

Israelis Mourn Their Dead and Destroy Bomber's House

By JAMES BENNET JAN. 31, 2004

Even by the ever declining standards of this conflict, the Palestinian suicide bombing that claimed 10 Israeli lives on Thursday seemed senseless -- or sensible only if calculated to deepen the misery of both peoples.

On Friday, as certain as a tide, Israeli armored forces rolled back into Bethlehem for the first time in six months to make arrests and destroy the family home of the bomber, Ali Muneer Jaara.

Israelis mourned their dead, ordinary people who just happened to catch the No. 19 bus in Jerusalem on Thursday morning: Yehezkel Goldberg, 41, who counseled troubled teenagers; Anat Darom, 23, a student of sociology and statistics; Rose Boneh, 39, who had just called ahead to her sister at the laboratory where they both worked to say she was running late and not to worry.

Ariel Sharon, Israel's prime minister, saw the bombing as evidence that Israelis live next to "a society that does not lift a finger to root out the murder and evil from its midst."

In the Aida refugee camp here, around the crumpled Jaara home, Palestinians spoke not of remorse but of continuing oppression and further retaliation.

Carrying 15 pounds of explosives packed with bits of metal in a bag, Mr. Jaara boarded the No. 19 bus as Israel was preparing to release 400 Palestinians in a prisoner exchange with the Lebanese guerrilla group Hezbollah; as John Wolf, the Bush administration's special envoy, was once again promoting a peace initiative here after a four-month absence; and as Palestinian officials were preparing to submit their arguments to the International Court of Justice in The Hague challenging the barrier Israel is building against West Bank Palestinians -- a barrier Israelis immediately said was essential to stop killers like Mr. Jaara.

A policeman himself, Mr. Jaara struck a day after Israel permitted Palestinian policemen to again appear in uniform on the streets of increasingly chaotic Palestinian cities from which they had been absent for two years. And he struck from Bethlehem, which Israeli forces have blockaded but largely stayed out of since a deal last summer that permitted the police there to operate freely.

"Let's begin with this premise," began Hisham Ahmed, a Palestinian political scientist, when asked in what way this bombing could have made sense. "The premise is: nothing makes sense here."

Dr. Ahmed observed that the bomber left a note saying he was retaliating for an Israeli incursion on Wednesday into the Gaza Strip that killed eight Palestinians, gunmen and civilians. He said the bombing might make Israelis see a link between "the kind of atrocities the Israelis commit against the Palestinians and the Israeli lack of security."

Dr. Ahmed, who is blind, was interviewed after he picked his way with a white cane and a helping hand over a dirt barrier that Israel piled up to block a road leading into Bethlehem.

A senior Israeli security official said that the bombing came right before the Palestinians were to submit their papers to The Hague. "You cannot find any logic in it," he said. "The logic is to kill as many Israelis as you can." He said the army would have to reconsider some plans to lighten restrictions on Palestinians.

The bombing was initially claimed by the Al Aksa Martyrs Brigades, an offshoot of Yasir Arafat's Fatah faction. On Friday, Hamas submitted a dueling claim of responsibility.

Mr. Jaara was known as a Fatah member, and few people here seemed to take the Hamas claim seriously. Hasan Abed Rabbo, a local Fatah official, suggested that the Hamas claim was probably intended to help Fatah leaders distance themselves from the attack. "Some people, for their own political considerations, want to deny he's Fatah," he said of Mr. Jaara.

After raiding Bethlehem before dawn, the Israeli forces pulled out in midafternoon, taking with them five Palestinians the army identified as terrorist suspects.

The senior Israeli security official said that some Al Aksa cells, including the one in Bethlehem, are increasingly financed and directed through Hezbollah by Iran. But why would Hezbollah risk its own prisoner exchange, which in the event went forward as planned on Thursday?

Alex Fishman, one of Israel's top military analysts, proposed an answer on Friday in the newspaper Yediot Ahronot: Iran was out to humiliate Israel. "This is the enemy Israel is facing," he wrote. "Its goal is to humiliate Israel, bring it to an internal moral crisis and make it crawl."

Palestinians here say they are the ones being humiliated, locked in a cage and denied work as Israel fences in Bethlehem.

Raed Sharara, 30, lives next door to the remains of the Jaara home. Like Mr. Jaara, he is a policeman, although from a different branch of the many Palestinian security services. He is unusual in having work, but he earns about \$220 a month and pays half to cover a loan for the apartment he built on top of his father's house.

His apartment was damaged when soldiers blew up the house next door. "It's not only Ali -- every Palestinian human being is a time bomb," Mr. Sharara said.

Pressed as to how Mr. Jaara's act could possibly benefit anyone, Mr. Sharara said: "You should understand that violence always leads to violence. I know it won't help the peace process. It

increases the cycle of blood between the two peoples, and I know there are innocent people who lost their lives. But you should understand, Sharon's policies are pushing us in this direction."

Standing on a rooftop overlooking the jumble of concrete and rebar that was his home, Ali Jaara's father, Muneer Yousef Jaara, 46, said he was shocked that his son Ali, one of 10 siblings, had become a suicide bomber. He had been planning to arrange his son's engagement next week, he said.

Mr. Jaara was asked if he would have stopped his son, had he known his plans. Parents of suicide bombers have been known to boast of the killings, either out of belief or in the hope of receiving money from militants.

"I would have stopped him," Mr. Jaara said. He looked at the ground and said that Thursday or Friday -- he wasn't sure which -- would have been his son's 25th birthday.