

## The Children's Crusade

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Husam Abdu, a short, 16-year-old with leonine eyes, says that he is happy to be alive. It is not the sort of sentiment one expects from someone clad in leg irons and a brown prison uniform, but Abdu dreams of a life beyond Tel Mond's Hasharon Prison: "When I get out of jail, I want to work with my father in his grocery," he says.

Last March, an older accomplice drove the mentally challenged teen to the Hawara checkpoint, south of the West Bank city of Nablus. There, Abdu was supposed to approach the soldiers manning the post and detonate an eight-kilogram explosives belt hidden under his red sweater.

However, paratroopers spotted the nervous boy and, guns trained, forced him to disarm.

The televised image of a tiny Abdu, hands in the air, rigged with explosives, deeply embarrassed Palestinians, some of whom later dismissed his capture as a phony media stunt by Israel. But the phenomenon of child suicide bombers is very real. Just last week, a 15-year-old boy was nabbed by Israeli authorities on suspicion of planning to be a shahid, or "martyr."

Since the beginning of the Aqsa Intifada in September 2000, there have been nine suicide bombers under the age of 18 and, says the IDF, another 30 have been caught before completing their deadly mission. Dozens have also served in support roles as scouts and couriers -- though sometimes, as in the case of Abdullah Kuran, the lines blur.

The conservative, English-language *Jerusalem Post* reported that on March 15, Kuran was asked to carry several bags -- one of which contained a bomb -- through the Hawara checkpoint. When the 11-year-old Kuran was stopped by soldiers, Kuran's dispatchers tried, but failed, to detonate the explosive by cell phone.

A few days after Kuran had been released by the IDF (and subsequently recanted the story about ferrying explosives), Husam Abdu was approached by a friend with an exciting proposition: How would he like to be a suicide bomber?

Abdu jumped at the offer.

"It's a normal thing to want to be a shahid at age 16," he now explains, sitting in the office of Hasharon's deputy warden. "I wouldn't be the first. Young people do it. Old people do it. It's a normal thing."

Abdu talks about everlasting life in the company of virgins, Muhammad and his loyal companions, but it is clear that the teen's rush to paradise was also an escape from an



Palestinian children dressed as suicide bombers at a demonstration in Nablus on August 1, 2003. (Photo: Pedro Ugarte/AFP-Getty Images)

unhappy personal life. According to various media reports, Abdu was an object of ridicule in his neighborhood due to his small bearing and limited intellect.

Even his mother humiliated him, Abdu says.

But as a martyr, he would finally become a hero.

Shortly after agreeing to die for the cause of Palestinian national liberation, Abdu was taken blindfolded to an apartment in Nablus where, he says, he met a 30-something man from the Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, a group loosely affiliated with Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat.

"He showed me how to detonate the bomb," says Abdu of his instructor, "but I was scared because I had never done anything like this before. Also, I was confused. I wanted to be a shahid, but I also just wanted to go home."

In the end, the youngster chose life.

But many found the notion that terrorist groups would use children in a suicide bombing operation too tough to swallow. Orla Guerin, a BBC reporter, dismissed the Abdu arrest as a stage-managed PR event by the army, "a picture that Israel wants the world to see."

In a similar vein, an article in the Egyptian weekly *al-Ahram* noted suspiciously that the IDF "inexplicably had TV cameras in place two hours in advance of the event..." (The arrest was actually filmed by a Palestinian, an Associated Press Television News cameraman, who was waiting to get through the same checkpoint.)

The Palestinians themselves launched a volley of denials.

The liberal Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* quoted Assam Abed al-Hadi, the liaison officer between the various militant groups in Nablus, as saying, "We are against the use of children, even if the Israeli occupation robs them of their childhood, and even if they were raised to sacrifice so as to achieve Palestinian national goals."

And yet no sooner did the Husam Abdu controversy die down than the local Islamic Jihad cell in Nablus enlisted 15-year-old Tamer Khawireh as another bomb-laden martyr. However, when Khawireh's father got wind of the plot, the terrorist group apologized and claimed that its recruiter mistook the gangly 10th grader for an 18-year-old.

Perhaps the militants were getting desperate.

Unlike other West Bank cities, Nablus was -- and still is -- under a tight military closure. A twenty something man would draw immediate attention from the soldiers ringing the city, but an adolescent...

"Terrorists believe that, because Israel is a Western country, it will not suspect children of doing anything wrong or that it will go easy on them if they are caught," says Yoram Kahati, a research fellow at the Interdisciplinary Center's International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT), in Herzliya. "Adolescents are also used as a cheap substitute for adults who have been caught or killed."

The Shin Bet notes that, as the conflict with Israel drags on, Palestinian terrorists are getting younger. So far this year, a total of 109 Palestinian minors have been arrested for involvement in terrorist activities as compared to 102 in 2003 and 54 in 2002. Similarly, there is a temptation to fall back on a younger crop of suicide bombers.

Like their older siblings, children are exposed to the same religious slogans in the mosques; they see the same pro-martyrdom posters in the streets, and, says Birzeit University

political scientist Hisham Ahmed, they suffer the same hardships of life under military occupation -- such as house demolitions, curfews and the deaths of loved ones.

In addition, Dr. Eyad Sarraj, a Palestinian psychiatrist who heads a clinic in Gaza, has noted that children, in general, have a hazy notion of mortality.

Even pre-teens have been found to fantasize about shahada, or martyrdom.

"I have studied the dreams of 300 Palestinian children from ages 10-12 and I would say that 15 percent of them dream of being suicide bombers," notes Shafiq Masalha, a clinical psychologist who teaches at Tel Aviv University's education program.

More so, these children feel themselves thoroughly enmeshed in the Palestinian national cause: "They only express collective wishes in their dreams -- for example, that their land be free of settlements -- as opposed to personal wishes. But it is personal wishes that keep us alive."

However, for all his righteous anger, ideological commitment and derring-do attitude towards life, a teenager's immaturity makes him a poor terrorist. Says Kehati: "He is less experienced and is more likely to fail in his mission. He can change his mind. He can also panic and thus arouse the suspicions of soldiers."

On the whole, Palestinians take a dim view of child bombers -- with the possible exception of 17-year-old Ayat al-Akhras, who had a PA-funded summer camp in Gaza named after her last year -- because they hurt efforts to draw international sympathy to the cause.

Indeed, following the Husam Abdu surrender in March, the al-Jazeera news service quoted the director-general of the PA's Information Ministry as claiming that the story was a fraud intended "to besmirch Palestinian childhood so that when they [the Israelis] slaughter the children, the world won't feel sorry for them."

How one interprets intifada-related deaths has itself been a matter of controversy.

The human rights group al-Haq says that the IDF has killed 2,618 Palestinians, 26 percent of them under the age of 18, during the last four years of the Aqsa Intifada. This figure is about two-and-a-half times greater than the Israeli death toll during the same period.

However, Israeli critics claim that, in order to bolster casualty rates, the Palestinian leadership actively encourages children to go out and get shot by soldiers. Accordingly, Husam Abdu and other child bombers are just an unwanted side effect of a pro-shahid PA policy.

Don Radlauer, an associate at ICT, contends that over 50 percent of those 2,600-plus killed are undoubtedly combatants. But what about the rest?

Radlauer looked at the names and noticed something odd: Less than five percent of the dead were girls.

"Starting with ages of 11-12, there is a dramatic upswing in casualties among Palestinian boys, but for girls the curve stays low," he says. "That tends to indicate that those who were killed did not die in the shelling or bombing of residential neighborhoods," otherwise the gender distribution of the victims would be more even.

Instead, Radlauer concludes that most of the non-combatant deaths were at "sites of confrontation" between Israeli soldiers and stone-throwing Palestinians.

Though many Palestinian youths need no prodding to attack IDF troops, Itamar Marcus says, "The Palestinian leadership has glorified and encouraged death-seeking behavior on the part of children, and then made political use of their deaths."

The head of Palestinian Media Watch, a Jerusalem-based monitoring group, Marcus notes how the official PA media treated the death of Faris Ouda.

In late January 2001, the 14-year-old Ouda was filmed throwing stones at an Israeli tank; a week later, he was dead. Before setting off for his final confrontation, he made a wreath for himself that read "The Brave Shahid Faris Ouda." But rather than discouraging this suicidal behavior, Yasser Arafat went on to laud Ouda.

The following year, PA TV broadcast a meeting Arafat held with a group of summer campers.

"Oh, children of Palestine! The peers, friends, brothers and sisters of Faris Ouda," cried the chairman, "The peers of this hero represent this immense and fundamental power that is within, and it shall be victorious, Allah willing!... Onward together to Jerusalem! Onward together to Jerusalem!"

The children chanted back, "Millions of shahids marching to Jerusalem!"

Another controversial broadcast that ran two years ago was a dramatization of a teen presenting his father, dressed in a traditional Arab robe and headdress, a note notifying him of his son's impending death as a shahid.

"Don't be sad my dear [father] and do not cry over my parting," says a narrator, reading the contents of the letter. "My dear father, for my country, I sacrificed myself."

In October 2002, a U.S. Senate subcommittee panned the PA for the broadcast, with legislators decrying it as a form of child abuse, and the "Farewell Letter" video clip was taken off the air. But in the last two weeks, it has returned, says Marcus.

At Hasharon Prison, Husam Abdu is lead back to the youth ward, a narrow hallway lined with aquamarine-colored steel doors. He took all the Palestinian shahid talk seriously and is now a national embarrassment. Not even his parents come to visit him in jail.

Abdu has one last word for his dispatchers or others who would send out teen suicide bombers. "Leave these children alone," he says. "Let them stay with their mothers at home."