

LETTER FROM GAZA NOVEMBER 19, 2001 ISSUE

## AN ARSENAL OF BELIEVERS

*Talking to the “human bombs.”*

**By Nasra Hassan**

November 11, 2001

Just before midnight on June 30, 1993, three members of the Palestinian fundamentalist group Hamas sat in their hideout, a cave in the hills near Hebron, and began reciting from the Koran. At dawn, when the men heard the morning call to prayer from a mosque in the village below, they knelt and uttered the traditional invocation to Allah that Muslim warriors make before setting off for combat. They put on clean clothes, tucked the Koran into their pockets, and began the long hike over the hills and along dry riverbeds to the outskirts of Jerusalem. In the Palestinian neighborhoods of East Jerusalem, they walked in silence so that their accents, the guttural vernacular of Gaza, would not arouse suspicion. Along the way, they stopped to pray at every mosque. At dusk, they boarded a bus that was heading toward West Jerusalem, filled with Israeli passengers. When the driver thwarted their attempt to hijack the vehicle, they tried to detonate the homemade bombs they were carrying. The bombs failed to go off, so they pulled out guns and began firing wildly. The shots injured five passengers, including a woman who later died. The young men fled the bus, hijacked a car at a red light, and forced the driver to take them toward Bethlehem. Israeli security forces stopped them at a military checkpoint, and in a shootout two of the young men and their hostage were killed. The third

hijacker, whom I will call S., was struck by a bullet in the head; he lay comatose for two months in Israeli hospitals. Finally, he was pronounced brain-dead, and the Israelis sent him back to his family in the Gaza Strip to die. But S. recovered, and when we met, five years later, he told me his version of the events. By then, he was married and the father of three sons. Each of them had been named for *shaheed batal*—"martyr heroes."

In Gaza, S. is celebrated as a young man who "gave his life to Allah" and whom Allah "brought back to life." He was polite as he welcomed me into his home. The house was surrounded by a high cement wall that had been fortified with steel. We sat down in a large, simply furnished room whose walls were inscribed with verses from the Koran. On one wall was a poster that showed green birds flying in a purple sky, a symbol of the Palestinian suicide bombers.

S. had recently turned twenty-seven. He is of slight build, and he walked with a limp, the only trace of his near-death. He invited his wife to join us, and he answered my questions without hesitation.

I asked him when, and why, he had decided to volunteer for martyrdom. "In the spring of 1993, I began to pester our military leaders to let me do an operation," he said. "It was around the time of the Oslo accords, and it was quiet, too quiet. I wanted to do an operation that would incite others to do the same. Finally, I was given the green light to leave Gaza for an operation inside Israel."

"How did you feel when you heard that you'd been selected for martyrdom?" I asked.

"It's as if a very high, impenetrable wall separated you from Paradise or Hell," he said. "Allah has promised one or the other to his creatures. So, by pressing the detonator, you can immediately open the door to Paradise—it is the shortest path to Heaven."

S. was one of eleven children in a middle-class family that, in 1948, had been forced to flee from Majdal to a refugee camp in Gaza, during the Arab- Israeli war that started with the creation of the State of Israel. He joined Hamas in his early teens and became a street activist. In 1989, he served two terms in Israeli prisons for intifada activity, including attacks on Israeli soldiers. One of his brothers is serving a life sentence in Israel.

I asked S. to describe his preparations for the suicide mission. “We were in a constant state of worship,” he said. “We told each other that if the Israelis only knew how joyful we were they would whip us to death! Those were the happiest days of my life.”

”What is the attraction of martyrdom?” I asked.

”The power of the spirit pulls us upward, while the power of material things pulls us downward,” he said. “Someone bent on martyrdom becomes immune to the material pull. Our planner asked, ‘What if the operation fails?’ We told him, ‘In any case, we get to meet the Prophet and his companions, *inshallah*.’ We were floating, swimming, in the feeling that we were about to enter eternity. We had no doubts. We made an oath on the Koran, in the presence of Allah—a pledge not to waver. This jihad pledge is called *bayt al ridwan*, after the garden in Paradise that is reserved for the prophets and the martyrs. I know that there are other ways to do jihad. But this one is sweet—the sweetest. All martyrdom operations, if done for Allah’s sake, hurt less than a gnat’s bite!”

S. showed me a video that documented the final planning for the operation. In the grainy footage, I saw him and two other young men engaging in a ritualistic dialogue of questions and answers about the glory of martyrdom. S., who was holding a gun, identified himself as a member of al-Qassam, the military wing of Hamas, which is one of two Palestinian Islamist organizations that sponsor suicide bombings. (Islamic Jihad is the other group.) “Tomorrow, we will be martyrs,” he declared, looking straight at the camera. “Only the believers know

what this means. I love martyrdom.” The young men and the planner then knelt and placed their right hands on the Koran. The planner said, “Are you ready? Tomorrow, you will be in Paradise.”

Since 1982, I have been an international relief worker, and after 1987 my job brought me regularly to the Middle East, especially to the Palestinian territories. In 1996, I was posted in the Gaza Strip during one of the most vicious cycles of suicide bombings. To understand why certain young men voluntarily blow themselves up in the name of Islam, I began, without official sponsorship, to research their backgrounds and the beliefs that had led them to such extreme tactics.

Finding people who were willing to discuss the details of these activities was no easy task. I was warned that my interest in trying to understand the suicide missions was dangerous. One day, I stopped to buy fruit at a roadside stand in the south of the Gaza Strip. When I asked where the mangoes had come from, the vender smiled and said, “From Beit Lid, Hadera, and Afula”—three Israeli towns that had been attacked by suicide bombers. Eventually, when the people who were observing me had assured themselves of my credentials—an important one was that I am Muslim and from Pakistan—I was allowed to meet with members of Hamas and Islamic Jihad who could help me in my research. “We are agreeing to talk to you so that you can explain the Islamic context of these operations,” one man told me. “Even many in the Islamic world do not understand.” Our meetings, which were arranged by intermediaries of all kinds, took place late at night, in back rooms, in small local cafés, on the sewage-strewn Gaza beach, or in prison cells. I would drive to a rendezvous point to pick up a contact, who then guided me to a meeting by way of a circuitous, untraceable route. From 1996 to 1999, I interviewed nearly two hundred and fifty people involved in the most militant camps of the Palestinian cause: volunteers who, like S., had been unable to complete their suicide missions, the

families of dead bombers, and the men who trained them.

None of the suicide bombers—they ranged in age from eighteen to thirty-eight—conformed to the typical profile of the suicidal personality. None of them were uneducated, desperately poor, simple-minded, or depressed. Many were middle class and, unless they were fugitives, held paying jobs. More than half of them were refugees from what is now Israel. Two were the sons of millionaires. They all seemed to be entirely normal members of their families. They were polite and serious, and in their communities they were considered to be model youths. Most were bearded. All were deeply religious. They used Islamic terminology to express their views, but they were well informed about politics in Israel and throughout the Arab world. I was told that in order to be accepted for a suicide mission the volunteers had to be convinced of the religious legitimacy of the acts they were contemplating, as sanctioned by the divinely revealed religion of Islam. Many of these young men had memorized large sections of the Koran and were well versed in the finer points of Islamic law and practice. But their knowledge of Christianity was rooted in the medieval Crusades, and they regarded Judaism and Zionism as synonymous. When they spoke, they all tended to use the same phrases: “The West is afraid of Islam.” “Allah has promised us ultimate success.” “It is in the Koran.” “Islamic Palestine will be liberated.” And they all exhibited an unequivocal rage toward Israel. Over and over, I heard them say, “The Israelis humiliate us. They occupy our land, and deny our history.”

Most of the men I interviewed requested strict anonymity; they insisted that not even their initials be noted. “With just a small detail like that, the security services could identify me,” one said. Some of them were masked and met me in dark rooms or parked cars at night so that I couldn’t see their faces. The majority spoke in Arabic, and they all talked matter-of-factly about the bombings, showing an unshakable conviction in the rightness of their cause and their methods. When I asked them if they had any qualms about killing innocent

civilians, they would immediately respond, “The Israelis kill our children and our women. This is war, and innocent people get hurt.”

They were not inclined to argue, but they were happy to discuss, far into the night, the issues and the purpose of their activities. One condition of the interviews was that, in our discussions, I not refer to their deeds as “suicide,” which is forbidden in Islam. (Their preferred term is “sacred explosions.”) One member of al-Qassam said, “We do not have tanks or rockets, but we have something superior—our exploding Islamic human bombs. In place of a nuclear arsenal, we are proud of our arsenal of believers.”

**T**he first suicide bombing by an Islamist Palestinian group took place in the West Bank in April, 1993; the latest was in October, 2001. Between 1993 and 1998, thirty-seven human bombs exploded; twenty-four were identified as the work of Hamas, thirteen as that of Islamic Jihad. Since the eruption of the second intifada, in September, 2000, twenty-six human bombs have exploded. Hamas claims responsibility for nineteen of them; Islamic Jihad claims seven. To date, an estimated two hundred and fifteen Israelis have been killed in these explosions, and some eighteen hundred have been injured. The attacks have taken place in shopping malls, on buses, at street corners, in cafés—wherever people congregate. Hamas and Islamic Jihad consider suicide bombings a military response to what they regard as Israeli provocations. But there is a clear correlation between the peace process and cycles of suicide attacks designed to block progress. Whenever I broached the issue, however, the Islamists denied that there was any such link.

Before September 11th, Islamist fundamentalist groups had sponsored human bombings not only in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and Israel but also in Afghanistan, Algeria, Argentina, Chechnya, Croatia, Kashmir, Kenya, Kuwait, Lebanon, Pakistan, Panama, Tajikistan, Tanzania, and Yemen. The targets have ranged from ordinary people to world leaders, including the Pope, who was to

have been assassinated in Manila in 1995. Dressed as a priest, the assassin presumably planned to detonate himself as he kissed the Pontiff's ring.

In 1988, Dr. Fathi Shiqaqi, a founder of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, whose assassination, in 1995, was attributed to Mossad, Israel's secret service, wrote a document in which he laid out the importance of penetrating enemy territory and set down guidelines for the use of explosives in martyrdom operations. These rules were aimed at countering religious objections to the truck bombings that had become almost routine in Lebanon in the nineteen-eighties. Shiqaqi encouraged what he called "exceptional" martyrdom as a necessary tactic in *jihad fi sabeel Allah* (striving in the cause of Allah): "We cannot achieve the goal of these operations if our mujahid"—holy warrior—"is not able to create an explosion within seconds and is unable to prevent the enemy from blocking the operation. All these results can be achieved through the explosion, which forces the mujahid not to waver, not to escape; to execute a successful operation for religion and jihad; and to destroy the morale of the enemy and plant terror into the people." This capability, he said, is "a gift from Allah."

Yahya Ayyash, an engineering student in the West Bank who became a master bomb-maker, was the first to propose that human bombs be adopted in Hamas's military operations. (The late Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin dubbed Ayyash "the Engineer," which became his nickname in the Palestinian streets.) In a letter written in the early nineties to the Hamas leadership, Ayyash recommended the use of human bombs as the most painful way to inflict damage on the Israeli occupation forces. According to a source in Hamas, Ayyash said, "We paid a high price when we used only slingshots and stones. We need to exert more pressure, make the cost of the occupation that much more expensive in human lives, that much more unbearable." The assassination of Ayyash, in January, 1996, which is widely believed to have been the work of Israeli security forces, set off a wave of retaliatory suicide bombings.

My contacts told me that, as a military objective, spreading fear among the Israelis was as important as killing them. Anwar Aziz, an Islamic Jihad member who blew himself up in an ambulance in Gaza, in December, 1993, had often told friends, “Battles for Islam are won not through the gun but by striking fear into the enemy’s heart.” Another Islamist military leader said, “If our wives and children are not safe from Israeli tanks and rockets, theirs will not be safe from our human bombs.”

Military commanders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad remarked that the human bomb was one of the surest ways of hitting a target. A senior Hamas leader said, “The main thing is to guarantee that a large number of the enemy will be affected. With an explosive belt or bag, the bomber has control over vision, location, and timing.”

As today’s weapons of mass destruction go, the human bomb is cheap. A Palestinian security official pointed out that, apart from a willing young man, all that is needed is such items as nails, gunpowder, a battery, a light switch and a short cable, mercury (readily obtainable from thermometers), acetone, and the cost of tailoring a belt wide enough to hold six or eight pockets of explosives. The most expensive item is transportation to a distant Israeli town. The total cost of a typical operation is about a hundred and fifty dollars. The sponsoring organization usually gives between three thousand and five thousand dollars to the bomber’s family.

**I**n Palestinian neighborhoods, the suicide bombers’ green birds appear on posters, and in graffiti—the language of the street. Calendars are illustrated with the “martyr of the month.” Paintings glorify the dead bombers in Paradise, triumphant beneath a flock of green birds. This symbol is based on a saying of the Prophet Muhammad that the soul of a martyr is carried to Allah in the bosom of the green birds of Paradise. Children who cannot read chant the names of the heroes, and make the Islamist sign for victory—right fist with

raised forefinger—as they play in narrow alleys. A biography of a martyr named Muawiyya Ruqa, who exploded a rigged donkey cart near a Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip in June, 1995, tells of how his soul was borne upward on a fragment of the bomb.

In April, 1999, I met with an Imam affiliated with Hamas, a youthful, bearded graduate of the prestigious al Azhar University, in Cairo. He explained that the first drop of blood shed by a martyr during jihad washes away his sins instantaneously. On the Day of Judgment, he will face no reckoning. On the Day of Resurrection, he can intercede for seventy of his nearest and dearest to enter Heaven; and he will have at his disposal seventy-two hours, the beautiful virgins of Paradise. The Imam took pains to explain that the promised bliss is not sensual.

Sheikh Ahmed Yassin is the spiritual leader of Hamas. He was released from an Israeli prison in 1997, and during the next two years I had many meetings with him, in his small house on an unpaved lane in a crowded quarter of Gaza. He cautioned that I would find it hard to make martyrdom comprehensible to Western readers. “I doubt that they will be willing to understand your explanations,” he said. “Love of martyrdom is something deep inside the heart. But these rewards are not in themselves the goal of the martyr. The only aim is to win Allah’s satisfaction. That can be done in the simplest and speediest manner by dying in the cause of Allah. And it is Allah who selects the martyrs.”

There is no shortage of willing recruits for martyrdom. “Our biggest problem is the hordes of young men who beat on our doors, clamoring to be sent,” a Hamas leader told me. “It is difficult to select only a few. Those whom we turn away return again and again, pestering us, pleading to be accepted.”

A senior member of al-Qassam said, “The selection process is complicated by the fact that so many wish to embark on this journey of honor. When one is

selected, countless others are disappointed. They must learn patience and wait until Allah calls them.” He told me that there had been many attempts on his life, and he made sure that we always met at a different time and in a different place. He wore a scarf over his face; only at our last meeting, when he was saying goodbye, did he remove it. “After every massacre, every massive violation of our rights and defilement of our holy places, it is easy for us to sweep the streets for boys who want to do a martyrdom operation,” he said. “Fending off the crowds who demand revenge and retaliation and insist on a human bombing operation—that becomes our biggest problem!”

Hamas and Islamic Jihad recruit youths for potential leadership positions in the organizations, but their military wings rely on volunteers for martyrdom operations. They generally reject those who are under eighteen, who are the sole wage earners in their families, or who are married and have family responsibilities. If two brothers ask to join, one is turned away. The planner keeps a close eye on the volunteer’s self-discipline, noting whether he can be discreet among friends and observing his piety in the mosque. (A cleric will sometimes recommend a notably zealous youth for martyrdom.) During the week before the operation, two “assistants” are delegated to stay with the potential martyr at all times. They report any signs of doubt, and if the young man seems to waver, a senior trainer will arrive to bolster his resolve. The father of Anwar Sukkar, who, with his friend Salah Shakir, carried out an explosion in Beit Lid in 1995, told me with pride, “Even after Salah saw my son ripped to shreds, he did not flinch. He waited before exploding himself, in order to cause additional deaths.”

A planner for Islamic Jihad said that his organization carefully scrutinizes the motives of a potential bomber: “We ask this young man, and we ask ourselves, why he wishes so badly to become a human bomb. What are his real motives? Our questions are aimed at clarifying first and foremost for the boy himself his real reasons and the strength of his commitment. Even if he is a longtime

member of our group and has always wanted to become a martyr, he needs to be very clear that in such an operation there is no drawing back. Preparation bolsters his conviction, which supports his certitude. It removes fear.”

A member of Hamas explained the preparation: “We focus his attention on Paradise, on being in the presence of Allah, on meeting the Prophet Muhammad, on interceding for his loved ones so that they, too, can be saved from the agonies of Hell, on the houris, and on fighting the Israeli occupation and removing it from the Islamic trust that is Palestine.” (A volunteer whom the Palestinian Authority arrested before he could carry out a suicide bombing offered this description of the immediacy of Paradise: “It is very, very near—right in front of our eyes. It lies beneath the thumb. On the other side of the detonator.”)

One of the “technical considerations” that may be taken into account in the final selection of a candidate for martyrdom is the ability to pass, at least temporarily, as an Israeli Jew. In Islamic Jihad’s first human-bomb operation, in September, 1993, the martyr Ala’a al Kahlout shaved his beard, donned a cap and dark glasses, and dressed in shorts and a T-shirt before carrying his bomb onto a bus in Ashdod.

I asked one planner about the problem of fear. “The boy has left that stage far behind,” he said. “The fear is not for his own safety or for his impending death. It does not come from lack of confidence in his ability to press the trigger. It is awe, produced by the situation. He has never done this before and, *inshallah*, will never do it again! It comes from his fervent desire for success, which will propel him into the presence of Allah. It is anxiety over the possibility of something going wrong and denying him his heart’s wish. The outcome, remember, lies in Allah’s hands.”

I was told the story of a young Palestinian, M., by two men who, at different times, had been his cellmates in Israeli prisons. In September, 1993, in a safe

house just outside Jerusalem, M. had performed ritual ablution, said his prayers, and set off on his bombing mission. He had boarded a bus—one on the same route on which S.'s bomb had failed to explode two months earlier. All he had to do was unzip his bag of explosives and press the detonator. “But at the moment he was to press the button he forgot Paradise,” one of his former cellmates recalled. “He felt a split second of fear, a slight hesitation. To bolster himself, he recited from the Koran. Refreshed and strengthened, he again began to think of Paradise. When he felt ready, he tried again. But the detonator did not function. He prayed to himself, ‘Please, Allah, let me succeed.’ But still it did not work, not even the third time, when he kept his finger pressed firmly on the knob. Recognizing that there was a technical problem, he got off the bus at the next stop, returned the bag to the planner, and went home.” (The Israeli security services subsequently arrested M. in another attack, and he is currently in prison.)

Many of the volunteers and the members of their family told stories of persecution, including beatings and torture, suffered at the hands of Israeli forces. I asked whether some of the bombers acted from feelings of personal revenge. “No,” a trainer told me. “If that alone motivates the candidate, his martyrdom will not be acceptable to Allah. It is a military response, not an individual’s bitterness, that drives an operation. Honor and dignity are very important in our culture. And when we are humiliated we respond with wrath.”

**A**l khaliyya al istishhadiyya, which is often mistranslated as “suicide cell”—its proper translation is “martyrdom cell”—is the basic building block of operations. Generally, each cell consists of a leader and two or three young men. When a candidate is placed in a cell, usually after months, if not years, of religious studies, he is assigned the lofty title of *al shaheed al hayy*, “the living martyr.” He is also referred to as “he who is waiting for martyrdom.” A young man named Ayman Juma Radi, whose self-explosion, in December, 1994, was delayed by a few days, wrote a message in his diary, in which he glumly

signed himself “the deferred martyr.”

Each cell is tightly compartmentalized and secret. Cell members do not discuss their affiliation with their friends or family, and even if two of them know each other in normal life, they are not aware of the other’s membership in the same cell. (Only the leader is known to both.) Each cell, which is dissolved after the operation has been completed, is given a name from the Koran or from Islamic history.

In most cases, the young men undergo intensified spiritual exercises, including prayers and recitations of the Koran. Usually, the trainer encourages the candidate to read six particular chapters of the Koran: Baqara, Al Imran, Anfal, Tawba, Rahman, and Asr, which feature such themes as jihad, the birth of the nation of Islam, war, Allah’s favors, and the importance of faith. Religious lectures last from two to four hours each day. The living martyr goes on lengthy fasts. He spends much of the night praying. He pays off all his debts, and asks for forgiveness for actual or perceived offenses. If a candidate is on the wanted list of the Israeli security services, he goes underground, moving from one hiding place to another.

In the days before the operation, the candidate prepares a will on paper, audiocassette, or video, sometimes all three. The video testaments, which are shot against a background of the sponsoring organization’s banner and slogans, show the living martyr reciting the Koran, posing with guns and bombs, exhorting his comrades to follow his example, and extolling the virtues of jihad. The wills emphasize the voluntary basis of the mission. “This is my free decision, and I urge all of you to follow me,” one young bomber, Muhammad Abu Hashem, said in a recorded testament before blowing himself up, in 1995, in retaliation for the assassination of Fathi Shiqaqi.

The young man repeatedly watches the video of himself, as well as the videos of

his predecessors. “These videos encourage him to confront death, not fear it,” one trainer told me. “He becomes intimately familiar with what he is about to do. Then he can greet death like an old friend.”

Just before the bomber sets out on his final journey, he performs a ritual ablution, puts on clean clothes, and tries to attend at least one communal prayer at a mosque. He says the traditional Islamic prayer that is customary before battle, and he asks Allah to forgive his sins and to bless his mission. He puts a Koran in his left breast pocket, above the heart, and he straps the explosives around his waist or picks up a briefcase or a bag containing the bomb. The planner bids him farewell with the words “May Allah be with you, may Allah give you success so that you achieve Paradise.” The would-be martyr responds, “*Inshallah*, we will meet in Paradise.”

Hours later, as he presses the detonator, he says, “*Allahu akbar*”—“Allah is great. All praise to Him.”

**T**he operation doesn’t end with the explosion and the many deaths. Hamas and Islamic Jihad distribute copies of the martyr’s audiocassette or video to the media and to local organizations as a record of their success and encouragement to other young men. His act becomes the subject of sermons in mosques, and provides material for leaflets, posters, videos, demonstrations, and extensive coverage in the media. Graffiti on walls in the martyr’s neighborhood praise his heroism. Aspiring martyrs perform mock reënactments of the operation, using models of exploding cars and buses. The sponsoring organization distributes cassettes of chants and songs honoring the good soldier. When a member of al-Qassam blew up himself and his victims in April, 1994, in retaliation for the massacre of Muslim worshippers in Hebron by the Israeli extremist Baruch Goldstein, he was commemorated in an anthem that ushered in a new popular genre of “revenge songs.”

The bomber's family and the sponsoring organization celebrate his martyrdom with festivities, as if it were a wedding. Hundreds of guests congregate at the house to offer congratulations. The hosts serve the juices and sweets that the young man specified in his will. Often, the mother will ululate in joy over the honor that Allah has bestowed upon her family.

But there is grief, too. I asked the mother of Ribhi Kahlout, a young man in the Gaza Strip, who had blown himself up, in November, 1995, what she would have done if she had known what her son was planning to do. "I would have taken a cleaver, cut open my heart, and stuffed him deep inside," she said. "Then I would have sewn it up tight to keep him safe." ♦

*Published in the print edition of the November 19, 2001, issue.*

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