



Shahad Hejji (2)

## **Operation Cast Lead: Two children killed as family lives a nightmare ordeal.**

*"Whenever I head south, all painful memories come back to me and I think of my daughter who is buried in another town."*

**On 4 January a marathon ordeal began for the Hejji family of Sammouni Street, az-Zeitoun, Gaza City. At 1:30pm, a huge explosion ripped through the area. Shahad Hejji's (2) family tried to flee next door, as it was more sheltered, but a second explosion killed her father and within moments soldiers had invaded their house. They were then ordered to their relatives' house, next door, where they were held until the next morning. At 11:30am, they were ordered out of the house, and they gathered all the family members as they walked down Sammouni Street. Metres from Jameel Hejji's house, they came under heavy fire.**

**Mohammad (14) and Shahad were shot, along with 'Ola Hejji (26), who died instantly. The family took shelter inside Jameel's house, but Shahad's mother decided not to wait for Shahad to die and left with a large part of the family to try to make their way to safety. Mohammad stayed with his parents and other family members. He died a slow and painful death, as ambulances were refused access to the area. Shahad's mother came under fire as she escaped, but eventually found a car to take them to hospital. Shahad died on the journey. Mohammad's family stayed trapped on the first floor of Jameel's house for another two nights, a fire raging above on the second floor. On 7 January, the Red Cross arrived. They had been given half an hour to evacuate the dead and injured, but without ambulances. These had to be carried to meet the ambulances over a dirt road with potholes. When they eventually met the ambulances, they were taken to hospital where Mohammad was pronounced dead.**

Mohammad Sameer Hejji (14) and Shahad Mohammad Hejji (2) lived with their respective families in Sammouni Street, in az-Zeitoun, Gaza City. Mohammad lived with his parents and seven siblings, his sister in law and niece. Shahad lived on the same street with her parents and four siblings. On the first day of Operation Cast Lead, on 27 December 2008, their uncle Nu'man was killed while shopping in az-Zeitoun market. The farmlands surrounding their area were often shelled.

### ***The nightmare begins.***

On 4 January, around 10:00pm, Shahad's mother Abeer (33) noticed the flashlights of soldiers invading a neighbour's house, 250 metres down the street, as she looked out the window. Hours later, at 1:30am a huge explosion ripped through the area, smashing all the windows of the house. Abeer suggested they make a run for her brother in law's house, as it was slightly more sheltered than theirs. Her husband, Mohammad, agreed. As Abeer prepared the children to evacuate, a second explosion struck: *"I heard a huge explosion and felt as if objects and stones were hitting my body. I heard my children screaming; 'Father, father.' I started crawling, because I was too scared to stand up, and screamed 'Mohammad, Mohammad!'* Mohammad was dead: *"I heard my daughter, Nagham, saying; 'My father's on the floor, mother.' I quickly lit the mobile phone and saw Mohammad lying on the floor on his back behind her. Part of the left side of his face was not there. His eyes were hanging out of his face."* She shouted for her brother-in-law, Nasr, who came over immediately.

*"At one time, she stuck her hand out the window to point at the sky; 'Here's daddy in heaven"*

No sooner had he arrived than the living room was stormed by Israeli soldiers pointing guns and shining flashlights into their eyes. They poked at Mohammad's body, asking if he was with Hamas. As more and more soldiers entered the house, the family were ordered into another room while the

soldiers decided what they were going to do. Nasr was taken out, stripped briefly and then ordered to move Mohamad's body and clean up the bloodstains he had left behind. Abeer listened as he tried to scrub away her husband's blood from the floor and walls in the next room. Nasr returned, fully clothed, minutes later. *"They want us to leave the house, so bring the children and get out."*

### **Shahad**

The family trooped into Nasr's house, where they stayed surrounded by soldiers until 11:30am, Shahad asking constantly for her father. Abeer remembers: *"At one time, she stuck her hand out the window to point at the sky; 'Here's daddy in heaven'."* Finally, they were ordered to get out of the house and head to Rafah. The extended family left, calling out to family members as they passed their houses to escape with them. Ten metres past Jameel Hejji's house, they were greeted by gunfire and heard a voice ordering them to go back home. In panic the party fled back to Jameel's house where heavy gunfire followed them, hitting Mohammad Sameer Hejji.

Shahad was hit in the chest, but Abeer didn't realise until they had all scrambled back into the house. *"I looked at Shahad; her chest was bleeding profusely. I thought she was dead, so I started screaming: 'Shahad is dead, Shahad is dead,' but everyone was busy trying to bring in Mohammad Sameer who was on the ground at the entrance."* Although her brother-in-law reassured her that she was still breathing, Abeer could not sit there watching her daughter die, so decided to try to head south and find help.

Joined by a group of family members, she ventured out onto the street running barefoot towards the south. Helicopters hovered overhead but didn't open fire. Abeer's arm began to pain her severely, she hadn't realised she had been shot and the wound was now causing her too much pain to continue carrying her daughter. As some of the family helped carry her, Abeer didn't take her eyes off Shahad for one minute, she was bleeding profusely but still breathing. Eventually they met a car and managed to flag it down, the driver agreed to bring them to hospital. Abeer noticed that Shahad stopped breathing as they drove towards Shuhada' al-Aqsa Hospital. On admission, Abeer was sent for an x-ray, totally forgetting in her shock and pain that she was two months pregnant. Shahad was dead, but Abeer was not told this until the next day.

### **Mohammad**

Meanwhile, those who had stayed behind with their dead and injured children faced a nightmare ordeal over the next two days. Mohammad's father Sameer recalls how they had to break down the doors on the first floor to find a room to shelter in. They tried to treat the wounded but without any medical supplies, or even anything to serve as a bandage, it was useless.

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*"I swear to God that we're banned from entering the area and the army bombs everything; even ambulances."*

Sameer placed his son on the bed: *"His body was covered in blood and I assumed his legs were bleeding, but when I took off his trousers I discovered that both his legs and pelvis were bleeding."* Sameer tried desperately to stop his son's bleeding. *"Even though I wrapped all the wounds, I felt it was pointless because the blood continued flowing from under the bandages. Mohammad was talking to us; he kept screaming the whole time; 'Help me, I'm dying, help me, my leg,' he kept saying."*

Mohammad's mother sat with her son's head in her lap, crying softly and trying to comfort her son as he bled to death. *"Don't be scared because the ambulance is on its way."* He calmed down for brief periods until the unbearable pain from his wounds ripped through his body again. Sameer and the others tried repeatedly to get an ambulance to come, but every time they called they were told the same thing:

ambulances couldn't come to the area because they had no access; the Red Cross had to coordinate with the Israeli Army.

Around 4:00pm, Mohammad took a turn for the worse. *"I saw Mohammad trembling; he couldn't talk or reply to us anymore. His teeth were chattering and he was shivering violently. I realized that he had lost so much blood that he would die unless we got him out of there quickly."* Sameer made one last desperate attempt to save his son, he phoned for an ambulance yet again: *"I kept crying and begging them to come. I remember that I cried and begged so much that the man on the other end of the line cried with me. I swear to God that we're banned from entering the area and the army bombs everything even ambulances and everyone here is trying to coordinate an entry through the Red Cross"* he was told.

Mohammad took his last breath around 6:00pm: *"I felt that Mohammad's chest, which I had been watching the whole time, had stopped moving."*

### ***The ordeal continues***

Their ordeal was far from over. As they huddled together, sheltering from the bombardment outside, a fire raged upstairs, completely gutting the second storey of the house. They remained trapped below, listening to the fire raging above, all that night, the next day, and the following night. *"We kept sitting on the first floor the entire day listening to shells landing near the house and shooting every where. We stayed the whole of the next night and nothing had changed; my son Mohammad was lying dead on the bed, Ihab and Ameen lay injured on the floor beside him, and their mothers hadn't stopped crying. I didn't know what to do. Every now and then someone from 'Arafat family would look through the door at their sister lying at the gate. We spent the entire night like this."*

Eventually, on 7 January, 3 days after their marathon ordeal had begun, they heard shouting out on the street. It was the Red Cross, who had been given a half an hour to evacuate the area. The ambulances were still forbidden access to the area, the dead and injured would have to be carried. A paramedic found a cart, and the fatalities and casualties were loaded onto it. The group tried to travel by the main street, as the paved surface was easier for pushing the cart but the Israeli soldiers wouldn't let them. Together, men, women and children pushed the overloaded cart over potholes and ruts along a dirt road to Dawleh Roundabout, about one and a half kilometres away.

Ambulances were waiting on the roundabout, and the injured were transported to hospital to be treated. They arrived too late for Shahad and Mohammad, who were already dead.

Speaking to DCI the following January, Sameer relates that he went to stay with a relative until the war was over. *"The war ended and I think we came home on 20 January 2009; I found a pile of rubble where my house had been; it was completely destroyed. I now live in this tent that I put up on the ruins of my old house."* His two older sons, Ameen and Ihab are alive, but Ihab has been disabled by the bullet which entered his backbone, Ameen is making a slow but steady recovery. Abeer relates that she had to move out of the house where her husband was killed in front of them and now lives with her parents.

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