

# Life is Tough

Calling the Shots in Jenin: an Interview with Zachariah Zbeidi

Zachariah Zbeidi became leader of the Jenin Al Aqsa Martyrs brigade after the Jenin refugee camp was invaded in April 2002 and many of his comrades were killed or captured in that battle. He is now one of the more prominent and notorious leaders of the armed resistance. The support Zbeidi recently gave to Abu Mazen in his election campaign was seen as a crucial element to their campaign, and now, with a ceasefire ('hudna') which the Jenin Brigades have signed on to and kept, (and with still more important elections to come), the young militant holds an increasingly influential position in the region.

In return for visible political support, Zbeidi has recently guaranteed more money from the Palestinian Authority (PA) for the families of fighters and 'martyrs', after threatening to close down the PA buildings in Jenin. In many ways, Zbeidi calls the shots in Jenin.

Below, we ask him about the conditions of the latest ceasefire; his relationship with Abu Mazen; the internal struggle within Fatah; the threat of Hamas in the upcoming elections; his views on working with Israelis (from Arna Mer-Khamis to Tali Fahima); international solidarity; and whether the 'Martyrs Brigade' will resume deliberately targeting Israeli citizens if the peace talks fail once again.



Photo: AIC Archives, 2005

Max Watson

Jenin camp, since the rebuilding effort following the wide scale destruction in 2002, looks pretty good. The sturdy, freshly painted buildings are a big improvement on the rubble and dead bodies that were left behind by the Israeli Army.

On the way in, we are checked out by armed fighters who openly guard the entrance to the camp, and we then walk past children laughing as they slide down a concrete slope on makeshift plastic sledges.

Max Watson is assistant editor of *News from Within*.

Zbeidi says that three years on, there are still a few houses that need rebuilding, and that the money donated for the reconstruction didn't cover the additional costs of the furniture inside the houses (which can amount to as much as the buildings themselves).

Zbeidi's position in the camp is clearly that of a leader, whether self-appointed or not. And as leader of the Jenin Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, the agreement to the current ceasefire there is in large part reliant on his word. So what exactly are the conditions of the current truce?

"Israel must stick to the peace process; release the Palestinian political prisoners; stay out of the Palestinian cities; stop building the Wall; stop the assassinations

and invasions; remove the checkpoints and allow Palestinians freedom of movement," he recites.

Zbeidi is quick to point out, however, "None of these demands have been met by Israel. Not one of them."

"We wish to have a Palestinian state. The US and the EU made a promise to Abu Mazen: The world must keep that promise and to put more pressure on Israel. Israel must pay the political price that they owe."

"As Palestinians, we did everything we promised to do. It's their turn to keep to their word. They wanted us to keep to a ceasefire, and we did. We were told to merge our security forces, and we did.

We were told we must have elections, and we held elections. We were told to merge the movements inside the PLO and we also did that... Nothing else was demanded from us. But what has Israel done?"

"They are still creating settlements, continuing with their policies of

## New President—New Era

Zbeidi once claimed that he would read Arafat's intentions and get his instructions by watching his eye movements on TV news broadcasts. What is his relationship and communication with Abu Mazen like?

"In fact Abu Mazen's policies are much

Current indications so far are that Hamas stands a very good chance in the local and legislative elections coming up, possibly threatening Fatah's long held monopoly on power, and even threatening Abu Mazen's authority. Zbeidi dismisses this threat, however, claiming that their electoral strength is, "No big deal!"

"Fatah's policies have brought Hamas into the democratic process. Even if they win, they have been brought into a process that they were always against. The Palestinian people will get a chance to vote, which is itself a victory over Hamas."

If Hamas does not pose a real threat to Abu Mazen, then what about the internal struggle within Fatah that has escalated since Arafat's sudden demise? Many voiced their continued support for Arafat stemming from his refusal to accept the wholly ungenerous offer at Camp David, and drawing 'Red Lines' that he would not cross nor compromise over.

What if Mazen is pressured into compromising on these red lines—on the right to return for refugees, for example—how much support could he expect from Fatah Youth and the Martyrs Brigades?

"It's not an issue, because he would not do that. Abu Mazen said in his election program that all the issues of central importance would be agreed by the people themselves—by a vote in a referendum. The Palestinian people will decide, not just Mazen."

So far, so supportive, but when asked about the struggle within Fatah, between the younger, more militant generation and the current leaders, he forthrightly states: "The older generation should retire and let the young leaders take over. The elections will resolve this issue; they will determine the outcome of this tension."

But what of the issue of compromising with Israel over key issues? After the first and then second Intifada, with a failed Oslo process in between, many say that the Palestinian people are completely worn down by fighting against occupation. Is there recognition in Fatah that Palestinians are exhausted by the Intifada and the continued occupation, and are thus more willing to accept less from Israel now than they would have accepted in the past?

Jenin camp was razed to the ground in April 2002.  
Photo: Allison Monroe, 2002.



**"As Palestinians, we did everything we promised to do. It's their turn to keep to their word. They wanted us to keep to a ceasefire, and we did. We were told to merge our security forces, and we did. We were told we must have elections, and we held elections. [...] Nothing else was demanded from us. But what has Israel done?"**

assassinations, annexations, building the Wall, maintaining the checkpoints, and not releasing prisoners."

What about the removal of settlements in Gaza? Is this seen as some kind of victory; as Israel making some kind of concession?

"Until now this has only been played out in the media, but nothing has actually happened in reality."

So how long can the ceasefire last if Israel meets these demands?

"Forever! We want peace but it depends on Israel. That question should be directed at them."

clearer. There is better communication. There is also more democracy under Mazen. You have to understand that Arafat was a military man; Mazen is more of a politician."

Does that mean things are better now with Mazen as president?

"It's not as clear cut as that. The Palestinian-Palestinian policies and relations are the same. But the Palestinian-Israeli relationship is much better. Mazen has negotiated a ceasefire and is implementing a democratic program. Hamas, for example, while not a democratic movement, have been forced to accept the elections."

"No it is not like this. Besides, a compromise has already been made, with the ceasefire. It is true that the Palestinian people have been squeezed but no one will give up or relinquish their fundamental rights. No one can assassinate all of the people. We will still be a nation and a people."

What about the right of return for refugees? The Geneva Initiative, for example, talks about quotas of numbers

trial, and is now in solitary confinement, despite an Israeli judge stating that she is not a threat to the Israeli public:

Zbeidi has happy memories of the theatre project, and was, "Angry, sad and upset" when he heard that Tali Fahima was arrested and imprisoned in 2004. He talks about Israelis and internationals building relationships with Palestinians in the past, but laments there are much fewer Israelis working with Palestinians now: "There is

balance the Zionist media strategy. To show the world what is being done to Palestinian people, and to organize as well as the Zionist lobby."

Putting this conflict in a global context, Zbeidi stresses that since the 1917 Balfour declaration of the UK government at the time Palestine has been an "open, bleeding wound. Palestinians blame the entire history of occupation on the British... But we don't have a problem with the British people," he adds reassuringly. His pistol is clearly marked MADE IN THE USA, which I decide not to comment on.

**"The older generation should retire and let the young leaders take over. The elections will resolve this issue; they will determine the outcome of this tension"**

who could have the right of return, and those who don't could have full compensation. Is this a potential gesture of compromise on behalf of the Palestinians?

"There is a right for refugees to return to their homes after war. This is the fundamental issue and the law is clear on this."

Zbeidi points out, as many proponents of the right of return do, that there are many refugees who wouldn't want to come back: "How many non-Palestinian Arabs are there in the US or the UK? They have the right to go back to their countries, and yet they stay there. The right of return is a right, but how many actually want to come back is another issue. The most important thing is that all of them have a right to go back. But less than a quarter would actually want to return."

## Israelis and Internationals

Jenin Camp is the focus of *Arna's Children*, an acclaimed documentary about a theatre project for the camp's children which was set up by Arna Mer-Khamis (1930-1995), a political activist, sculptor, winner of alternative peace prize and a revolutionary Israeli-Jewish woman. Zbeidi's parents initially hosted the project in their house before it was destroyed, and Zbeidi is later depicted in the film as he became a fighter after the theatre group had folded and the Intifada was in full swing. Then, last year, Tali Fahima was arrested after coming to visit the camp and raising funds to restart the theatre project. She is still being held without

now a weak relationship between us. Tali Fahima tried to reestablish the theatre project in the camp and raise money for the people of Jenin. But the Shabak [Israeli secret police] doesn't allow this to happen. Tali tried to reactivate the theatre, and they arrested her." (For more on Tali Fahima, see *N/W* Vol XX No 6, Sept 2004).

Zbeidi was asked to support reactivating the project himself: "From our side, we wish it to happen. But now, peace activists are afraid to come to Jenin."

What about other internationals, such as the International Solidarity Movement (ISM)? While Zbeidi expresses complete

Despite talk of working with internationals and Israelis for peace, he maintains that if the peace talks fail, and another Intifada erupts, then Israeli civilians will continue to be targeted by the Martyrs brigades: "There will be a third, a fourth, a fifth and a sixth Intifada if Israel continues to occupy Palestine. If Israel attacks us, and continues to target Palestinian civilians, then Israeli civilians will also be targeted."

"Palestinians do not have a military or even a state. Israel has a state and an army, which attacks our people. If there is no exception for Palestinian people there is no exception for Israeli people."

On top of this he adds, "War is the last choice for us. Just as we don't like to be killed, we don't like to kill others. But when all other doors are shut in your face—there is no other choice but war. The world should recognize this."

**"Fatah's policies have brought Hamas into the democratic process. Even if they win, they have been brought into a process that they were always against. The Palestinian people will get a chance to vote, which is itself a victory over Hamas"**

support for them (they're "Perfect!") his judgment of their results seems to stem from the fact that they've had several people killed and wounded, rather than their promotion of non-violent resistance: he names Rachel Corrie, Tom Hurndall, Bryan Avery and others, and also names Iain Hook, of the UN, who was killed by Israeli fire in November 2002 in Jenin.

The most important role for internationals in the Palestinian struggle is to "counter-

Does he think that targeting Israeli civilians has helped the Palestinian cause?

"Nothing helps a cause by the use of war. The problem is there is no other choice. Israel are using this choice against us, forcing us to choose war. The suicide attacks by 'self sacrificing' fighters—they have no other choice. This is the last resort for them. The Japanese kamikazes had no other way to attack the gun ships of the US, so they sacrificed themselves. They



The rebuilt Jenin Camp, 2005. Photo: Bex Tyrer.

**"For each tower that was demolished in [the 9/11] attacks, a country was invaded—Afghanistan and Iraq got a tower each! But there wasn't even an investigation for the destruction of Jenin camp"**

had no other choice, and we learned a lesson from them."

Again, Zbeidi puts things in a global context, comparing the destruction in Palestine with the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York: "For each tower that was demolished in those attacks, a country was invaded—Afghanistan and Iraq got a tower each! But there wasn't even an investigation for the destruction of Jenin camp."

Over 600 houses, he points out, were demolished—many with several stories—and over 400 tanks invaded their city. "Imagine if the destruction in Jenin camp happened in Tel Aviv at the hands of the Palestinians... what would happen to us in response?"

### Life is Tough

For the duration of the interview, we're very aware of the danger of being with "The most wanted man in the West Bank." When someone else in Jenin hears we have just interviewed Zbeidi, he tells me he is afraid to even say hello to him in the street for fear of an Israeli assassination attempt. How must it feel, from a personal point of view, to live your life constantly under threat?

As he is being asked this question, one of Zbeidi's comrades is passing him some painkillers and a glass of water: "As you can see, it gives me a headache..."

Zbeidi's father was a fighter and so was his father before him. At 13 he was first wounded, and has since been shot 13

times and a grenade once exploded in his face, covering him with highly visible, blackened burns. He spent most of his teenage years in and out of prison (a total of seven years). His house has been demolished three times, including in 2002 when his mother and sister were killed in the destruction. Three of his brothers are in jail, including his youngest, 19-year-old.

At thirty years old, Zbeidi has a one month-old baby girl and a one and a half years-old boy, (he's "much more beautiful than me"). He says he just wants his son to have a better life than him, but if the situation continues as it is, he too will have a similar life as he and his forefathers have had: "I hope this conflict will end before he grows up to be a man. Life is tough here; it's true."