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# From Suicide Recruit to Captive of Israel

By Edward Walsh  
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**JERUSALEM, June 17**—As a prisoner of the Israelis, Mohammed Mahmoud Burro, a 16-year-old Lebanese Shiite Moslem whose dark complexion bears the faint traces of teen-age acne, is one of the unseen but central characters in the drama surrounding the hijacking of TWA Flight 847.

Last February, in the southern Lebanese village of Sir el Gharbiye, Burro was among a number of men rounded up by the Israeli Army in its series of sweeps through the Shiite villages of the area. The slightly built, soft-spoken youth who likes to work repairing telephones, was sent to southern Lebanon on a suicide mission to kill Israeli soldiers.

Before he could do that, the Israelis found him, probably saving his life but turning him inadvertently into one of the figures in another life-and-death struggle that began last Friday, four months after his capture.

Now, at least one American is dead and the lives of more than 30 others are threatened in a brutal attempt by the hijackers to force the release of Burro and the other Lebanese Shiite Moslem prisoners being held by Israel at the Atlit Prison south of Haifa.

Burro's drama began in Beirut, where he lived with his family. His journey to southern Lebanon, to the Israeli prison camp at Ansar and finally to the Atlit Prison near the Israeli coast, Burro insisted in a recent 90-minute interview, is not one of Shiite Moslem religious extremism. He is a Shiite, but not religiously observant, and what he attempted to do stemmed from factors far removed from any religious impulse or edict to inflict harm on Israelis, Americans or anyone else, the youth said.

According to Burro, who describes himself as detached from the political and religious passions that enflame the Middle East, he acted out of fear and under pressure.

Burro was interviewed at the request of this reporter last month in a conference room of the Israeli Defense Ministry in Tel Aviv. He was brought to it blindfolded from Atlit Prison in an Israeli military police van.

Burro was interviewed in the presence of several Israeli officials, who did not interfere. He spoke through an interpreter, an Israeli reporter

for Israel Television who had interviewed the youth earlier for a program broadcast on the state-run television network.

This article based on the interview was submitted for prior approval to the Israeli Army spokesman's office and the Israeli military censor and was cleared without changes.

Burro, dressed in blue prison garb and wearing sandals, his hair cut close to the scalp, was interviewed at about the same time that Israel released 1,150 mostly Palestinian prisoners in a massive and controversial prisoner exchange that freed three Israeli soldiers. He said the Lebanese Shiite inmates at Atlit knew about the prisoner exchange, but had not expected to be included in a deal Israel struck with the Palestinians.

He said the Israelis had told him nothing would happen to him and that eventually "you will go out with your comrades." In all likelihood, Burro and the other prisoners at Atlit now know about the TWA hijacking and the hijackers' demands for their release.

Officials in Israel, whose intelligence agencies have interviewed Burro extensively, say they believe the youth's story. He is not, they say, typical of the Amal guerrillas who attacked Israeli forces in southern Lebanon and almost certainly nothing like the apparently hardened men involved in the hijacking of the TWA airliner.

According to Israelis who are familiar with the case, Burro is an example of one "recruiting process" in Lebanon in which vulnerable and often frightened young people are enlisted as terrorists. Another example, they say, is Sana Mhayali, the 17-year-old called the "bride of the south" who videotaped a final message that was broadcast throughout the Arab World.

"I am a future martyr. I do what I've decided to do with my soul at peace," she said before driving a Peugeot packed with explosives to blow herself up along with two Israeli soldiers near the southern Lebanese town of Jezzine.

In the recording, Mhaydali said she was acting "for the love of my people and my country." But the Israelis say their investigation disclosed that the unmarried young woman was three months pregnant, a possibly fatal predicament in her rigorously orthodox Shiite family. It was in these circumstances, they say, that she was recruited as a suicide car bomber by the small, nonreligious Syrian Popular Party.

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Israeli officials say the Burro and Mhaydali cases make the frightening phenomenon of the suicide bomber potentially even more problematic because it cannot be assumed that it is confined to the religiously fanatic. Other seemingly ordinary people, it appears, can be pressed into this service.

Burro says he is no religious fanatic and does not believe in the Shiite view of religious martyrdom that is so often associated with the suicide car-bombers of the Middle East.

"No one believes that kind of thing," he said. "No one went to Paradise and came back to say, 'Yes, I saw it and this is true.'"

The middle child in a family of five children, he grew up in the squalid suburbs south of Beirut that teem with Shiites, historically the country's most downtrodden religious group.

Burro's father was a policeman, while young Mohammed, who quit school after the fifth grade, worked for the telephone company in Beirut, a job he said he would like to return to. But by 1984 the constant fighting in Beirut had all but destroyed the phone system and there was no work, so Burro joined the fire and rescue brigade of Amal, which is in control of the suburbs south of the capital.

The trouble started a few months later and began with his father. The father, already hard pressed financially because of medical bills stemming from an injury, was involved in an automobile accident in which his car struck a young woman. The woman's family demanded compensation and Amal settled the claim.

"Amal took it upon itself," Burro said. "I didn't ask for help. It is usual in our area that Amal takes care of these things." But that was not the end of it. Amal began pressing the father to pay his debt to the militia, Burro said.

"My father sort of ran away from it," he said. "They knew I was his son," he added, so he was summoned to a meeting with a man named Abu Hassan, an Amal official.

Burro said he had never been to southern Lebanon and that he and his friends never thought about that part of the country, which was then in its third year of Israeli military occupation. But it was southern Lebanon that Hassan wanted to talk about.

"He said, 'You have to go to the south because of your father,'" Burro said. "He said, 'The south is on fire, people are going to the south and they give their lives. If you don't go, someone else will, but you have to help your family."

"Your father hit a girl with his car and you have to help the situation of your family. If you go to the South, we'll help you and your family and you don't have anything to be afraid of. You'll have a car—an armored car—so go and don't give a damn.'"

Then, Burro said, Hassan sent him to a Shiite religious leader named Haj Ali with instructions to give the correct answers to any questions about his religious practices. "He started to give me a religious lesson, about how those who give their life for God go to Paradise," Burro said. "He started to tell me how one stays alive, actually doesn't die. I said okay."

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But Burro said he did not believe this and was reluctant to agree to a mission in southern Lebanon. He told his friends about it, and they told him he was crazy, he said. Hassan also promised him a bulletproof jacket, saying he might be injured but would not die. Burro said he was aware of the contradiction between this and Ali's lesson on the glory of martyrdom. He said he believed Ali's version of what was being asked.

But after a week of thinking it over, Burro said he returned to Hassan and reluctantly agreed to the suicide mission. He was given another religious lecture by Ali and some quick driving lessons around the Beirut suburbs. Finally, he was taken to a man named Sheik Hassan, a prominent Shiite religious leader who gave an official Islamic blessing for the mission and had arranged for a *shafaa*, a Shiite practice in which a religious leader authorizes a person to pray for the soul of another.

In mid-February, two automobiles set out from the Beirut suburbs for the Lebanese port city of Sidon to the south.

The leaders, apparently seasoned Amal operatives, were named Nour and Malik, Burro said. They did not talk to him on the trip south, but outside the car they talked between themselves and he was able to hear them, Burro said.

"Nour told Malik, 'I have to drive into Israeli soldiers and not be afraid and that I should take care to be far away from civilians,'" he said. He never saw the actual suicide car. He was never told his target, but understood it to be the Israeli military headquarters in Nabatiyah, the main Shiite city of southern Lebanon.

Burro said he heard Nour telling Malik about two buttons in the car, one on the left and one on the right of the steering wheel, but he did not know what these were. Israeli sources have since said that some of the suicide vehicles have been equipped with these buttons, one that is pushed when the car is started and automatically explodes the bomb if the car is turned off, the other to be pushed to detonate the bomb manually when the driver reaches his target.

From Sidon, the two cars continued south, heading inland on the road that leads to the village of Zrariye, an Amal staging area for attacks into that part of southern Lebanon that was still occupied by the Israelis. Cars were changed, and other men joined the convoy. At about 9 that night, Burro said, they reached Sir el Gharbiye, where the others kissed him goodbye and said they would pick him up in the morning.

The Israeli soldiers came at 6 the next morning, Feb. 23, sweeping through an area they had evacuated only a few days before. Burro, who had spent the night at the home of a man named Ali, was awakened with the news that the village was surrounded.

He and Ali fled, Burro seeking shelter in a nearby house. There was gunfire, and he heard Ali scream. "He is now in heaven," Burro said, a faint smile crossing his face.

The Israelis found Burro, took him with the other men and youths to the village school and questioned him. He was taken to Nabatiyah, where, after 15 days of interrogation, Burro said, he admitted the purpose of his presence in southern Lebanon. He added that he has been treated well by the Israelis, whom he found to be "nothing like anything any of us thought of them."