

Operation Cast Lead: Five children killed while praying in mosque



Ahmad Tbail, 15



Hani as-Silawi, picture taken some time ago



Hasan Hejjo, picture taken some time ago.



Mohammad as-Silawi, picture taken some time ago

At 5:00pm on 3 January 2009, Naseem Hejjo had just finished *Magreb* prayer, in the Ibrahim al-Maqadmeh Mosque, in Beit Lahiya. His son, Hasan (15), was praying in the back row. Suddenly, a huge explosion within the mosque sent shrapnel flying and filled the place with thick black smoke. When the smoke cleared, Naseem pulled himself to his feet to see a multitude of worshippers lying dead and injured around him. Amid the screams in the darkness he searched for his son, and saw him being carried out on a stretcher. Hasan was admitted directly to the morgue along with Hani as-Silawi (6), Mohammad as-Silawi (11), Rajeh Zeyadeh (17) and Ahmad Tbail (15). Nine-year-old Maher Mohammad Silawi was also injured. Many adults were also killed in the attack. In total, the as-Silawi family lost five members. Every time he returns to the mosque and looks at the shrapnel holes in the walls and steps where the missile struck, Naseem can't understand how he survived and his son didn't.

The following information is based on three affidavits taken from Hasan Hejjo's father, Naseem Amer Abed al-Hameed Hejjo (46) on 4 May 2009; Mohammad's grandfather and Hani's uncle, Ismail Musa Isa as-Silawi, on 20 June 2009; Rajeh's father, Nahed Rajeh Nu'man Zeyadeh, on 22 December 2009.

"Oh father, they have bombed the mosque."

Around 5:00pm on 3 January 2009, Ismail as-Silawi heard a huge explosion near his house. When his daughter, Khetam (13), told him it had been in al-Maqadmeh Mosque, five metres from his home, his first thought was that it would be full of worshippers, as it was time for *Magreb* prayer. Running to look out his front door, he saw plumes of black smoke coming out of the mosque. As he stood there, he took stock of who had been praying there, and realised his father, three brothers, three nephews, including Hani (6), his grandsons Mohammad (11) and Maher (9), Mohammad Khalil (13) and Abed al-Kareem as-Silawi (8) were all inside.

Naseem Hejjo was inside the mosque praying when the explosion struck: *"At that moment, there was a huge deafening and terrifying explosion and I heard shrapnel hitting the interior walls of the mosque. I threw myself onto the floor to protect myself from the shrapnel. The electricity went off and thick smoke started entering the mosque."* He looked around for his son desperately among the bodies strewn around the mosque: *"I saw my neighbours from as-Silawi family and al-Masamhi family on the floor. I saw youths and children and I didn't recognise. They were all injured and some of them were breathing with extreme difficulty."*

When he heard the explosion, Nahed Zeyadeh (46) grabbed his phone to locate his son, Rajeh (17). The only answer he could get was “*“The mobile phone you're trying to reach is unavailable.”* Nahed knew then his son was inside: “*I felt at that moment that my son Rajeh was inside al-Maqadmeh mosque because he always prayed with me in that mosque.”*

When Ismail as-Silawi ran into the mosque to find his family members, the first child he found was Naseem’s son, Hasan. “*I saw a child on the floor near the door; his back was injured. He was about 16 years old. He was Hasan Hejjo, I learned later.*” As Hasan was not moving, he assumed he was dead. Ambulances started arriving and a large crowd of people gathered outside, afraid to go inside, as there could be another attack from the drone plane still overhead.

Naseem Hejjo, terrified and choking on the dust and smoke, found his son being carried out on a stretcher, unconscious from a head injury. He ran the 200 metres to Kamal Odwan Hospital after the ambulance, to find Hasan lying on a stretcher in casualty: “*I heard a doctor asking the workers to take Hasan to the morgue. I grabbed the doctor and asked him to make sure Hasan was dead. I was hoping he hadn't died, but the doctor said he had already checked him and found him dead. At that moment, I collapsed. I was shocked and couldn't believe it.*”

As the mosque was emptied of the dead and dying, Ismail as-Silawi noticed the blood stained carpet: “*I no longer saw anything on the carpet except blood.*” He followed the ambulances to Kamal Odwan Hospital, 200 metres down the road. “*When I entered casualty, I saw my son Ahmad (22) being taken away by some people to the morgue and I started shouting ‘My son! My son!’ and followed them to the morgue.*” In the morgue he found more of his family: “*When the door of the morgue was opened, I saw my nephew Hani Mohammad inside one of the chambers with head wounds. Next to him, in the same chamber, was my grandson Mohammad Musa (12) [11] whose entire body had been injured.*” Soon, his brother came with more bad news, this time about their brother, Ibrahim: “*He told me that Ibrahim was in casualty and doctors were trying to save his life, but he wouldn't make it because his injury was critical.*” Ismail ran to find his brother, but he had been transferred to Shifa Hospital, where he died two hours later.

At 6.15pm, Nahed Zeyadeh heard his friend, Abu Omar, calling him from outside the house: “*He told me that Rajeh was among the worshippers in al-Maqadmeh mosque and had been killed inside. He found out from an acquaintance working for Kamal Odwan Hospital, who knew Rajeh and knew that Abu Omar is my friend and the only person who could tell me such news.*”

Speaking to DCI in June 2009, Ismail as-Silawi reports that his family lost five members: “*With the death of Ibrahim, we had lost five people: my son Ahmad, my grandson Mohammad, my nephew Omar, my nephew Hani, and my brother Ibrahim. My nephew Maher (10) [9] was injured in the chest but he is fine now. His brother Abed al-Kareem was also injured in the right arm. In addition to that, 11 other neighbours were killed. They are Hasan Hejjo [15], Said Battah, Rajeh Zeyadeh (18) [17], Muhannad Tannani (19) and others that I cannot recall right now.*”

In May, Naseem Hejjo explains that when he returns to the mosque it has painful memories. “*I still go to Ibrahim al-Maqadmeh mosque to pray but I still miss my son Hasan very much. I sit inside the mosque and look at the holes inside the walls and wonder how I survived and escaped all the shrapnel that hit those walls.*”