

## IN THE GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY

## WITNESS STATEMENT OF ZAKARIYA CHEBIOUNI

I, Zakariya Chebiouni, previously of Flat 66, 9<sup>th</sup> Floor of Grenfell Tower, Grenfell Road, London, W11 1TQ, WILL SAY as follows:

**Background**

1. I was born on the [REDACTED] and was 16 years old at the time of the Grenfell fire. I was born and raised in London, and my first language is English. At the time of the fire I lived in Flat 66 with my mum, Hanan Wahabi (born [REDACTED] 1977), my dad, Salah Chebiouni (born [REDACTED] 1972), and my little sister, [REDACTED] (born [REDACTED] 2008), who was 8 years old at the time of the fire. My uncle, Abdulaziz El-Wahabi (born 1 December 1964), my aunt, Faouzia El-Wahabi, and my three cousins, Yasin (born 9 August 1996), Nur Huda (born 27 June 2001) and Mehdi El-Wahabi (born 22 February 2009) lived upstairs, in Flat 182 on the 21<sup>st</sup> floor.
2. I liked living at Grenfell Tower. I saw my friends every day. We used to hang out at the café in the Kensington and Chelsea Leisure Centre. Yasin hung out with us. I exercised almost every day as well, either playing football, as we lived very close to football pitches, or going to use the gym at the Leisure Centre. I was very close with my cousins, especially Yasin, and saw them all the time because they were just upstairs.
3. Our flat flooded a few times. Once, it flooded because the water was cut off, and when they turned it back on, the faucets were open and we hadn't realized, so the place flooded. There were also leaks from the upstairs flat sometimes.

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4. The only electricity issues that I can remember in Grenfell Tower are firstly, a black-out when I was young that lasted all night, and secondly, that the lights on some of the landings sometimes went out.
5. I usually used the lift, but when I was running late in the mornings, and both lifts were full, I would run down the stairs because it was quicker. Sometimes I used the stairs just to keep fit. Also, the lifts sometimes broke. There were two lifts and usually only one broke at a time, but sometimes both were out of use. I remember in Year 6 having to carry my BMK bicycle down the stairs because both lifts were broken. I think both lifts had broken down not long before the fire, actually. It took them days to fix them. My dad and Nur Huda got trapped in the lifts a couple of times. I never got stuck inside but sometimes, after the refurbishment, I had to manually close the doors to the lifts from inside because they didn't close automatically. I remember a while before the fire the doors of one of the lifts was making such a loud banging noise when they closed that my neighbor wedged a mirror in the doors to stop them from making noise.
6. The council replaced the front door to our flat at some point. To lock the new door, you had to lift up the handle first, as it was a hook lock. At one point, the hook got stuck and we had to spend the night with the door unlocked. We called someone from the Council to fix it. When they came, the guy removed a rod from inside the door and didn't replace it. After that, because the door was lighter, it didn't close automatically. You had to pull the handle up in order to close it, not just to lock it.
7. The council also replaced the windows in the flat. Not long after they did, the window in my room broke. The lock came out and I couldn't open the window anymore. No one ever fixed it. Also, the new window in the living room came off its hinge. I remember because I helped my mum fix it.
8. I remember seeing signs by the lifts that said people should stay in our flats if there was fire in the building, unless it was in their flat. I heard people talking about that advice sometimes, saying it was dumb advice.
9. As far as I know, the fire alarms in our flat were working at the time of the fire. They

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would go off if we burned something in the oven or cooked with oil on the stove. I didn't hear the fire alarms in our flat go off the night of the fire though.

10. There had been a fire in the building previously, when I was younger, maybe 10 or 11 years old. Someone lit rubbish on fire on the landing outside the flat of someone who lived on our floor. That fire didn't spread. I remember that I was upstairs with my auntie, Faouzia, during that fire. Since that fire had been contained, I wasn't too worried about fire safety before the big Grenfell fire. Sometimes I did worry though that my dad might not be able to get out of the building if there was a serious fire, because he has problems with his legs, [REDACTED] and sometimes I worried about Abdulaziz and his family being able to get out of the building in a serious fire, because they lived so high up.

#### 13 to 14 June 2017

- 13 I sat A-level exams on the 13<sup>th</sup> of June 2017 and was scheduled to sit more exams the next day. After school finished, I went home and got changed, and then went back down to the Kensington and Chelsea Leisure Centre. I hung out in the outdoor seating area at the café with Yasin and some friends. It was Ramadan, so we were fasting, and trying to kill time. When it came time to break our fast, I went back home and ate with my family. My dad had a couple of houseguests who ate with us. After eating, I left the house to go and pray at the mosque. I went on my moped. Yasin went too. I didn't stay at the mosque for the entire prayer, as I was tired, and the prayers are very long.
- 14 From the mosque, my friend [REDACTED], Yasin and I went to Tinseltown in Bayswater. We had milkshakes, and a few guys we know came and chatted with us. Then, one of Yasin's friends was about to leave, so we decided to leave as well. I remember that Yasin didn't have a bike so he asked [REDACTED] to let him ride on the back of his moped, but [REDACTED] didn't have an extra helmet. I'm not sure how Yasin got home. I arrived at Grenfell Tower before him, and he messaged me when he reached home. Often, Yasin and I would come in together and either he would come to our flat or I would

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- go to his, but it so happened that that night, we travelled separately.
- 15 The CCTV image of me entering the building that night gives the time as 12:38 a.m. When I got to the flat, I went to my room and started playing PlayStation 4. I messaged with some friends from school and a few family members. Then I got some food to eat. I had just finished eating, and was watching television, when I smelled plastic burning. I thought it was my mobile phone charger so I unplugged it. The burning smell wasn't particularly strong, but it was constant.
  - 16 About 5 minutes later, I heard my dad get up and go to the kitchen. He called me, and my mum's name. I think he thought one of us had left something in the oven. I went to the kitchen and could see that smoke was coming in through the extractor fan in the kitchen window. The kitchen windows were closed. We always sleep with the windows in the kitchen and living room closed because people throw things out of their windows sometimes, like burning cigarettes that could catch a curtain and start a fire. Once rice was thrown into our flat.
  - 17 My dad's eyesight is bad, so he couldn't see where the smoke was coming from, which is why he thought it was from the oven. I could see that it was coming in from the extractor fan in the window, and settling on the ceiling, like water. The smoke was black.
  - 18 I wondered if people had lit a bonfire in the grassy area downstairs, so I went into the living room to have a look. Through the bottom of the living room window, I could see the top flicker of a flame. There was a little bit of black smoke in the living room too, though not as much as in the kitchen. I thought maybe the tree under the living room window was on fire, and wanted to have a look, so I went to open the window. It's one of those windows that you can open in different ways. If you turn the handle so that it points straight up, it opens like a door, if you turn it another way, it hinges open at the top, and if you turn it another way, it locks the window closed. The window is behind the sofa so I had to climb onto the sofa to reach it. I opened the window like a door. I saw a spark and just as I leaned forward to see where the spark had come from, fire

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shot straight up, in front of my face. I realised that the fire was on the outside of the building. I moved back and my mum said, "*quickly, quickly, close it!*", so I closed back the window.

- 19 My dad was saying that we should stay in the flat, but I was like no, you lot can stay, but I'm taking my sister, I can't leave my little sister here. [REDACTED] was still in her bed, but she was awake because she had heard the commotion. I walked to her bedroom, lifted her up and brought her out. Then I set her down, maybe near the front door, I can't remember. I put on my sandals, walked out of our flat, onto the landing, and poked my head down the stairs, to check there wasn't any fire on the landing or the stairs. There wasn't any fire, but I saw some white smoke on the landing, and in the stairwell.
- 20 At this point, I was wearing my tracksuit bottoms and my *abaya*, which is traditional clothing that Muslims wear to the mosque, and sandals on my feet. [REDACTED] was wearing her pajamas, and no shoes. My mum was wearing a brown dressing gown and a brown head scarf, and my dad was wearing his work clothes, I think. When I got back to the flat my parents asked me whether there had been any smoke on the landing and in the stairwell. I lied and said no, as I knew if I told them about the smoke I'd seen, they would say we should stay in the flat.
- 21 I picked [REDACTED] up and ran down the stairs carrying her. The smoke got worse as I went down. I don't remember struggling to breathe, but when I got out of the building, I was spitting black stuff. I was coughing as I went down the stairs but I covered my mouth with my clothes and covered my sister's face with my robe. I can't remember if [REDACTED] was coughing, but I know she was crying. I don't remember seeing any hoses in the stairwell. I could see pretty well.
- 22 At around the third or second floor we came across an older woman in the stairwell. She looked Eritrean, and was wearing a headscarf. She had two children with her, a boy and a girl, who looked around [REDACTED] age. I'm assuming the lady was their grandmother. They were in front of us, and were the first people we came across in

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the stairwell. The stairwell was narrow, too narrow for us to walk down side by side, or for me to pass them, so I had to let the lady and the kids she was with stay in front of me. Then the little girl with the older lady went back upstairs, I think to get her parents.

- 23 When we reached the first floor, we came across two firefighters. They weren't wearing masks. I could see their faces: they were both white men with blue eyes and brown hair. One was holding the door from the stairwell to the landing open. The other told me to go back upstairs. I thought that was such a dumb thing to say. There was no way I was going back, but I started to back up, like I was obeying him. Then, the Eritrean-looking grandmother started speaking with the firefighters. She couldn't speak English very well. As she spoke with them, I pushed past and walked out the door the firefighter was holding open. He looked annoyed with me as I walked by, but I kept going. I have been shown a CCTV image showing me leaving the building, carrying [REDACTED]. The time on the image is 1:19am.

- 24 When I got out of the building, I carried [REDACTED] over to the Leisure Centre and looked back at the building. I could see that a firefighter was trying to spray water on the fire, but it wasn't working because the fire was too high for the hose to reach. By that point, the fire was past my floor, travelling up on the side closest to the Leisure Centre. I saw pieces of plastic and foam falling from the building.

- 25 There were people standing spread out next to the Leisure Centre, including my friend, [REDACTED], with his brother, his mum and his dad. They lived in flat 106, so on the same side as our flat is, but higher up. I saw my dad as he came out of the building, and then my mum, who asked me where my dad was. I told her.

- 26 [REDACTED] and his family looked like they were going on holiday: each had a rucksack with clothes and their passports inside. I was surprised because when I left the flat, I still didn't really think the fire was that serious. I had even left my mobile phone.

- 27 My mum was talking to Faouzia and Abdulaziz on her mobile, saying there was a fire. She was speaking really quickly, because she was panicking. I tried to grab the phone

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from her so I could speak to them more calmly, but she didn't let me, so I used my dad's mobile and called Yasin. I would say this was 5 to 10 minutes after I got of the tower, so around 1:30 a.m. Yasin answered his phone normally, like there was nothing wrong. I said, "*bro, you have to leave now*". He asked why and I told him that if they didn't get out, they were going to be trapped. He said "okay, alright, then I'll come down". He asked me if the fire was in the stairwell and I told him no, that I had just come from there, and there was no fire in the stairwell. He said alright, and again said he would come down so I cut the phone and gave it back to my dad.

28 We stood outside for what felt like ages but they didn't come out of the building. The police were telling us to get back. I gave my sister my robe and sandals. I wasn't feeling that worried yet even though I could see that my mum was panicking. I wasn't thinking about the smoke and I didn't think the fire was inside the building; I thought it was just on the outside of the building, and that Yasin and the rest would be okay.

29 I got my sandals back from [REDACTED] as she was sat on someone's lap, and walked around. I saw a girl I had gone to school with who lives nearby and used her mobile to call my cousins. I had tried them 2 or 3 times on the landline and Nur Huda's phone when Nur Huda answered at around 2 a.m. I asked her, "*have you come out yet?*" and she said no, they were still inside. She said the firemen said that they couldn't leave. She didn't sound that scared, nothing like in the 999 calls, I think because she thought the fire brigade were going to rescue them. I said that the firefighters had said the same thing to me, and I told her not to listen to them, because they were going to get stuck. She said they were speaking to the fire brigade, and we hung up.

30 A little while later I called Nur Huda again, and that time we didn't speak for very long. She said they were still speaking with the fire brigade and I told her she needed to get out. The conversation was short because her dad took the phone from her and said "*we're busy*", or something like that, as in, they were busy speaking with the fire brigade. He sounded like he was in a rush. After that, I didn't speak to them again. I called a while later to the house phone but it didn't go through, and I called all of their phones but nobody picked up.

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- 31 I didn't realise when the fire reached their flat. I got the location of their flat mixed up; I thought they were where the flats ending in "5" were, but my uncle Mokhtar corrected me, and I realized then that the fire had already reached their flat. But even then I didn't feel that worried. All my family were crying and hugging me, and I didn't get it. I still didn't think the fire had actually gotten inside their flat, so I thought they would be okay.
- 32 My friend [REDACTED] and I decided to get closer to the building to see if we could get back in. There's a door to Grenfell Tower garage near Latimer Road. We got in through that door but the fire brigade told us to leave, and we did. As we left, I remember seeing pieces of the building melting and falling off, into the park. Daylight was just breaking by this point, and the fire was still raging. Lots of firefighters were sitting out on the grass away from the building eating sandwiches and chatting.
- 33 It still makes me angry to think about them sitting there and eating while people were dying inside. I feel the firefighters should have done more. It seemed like they had given up by the time I saw them, but there were people still alive who could have been rescued inside. They should have tried to rescue them.
- 34 Later in the morning, I went to the Portobello Rugby Club, where the rest of my family was. For the next days we pretty much stayed there. On the night of the 14<sup>th</sup> of June, I slept at a friend's home who lives in the area. My mum stayed at the Premier Inn.
- 35 Over that first day, I didn't feel sad or worried. I can't explain it. There were so many rumours going around, and we didn't get any official updates. People would tell me that they had seen Yasin at a hospital, or that he and the rest of the family had escaped to the roof of the tower and had been rescued. I got sick of being told different things. I called 999 to give them my missing family members' details, but they couldn't tell me anything.
- 36 After a day or two though, I started to believe that Abdulaziz and the rest had died,

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because no one had found them yet. This was confirmed finally by the Coroner many weeks later.

37 I continued to stay with friends in the area over the next couple of weeks. I knew I could have stayed with my mum at the hotel but I couldn't deal with her crying. I don't cry, and I just didn't feel able to go up to my mum when she's crying and try to comfort her. I think I only spent one night at the hotel with her in those first two weeks.

38 I don't think I showered or changed my clothes for about a week after the fire, and I barely slept. I lost weight over the weeks and months after the fire. The people from the community are the ones who fed me and offered me clothes.

39 I missed my A-levels last year because of the fire. Had things gone as planned, I would have spread the exams over two years, but because of the disruption from the fire, I've had to take all of my A-level exams this year, which has been hard.

#### **Previous statements**

40 I have given 2 interviews to the Metropolitan Police about matters relating to the Grenfell fire, one on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July 2017, and another on 8 May 2018. The later statement was about fraudulent claims made by individuals claiming to have lived in Flat 182, Grenfell Tower.

41 I am willing to give oral evidence at the Inquiry.

**I believe that the content of this witness statement is true.**

Signed: Zakariya Chebiouni Dated: 09/09/2018

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