

Operation Cast Lead: 14-year-old boy among 44 fatalities resulting from shelling nearby UNRWA school

Al-Fakhoura School is one of 37 schools operated by UNRWA in Jabalia refugee camp. During Operation Cast Lead, the school was used to shelter displaced civilians who were trying to escape the fighting, or had been ordered to leave their areas of residence by the Israeli military, in northern Gaza. UNRWA had provided the Israeli army with the exact GPS coordinates of al-Fakhoura School.¹ The school was also included on a list of 91 provisional shelters that was communicated to the Israeli military before the start of the offensive.²



People running away from the explosions. Photo credit: BBC

On 6 January 2009 at around 3:45pm, Israeli tanks shelled the perimeter of al-Fakhoura school. Shells landed on the road just outside the school. There were no fatalities inside the school, but, according to DCI-Palestine documentation, 44 people, including 14 children, were killed in the immediate vicinity of the school; 14-year-old Ibrahim Ma'rouf was living in the school and died in the incident.

The following is based on information provided by Ibrahim's father on 28 April 2009:

During Operation Cast Lead, 58-year-old Ahmad Ma'rouf, his wife Ni'ma and children Yousif (21), Khetam (17) and Ibrahim (14), left their house in Izbet Fadous (Beit Lahia) to seek refuge in the UNRWA-run al-Fakhoura school. In the afternoon of 6 January 2009, Ibrahim asked his father for one Shekel [\$0.25] to go to the shop across the street.

I gave him the Shekel and remained seated with my neighbours, talking about the bad conditions we were experiencing. Drone planes were hovering in the sky. I could hear them very clearly. It was around 3:45pm. Suddenly, a huge explosion took place in front of the school's main gate. Everyone started to run and flee. I did not know what was going on. I heard three consecutive explosions taking place, followed by another two explosions. I believe all explosions took place southwest of the school and were caused by missiles fired from the drone planes.

"There're so many people dead outside! Massacre! Massacre!"

I became terrified, like everyone else inside the school. Some people inside the school were injured, and that made me think that the explosion took place inside the school building. I went to my wife Ni'ma and daughter Khetam to check on them. I approached them and they asked me about Ibrahim. I looked around hoping I would see him among the people, or that he had returned from the shop, or that he had not gone to the store at all, but I did not see him. My other son Yousif rushed towards me. He was pale. I asked him about Ibrahim but he said "There're so many people dead outside! Massacre! Massacre!"

¹ Board of Inquiry Summary, paragraph 19.

² Ibid.

I could not believe what Yousif said. I did not imagine that the massacre would be very horrible. I ran towards the main gate of the school and looked south. I saw more than 200 people on the ground. All of them were either dead or injured. I ran towards the shop opposite the school. I could not believe what I saw. People were on the ground near the school gate until as far as 200 metres away to the south. The ground was covered in blood. I reached the shop and saw my son Ibrahim on the ground. I saw young men coming and quickly carrying him away. I ran after them to check on him and see whether he was dead or alive. They stopped an ambulance and drove him away. I kept running towards Kamal Odwan hospital, near the area [...] it was crowded with people. I went to the reception hall and saw dead and injured people on the floor. Beds were crammed with people. I saw my son Ibrahim on the floor. He was not moving. I realized he had died because of his injury.



Ibrahim, a few years before the incident

The next day, I buried my son Ibrahim in Beit Lahiya cemetery. [...] We stayed in the school until 18 January 2009 when we went back to our house, which had been destroyed from inside. I believe Israeli special forces were positioned inside the house. I went back to the house without Ibrahim, my youngest child.

The Israeli military alleged that Palestinian fighters had been firing mortars from the school and that the school was booby-trapped. A United Nations Board of Inquiry which was established to investigate incidents where deaths, injuries, and destruction of property occurred at UN facilities found that “*there was no firing from within the school and no explosives within the school*”. The Board could not establish with certainty whether there had been any firing from the vicinity of the school, but all four witness statements collected by DCI-Palestine indicate that the area was quiet, and that adults and children were going about their daily business.

According to data gathered by DCI-Palestine, the following 14 children were killed in the shelling in close proximity to al-Fakhoura school:

- Nour Moe'in Shafiq Deeb (3)
- Mohammad Ahmad Shaqoura (8)
- Asil Moe'in Shafiq Deeb (9)
- Lina Abed al-Meni'm Nafez Hasan (10)
- Abdullah Shafiq Abdullah (11)
- Esam Samir Shafiq Deeb (13)
- Mostafa Moe'in Shfiq Deeb (13)
- Bashar Samir Moussa Naji (13)
- 'Ahed Iyad Quddas (14)
- Imad Mohammad Abu Askar (14)
- Ibrahim Ahmad Hasan Ma'rouf (14)
- Ismail Adnan Hasan Hawila (16)
- Mohammad Moe'in Shfiq Deeb (16)
- Bilal Hamza Ali Obaid (17)

During Operation Cast Lead, many children were killed as a result of Israeli military attacks targeting schools or alleged military objectives located in close proximity to schools. So far, DCI-Palestine has documented the killing of 32 children and maiming of at least six.