

'Call Me a Terrorist, but I'm No Different From Israeli Troops Defending Their Homeland'

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Some thoughts on the true source of incitement against and hatred of Israelis from a Palestinian who spent 23 years in jail for killing one.

As we make our way down a narrow, dark alley barely wide enough to walk through, on the way to the house of mourning, Najah Mohammed Muqbel bends over to pick up a few spent cartridges. "You see, this is the material that incites our children," he says.

In 1990, Muqbel was sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of Yaakov Shalom in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Ein Karem. Released after 23 years, he is now a key activist in Fatah, talking on the movement's behalf in West Bank schools.

"We do not want to die and we do not send our children to die," he says, before we enter the small, [cramped home of Omar Madi, a teenager who was killed last week by Israeli soldiers in the Al-Arroub refugee camp](#). "No father wants his child to die. But sometimes our children make decisions that are bigger than their age."

Al-Arroub, on the main road between Bethlehem and Hebron, is one of the most squalid of refugee camps, and one of the most militant. We are also joined accompanied by Thomas Huelse, an Israeli automotive engineer of German origin who has "adopted" a family living in the camp. The mother of the family is from Deir al-Assad, in the Galilee; the father is from Al-Arroub. Their house overlooks the cemetery, where Omar, the young shahid (martyr for the cause), was killed. Omar's home is situated at the other end of the camp, next to the approach road that the Israel Defense Forces has sealed off with large concrete blocks, not far from the army guard tower that dominates the landscape.

The bereaved parents, Naama and Yusuf Madi, and their 10 remaining children huddle in the house. Anguish is etched on the face of the father, a hardscrabble laborer of 52, employed by the Bethlehem Municipality.

The event occurred last Wednesday, February 10. A few youths threw stones at soldiers who, as usual, had infiltrated deep into the camp. One bullet struck Omar. He wasn't yet 16; he died 10 days before his birthday, his mother tells us. The last time she saw him was on the roof of their house, when he asked her to wash his sports shoes, which were muddy. She told him she'd wash them with the rainwater collected in the tank on the roof, and that he should clean up afterward. Omar then went to pray in the mosque. And afterward "the story ended," in Naama's words.

Shots were heard in the camp. Her heart told her it was her son, and at Al-Mizan Hospital in Hebron a short time later she saw his body. The bullet had entered Omar by way of his right hip and exited through the left one; he was declared dead shortly afterward by the hospital staff.

Many young people in the camp are wearing black T-shirts

with Omar's photo emblazoned on them.

"They [the soldiers] murdered him in cold blood," one of the teen's brothers says. "They have no pity for the old or for the young," their mother adds. "What reason do the soldiers have to walk around the camp every day," the dead boy's father asks, and then answers himself: "They come so the children will throw stones at them and then they can kill them."

This is now a house of rage. It's not hard to guess what will take root here. On the day after the killing, when the family had just begun to mourn, soldiers arrived at the house to arrest one of the other children, claiming he had thrown stones. The family resisted and the soldiers left.

"It is our right to throw stones at soldiers and we will insist on it," one of the brothers says.

The IDF Spokesperson's Unit stated this week, in reply to a query from Haaretz: "This incident is being investigated by the Military Police. Upon completion of the investigation, the findings will be conveyed to the military advocate general for examination."

"No child here can differentiate between Israeli, Jew, Zionist, soldier or civilian. For our children, every Israeli is a Jew and every Jew is a soldier and every soldier is hostile," Muqbel tells us in his excellent Hebrew, acquired during almost a quarter-century in prison.

"I was 'born' on Oct. 30, 2013. I am a boy with a mustache, I am 2 years old," he says, referring to the date of his release from prison, as part of Israel's goodwill gestures to the Palestinians during negotiations led by Secretary of State John Kerry.

A native of the camp, Muqbel now wears a tie and has a Jeep at his disposal thanks to his work for Fatah. He described his approach to the present situation at length, and it's worth listening to.

"We used to think that the killing of children was a 'mistake.' Now," he explained, "we believe that there is an IDF policy to kill children, to execute our children. After all, a child's body shows that he is a child. The soldier knows he is a child. If you think that this is a message that will help you, you are wrong. These children are a new generation of hatred. Not incitement, not Abu Mazen [i.e., Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas], not Hamas – the true source of incitement is the behavior of the Israeli soldier and whoever gives him his orders.

"Once," Muqbel continued, "your way of thinking was that our old people would die and the young ones would forget. I am telling you in all seriousness: We, the old ones, will die, but the next generation believes [in the cause] more than we do. It's a generation that does not listen to any leader. Believe me or

don't believe me: The parents have no hand in the matter. The real lesson the child learns is this refugee camp. Did you see the entrance to Al-Arroub? It's open for one hour and closed for two. And what are the soldiers doing inside the camp? Would you stop a child from throwing stones at them? It is you who are making them throw stones and afterward be killed.

"What did the person who jumped from the 80th floor of the Twin Towers think to himself? What pushed him to jump and die? The hope that maybe he would live, despite everything. If you understand that, you will not ask what makes the children try to assassinate Israelis. Our weapons are dirty, because we don't have smart ones. A stone, a knife ... If we had smart weapons like you, we would aim them at your army bases. It's not easy for a person to kill or murder a human being. I know, it supposedly happens only in the jungle, between animals.

"Maybe you were a soldier in the past. Maybe you killed. Why don't you see me as a soldier, in exactly the same way you see your soldier as a hero who is guarding the homeland? Look at me. Say 'terrorist,' 'murderer,' 'criminal' – it's of no interest to me. We are the soldiers of our people. When I got married, I was asked what I would say to the mother of the person I had killed, with me celebrating and him underground. I allowed myself to say that there is no difference between a bereaved Palestinian mother and a bereaved Israeli mother, and it is their right to be angry. But every war has a price and it is paid by the ordinary people. Not by the leaders. Pain has no answer and pain has no price. I paid 23 years of my life. How can you put a value on that?

"The feeling that allows me to accept myself is that I did something for my people. But what will you say to the mother of one of our children who was killed? Why do you always ask us about our killing? I am the one who killed Yaakov Shalom. By my act, I cried out that I exist. I was 24, and that was my response to Ami Popper, who murdered seven Palestinian workers.

I knew it would not bring about the liberation of the homeland, but I believed that I had to take action. To make the Israelis and the world look at me. Maybe it was a mistake, maybe we didn't gain anything. I've seen children who were killed for hoisting a [Palestinian] flag. Today those flags are sold in stores and their importer is an Israeli, a Zionist, maybe even a demobilized soldier. You have to understand, there's no going back.

"Even though we are now weak, our strength lies in our weakness, and your strength in your Dimona [i.e., nuclear] project. But we will come back to life. We know that the way is long and the war will continue. But neither a fence nor a tank nor a plane, neither the Arrow nor Iron Dome will be able to withstand the will of a people to live with dignity. I give talks as a volunteer in schools and I teach our children love of the homeland and how it can be realized. I teach them that an uprising is not only with weapons, it is also with the pen, with a poem, with music, with a play – a weapon is the last thing.

"The only resource the Palestinians have is people. We have no other resources. Accordingly, we have to forge a people who will have values, who will know how to love the homeland and preserve it, who will understand that weapons are only a small part of this. This morning, on the way to taking my daughter to my mother, I saw cartridges all over the road. That is the instrument of incitement, and it is everywhere. Your children are not familiar with this. All you have is the pepper spray that mothers carry in their purses, and the knives that young people take to clubs.

"Netanyahu wants to put cardboard over the eyes of Israelis, so you will see reality only through the holes he makes in it. In war there are victims, but what is happening now is executions. There is a famous photograph from the second intifada of an Israeli soldier confronting a child with a stone and not shooting him. There was a time when you took pride in that picture."