

Operation Cast Lead: Two boys killed in direct airstrike on their roof terrace



Left to right: Mahmoud al-Mashharawi (14) and Ahmad Sbaih (17)

Al-Remal neighbourhood, Gaza City, had not come under heavy fire during Operation Cast Lead. Its distance from the border and az-Zeitoun, where Israeli tanks had stationed themselves, plus the lack of any Hamas affiliated buildings in the area had kept them relatively free from attack. Until 11:00am on 4 January 2009, when an explosion brought Salem al-Mashharawi (40) out to the balcony with his small radio to listen for news. When he saw a drone plane flying low, getting ready to attack, he searched anxiously for its target as the area was

inhabited by his family, the al-Mashharawi. Seeing Mahmoud al-Mashharawi (14) and Ahmad Sbaih (17) on a roof terrace 20 metres away, he shouted for them to get down. They didn't hear. He watched the missile slowly make its way to them. The boys were blown to pieces. Salem, Hasan (Mahmoud's brother) and another relative arrived at the scene and found the two boys blown to bits, with pieces of flesh, blood and body parts scattered all over the roof.

The following information is based on two affidavits taken by DCI Palestine from, Salem al-Mashharawi on 5 June 2009 and al-Moatasem al-Mashharawi on 7 June 2009:

As Salem al-Mashharawi (40) stood on his balcony of his two-storey house on al-Wehda Street in al-Remal in Gaza City he shouted at the two children on the roof terrace 30 metres opposite to go downstairs. They didn't hear him. It was around 11:15 on 4 January 2009. The day after the ground offensive stage of Operation Cast Lead was unleashed on the Gaza Strip. Their neighbourhood of al-Remal in Gaza City had so far not been heavily hit. However today, things had taken a turn for the worse. When al-Moatasem al-Mashharawi (21) heard an explosion around 11:00am he wasn't too concerned, just curious: *"We had been accustomed to such explosions since the beginning of the Operation Cast Lead, so I kept listening to the radio to find out where it had been."* He heard on the radio that it had been in the city centre municipality building one kilometre away. When he heard a second explosion, nearer the house, he ran out to the balcony to see where it had been. As he scanned the neighbourhood he caught sight of Salem al-Mashharawi shouting at him from his balcony.

Salem had also heard both explosions; after the first, he carried his small radio out to the balcony to keep listening for news of the explosion, as he searched the horizon for the explosion. He was still out there about 15 minutes later when he heard a drone plane circling lower and lower overhead. From the noise it was making he knew what would happen next: *"We had heard a lot about drone planes; that when their sound grows louder and they fly in low altitudes, that means they are preparing to strike something."* He looked around anxiously for the target among his family's houses. His gaze fell upon Mahmoud al-Mashharawi (14) and his friend Ahmad Sbaih (17) on the roof terrace of Mahmoud's house, 30 metres away. In vain he shouted at them to go downstairs, fearing they would be attacked. *"They were standing about one metre away from the 120-centimetre-high wall. I*

could see them because the balcony of my house is parallel with the wall of the roof terrace. I looked quickly at the drone plane in the sky and saw it as if it was stopping in mid-air as its sound grew louder. I became worried about Mahmoud and Ahmad. I did not see anyone else except them. I started shouting at them very loudly and asked them to come down but they did not hear me.” In desperation he tried to shout at Mohammad’s brother Hasan, (~18) thinking that if he were inside the house he might hear and get the boys out of danger. It was useless. Salem watched the inevitable unfold as if in slow motion: *“I was shifting my eyes between Mahmoud and Ahmad on the rooftop and the drone plane. Then, I saw a missile being fired from the drone plane. The speed of the missile was quite slow. I kept looking at the missile and as it was approaching the ground, it sped up. Within a few seconds a huge explosion shook the rooftop of Khaled’s house.”*

The second explosion brought al-Moatasem running to the balcony where he saw Salem shouting at him from his balcony 15 metres away: *“Khaled’s house has been targeted, run to it,”* When al-Moatasem arrived to the house there was a crowd gathered outside around a waiting ambulance. No one seemed to know exactly where the explosion had been. *“Let’s go to the rooftop,”* al-Moatasem remembers shouting at Hasan. *“I started running and both the paramedic and Hasan followed me. We quickly climbed up to the roof terrace of the two-storey house.”* The first child they saw was Ahmad Sbaih (17), lying on the ground, two metres from the door; his hand blown off, and his stomach gaping open as his entrails hung out. As al-Moatasem carried him to a stretcher he watched Hasan walk over to his little brother, Mahmoud, on the other side of the roof terrace: *“He was lying on the ground like a torn piece of cloth. Everything in his body was open. Blood was covering the eastern part of the wall and his body parts were lying all around him”* Hasan could not bear to see his little brother like this; *“Hasan fell to the ground and started banging his head and shouting words that I couldn’t understand except; ‘He’s dead, he’s dead.’”*

The children were brought to Shifa Hospital. Salem arrived as they were being carried into the ambulance. *‘Are they injured?’* he asked the paramedic. No, he was told, they are dead. In preparation for the burial, Salem and al-Moatasem undertook the task of collecting the body parts strewn all over the roof, which was covered in blood. Most of the parts they could not identify, so they put them in a plastic bag and buried them with Mahmoud and Ahmad when they came home two hours later.

Neither Salem, nor al-Moatasem can forget what they saw on the roof that day. *“I still remember how much the two bodies were torn apart and that really scares me.”* al-Moatasem told DCI in June 2009. He finds it hard to bring himself to go over it again: *“I don’t even like to talk that much about what I saw up there.”* Salem just remembers how the missile slowly and carefully shot at its target, which was the children, not the roof.

“The missile exploded in the bodies of those children, not on the roof.”

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