

Operation Cast Lead: Two cousins killed while feeding birds on their roof terrace



Mahmoud (17) and his cousin Hamzi (11) Tanteesh

At around 8:00am on 4 January 2009, cousins Mahmoud (17) and Hamzi (11) Tanteesh were on the roof terrace of their house feeding the birds when a missile hit them. They lived in a four-storey house in Beit Lahiya, North Gaza. Earlier that day, as Mahmoud was having breakfast with his father Zaher and siblings, he announced he was going to the roof to feed the birds, taking advantage of a lull. Five minutes after he had left a huge explosion shook the house. The families ran outside and assembled on the street. When Zaher realized Mahmoud and Hamzi were missing, he ran upstairs to find them blown to pieces. The older

children picked up the bodies and rushed to an ambulance and brought to Kamal Odwan Hospital. Speaking to DCI the following December, Zaher explains that his children are traumatized by the deaths; their school performance has been badly affected.

The following information is based on an affidavit taken by DCI-Palestine from Mahmoud's father (Hamzi's uncle), Zaher (49), on 21 December 2009:

Mahmoud (17) and Hamzi (11) were cousins. They lived in a four-storey house on Islamic Foundation Street in Beit Lahiya, North Gaza. Mahmoud lived on the second floor with his father, Zaher (49) and nine siblings (aged 4-24). Hamzi lived on the first floor with his father Zuhair, and six siblings (aged 6-22). Although their area was very dangerous during Operation Cast Lead, the family had nowhere else to go. When most of the neighbours fled their homes after the dawn invasion of as-Salatin and al-'Atatra neighbourhoods, 1.2 kilometres west of the house on 3 January 2009, they stayed. *"I didn't know where to go or which area was safe. I mean all areas of the Gaza Strip could be subjected to bombing."*

The day after the ground offensive stage of Operation Cast Lead began, 4 January 2009, Zaher sat with his children having breakfast around 8:00pm. As he had warned them not to go outside, he was surprised to see his son, Mahmoud (17) putting on his shoes. *"Where are you going?" I asked him. "It's calm today compared to last night, so I'll go up to the roof terrace and feed the birds before the bombing starts again,"* Zaher continued his breakfast with his children.

Five minutes later a huge explosion shook the house. The family rushed out to the street, terrified: *"My heart was filled with fear and terror. The faces of my children and my nephews were all pale with fear."* As they assembled outside on the street, Zaher's brother Bahjat shouted; *"The children are up there!"* as he pointed to the roof. It dawned on Zaher that Mahmoud was not with them. Zaher ran up the stairs to the roof terrace, followed by his brothers, cousins and the children. A horrific scene greeted them. *"I climbed up the stairs; my legs shaking with fear. Once I reached the roof terrace, I saw a body on the floor. The upper part of the chest and the head were blown off from the rest of the body and the floor was covered in blood. I looked at the lower part of the body and recognised the shoes that Mahmoud had put on to go up the roof terrace. I realized that the body was Mahmoud's. Hamzi was on the southeast side of the roof, about three metres away from Mahmoud. His head was cut off. The floor was covered in blood"*

and rubble was scattered beside them. I started shouting and crying over my son and my nephew.” The older children pulled themselves together to pick up the body parts and carry them down to the street. Zaher was badly shaken and followed them, his legs shaking, to the street where he saw ambulance arriving and taking the children to Kamal Odwan Hospital.

Hamzi and Mahmoud were buried in Beit Lahiya Cemetery and Zaher moved his family to his father-in-law’s house until the war ended. They returned to a damaged house.

Speaking to DCI-Palestine the following December he explains that his children are badly scarred from these events; *“My children still grieve their brother Mahmoud and their cousin Hamzi especially my children Hanan, Ezz ad-Deen, Rizq, Ahmad, Samar and Yara. They suffer from psychological problems. Rizq, Ahmad, and Samar always wake up from nightmares of their brother being blown to pieces. The academic performance of Ezz ad-Deen, Rizq, Ahmad and Samar has dropped significantly since the war.”*

DCI-Palestine, 4 April 2010