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[Translated from German]

## **“They Kill Us, We Kill Them”**

By **Bruno Schirra** in Jenin, the West Bank

“Have you ever killed?” “Yes,” he says. “Have you ever authorized killings?” “Yes,” he answers and smiles – a smile, so it seems, that is lost in sadness. “Your people kill women, men and children. How do you feel when you send someone out to kill? Are you sorry for your victims?” Zakariya Zubeidi waits. He takes a long time to answer the question. “Yes,” he says, “but it is necessary. They kill us, so we kill them. It’s that simple.”

The 29-year-old is sitting on the roof of his house in Jenin in the northern West Bank, thoughtfully tapping with his fingers on a pistol sitting in his lap. When he talks about killing Israelis, a shy, embarrassed smile appears on his boyish face.

“You’re a terrorist,” Zubeidi is told. He shrugs. “What you call a terrorist I call a freedom fighter.” He has come a long way – from a part-time unemployed thief to the feared leader of Fatah’s al-Aqsa Brigades in Jenin – catapulting him to the top of Israel’s death list.

Zakariya Zubeidi has organized, during the last three years, dozens of terrorist attacks inside Israel and thus became a leader whose word is listened to beyond the confines of the West Bank’s picturesque mountain villages.

When PLO chief Mahmoud Abbas wanted to deliver a campaign speech in Jenin at the beginning of 2005, he was forced to ask for Zubeidi’s permission. Under Zubeidi’s orders, the members of Abbas’ security detail were chased away like stray dogs. He then let Abbas wait for hours at the gates of Jenin, finally lifting him onto his shoulders and carrying him into Jenin under the protection of al-Aqsa Brigades.

“Zubeidi, Zubeidi, Zubeidi,” the crowds chanted at the terror brigades’ leader; Mahmoud Abbas got the message. Zubeidi was appointed chief of the Palestinian police in the Jenin district on the Palestinian Authority’s payroll, providing him with an opulent salary financed through European aid money.

Zubeidi grins happily when he talks about this episode a year later. “Since Hamas’ elections victory, Mahmoud Abbas is history,” he says today, “just like Fatah’s entire corrupt leadership. We at al-Aqsa Brigades who fought and suffered for the liberation of the Palestinian people will become Fatah’s new leaders.”

While Zubeidi carries on with his political analysis, three members of his bodyguard are looking nervously at the sky above Jenin. They look for Israeli helicopters or unmanned drones from which the Israelis might fire rockets. Zubeidi outlived three Israeli assassination attempts. “They killed my mother, they murdered my brother,” he says.

His brother was a member of the Tehran-financed Islamic Jihad. After Hamas forms the next Palestinian government, Zubeidi plans to further tighten the alliance between the radical Islamic

Jihad and his al-Aqsa Brigades. “ Hamas will not carry out military operations in Israel during the next weeks and months. We, the Brigades and Jihad, will take over this role,” Zubeidi declares.

That’s precisely what scares Israeli security experts. After the catastrophic elections defeat, the thinking goes, Fatah may become radicalized under a new, young leadership and may try, by way of attacks inside Israel, to rebuild its legitimacy on the Palestinian street. In the background stands Tehran, which supports its Lebanese Hezbollah Shiite co-religionists, as well as al-Aqsa Brigades and Islamic Jihad, with money, weapons and instructors. What is gleefully described in the West as an Israeli disinformation campaign has long become a reality in the Palestinian autonomous areas.

Zakariya Zubeidi openly admits that Iran has great influence. “Without the help of our brothers in Hezbollah we could not have continued our struggle,” he declares. “They give us money and weapons. We coordinate our military operations.”

He then reveals his plans during a stroll through the streets of Jenin. He strides fearlessly through the alleyways of a refugee camp, rebuilt with money from the United Arab Emirates, here patting a little girl’s hair, there tweaking a boy’s cheek, gracefully listening to the street merchants’ complaints, acknowledging passersby respectful greetings.

Here he is building himself up for the leap to the Fatah leadership. “Fatah’s old leaders had their chance,” he says. “They talked and talked and talked to the Israelis and achieved nothing. The Israelis understand only one language: the language of force. Only this way will my people achieve its rights,” he adds, demonstratively and proudly holding up his brand-new M-16 assault rifle.

Isn’t he afraid to walk the streets of Jenin so often and so openly? He laughs and shrugs. “We always know when an Israeli patrol comes near,” he says, and then leads me to a house at the edge of the refugee camp. There he calmly invites me to dinner. Six packages are visible in the dining room’s corner. These are fully constructed suicide-bomb belts, filled with explosives, sharp metal objects and small ball bearings.

As Zubeidi shovels generous portions of rice and lamb into his mouth, he lays out his strategy. “We will strike even before the Israeli elections. Once, twice, three times – as often as we can. The Israelis must pay with pain and fear and blood for my country’s occupation until my people achieves freedom.”

That Benjamin Netanyahu – precisely the politician in Israel who is hardly prepared to make compromises with the Palestinians – will get stronger under these circumstances seems to Zubeidi politically quite reasonable.

For the “young lion,” as Zubeidi calls himself, nothing could be better than a Netanyahu win. “He always states very clearly what the Israelis really want: to oppress my people. If he wins the elections, he will expose to the world the true face of his country.” Then he points at the suicide-bomb belts in the corner. For the first time in the many hours of our meeting he becomes cynical. The chances for success in the elections may look bad for Netanyahu, “but I will do everything in my power to bomb Netanyahu to victory,” he says.