

Operation Cast Lead: Five children killed and two injured when F16 attacks their neighbour's house.

"At this point, it felt as if everyone had been killed." Who else died?" I asked."



Husam Mohammad Esleem
(7)

Sahar Ali Esleem (16)

Ahmad Qurtum (6)

Ahmad Mohammad
Esleem (13)

Abdullah Nabeel
Esleem (16)

Five children were killed and two injured when an F16 struck their neighbours' house on 15 January 2009. Sahar Ali (16), Abdullah (16) and Mahmoud Nabeel Esleem (11) lived in a four storey house in Yarmouk Street, al-Ghafri, Gaza City with their respective families. Ahmad Qurtum (6) lived on the same street. At 3:30pm, during the ceasefire hours, Maram (15), Ahmad (13) and Husam (7) Mohammad Esleem arrived with their family from their invaded area of Tal al-Hawa, 10 kilometres away. At 4:00pm an F16 struck destroying most of the buildings on the street and resulting in the deaths of five children; Ahmad Qurtum (6), Sahar Ali Esleem (16), Abdullah Nabeel Esleem (16), Husam Mohammad Esleem (7) and Ahmad Mohammad Esleem (13). Two children were badly injured Mahmoud Nabeel Esleem (11) and Maram Mohammad Esleem (15). Mohammad Imad Esleem (10 months) lost his mother, Iman. Mahmoud Nabeel Esleem (11) lost his older brother Mohammad (21) as well as Abdullah (16). They later discovered that it was their neighbours' house that had been targeted where Siad Siam, Minister of the Interior of the Hamas-led Government was that day. Both the Esleem and Qurtum family houses were destroyed, along with other houses on the street, they have been unable to reconstruct them due to the ongoing blockade of Gaza.

The following information is based on three affidavits taken by DCI-Palestine from Sahar's father Ali Sha'ban Ahmad Esleem, on 25 March 2009, Abdullah and Mahmoud's mother, Muna Mustafa Hanafi Esleem, on 7 April 2009, and Ahmad Qurtum's father, Osama Mohammad Othman Qurtum, on 16 February 2009.

On 15 January, Mohammad Esleem, during ceasefire hours, fled with his wife and four children, including Maram (15), Ahmad (13) and Husam (7) to his brothers' four storey house in Yarmouk Street, al-Ghafri, Gaza City. They had spent a harrowing few days under bombardment when their neighbourhood of Tal al-Hawa, 10 kilometres away, came under attack. Arriving at 3:30pm, they exchanged greetings with the household, and went to get some rest.

Down the street Osama Qurtum was sitting in a large barn opposite his house where he stored the construction materials he sold to make a living. As his son, Ahmad (7) and nephew were playing outside Osama braced himself for the airstrikes which he knew would start thundering around the neighbourhood as soon as the ceasefire ended at 4:00pm.

In the Esleem house, Ahmad Nabeel's mother, Muna asked her son Mohammad, to call his younger brothers inside as the ceasefire was ending. Without warning, smoke and dust inexplicably began to fill the house; Sahar's father, Ali remembers the shock of this unexpected attack; *"Suddenly and without hearing a sound, I saw the living room filled with thick smoke, followed by the sound of smashing glasses. I froze, petrified. I did not understand what was going on or what to do."* When he heard his son screaming; *"Sahar is dead, Sahar is dead"* he pulled himself together and rushed in to find her buried under a pile of rubble. Scrambling to clear the stones he found her head smashed in and obviously dead.

Osama Qurtum saw a strong light as the F16 hit its target; *"I was looking into the sky when I saw a very strong light that I could not bear to look at. Before I could shout, stones started raining down on us. I saw concrete pillars flying in the sky. Everything was flying in the sky; stones, concrete pillars, rubble, dust, everything, especially the smoke that was so thick that it was impossible to see."* He made his way through the smoke to find his son; Ahmad Qurtum had also been buried under the rubble; *"Blood was coming out from the back of his head near his left ear. I tried to carry him but I fell into the ground and fainted. I could not bear the scene."* He woke up in his neighbour's house to be told Ahmad was in hospital, he immediately rushed to find him, only to be told he had already died.

Ali Esleem managed to retrieve his sons' wives, Iman and Aicha from the rubble, Iman was dead but Aicha was unharmed. Hearing that his wife and children had gone to their neighbour's house he followed them over where he learned that his nephews, Husam Mohammad (7) and his brother Ahmad (13) had been killed. Racing to Shifa Hospital he found it in a state of chaos from all the airstrikes, and shellings that had been unleashed that day. There he discovered that his brother, Nabeel's children, Abdullah and Mahmoud, were in the intensive care unit and that Mohammad had died. *"At this point, it felt as if everyone had been killed." "Who else died?" I asked. They said no one, but Hala, the wife of my brother Mohammad, was injured. Her daughter Maram sustained fractures and was admitted to the operation room. My sons Iyad and Ahmad and Waseem's wife were injured as well but mildly."* Abdullah Nabeel was transferred to Egypt for surgery but died on 24 January.

Speaking to DCI in March 2009, Ali reports that the two injured children have not yet recovered; *"Mahmoud Nabeel Esleem is still being treated for his jaw and teeth. Maram Mohammad Esleem is still suffering fractures in the pelvis and leg; the right one I think."* Muna worries about Mahmoud, he still needs treatment but this they cannot get in Gaza. *"He needs new teeth, but how? They cannot do that that in Gaza. Isn't it enough to lose two sons and a house that is no longer suitable to live in?"* Their house is still destroyed, they cannot rebuild due to the lack of construction materials from the blockade on Gaza.

Osama finds it difficult to bear the loss of his son; *"I still hate sitting in the street where my son Ahmad was playing in front of me before he was hurt. I still remember him every night playing in front of me when suddenly the entire world exploded around me and I could not do anything for him. I am still in pain as well as my wife. Grief and bitterness over our loss still prevail in the house. We lost Ahmad, the most precious thing in the entire world."*

Ali reports that they discovered that Siad Siam, the Interior Minister of the Hamas-led Government had been in the neighbour's house that day. This was the target of the attack. *"We did not do anything wrong except hide in our apartments to try to protect our children."*

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