is not local. *“I still do not know who he was but most likely he was not a neighbour or from the local residents.”*

As for the children, they were not so fortunate. *“Some neighbours told me that had Rafeeq had died immediately after being transferred to Shifa hospital. At around 11:00pm, I found out from al-Bayed family that Amjad had died at the hospital at around 10:00pm.”*

Children killed in the attack:

- Rafeeq Abed al-Baset Saleh al-Khudari (16)
- Amjad Majdi Ahmad al-Bayed (15)