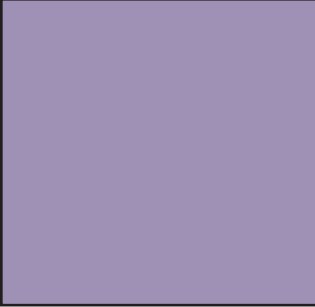
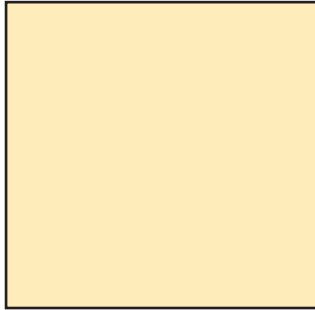
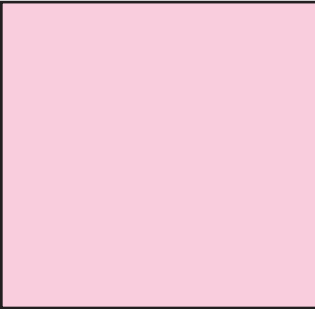




Palestinian Centre for Human Rights

The Best is Yet to Come



**Humanitarian stories
reflecting Palestinian
children's experience
of loss**





Palestinian Centre for Human Rights

The Best is Yet to Come

**Humanitarian stories reflecting
Palestinian children's experience of loss**

January 2013

Contents

Introduction	6
Legal framework	8
I: Bereavement	11
Meaningless life	12
Some days cannot be forgotten	15
Striving for success in honour of my mother's memory	19
Present yet absent	22
Constant yearning	25
Determined to remember, never to forget	27
II: Living with injury	31
Obscured future	32
My life is no longer my own	35
Eager for life in spite of its bitterness	38
An upside-down life	42
III: Separated by imprisonment	45
Joyless home	47
Waiting with pins and needles	50
Why does Israel keep my father away?	53
IV: Loss of shelter	57
Homeless life	58
Four years of frequent moving	61



Introduction

Behind the numbers and statistics related to Palestinian civilians who have fallen victim to Israeli violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, there are people with horrifying stories about loss, including many children. Despite great suffering, they still hold hope and ambition within their hearts. In this report, the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) aims to highlight the stories of certain children from the Gaza Strip who have suffered from one of the many Israeli violations committed against civilians and civilian property, and who still suffer from the bitterness of loss caused by such violations.

This publication demonstrates the magnitude of the loss experienced by Palestinian children who were, and still are, subjected to Israeli violations and still suffer from its impact and consequences. It focuses, particularly, on presenting a number of the children's personal experiences. These accounts demonstrate four forms of loss:

- Loss of a family member who was killed by Israeli forces;
- Loss caused by injury of a child or a family member;
- Loss caused when a father is imprisoned inside an Israeli jail and the child is deprived the right to family visits; and
- Loss caused by house demolition.

PCHR gathered the information included in this report through personal interviews with the children and a number of their family members. These stories are but a small part of the whole picture, examples which demonstrate the harsh reality of life for children in the Gaza Strip. The suffering of the living continues without end, as the impact of the loss inflicted through violations by Israeli forces hinders their ability to move on with their lives normally.

Since the outbreak of al-Aqsa Intifada on 28 September 2000, PCHR has documented the killing of 958 Palestinian children and injury of 6,355 others in the Gaza Strip alone. PCHR has also documented the tragic consequences on thousands of children of their houses being destroyed, denying them the right to shelter. In addition, dozens of Palestinian children whose fathers are imprisoned inside Israeli jails suffer due to the Israeli policy of preventing children from visiting their fathers in prison, in violation

of international humanitarian law (IHL).

PCHR's investigations of the vast majority of the crimes committed against children since 2000 have led to a bitter conclusion: Israeli forces fail to take the necessary precautions when carrying out operations and do not correctly apply the principle of distinction, failing to differentiate between civilians and non-civilians, military targets and civilian establishments. This is evident, for example, by the killing of 313 children who died in the Israeli offensive on the Gaza Strip between 27 December 2008 and 18 January 2009, also known as 'Operation Cast Lead'.

While this report was being prepared, Israel launched a new offensive on the Gaza Strip, so-called 'Operation Pillar of Defence' which lasted from 14 to 21 November 2012. PCHR's fieldworkers carried out investigations around the clock during the offensive, obtaining evidence that many attacks were carried out against civilians; among the 171 people who were killed during this offensive, 102 of them were civilians, including 35 children. This offensive had a catastrophic impact on the people of the Gaza Strip, and this suffering and pain of loss will continue into the future.

This report is, in short, a platform for a number of children, who have been victimised by the practices of the Israeli forces, to make their voice heard throughout the world. The report aims to expose their suffering through testimonies and stories that are filled with the pain of loss, yet full of hope for a more beautiful life that awaits them.

We hope that this publication will enhance people's understanding of the suffering endured by Palestinian children. The report calls on Israel to fulfil its obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law, and to ensure that perpetrators are accountable for their crimes. Furthermore, the report calls on the international community, in particular the European Union and the United States, to ensure that Israel abides by international human rights and humanitarian law in its treatment of Palestinian people. International bodies, such as the UN Human Rights Council, also have a crucial role to play in holding Israel to account for the actions of its forces. By challenging the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of these violations, it is hoped that a change will come and the children of the Gaza Strip will be given the opportunity to grow up in a better, safer world, and have the future that they deserve.

Legal framework

Israel's continued occupation of the oPt requires the application of the rules of IHL, as well as the various international human rights standards codified in international conventions and covenants, to guarantee basic protection for human rights for the Palestinian people. Various United Nations (UN) bodies and committees, to which Israel is party, confirm that international standards of human rights and humanitarian law must be applied to the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt); however, Israel claims that it is not obliged to abide by international law in respect of the Gaza Strip. Israel also rejects the legal application of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, which applies due to its occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. It is, furthermore, the responsibility of the High Contracting Parties to this Convention to ensure that Israel fulfils its responsibilities as the Occupying Power, as stipulated in Article 1.

Palestinian children are a particularly vulnerable group and are among those most affected by Israeli forces violations in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which have been ongoing since 1967. IHL grants children two forms of protection: first, the general protection granted to them as non-combatant individuals; second, special protection as they are considered to be a particularly vulnerable group in times of war and armed conflict.

The principles of IHL seek to create a balance between military necessity and the protection of civilians. To guarantee the protection of children, it is imperative that they benefit from all of the provisions related to protected persons, including respect for life, physical integrity and well-being, the prohibition on the targeting of civilians, and the prohibition on collective punishment and retaliation.

Key principles of IHL

The principles of distinction and proportionality

The parties to the conflict must, at all times, distinguish between civilians, including children, and combatants, and civilian objects and military targets. Attacks may only be directed against combatants and military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilians and/or civilian objects.

While combatants and military objects may be targeted, it is prohibited to target civilians and civilian objects. Customary IHL explicitly prohibits violations of the principle of distinction. Such violations are war crimes, as defined in, inter alia, Articles 8(2)(b)(i), and (ii) of the Statute of the International Criminal Court. Additionally, violations of the principle of distinction may constitute 'wilful killing' of civilians, a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions.

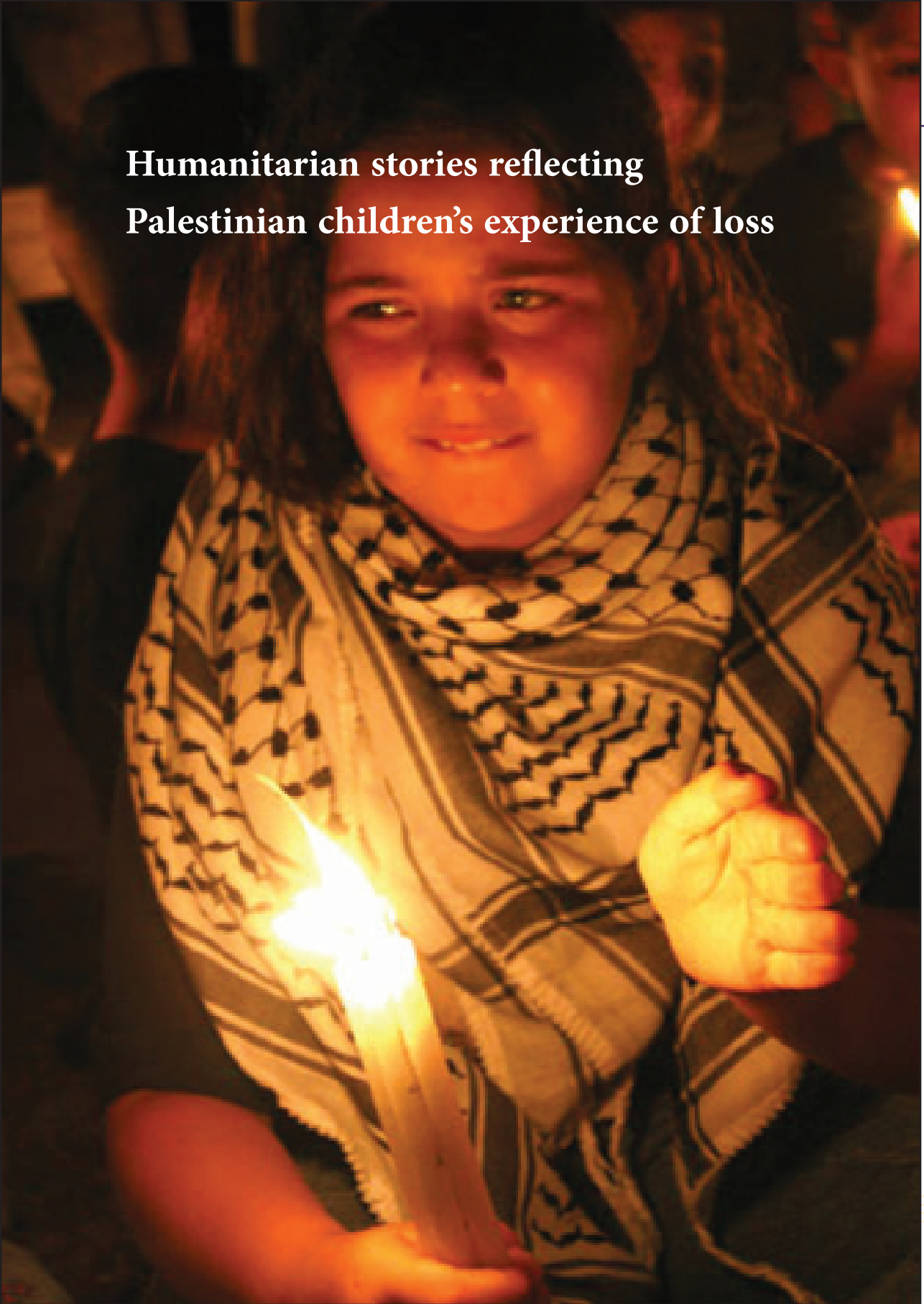
IHL defines indiscriminate attacks as those which are not directed at a specific military objective; which employ a method or means of combat which cannot be directed at a specific military objective; or which employ a method or means of combat the effects of which cannot be limited as required by IHL. Indiscriminate attacks violate the principle of distinction and are considered war crimes under Articles 8(2)(b)(i), and (ii) of the Rome Statute of the ICC. Depending on the scale of such attacks, and whether they form part of a plan or policy, they may constitute the crime of wilful killing and be a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions.

In addition to the prohibition on indiscriminate attacks, IHL requires that any attack must be proportionate. An attack which may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated.

The principle of precaution

Customary IHL requires that all feasible precautions must be taken to avoid, or at least to minimise, incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians and damage to civilian objects. This regulation requires that those launching an attack must take all feasible measures to ensure that the objectives to be attacked are neither civilians nor civilian objects. In cases of doubt – given the fundamental purpose of IHL – a decision must be made in favour of protecting civilians and civilian objects. In addition, care must be taken when choosing the methods and means of an attack, in order to avoid or minimise incidental loss to civilian life, injury to civilians, or damage to civilian objects.

**Humanitarian stories reflecting
Palestinian children's experience of loss**



I: Bereavement

On the morning of 11 March 2012, an Israeli warplane fired a missile at a group of civilians, mostly children, who were playing on a plot of land near their home, located at the end of Assayla Street, Jabalia City, in the northern Gaza Strip. As a result, Ayoub Amer Mohammed Assalya (13) was killed, and 13 others sustained injuries.



Meaningless life

Faraj Assalya: “Israel killed my brother. They took him away from us. Should we forgive them for what they did to him and to us?”

Faraj Assalya, the younger brother of Ayoub, is 10 years old, though he seemed years older when he spoke to us of the loss of his brother, his best friend, Ayoub, and how he tries to cope with his loss.

“Ayoub and I were hardly ever apart. We used to play together, go to school and study, and shared a bedroom. Even though he is dead, I feel him with me all the time. It is like he never left, he is always with me and I see his face everywhere. Sometimes, I can actually hear his voice in my head.”

Of Ayoub's five surviving brothers, Faraj was the most affected by his death, to the extent that he

has stopped doing things he used to do with Ayoub. When we asked him what his hobbies were, he instantly answered, “Football”. However, he added through his tears, “I do not play it anymore. Whenever I see a ball, I remember Ayoub and I remember that he will not be playing with me again. I remember that he will not be playing with me or sharing our joy when we played together.”

Faraj was silent for a moment and the tears continued to fall from his brown eyes. His gasps audible, he continued: “Ayoub was fun. He loved everyone. One day, before his death, he gathered us siblings and our nephews together and we played till the late hours of the evening, until our mother came into our room and made us go to sleep. We laughed a lot those days. I haven’t laughed like that since.”

His young age made it difficult for Faraj to grasp the reality of Ayoub’s death at first, that Ayoub could no longer go with him to school, play football, or play pranks on their friends and family. “when i learned of his death, i did not believe that i would not see ayoub again. i did not understand what death meant exactly, but a while after ayoub died i began to understand that he is gone and he is never coming back to our lives.”

Faraj is overwhelmed by an unshakable feeling of loneliness, even though his brothers try everything to encourage him to spend time with them. Faraj finds sleep to be the best refuge from his loneliness and the chronic yearning for his brother. “Before he died, we used to do so many fun things. I hated sleep because it ended our fun. We were always forced to go to sleep by our parents. Now, I love sleeping. It gives me comfort. It is the only thing that does not remind me of Ayoub.”

Before Ayoub was killed, the Assalya family lost two other sons; Mohammed (22), was killed in an Israeli shelling three years ago, and Hassan (5) died of meningitis in 1997. Although the family has lived through the bitterness of losing a loved member twice before Ayoub’s death, this is the first time Faraj has truly experienced loss. Faraj was not yet born when Hassan died, and was just six years old when Mohammed passed away.

It has been more than one year since Ayoub's death, during which time Faraj scarcely went out into the street. According to his mother, Adlya, he became isolated and is easily frightened. "He was badly affected by Ayoub's death. His behaviour and personality changed drastically. He became fearful and refuses to go out to the street. He is afraid that he will be bombarded by warplanes like Ayoub was. Before, Faraj was very sociable and outgoing. He spent most of his time with his brothers and other children of the family, but now he is a totally different person. Whenever he goes missing, we find him sleeping here or there."

Faraj rejects the idea of moving on with his life, to go about his days and live normally like other children. "A few days ago, I went with my brothers to a party that our neighbours threw on our block. Before half an hour passed, I left and went home. The party, like everything else in my life, has lost its meaning because Ayoub is not with me."

Faraj has suffered a lot since Ayoub's death. He keeps thinking about the details of his death, and tries to understand why Israeli forces killed him, but he is still incapable of finding an explanation. "The hardest thing I go through since Ayoub's death is my thoughts. Most of my waking hours, I keep remembering what happened. I remember the bombing and Ayoub. His body lying in a pool of his blood is the picture in my head. There is one question that comes into my head every day: What did Ayoub do to be killed and be torn to pieces like that?"

When we asked Faraj for a final comment, he looked with piercing and tearful eyes and said, "Israel killed my brother. They took him away from us. Should we forgive them for what they did to him and to us?"

On 27 December 2008, Israeli war-planes targeted Jaber Howaij's (46) home in Gaza City. As a result, Howaij was killed, along with three of his sons, two of them children. The bombardment of the house made Howaij's wife and eight surviving sons and daughters, including four children, homeless.



Some days cannot be forgotten

Basma Howaij: "All words in all languages cannot capture a fraction of what I felt at the moment or what I feel whenever I remember it."

27 December 2008 is a date that Basma Howaij (15) will never forget. On this day, Basma returned from school to find her home was a pile of rubble. The Israeli shelling of the house caused it to collapse upon those who were inside at the time. "I will never forget that scene", says Basma. "I returned from school and I was shocked by the sight. Dozens of people were gathering at the scene. I tried to get as close to the house as possible, but all I found of our home was a pile of rubble."

The thought that their house could be bombed had never crossed Basma's mind and, when she saw the destruction, she did not think that any of her family members could have been

killed. "It did not occur to me for a second that I had lost my father and three of my brothers. I wish the destruction had limited to the house, but the catastrophe that befell us was bigger than my worst nightmare." Basma added, in a whispering voice, "I can never begin to describe how I felt when I saw the bodies of my father and brothers inside one of the neighbouring houses. All words in all languages cannot capture a fraction of what I felt at the moment or what I feel whenever I remember it. Sadness, anger, fear, helplessness, and oppression are some of the feelings I felt at the time, and some still live with me to this moment."

The Howaij family lived a simple life, but the loss of the head of the family and three of their sons made life bitter and complicated, as Basma explained: «Our life before the bombardment of our house was beautiful. We were just another family, poor but happy. My father worked day and night to meet our needs. Now, our suffering has doubled because we lost the core of our family. We lost our father, and away with him went any feelings of security and safety.»

The suffering of the surviving members of the Howaij family is not limited to their bereavement; the Israeli shelling that demolished the house rendered the family homeless with no refuge. Considering their difficult financial situation, the prospect of building a new house is very slim. "The bombardment demolished our house entirely. Since then, we have rented a few different apartments, so we have not felt any kind of stability since the shelling." She continued, "Our life changed drastically after the death of my father and brothers. Not one single happy moment has entered our lives because we constantly feel like something is lacking. Before, our life was not perfect but we were happy. Our house was spacious and our father was loving and caring."

Basma's performance at school deteriorated in the two years following the death of her father and brothers, as they used to help with her homework. With their death, Basma lost those who had most encouraged her education. "My father used to support and encourage me all the time to excel at school. He helped me to revise my lessons and do my homework, and when I lost him my performance at school was badly affected. Whenever I open a book and try to study, I remember my father and start crying. At first, I could not focus on anything, but with my mother and siblings

encouragement, I recently returned to being as good as I used to be. I now study hard and I am determined to do well to make my father proud. I will do all I can and work hard to be the person he always wanted me to be.”

Basma’s eldest brother Jaber (27) has since married, and he is now the breadwinner of the family, supporting his wife, two children, mother and seven siblings. The family’s current condition cannot be described as stable yet; the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) has not yet provided the family with a new house to replace the one destroyed by Israeli forces.

Mahmoud Howaij (25), another of Basma’s brothers, spoke to us about the family’s suffering, “Directly after the killing of my father and brothers, my siblings and I gathered together. I distinctly remember Basma’s expression when she said, “They killed Daddy. Who am I going to call Daddy now?” At that moment, I felt heart-wrenching pain, helplessness, and fear of what the future held for us. My eldest brother and I work hard to fill part of the gap caused by our father’s absence; however, that is not easy. What our family went through was extremely difficult. We are talking about the loss of our father – the breadwinner of the family –, three brothers, and our house. It all happened in one moment. We became orphans. My eldest brother, Jaber, and I became responsible for this homeless family. What we live through is indescribable, but we are patient and we will keep holding on and work to realise our father’s hopes and dreams for us. He wanted the best for us and that is what we seek, in spite of all the hardships and the pain of our loss.”

Basma and her siblings prefer to ignore what happened and never mention it, as the best means to move on with their lives. Nonetheless, they recognise the cruel reality that their wounds will never heal and what happened cannot be forgotten. “Whenever we remember the incident, our pain grows. That is why we choose to live in denial about what happened, knowing that our wounds will never heal. We thought that when our eldest brother got married, a year after the killing of our father and brothers, it would bring joy to our hearts. Did it? I tell you with all honesty: No. We have not known the true meaning of happiness since their death. We claim to be happy, but we do not feel it. We do all we can to cope with our reality. There is no other way because, in spite of our loss,

life will go on. We realised that, and made our decision to use the pain as motivation for us to move forward, not hold us back.”

Basma, mature beyond her 15 years, explained the circumstances in which their house was bombed: “Our house is located between two targeted locations, a police station and a training site. However, this does not justify Israel’s attack on our house or the deaths of my father and siblings. We all know that Israel has the technology and capabilities to precisely locate its targets. They bombed both locations and our house along with them, and I am certain that they knew that it was a house occupied by civilians.” Basma was silent for a while, then continued with tears streaming down her cheeks: “Why did they do that to us? Why did they kill my Daddy? What were my murdered brothers guilty of? And what were we guilty of to deserve becoming homeless orphans?”

On 10 January 2009, Israeli forces, stationed at the border fence, began firing shells at civilian houses, east of Khuzaa, to the east of Khan Yunis. One of the shells fell inside Ahmed Qodaih's home, which was crowded with people, resulting in the killing of his niece, Hanan Fathi Qodaih al-Najar (41), and injuring three of her children.

Approximately 10 others who were in the house suffered from smoke inhalation. Hanan had left her house in the al-Najar neighbourhood, located near the border fence, and taken refuge in her father and uncle's house, believing it would be safer for her and her children.



Striving for success in honour of my mother's memory

Mo'ath al-Najar: "Israel killed my mother with no right. They took her away from us and that is something we can never forget."

Majid al-Najar (43) is now a widower, left to care for his children alone. At first glance, the family seems to be happy and well-adjusted. Although their house is small and modest, it is tidy and well-organised, prompting us to ask: How does the family manage to carry on in the absence of their mother?

Mo'ath explained that Majid and his four children, Ahmed (18), Mo'ath (15), Haneen (12), and Aya (10), work together to carry out the various household chores. Each one of them plays his or her role in the house, willing to help the others in order to keep their house organised, clean, and warm. "My father, siblings and I work daily to keep our house pristine. My mother al-

ways cared for the house, and now that she is gone, we are all doing our best to keep the house the way she would have liked it. The daily chores are not a problem to us. Our father plays the biggest and hardest role, but we all cooperate together and help as much as we can. You could say that, in terms of household matters, we have overcome all troubles. It is our mother's sudden absence, missing her, that we cannot overcome."

Mo'ath misses his mother the most during the evening gatherings of the family. "I miss my mother terribly. I miss her presence in our family's gatherings. Our family used to gather every night before going to sleep. We talked about our days, joked around, and had fun. We still gather every night, but it just is not the same without my mother. Our mother's presence was special. She had this air around her that made our gatherings fun and warm. She had a friendly way in guiding us. My mother's absence cannot be compensated for in any way whatsoever."

The family also lost their house during the same offensive. Israeli forces destroyed a number of houses located near the border fence after warning their residents. Majid and his wife, Hanan, thought it would be better for them to leave their house to keep their children safe, so they left the house with all its contents and sought refuge in the home of Hanan's father. "After learning that Israeli forces were targeting our area, we took refuge in our grandfather's house, located in the centre of Khan Yunis, out of the belief that it would be safer for us and guard us from the Israeli shelling. We were wrong and they killed my Mom. Israel killed my mother for no reason."

Moa'th is the only one of his siblings who has visited the rubble of their destroyed house, as the others still cannot face it. He goes there every one in a while. "I visited the rubble of our house more than once. My siblings refused to but I went. I went because I had a pressing need to see what had happened. The first time that I visited our destroyed house, I had an odd feeling. It was painful to see the place that witnessed the best moments of our lives was nothing more than a pile of rubble. What hurts the most is when you ask yourself why and cannot find a reason."

Majid has taken on full parental responsibility for his children since their mother's death. "It is a

big responsibility but our life is going well in spite of all the difficulties. I am both the mother and the father and I will continue to play these roles because I decided to spend whatever I have left of my life for my children and to see that their mother's hopes and dreams for them will come true."

Hanan always dreamed of seeing her son Ahmed become an engineer and hoped that Mo'ath would grow up to become a doctor. Ahmed was successful in obtaining a place to study engineering, while Mo'ath is working hard to maintain a good performance at school so he can realise his mother's hopes for him. "I study very hard and I have but one dream: I want to become a doctor as my mother wanted for me."

Mo'ath and his siblings insist on going on with their lives in spite of the pain of their loss, believing that working towards becoming what their mother always wanted for them is the best way to remain faithful to her memory. "The killing of our mother was the biggest shock we ever faced in our lives. We never thought of a life without her. In the beginning, we thought that life would stop now that our Mom was gone. We made it through this trauma because we want to make sure that our mother will rest in peace. We try to be happy because she always ensured that we were happy and comfortable." Mo'ath concluded, "Getting through the trauma of our mother's death does not mean that we will ever forget who killed her. Israel killed my mother with no guilt and that is something we will not forget for as long as we live."



On 18 August 2011, Israeli forces targeted and killed six men in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip. The men were in the garden of a house in al-Sha'out Block I in Rafah refugee camp, when Israeli warplanes fired several missiles at them. Five of the victims were leaders and members of popular resistance committees, while the sixth victim was the son of one of the men.

Among the victims was Kamal Awad Mohammed al-Nairab (43).



Present yet absent

Hadil Al-Nairab: “I am doing my best to go back to where I was. My father wanted me to become a doctor. His dream is my goal and I am determined to achieve it.”

The killing of her father had a tragic impact on Hadil (14). Her performance at school deteriorated drastically, which pushed her family to coordinate with her teachers to overcome this setback, as Hadil had been an excellent student up until her father's death.

Hadil spoke to us frankly of her problems at school, emphasising her determination to regain her focus in school. “I know that my performance at school has deteriorated. I have always been the top of my class and the best among my peers but everything has changed since my father's death. I could not focus anymore. It hurts, because my father used to help me study and his memory is much too strong and painful. I am doing my best to go back to where I was.

My father wanted me to become a doctor. His dream is my goal and I am determined to achieve it.”

She describes their life before the Israeli shelling that killed her father, saying, “Our life was wonderful and joyful. We did a lot of activities together. Our father used to sit with us, talk and joke. We had fun together.” A sad and shy Hadil emerged, when she whispered, “Since I was in the first grade, my father has helped me to study and do my homework. I miss him. I miss him and wish I could have one more day with him.”

The strongest memory Hadil has of her father is his tenderness. In spite of his busy schedule as a social worker, he seized every chance to be with his children to compensate for his long working hours. “My father’s tenderness is what I remember most vividly of him. Although he was very consumed by his community work, he always made sure he had time for us, and he was never cheap with his love and care. Our house feels empty without him, he used to fill it with life, noise, laughter, and activities. I remember how he used to wake us up every morning for school. When it was Ramadan, he used to stay up all night till dawn to wake us up for Sohour.”

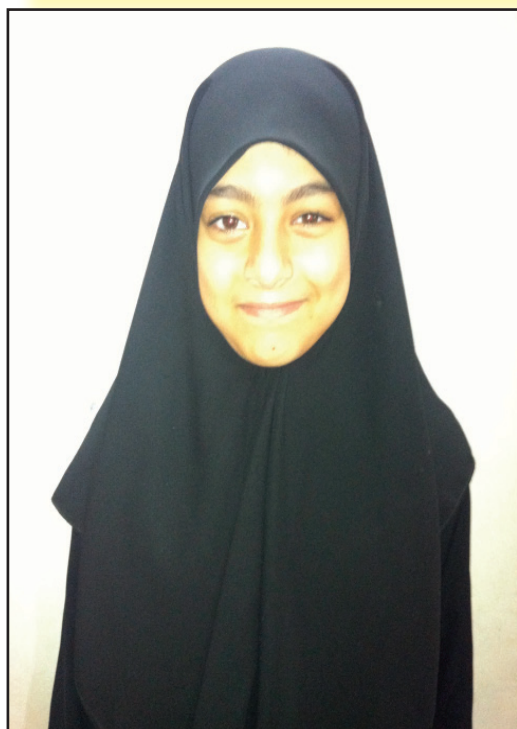
Hadil has six siblings; the eldest, Nour, is 16 and the youngest, Isma’il, is two and a half years old. They gather together regularly and recall their memories with their father, laughing and crying together. “My siblings and I talk about our father almost daily. We could never forget him. He was the perfect father. He lived and worked for our happiness and comfort. We remember him and laugh, reminding one another of various situations, then cry because he is no longer with us. I know that it was my father’s destiny to die that day, but losing him is very difficult. It has been more than a year since his death, but he has not left my mind for one second. He is absent but he is here, always, all the time.”

Hadil’s uncles are trying hard to make up for the absence of the children’s father. They visit them daily and see what they need. “We do all we can to compensate Hadil and her siblings for the loss of their father,” said Essam al-Neirab (47), one of the children’s uncles. “It is not easy. The absence of the father cannot be compensated. My brother was very tender and caring. He was very close to

his children in spite of his busy schedule, and that is why his death has affected them greatly. His children are all very bright students; however, their performance at school deteriorated significantly following their father's death." Essam stopped for a moment, looked at Hadil and said, "Hadil, in particular, deteriorated in an alarming way, but she is trying her best, with our help, to get back to where she used to be."

Hadil asked us to conclude the interview with a message to her father, "My dear Daddy, I want you to know that you are here with us and we will never forget you. In spite of your absence, it is like you never left. You are in our hearts and memories every single day. The house has lost all its warmth without you, but we will be strong and we will not let you down. We will study hard, because you always pushed us to do and be better. We will be who you always wished us to be."

On 29 December 2008, Israeli warplanes shelled the entrance of Yassir Abu-Tair's (35) house; as a result, he and his 6-year-old son, Mo'ath, were killed. In the same incident, Ziad Abu-Tair (32) and Mohammed Abu-Tair (21) also died.



Constant yearning

Zahra Abu-Tair: "I wish my father and brother had only sustained wounds. I wish they did not have to die and never return."

Zahra Abu Tair (12) lives in a small house in Khan Yunis with her mother, her brother Maisra (13), and her sister Zainab (8).

Zahra was only eight years old when her father and brother were killed. "I clearly remember that day. We were playing in the garden. My father and brother were standing by the entrance of the house when we heard the explosion. My grandfather came and took us to his house. We did not know what had happened until our mother arrived in the evening and told us. I never imagined my father would die and leave us."

Zahra has many memories of her father, as he used to stay home with them most of the time, helping them with their homework and to mem-

orise the Quran. "My father was an Islamic preacher and always encouraged and helped us to memorise the Quran," Zahra explained. «We used to play together and we spent most of our time in the garden. Even though he was always very busy, my father leaped at every chance he could get to spend time with us."

Even though it has been almost four years since her father's death, Zahra is still filled with sadness. "I was very sad when I learned of my father's death. I never imagined that he would go and never come back. Even when my mother said that he had died, I always imagined he would come back, and I kept waiting for him, but now I know he is never coming back. He is gone."

In her mind, Zahra constantly wonders why her father and brother were killed. She shared her thoughts with us: "Every single day I ask myself, why did Israel kill my father? Why? Why did they take him away from his family, his children? Why did they kill my brother, Mo'ath? Mo'ath was just a child when the Israeli shelling happened, and he died." Zahra was silent for a moment while she dried her tears, then added, "I often think about Mo'ath. He used to play with us all the time. We spent all our time together in our garden. We had a happy and simple life until the shelling changed everything. It stole my father and brother."

Under the circumstances, the family is doing well. "The absence of my father is very difficult. However, in spite of his death, he is always on our minds. My longing to see him will never stop. My siblings and I remember him and talk about him all the time. I wish they had been only injured, that they did not have to die, to leave and never come back. I know that this is their destiny, but I also know that Israel was the one who did this to us."

Whenever she remembers her father, Zahra feels enraged and pours all her anger on those who are responsible for his death: "Whenever he crosses my mind, I feel furious at the Israeli occupation because they are the ones who killed my father and brother and took them away from us. I want these soldiers to know that we, the children of those who have been killed, are not afraid of them or of their warplanes. This is our land, and future generations will know that they killed our parents and deprived us of their love. We will not forget.»"

On 08 May 2008, an infantry unit of the Israeli forces raided Majdi Abdel-Raziq al-Daghma's house in New Abasan village, east of Khan Yunis. They opened the steel front gate, then taped an explosive device to the inner wooden door and blew it up. Majdi's wife, Wafa' (33), was standing behind the door and was instantly killed. Israeli soldiers raided the house, covering Wafa's body with a rug that was in the house after they confirmed that she was dead. The soldiers took three of her six children, who were with her in the house at the time, and detained them inside one of the rooms.



Determined to remember, never to forget

Samira al-Daghma: “They covered my mother’s body with a rug not worthy of a martyr’s body and, as they left, they waved their hands at me and said “Shalom.” Is there anything more horrible than that?”

Samira al-Daghma is now 17 years old, and is working very hard to prepare for the tawjihi (high school diploma) exams. She hopes that she will receive high enough marks to allow her to join the Faculty of Medicine, as her mother always hoped she would. “I study hard and put all my effort into preparing for my tawjihi exams. I hope that my GPA will allow me to study medicine. I want to fulfil my mother’s wish and make her happy. They say that the dead share the happiness of their living loved ones. I believe that my mother will share my joy in succeeding.”

The memories of the day her mother was killed

are still vivid in Samira's mind. She was 13 years old at the time. "I was with my mother when the Israeli soldiers raided our house. They blew up the door while my mother was trying to open it, killing her instantly. I stayed inside the bedroom with my brother, Qosai, and my sister, Ruba, who were 3 and 7 years old at the time. We stayed there for many hours until the soldiers left our house. I knew that my mother was dead, but I felt great fear for my siblings, and keeping them safe was my only concern. I did not want them to see our mother lying dead on the ground."

Before her mother's death, Samira was used to helping her mother around the house. Wafa' was very busy working as a teacher, studying at the university, and being a mother to her six children. "I was my mother's companion and friend. I used to help her all the time as she used to work as a teacher in the morning and study at the university as well. My mother always had us as her top priority. She gave us everything we ever wanted, and helped us with our studies and homework."

Since her mother's death, Samira, as the eldest child, has taken responsibility for caring for the house and her siblings. "Before her death, I used to help my mother all the time, but the biggest responsibility was on her shoulders. Since she died, I am the one responsible for everything. At first, I was not alone. My aunt used to live with us, and she helped me but things were still not easy at all. I feel a huge responsibility towards my siblings and I feel like nothing I do will ever be enough for them in comparison with what my mother would have done. It breaks my heart that they never knew Mom like I did. They did not have enough time with her. My siblings did not have the chance to learn from her or have her as role model, because they were all too young when the Israeli forces killed her."

The al-Daghmas will soon move into a new house. Since the killing of their mother, the family has lived with their grandfather. Except for Samira, none of the family has returned to the house where Wafa' was killed. "We left the house where our mother was killed by the Israeli forces as soon as they left. We never returned. My father and siblings refuse to; they believe that visiting the house will reignite the pain of losing her and the memories of her killing. I am the only one in my family who wants to visit the house because it holds all my memories of my mother. This new house has nothing of my Mom, while the old one is filled with her, all my memories of her, in each and every corner."

It has been four years since Wafa's death, and it could be said that the family has managed to get its life back to normal. Majdi recently remarried, and the children are gradually getting used to having a new step-mother; nevertheless, the family still suffers. "Life goes on in spite of the pain and suffering. My father re-married recently and our life could be called normal, but we are not what we used to be before my mother was killed. Her death broke something in all of us. There is not a day that passes when we do not remember Mom or talk about her. Losing her was extremely difficult. We have coped with it, but we will never truly get used to it."

Mohammed al-Daghma (33), Samira's uncle, spoke to us about how she and her siblings dealt with the death of their mother: "The incident in itself was very difficult. Wafa' was killed inside her own home and three of her children were present when the crime took place. Samira was the most damaged by the incident as she had to care for her little siblings while her mother was lying in a pool of her own blood only metres away from them." Mohammed continued, while looking at Samira warmly, "Samira took on huge responsibility after her mother died. She became both mother and sister to her siblings. She managed to care for them and the house, while maintaining her excellent performance at school, because she is determined to fulfil her mother's dream and become a doctor."

Samira seemed strong and determined when she told us about her intention to prosecute the Israeli soldiers who killed her mother. "I will never forget what those soldiers did to my mother. I will not forget what they did to her dead body. They covered her body with a rug, not worthy of a martyr's body, and as they left, they waved at me and said "Shalom." Is there anything more horrifying? Is there anything more disrespectful towards the lives and feelings of innocent people than what they did that day? I was young but I vividly remember the details of their crime. I will prosecute them whenever I get the opportunity. I will not turn this page until the criminals are punished."



II: Living with injury

On 19 August 2011, an Israeli drone targeted members of a Palestinian armed group with one missile while they were standing near al-Wafa Hospital, in eastern Gaza City. As a result, 14-year-old Ibrahim Adnan Abd-Raboh al-Zaza was killed, and his cousin, 15-year-old Mohammed Attuf Abd-Raboh al-Zaza, sustained shrapnel wounds throughout his body.



Obscured future

Mohammed al-Zaza: “I will do everything I can to fulfil my dreams in spite of my injury and suffering, so Israel’s goal to destroy us will never be accomplished.”

The first thing Mohammed said, after waking from a 17-day coma, was his cousin and best friend’s name, Ibrahim. Mohammed and Ibrahim had been playing football near their family home, in eastern Gaza City, when they were hit by shrapnel from the Israeli missile. Ibrahim and Mohammed were transferred to an Israeli hospital for treatment due to the severity of their injuries. On 19 September 2011, Ibrahim was pronounced dead.

Considering their close relationship, Mohammed’s family hid the news of Ibrahim’s death from him for two months, to avoid affecting his recovery. “I was receiving treatment in

an Israeli hospital when I learned of Ibrahim's death. My father, who was with me in the hospital, hid the news from me and I only found out about it when my father left me for my grandmother's funeral. I looked up my cousin's name on the internet and I found out that he was dead. I immediately called my father. I broke into tears and kept repeating Ibrahim's name. I did not, for a second, imagine that he would die, that we would not grow up together, play and study together."

For months afterwards, Mohammed lived through endless fear and pain. "When I awoke from the coma and realised the extent of my injuries, I thought I would never go back to my old life. I did not think I would be walking on my feet again. For a long time, I was convinced that I was going to be physically disabled for the rest of my life and that was a very difficult time for me. When I used to think about my injuries and my dead cousin, the thought of death became very appealing. It was not scary. I felt like I wanted to join Ibrahim and be with him like we used to be before."

Mohammed remembers his shared memories with Ibrahim as if it was only yesterday. "My relationship with Ibrahim was very strong. He was my best friend and we never parted, as we both lived in the same house. We used to go out together and play football. He lived to swim and I will never forget how we used to play together while swimming. We had a simple and quiet life. It was not perfect. Ibrahim and I used to work as street peddlers sometimes, to help our families with money, but we were happy."

Aside from the pain of losing his best friend, Ibrahim, Mohammed still suffers from the severity of the injuries he sustained in the Israeli shelling. He was referred to Israeli hospitals for treatment by the Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH). Mohammed's medical bills reached 77,000 NIS (20,000 USD) and the accommodation in Israel cost 2,000 NIS (530 US dollars) per night. "I received treatment inside an Israeli hospital for eight months. For the first couple of months, I was completely paralyzed. I underwent numerous surgical operations, during which I received skin transplants on both of my legs and my right arm. After that, I was transferred from the Israeli hospital to a hospital in Nablus, where I stayed for 25 days. I still receive treatment every 3 weeks as I suffer from infections in the bones in my legs. I also have an open wound in my back."

Mohammed believes that Ibrahim was saved by death from the suffering of living with injuries like his, which prevent him from living a normal life. "Ibrahim died, but he was saved. Even though it has been over a year since I was injured, I am still suffering and God only knows how things will turn out for me. I want to be completely independent but, because of my injuries, I can hardly do anything without the help of a family member. Before the attack, I used to help my family but now I cannot work. What happened changed my life 180 degrees."

Mohammed was wounded in the legs, abdomen and right hand. According to his medical report, issued by MoH on 23 April 2012, he also suffers from "keloid scars that require plastic surgery using tissue expanders. He also needs silicon chips, pressure garments, and a glove for his right hand."

Saber Abed-Raboh al-Zaza (43) spoke to us about Mohammed, saying "Mohammed's situation is very difficult. Although a year has passed since his injury, he still needs continuous physical therapy. Mohammed also needs a number of plastic surgeries and skin grafting operations. If he does not receive these surgeries, which we cannot afford due to their high cost, Mohammed's health will be at risk."

In spite of his difficult situation, Mohammed seemed to be coping with his situation. "I understood what had happened and I learned to cope with my injuries and situation. Still, I wish I could overcome all the obstacles and have the necessary plastic surgeries to move on with my life. I realise that an obscured future awaits me, but I am determined to continue my studies and do all I can to fulfil my dreams in spite of my injury. I do not want Israel, who targets children, to accomplish its goal and destroy us. They changed the course of my life, but I will not let them determine my future."

On 17 January 2009, Israeli forces shelled an UNRWA school, Beit Lahia School for Boys, with incendiary and artillery bombs. Approximately 320 families had sought refuge from the Israeli offensive in the school, which is located in the centre of Beit Lahia Housing Project. As a result of the attack, a number of classrooms caught fire and two siblings died: 4-year-old Mohammed Hamad Shihda al-Ashqar; and 5-year-old Bilal Hamad Shihda al-Ashqar. Moreover, 36 other civilians sustained various wounds, including the mother of the deceased, Najoud Shaaban al-Ashqar (24).



My life is no longer my own

Madlin al-Ashqar: “Since my mother lost her arm, I have been doing everything I can to substitute for her amputated arm.”

Madlin al-Ashqar was almost nine years old when the attack killed her younger brothers, Bilal and Mohammed, and disabled her mother. Madlin recalls the details of the incident as if it happened yesterday. “I lost two of my brothers. They were very young when the Israeli warplanes killed them. I, too, was young, but I remember what happened vividly. My mother was injured. She lost her arm and I have been doing everything I can to substitute for her amputated arm since then.”

Before that day, Madlin had a normal childhood, though her family was in a difficult financial situation. She spent most of her time playing with her friends and neighbours. “I was

used to playing with my friends. I used to spend my free time with them, playing and going out for walks.”

The impact of the Israeli shelling did not stop with the death of her young brothers. It changed her whole life and snatched her childhood from her. Madlin was required to take on the role of an adult much too soon. She could no longer play with her friends or spend time with them, and has to handle responsibilities much too heavy for her young 12 years. “I spend most of my time helping my mother with the household chores and duties, especially those that cannot be carried out with one hand. I clean the dishes after our meals, I prepare the dough and bake the bread for our family, and I help around the house, cleaning and organising it.”

Nonetheless, Madlin seems content with her life. She is convinced that it is her responsibility to step up. “It is my duty to help my mother. If I do not, who will? Even though being my mother’s second hand takes the largest part of my day, it does not bother me. Even when I am with my friends, I do not feel the same joy as I did before Mohammed and Bilal died. I miss them all the time and I remember how we used to play, how our parents used to play with us. I remember all of this and wish nothing ever had to change.”

Madlin’s role in the household is not limited to the regular daily chores. She is also responsible for helping her deaf-mute father. Madlin accompanies him whenever he needs her to translate for him. She learned sign language so she would be able to engage in conversation with her father. Madlin is the only family member who can help her father, as her surviving brother, Sabri (4), is too young to handle this responsibility. “I learned sign language and I can understand it perfectly. I help my father a lot, translating what he wants to say to others as the vast majority of them do not understand sign language. My father used to depend on my brother Bilal before the attack. He used to accompany him everywhere, but now it is my responsibility.”

Madlin does not have much time for herself. Between her chores and helping her father, she has little time for studying and reading the Quran. “I feel that my life is no longer my own. I spend the

largest portion of my day tidying up the house and helping my Mom. I also assist my father and try, at the same time, to maintain a good performance at school. I used to be a better student before the war and the killing of Bilal and Mohammed. Then, my mother used to help me to study, revise my lessons and do my homework. She cannot do that anymore and I have had to become more independent.”

Madlin acknowledges that her life changed because of her mother’s disability. She does not complain or whine; moreover, she accepts and understands her mother’s occasional tantrums, as if she were, in her mother’s words, a grown and mature woman. “Madlin has become my indispensable helping hand around the house. I rely on her greatly as she helps me with the various chores. The amputation of my arm changed my life and put heavy burdens on Madlin’s shoulders. It made her responsible for things she was too young for. In spite of everything, Madlin never complains. On the contrary, she always shows initiative to help and takes up more than necessary. Sometimes, I feel truly sad for her. Madlin was deprived of her childhood and had to take on the role of an adult much too soon. She is very strong. She even handles my tantrums, which I usually take out on her without thinking. I have the constant desire to scream so I yell at her, but she just understands and bears it till I calm down. I lost my sons, Bilal and Mohammed, and my arm as well. Ever since that day, our life was changed. A new way of life was imposed on us. We just try to get by every day. It is difficult, it is hard, and it is meaningless.”

In spite of Madlin’s harsh childhood, she says that the most difficult thing she has lived through was the loss of her brothers. “Mohammed and Bilal’s death was the hardest thing that happened to our family. It hurt all of us. My life changed and I became responsible for the house affairs and my other siblings, but still that is nothing compared to losing them. Since their death, we were all changed. My mother and father both changed. We do not share time together like before. Happiness has become a distant memory in our house.”

On 04 January 2009, Israeli warplanes shelled the al-Habbash house in Gaza City, while children were playing on the roof. As a result of the attack, two children, 10-year-old Shatha al-Habbash and her 13-year-old cousin, Israa, were killed. Moreover, a number of the children in the family sustained injuries, including 17-year-old Jamila.



Eager for life in spite of its bitterness

Jamila al-Habbash: “What happened will motivate me to move forward to prove to Israel that it will not take the joy of life from us.”

Jamila captures the attention of anyone who meets her with her spontaneity, friendliness, and bright smile. Knowing what Jamila has been through and what her living conditions are, you are forced to wonder: What is the secret of this girl's cheerfulness and optimism? Where does she get the strength to face her challenges with a heart full of hope and a spirit eager for more of life, in spite of its bitterness?

Jamila lost both her legs when she was 14 years old, as a result of the Israeli shelling of her family home. “It has been nearly four years since the attack took place, but I can still remember it as if it was yesterday. I can never forget what happened. I can never forget my sister, Shatha, and

my cousin, Isra, who were killed in the same attack that caused my physical disability. Nevertheless, I will not allow what happened to become a cause for frustration or to weigh me down. On the contrary, it will be a motivation for me to move forward to prove to Israel that it will not take the joy of life from us.”

In the years since the attack, Jamila has undergone a number of surgeries. She is still in need of physical therapy sessions, which are supposed to provide rehabilitation and enable her to use prosthetics comfortably in place of her amputated legs. “Up to this moment, I still suffer because of my inability to rely on the prosthetics. I find it very challenging to use them, even though I have received intensive training in France and Slovenia,” Jamila told us, with a smile on her face.

Jamila does not feel pity for herself. In fact, she is hard on herself and berates herself for struggling with her prosthetics. “I blame myself for my inability to use the prosthetics. I am the one who has to train hard and practice physical therapy exercises daily. My family give me everything they can. They support and encourage me, and they are always by my side. It is all up to me and I cannot blame anything but being busy preparing for my tawjihi exams, which I have passed successfully, thank God. Now, I will try to increase my training sessions, in order to get used to my new legs.”

Jamila obtained a place in the Journalism and Arabic Language Department in the Faculty of Arts in al-Azhar University. She is taking serious steps towards realising her dream of becoming a journalist, so that she can document what happens in her community and the Israeli violations and crimes committed against the Palestinian people. “I have wanted to become a journalist ever since I was child. After the war on Gaza and my injury, I became even more determined to fulfil this dream, because I understand the important role that journalists play, especially for us as Palestinians. We need people who will expose the true face of Israel by publishing the truth of its practices against us.” Jamila continued, with a smile that never left her face, “I am filled with determination to continue my studies in order to fulfil my ambition, become a journalist, and play a part in delivering the voice of the victims to the entire world so that they will see, hear, and judge for themselves.”

Jamila lives with her father, mother, and eight surviving siblings on the third floor of a four-storey building. She does not face any difficulties moving around inside the house as it is adapted to fit her needs. Her true suffering begins when she leaves the house: "Movement inside the house is easy. My family has made all the necessary changes to ensure that I am comfortable moving about. The real dilemma starts with the simple thought of leaving the house. As you can see, we live on the third floor, which means that I need to go down many steps whenever I have to go out. In order for me to go down the stairs, I need at least one person to assist me. Usually, one of my brothers helps me out and, if they are not around, my cousins do."

Jamila's problems grew when she entered university. "The facilities in our community are under-equipped for disabled persons, which worsens our suffering. For instance, in the university there is no elevator, and the classes where I take my lectures are all on the fourth floor. You can imagine my daily suffering trying to go up and down the stairs on campus. My physical suffering is not the worst part. It is the look on the faces of other students, varying between pity and ridicule."

Jamila's brothers hardly ever leave her side. "My brothers assist me in everything I need, compensating for my amputated legs. They never leave me and ensure that it is easy for me to move about from one place to another." Jamila was silent for a minute, then continued with her ever-glowing smile: "My brother, Mo'men, who is one year older than me, sacrificed his true ambition to study the English language. He enrolled in the same department as me, to be near me and assist me whenever I need him to move about on campus or outside."

She does not think about the hardship she faces in her everyday life, as she finds it futile to ponder such things. "I do not have the time to think about the obstacles. I am completely focused on finding a way to face and eliminate these obstacles so that I can move on with my life. I will not allow my injury to cripple me and stop me from continuing on the path that I have set for myself. All I wish for is that the concerned authorities would give disabled persons their due attention, fix the streets and the various public facilities, and adapt them to fit to our needs. We are part of this community and it is our right to have the adequate conditions to ease our life and reduce our suffering."

Jamila's strength helps her to get past her pain, and helps her family as well, according to her mother, Hala al-Habbash (39). "Psychologically, Jamila has cured herself by herself. She has always maintained high spirits in spite of her disability. She is still the strongest among us. Jamila gives us strength and joy. She is the cornerstone that brings us together and empowers us. We cannot permit ourselves to feel weak, helpless, or desperate because we have a living example that inspires us to have faith and keep hoping for a better future. Jamila continues to believe that the best is yet to come."



Jamila
cannot
move freely
out of
the house
without
the help of
one of her
brothers.

On 10 January 2009, an Israeli drone fired two missiles at Wafaa al-Radee(39) and her sister, Ghada (32), while they were walking down Haboub Street, one of the main streets in Beit Lahia, in the northern Gaza Strip. The sisters had left the house during a one-hour ceasefire announced by Israeli forces to visit a nearby medical clinic, as Wafaa believed that she was about to deliver her baby. Wafaa sustained critical injuries as a result of the Israeli attack and one of her legs was amputated. Her baby, Iyad, was delivered by Caesarean section, as Wafaa was being treated in hospital.



An upside-down life

Sahir al-Radee: “I feel a lump in my throat each time I look at my Mom, and I know this feeling will not leave me as long as I live.”

Sahir is the sixth child in a family of eight children. Of his seven siblings, Sahir is the most attached to his mother and the most affected by the attack that resulted in the amputation of her leg. “The Israeli shelling that targeted my mother changed our lives completely. Her life was changed, as she could not do many of the activities that she used to anymore. Before the incident, my mother used to walk us to school almost daily, and pick us up when the school day was over. She used to help us with our homework and go shopping for us. After the incident, everything changed. She cannot do most of those activities, as it is very difficult for her to move about. Because of that, she hardly ever leaves the house nowadays.”

Wafaa's disability has forced the children to take

up responsibility for the household chores that she used to do but no longer can. “Before her injury, our mother used to do all the house chores by herself. She cooked, cleaned, tidied up our things, and did not allow us to help her, except on holidays. Since her injury, we try to help our Mom in order to ease the burden on her shoulders. We divide the chores among us and help each other, My siblings and I help our mother out with everything in the house. It does not bother us at all. In fact, helping her makes me happy because I understand that her health is not how it used to be and it is not easy for her to handle all the matters of the house by herself.”

Sahir is very passionate about football. He used to dedicate most of his free time to the game. “Before my mother was targeted, I used to skip chores and go to play football, but not anymore. Being there for my mother is much more important than football, and the happiness I feel when I help her is far greater than any game of football I ever played with my friends.” Sahir was silent for a moment, then wondered aloud, “Does it make any sense for me to leave my mother struggling at home to go and play football? It does not. She comes first. Helping my mother is even more important than my homework.”

Wafaa’s injury has impacted her whole family, as she told us: “My children took on a whole new life since the moment of the attack. I hardly ever relied on them in the house before, but now I hardly do anything without their assistance as I lost the ability to move freely. My injury has changed me from a completely self-sufficient person to a needy dependent who cannot accomplish anything without the help of others. I used to run the whole household and my family’s affairs but now I am totally dependent on my children, who rely on themselves, each other and their father. Directly after the attack, I was transferred to Egypt for treatment. I stayed there for six months and, when I came back, I realised that nothing was the same anymore. Every single detail of my life had changed. My children now carry the heaviest burden as they insist on helping me in everything I do, no matter how big or small. They believe that it is their duty and they have to do it, to be by my side.”

The children’s mother says that her injury has turned her life upside down. She describes a heavy sadness that never leaves her, as she feels sorry for her children who had to take on so much responsibility at such young ages. “Feeling that you cannot give your children all the love and care that they need is frustrating. My helplessness breaks my heart because they deserve much better. I

feel sad for them. Their lives have changed. Their time is not their own, but dedicated to the house and family. They have learned to cope with this reality and they never complain, but it grieves me that the shelling and the amputation of my leg have turned our lives upside down. My children and I have exchanged roles, against our wishes, and it is an injustice for children of their age to have to go through life like this.”

Sahir does not agree with his mother that doing the household chores is difficult or troubling for them. He considers it to be part of the family's daily routine. “The chores are not a problem at all. They have become a normal part of our lives, and we do it without complaint,” he explained.

“The only thing that we cannot cope with or get used to is our mother's injury and the loss of her leg. I feel a lump in my throat whenever I see my mother unable to do something without the help of someone else. It gives me heartache whenever I compare between the way she used to be before the Israeli shelling and afterwards. I feel it each time that I look at my Mom and I know that this feeling will not leave me as long as I live.”



III: Seperated by imprisonment



On 24 November 2011, the family of Iyad Sha'ban Ahmed Dawwas (39) received a phone call from the Israeli authorities informing them that Iyad had been detained in Ashkelon prison in Israel. Iyad, a bakery-owner, is from Jabalia refugee camp, north of the Gaza Strip, and is married with ten children. Iyad had been referred to receive medical treatment in al-Maqased hospital in occupied East Jerusalem, as he had a tumour in his leg. He travelled via Beit Hanoun («Erez») crossing on 26 October 2011. After receiving the necessary medical treatment, Dawwas was arrested while on his way back into Gaza.



Joyless home

Soha Dawwas: “I cannot stop thinking about my Dad and his conditions in prison. I am so worried about him. I hope with every moment that he will return safe and sound.”

Soha Dawwas, 17, has not been able to visit her father in the Israeli prison for over a year. She and her nine siblings miss their father very much, particularly how he used to stay with them at home, chatting, playing, and telling jokes.

“My Dad was perfect,” Soha said. “We had a peaceful and happy life. We used to sit together until late at night on the weekends and have fun together. My Dad was happy and used to spend most of his time with us. We all miss him. Our house was a place of happiness when my Dad was around, but since he was arrested, happiness faded away.”

Iyad's absence is felt in the house and in the hearts of his children, despite the effort made by

his brothers to make up for it. "Almost a year has passed since my Dad's arrest. This is too long for me. We could not stand his absence for one day before he was arrested. He left us and left a big void behind. My uncles try their best to make us happy and not to feel the absence of our Dad, but it is something that can never be made up for."

Soha added, "I cannot stop thinking about my Dad and his conditions in prison. I am so concerned about him. I hope in every moment that he will return safe and sound. I get so worried, especially when I hear news of the poor detention conditions and the suffering of prisoners in the Israeli jails."

Soha was preparing to sit her high school exams when her father was arrested. Her concentration suffered and she did not sit her exams. "With the arrest of my Dad, I became unable to study anymore. I cannot concentrate on my education because I keep thinking of my Dad and his conditions. I stopped going to school, did not sit my exams and made my decision: I will not return to school until my Dad returns home. He used to help me in revising my lessons. He was the one who supported and encouraged me. Whenever I open my book to study, I see his face in front of me. Because of that, I am unable to focus on my studies. He was the best person to encourage me in my life and I will wait for his return, so he will encourage and support me again and be the first one to share my success."

Soha and her siblings have only received two letters from their father during his detention period. The letters were brought to them by released prisoners. One of the letters was sent specifically to Soha. "I received a letter from my Dad. He explained his conditions in jail to me and reassured me. I read this letter daily, as it is the sole communication I have from my Dad. When I read it, I feel him in front of me. I was special to my Dad. His letter to me was touching because, even while in detention, he has not forgotten me and sent me a special letter. When I read the letter, I have a mixture of happiness and sadness together. I feel sad because it reminds me that he is suffering far away in prison. On the other hand, I feel happy because it brings us together, although we are apart."

From July 2007 until July 2011, Israel denied prisoners from the Gaza Strip the right to family visits. The programme of family visits was resumed on 16 July 2011, and Soha's mother was able to visit her husband. However, not one of his ten children can visit because the Israeli prisons administration

only permits fathers, mothers or wives to visit prisoners. Soha explains, “When we heard about the resumption of the visits programme, we were extremely happy. I regained hope that I would see my Dad. Unfortunately, this happiness was turned into sadness once the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) declared that the children of prisoners were not included in the categories that are allowed to visit prisoners. I have no idea why Israel prevents a father from seeing his children? Why does Israel keep my Dad in detention without trial and prevent us from visiting him? Why are the prisoners children not allowed to visit their fathers in Israeli jails? Do we pose any threat to Israel’s security? Will I be threatening Israel’s security if they allow me to visit my father? I think no one on earth can answer my questions.”

Soha addressed the whole world in her final words: “I want to send a message to free people around the world and to those who believe in justice and equality. I call on them to be more active regarding the issue of Palestinian prisoners and to learn about what prisoners really experience in Israeli prisons. This may help people to know the real Israel that claims to be a democracy, but practices the cruellest forms of torture and terrorism against Palestinian prisoners and their families. We are denied the right to visit our fathers in Israeli jails. Israel not only arrested my Dad illegally. Now, they prevent us from seeing him and deny him his right to be reassured about us. In all of that, where is justice?”



Iyad Dawwas' wife and a number of his children

On 07 June 2004, Israeli forces, previously stationed at Abu-Holey checkpoint in the central Gaza Strip, arrested Akram al-Rakhawi, who is from Rafah. Al-Rakhawi is now serving 10-year sentence in an Israeli prison. Since his arrest, Akram's sons have not been allowed to visit him. His wife was only allowed to visit during the first year of his imprisonment.



Waiting with pins and needles

Mirwan al-Rakhawi: “Our father is alive, but we cannot see him. We need him, but he cannot be with us, and the space he left cannot be filled.”

“What does my father look like? Is he tall or short? Thin maybe?” These are all questions that Najah al-Rakhawi (43) has grown accustomed to receiving from her children, who have grown up without the chance to see their imprisoned father for the past eight years.

Twins, Anas and Sami, were just one year old when their father was imprisoned and, like the vast majority of prisoners children, they have not visited their father due to the severe restrictions imposed on the family visits programme for prisoners from the Gaza Strip. 17-year-old Mirwan outlines his own experience, following his father's imprisonment: “I was only nine years old when my father was imprisoned. In the eight years of his imprisonment, I have not been able

to visit him once. The only thing that helps us to remember his face is the pictures we have all over the house. Our lives are very difficult. For so many years now, a bunch of pictures and a few letters are all that connect my siblings and me to our father.”

Mirwan believes that, without their father, their life is missing many things. Words fail to capture their suffering, for their father is alive and well but they do not know him. “We are not truly alive, yet not dead,” said Mirwan. “Our father is alive, but we cannot see him. We need him, but he cannot be with us, and the space he left can never be filled.”

Akram now has a number of grandchildren, but he does not know them. Three of his children have married since he has been in prison. “Our joy was and will always be missing something until my father is released from prison, safe and sound. Two of my brothers and one of my sisters got married, but we did not feel any joy because my father was not with us. On her wedding day, my sister cried her heart out because my father was not there with us. We all miss him so very much and are waiting impatiently for him to come back.”

Mirwan and his siblings imagine their father’s return and discuss what it will be like. “I dream of the moment when I will see my father. My siblings and I talk about it all the time, what we imagine our re-encounter will be like. My youngest brothers, Anas and Sami, do not know our father. My 16-year-old sister fears the moment when she will meet him, as she is afraid she will be too shy or will not know how to act around him. I do not think that there are any human beings in the world who go through what we, the Palestinians, live through every day. Prisoners everywhere in the world have the right to receive visits from their relatives and friends, but Israel deprives Palestinian prisoners of this right. Does it make any sense that Israel would arrest my father and deprive my siblings and me the right to see him for all those years?”

Even though it has been eight years since Akram was imprisoned, Mirwan still has many beautiful memories of the times he shared with his father. “I remember my father used to take me with him to his football games with his friends. Those were the best times of my life. I also remember the stories

he used to tell us. Those stories were filled with beautiful meanings and ethical messages.”

The suffering of the al-Rakhawi family is not limited to the pain of separation; they also fear for Akram's health inside the prison. He suffers from asthma and has been imprisoned for years in Ramla prison, which does not meet the standard minimal rules for the treatment of prisoners, particularly patients. Akram's wife, Najah, explains: “We are very concerned for Akram, as his health has been deteriorating. We think of him all the time, especially when there is news related to prisoners hunger strikes. Akram went on a strike before for more than 70 days. We almost died of fear for his life at that time. He has suffered from numerous health problems since his arrest. He now has diabetes, osteoporosis, and high cholesterol, as well as asthma.”

The thought that his father will not recognise him when he returns breaks Mirwan's heart. “I have grown up and I look very different than when my Dad was arrested. I am not the same little boy I was before. It truly pains me to think that he will not be able to recognise us when he sees us. I think my siblings and I have to prepare ourselves for the first meeting with our father when he comes out, and understand that it will take time to get to know each other after all those years that Is-

rael took him away from us.” Mirwan continued, “I want to say something and deliver it through you to the entire world and to all human rights activists and supporters. Where are you? Why are you turning your back to the crimes and violations that Israel is committing against us? Not only is Israel detaining our father in prison in spite of his illness, they also prevent us from seeing or visiting him. We die a thousand deaths each day worrying about our father and fearing for his life. What good are all the international conventions of human rights? What good are they, when they are just ink on paper?”



In 2001, Israeli forces arrested 'Alaa Abu-Jazar (37), from Rafah, and sentenced him to 20 years of imprisonment. Abu-Jazar has one daughter, Jumana, whose mother died when she was four months old.



Why does Israel keep my father away?

Jumana Abu-Jazar: “I dream of the day when my father will hold my hand and walk me to school. I dream of a new dress that my father will buy me. I dream that my grandmother and I will share Eid one day with my Daddy. Is that too much to ask for?”

Alaa was arrested two weeks after his wife's death. 10-year-old Jumana is Alaa's only child. Without a mother, a father, a sister or a brother, Jumana has been raised by her grandmother.

Since then, Jumana has visited her father once, when she was two years old. She has not been allowed to visit him again due to severe Israeli restrictions on the family visits programme for prisoners from the Gaza Strip. “I visited my father in prison once, when I was two years old, but I keep him in my heart, always with me,” Jumana said spontaneously. “I live with my grandmother, as my mother is dead, and I do

not have any siblings. The only dream I have in this world is that my father will be released from prison and we will live together.”

“Why does Israel take my father away from me?” Jumana asked. “I am just a child so why do they insist on preventing me from visiting my father? What threat do I pose to them? My whole life, I have been denied my father’s love and care because of Israel. In all my life, I saw my father once, just once. Can you even imagine that? My father is alive inside an Israeli jail, but still I cannot see or visit him. I am waiting for the day he comes out. I still have to wait eight more years until the end of his sentence. Will I not see him for the next eight years too?”

In spite of her young age, Jumana realises that this reality will probably continue, and she will not be able to visit her father in the coming years. “We went to the ICRC and to other human rights organisations but none of them could help. The power of the decision rests in Israel’s hands. Still, my father and the other prisoners fight with their empty stomachs to improve their detention conditions and allow them to receive visits from their families. Children all over the world live in the bliss of their parent’s love and care, except for Palestinian children. We are denied from having a normal life with our fathers. I dream of the day when my father will hold my hand and walk me to school. I dream of a new dress that my father will buy me. I dream that my grandmother and I will share Eid one day with my Daddy. Is that too much to ask for?”

Jumana stops eating whenever she hears that the prisoners have started a new hunger strike. She also participates regularly in sit-ins organised by prisoners’ families in front of the ICRC headquarters. “Participating in hunger strikes is the least we can do in support of the prisoners. I cannot stand the idea of eating while my father is hungry and on strike. It saddens me to think about my father’s imprisonment conditions. The prisoners have a very hard life and that is why they go on hunger strikes. Their cells are cold and tiny, and they are subjected to torture and maltreatment.”

Jumana spends most of her time studying and she is the top of her class. She counts the years of her father’s absence in school certificates. “I study hard because my success makes my father happy. I

want to be a source of joy for him. That is why I study and get high grades. I keep all my certificates so he will see them when he comes out of prison.” Jumana’s eyes began to tear up, as she said, “I wish that my father would be released soon. I cannot imagine living without him for another eight years. It is cruel and unfair.”

Alaa’s mother, with whom Jumana lives, spoke to us about Jumana’s suffering: “Jumana lives the bitterness and pain of being an orphan even though her father is alive. Her mother died when she was four months old, and Jumana never had the love of a mother or a father.” She sat in silence for a moment, with a look of deep sadness on her wrinkled face. “There is not a day that passes that Jumana does not speak to me about her father. She keeps asking me about him and she is very happy when I tell her about how he used to be when he was young, what he loved and what he hated. She is always eager to hear more. She barely knows him as she only visited him once when she was two years old. Since then, she has not been allowed to visit him. Does a child like her pose such a danger to Israel’s security that she has to be prevented from visiting her father in prison?”

Every once in a while, Jumana has the chance to meet with a released prisoner who can tell her how her father is doing. “Whenever we hear about a released prisoner, my grandmother and I go to visit him. We enquire about my father and ask how he is doing in prison. Some of them bring us letters from him. These letters have become my only connection to my father and I eagerly await them. I enjoy every word and letter of his letters, I imagine him writing down the words and it makes me very happy. I feel like can see him through his few messages, and I know that the prisoners write their letters secretly. Even letters are banned !”

Days pass by for Jumana and her grandmother, similar, slow, and void of meaning. They both await the much-anticipated day of Alaa’s release, even though it will not be soon, while Jumana suffers in fear for her ill grandmother. “My grandmother and I have a simple and quiet life. Our life is normal, affected only by my father’s absence and the anticipation of the day of his release. I fear a lot for my grandmother. I cannot sleep or eat whenever she is sick. I am afraid she will leave me as well, like my Mom and Dad.”



IV: Loss of shelter

On 04 January 2009, Israeli forces destroyed the 'Awaja building in Beit Lahia without any prior warning. The residents fled to a neighbouring tract of land when Israeli bulldozers began to destroy their home. When the family tried to come back to their home to collect their belongings, Israeli forces fired shots at them. As a result, Ibrahim (9) was killed and a number of family members, including the father and mother, sustained injuries.



Homeless life

Omsiyat 'Awaja: "I used to love drawing landscapes. All I drew in my paintings were flowers, butterflies, and trees. Now, when I intend to draw a flower, I automatically draw a tank, a tent, or a destroyed house."

A small, mud house with a small yard in the front, piles of pots and kitchen tools scattered here and there, a number of books leaning against the wall of the house, which barely shelters its residents. That is what the house in which Omsiyat Kamal 'Awaja, (15) currently lives looks like. The house was built by UNRWA as a temporary alternative for the 'Awaja family home, which was destroyed by Israeli forces during 'Operation Cast Lead'.

"Before moving to the house that you are seeing now, we lived in a tent for around two years. During that time, we realised exactly what it feels like to be a displaced person who has no home. We did not get used to living in a tent. It took us a long time to adjust, as we used to live

in a big house with most of the things we needed.”

Kamal ‘Awaja (51) tried his best to create an environment for his children that was similar to the one they used to have. According to Omsiyat, “Dad installed an internet line in the tent and bought us a computer. He also replaced most of the electronic devices we used to have in our house, but unfortunately he could not build a new house because he did not have enough money. UNRWA built us this temporary house and told my Dad recently that they are planning to demolish it to build a new permanent house. We are preparing to go back to living in a tent.”

The family will live in a tent again until UNRWA finishes building the permanent house. “In spite of being aware of the harshness of living in tents, out of experience, the idea of going back to the tent does not worry me. In comparison to what we have been through, tents seem luxurious.” Omsiyat was silent for a few minutes, turning her face away, and then continued: “In the early days of the war on Gaza, I was playing with my siblings because we did not understand what war and shelling meant. We were that until war took my brother Ibrahim away in an incident which I will never forget as long as I live.”

The tragedy of the ‘Awaja family began when Israeli forces destroyed their house on 04 January 2009. They did not give any prior warning before they began to destroy the house. The family members fled from the house to a neighbouring farmland, as the walls of their home fell beneath Israeli bulldozers. After the house had been destroyed, the children’s mother, Wafaa’ (36), wanted to go back to collect what could be salvaged from under the rubble. She was accompanied by three of her children, Diaa, Sobhi, and Ibrahim, each of whom was younger than 13 years of age.

Omsiyat recalls: “My brother, Ibrahim, was the first to be injured, sustaining injuries in his waist. Mom screamed, so Dad went to check on her, and picked up my brother. They left the house, or what remained of it, and Dad was screaming, ‘My son is injured. We need an ambulance.’ The Israeli soldiers were still in the area. They answered his screams with laughter and then shot more bullets, so that Dad sustained injuries, as well as my mother. My father was left lying on the street and

Ibrahim was lying next to him. My mother crawled until she reached my siblings and me where we were hiding behind a wall. We saw the Israeli soldiers approaching and shooting at Ibrahim, and Dad told us later that he had died.”

Regret tears Omsiyat apart, and the feeling has not left her for three years. Although Omsiyat is very young, she feels guilty about the death of her brother because she failed to help him. “When my Dad, Mom, and Ibrahim were injured, I stood there, unable to do anything, though I am the oldest of my siblings. I cannot forget what happened and I feel so much pain whenever I remember that I did not try to help. The idea that my help might have done something, in some way or another, to rescue my brother never leaves my mind, and it causes my stomach to ache. Maybe if I had tried to pull Ibrahim away from the Israeli crossfire, he would still be alive. I feel so much regret and sadness because I stood helpless and because my fear stopped me from doing anything that could have helped my brother.”

Omsiyat was severely affected by the suffering that she and her family went through. Her father, Kamal, says, “Omsiyat suffered so much after the death of her brother and the destruction of our house. It took us a long time to settle into our new life in the tent, and then in the mud house, as both were incomparable to the house we used to live in and what I used to provide for my children. My child was executed, my house was destroyed, and I turned from being a father who provided the best he could for his family to a father who is incapable even of providing a suitable house for his family. Days pass by meaninglessly. This how we all feel. Even psychotherapy sessions could not help us to get over this. My wife, children, and I share an indescribable feeling of oppression that changed us.”

Omsiyat used to love drawing landscapes, but today she only draws scenes of death and destruction. Warplanes and missiles replaced flowers and butterflies in Omsiyat’s drawings. “I can see no beauty around me and I am not good at drawing anything but warplanes, tanks, and funerals. I used to love drawing landscapes. All I drew in my paintings were flowers, butterflies, and trees. Now, when I intend to draw a flower, I automatically draw a tank, a tent, or a destroyed house.”

On 05 January 2009, Israeli warplanes attacked a house belonging to the family of a member of a Palestinian armed group in Rafah. The attack resulted in the destruction of the targeted house, along with a number of neighbouring houses, including the home of Mohammed al-Jamal (33). Al-Jamal, his wife, four children, and mother, have suffered greatly over the past years as a result of losing their home



Four years of frequent moving

Khalid al-Jamal: “We have moved from one house to another many times and, up to this moment, I have not made any new friends. That makes me sad.”

Khalid al-Jamal (10) and his siblings, Hiba (7), Lamia (5), and Abdullah (3), have not felt stability since Israeli forces destroyed their home four years ago. The family has been forced to move several times to different neighbourhoods throughout Rafah, as they struggle to find alternative housing, which has good ventilation and insulation but is affordable.

The young father, Mohammed al-Jamal (33), was forced to leave his home in the middle of a cold night in December 2008, when he heard that one of the neighbouring houses would be targeted by Israeli forces. Mohammed’s worst fears were realised when the attack resulted in the destruction of neighbouring houses,

including his home. The destroyed home was where Khalid had been born, and where he had spent the first years of his childhood. "I remember very well how Dad carried me that night as we all got out of our house. We ran away from the bombs and, when we came back, we could not find our house. There was rubble everywhere. I was young, but I remember exactly what happened. Since then, we no longer have a house."

Khalid faced many difficulties dealing with the new reality imposed on the family after their house was destroyed. He missed his school and the neighbourhood he grew up in, and he especially missed his friends, cousins, and neighbours. The destruction of their home took the family away from their familiar environment. Overnight, Khalid found himself in a new setting, without friends or acquaintances. "I loved our house very much. Over there, I had a lot of friends, relatives and neighbours. I miss them all, as we used to play and spend most of our time together. We have moved from one house to another many times and, up to this moment, I have not made any new friends. That makes me sad."

Khalid and his father used share a hobby, raising birds of all kinds on the roof of their destroyed house. Over the past four years, they have not been able to continue this hobby because of the family's frequent moving between houses. "My father and I used to go up on our roof every day and spend many hours taking care of the birds, feeding them and cleaning their cages. It has been a very long time since we did that, as our constant moving from house to house has not permitted my father to build new cages." His father added, "Raising birds requires stability, as building and setting up cages is very expensive and they are not mobile."

Khalid cannot understand why their home was destroyed. "I do not know why the occupation destroyed our house. I ask my father all the time about what happened and I try to understand. Sometimes, I think that we should not have left our house in the first place and I wonder what might have happened if we hadn't. It bothers me that we have had to move a lot in the past while, as I had to change schools as well, which is very annoying."

Mohammed recognises that the frequent moving has been very hard on his family. He acknowledges that it has been a huge weight on his children's shoulders, as they have all had difficulty coping with their new situation and have not adjusted easily. "My children are very sociable. Khalid, especially, is fun and outgoing. However, he has suffered a lot in the past few years because we were constantly moving from one house to another, as we had difficulty finding a proper and affordable house."

Recently, on 25 October 2012, Khalid and his family moved to their new home, which was built by UNRWA to replace their destroyed house. "I do not have many friends here, but I will build new friendships," Khalid said. "My father started setting up bird cages and I am so happy that we will get to share my favourite hobby again."

Funded by UNICEF

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and editors and do not necessarily reflect the policies or views of UNICEF, nor of any particular Division or Office. The text has not been edited to official publication standards and UNICEF accepts no responsibility for errors.



Palestinian Centre for Human Rights

January 2013

