One day last month, I visited the terrorist Abdullah Shami at his home in the Shejaiya neighborhood of Gaza City. Shejaiya is said to be a stronghold of Islamic Jihad, a group that conducts suicide attacks against Israeli targets, and Shami is the group’s leader in Gaza. He lives on the third floor of a concrete-and-plaster apartment house. Before I went upstairs, I met three of his sons in the sand-covered alleyway that leads to the building. The sun was boiling hot, and the building provided shade for the boys and their friends. They were playing a game called shubada, which means martyrs. The youngest son, Ahmed, who is three, played the shabeed, the martyr, and charged a make-believe Jewish bunker. The other boys made the sound of rifles firing, and Ahmed dropped to the ground and pretended to be dead. His brothers Mahmoud, who is five, and Muhammad, who is six, then carried his limp body down the alleyway, and performed a mock funeral. The game ended when Ahmed rose from his imaginary grave, shouted “Alabu Akbar!” and giggled.

An Islamic Jihad official accompanied me to Shami’s sitting room, which was furnished with huge red-and-gold couches. Framed photographs of the Dome of the Rock hung on the walls. Shami, a genial and open-faced man of forty-five, greeted me warmly. He is tall, and has smooth skin and a carefully trimmed beard. He was dressed in a white djellaba and a gray cape with a gold fringe.

The meeting took place during a particularly tense moment in Gaza. Three days earlier, a suicide bomber from the terrorist wing of Hamas, a fundamentalist group, had blown himself up in the middle of a crowd of teen-age girls outside a disco in Tel Aviv. The attack killed twenty-two people, including the bomber, who was infected with hepatitis B, and whose flying body parts may have infected some of the survivors.

After the disco attack, Gazans were seized by dread: surely the Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, would retaliate without mercy. But Sharon declared that “restraint is strength” and staved off right-wingers in his Cabinet who demanded severe reprisals. It was an uncharacteristic and widely praised (and presumably temporary) reaction on Sharon’s part; but he seemed to sense, correctly, that the West had become repulsed by Palestinian terror attacks, and that such feelings could be exploited by his government.

But, nine months into the Palestinian war of independence, the people of Gaza do not trust Sharon’s declarations. As I drove through Gaza City with a Palestinian friend, I noticed dozens of men in the uniforms of the various Palestinian security services; they were afraid to enter office buildings that could be—or already had been—targeted by Israel. Shami, however, did not seem unnerved by the prospect of death at the hands of Israel, even though Israeli agents had assassinated the founder of his group, Fathi Shikaki, on Malta, in 1995.

“Fear is a human sensation,” Shami said. “If I say that I am not afraid, I am not human. But fear will not stop me from doing what needs to be done.”

What his group needs to do, he said, is kill more Jews.

Over the past month, a platoon of international envoys and foreign ministers and would-be peace negotiators have attempted to keep alive a fragile ceasefire negotiated by George Tenet, the C.I.A. director. But few people outside the King David Hotel, in Jerusalem, where these envoys have situated themselves (they are mostly alone in the hotel, tourism to the Holy Land having vanished months ago), believe that the ceasefire will lead to anything except its own failure. Among many Palestinians, in particular, there is depression, and a
vow to increase the violence, which has so far gained them nothing except more than five hundred dead and the unfulfilled promise of aid money from the Gulf Arabs. Palestinian society, in its desolation, seems more susceptible than ever to the romance of martyrdom, which explains the resurgent popularity of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the two groups that sponsor suicide bombings.

For Abdullah Shami, ceasefires are distractions, short pauses in the otherwise unrelenting march to Jerusalem. “We must fight Israel until it is gone,” he told me. The Jews who are alive can stay in Palestine, he said, adding that “during history, the Jews were most secure under Muslim rule.”

On the spectrum of Palestinian militancy, Islamic Jihad stands alone. Unlike Hamas, which also runs schools and hospitals and mosques, Islamic Jihad is exclusively dedicated to terrorism. Hamas claims thousands of members, and hundreds of thousands of supporters; Israeli and American experts say that the hard core of Islamic Jihad consists of several cells in the West Bank and Gaza, with, collectively, several dozen members. (The group’s paramount leader, Abdullah Ramadan Shalah, is in Damascus.) Hamas is a threat to the rule of Yasser Arafat’s Palestinian Authority, which is dominated by men from Fatah, Hamas’s rival. But Islamic Jihad, though more radical than Fatah, is also regarded as more subservient to Arafat than is Hamas, Israeli experts say.

“Arafat has excellent intelligence, and he could take apart Islamic Jihad quite easily,” said Boaz Ganor, the director of the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, in Herzliya, a city north of Tel Aviv. “I believe that Arafat preserved Islamic Jihad in order to use its terrorists when needed. What he needed was another Black September. The whole idea is deniability.” Black September was the group responsible for the 1972 attack on Israeli athletes in Munich. It was initially thought to be independent of Arafat’s Palestine Liberation Organization, but it is now widely accepted that Black September operated under Arafat’s control.

During my visit with Abdullah Shami, I hoped that he would comment on a recent controversy concerning a fatwa, or religious ruling, issued by the Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheik Abd Al-Aziz bin Abdallah Al-Sheikh, in which suicide bombing was declared contrary to the tenets of Islam. “This is not a part of jihad, and I fear that it is merely killing oneself,” the Mufti was quoted as saying.

The ruling of the Saudi mufti was not motivated by moral or theological qualms about the murder of Jews. The questions he raised had to do with the threat that suicide poses to the eternal soul of the Muslim bomber himself. Even so, the fatwa has been met with scorn in many quarters. The head of the Hamas-affiliated Palestinian Islamic Scholars Association, Sheik Hamed Al-Bitawi, stated that “jihad is a collective duty…” However, if infidels conquer even an inch of the Muslims’ land, as happened with the occupation of Palestine by the Jews, then jihad becomes an individual duty, and, therefore, suicide attacks are permissible.”

Shami raised his eyebrows when I mentioned the mufti. He said, “There are some people who are ignorant of certain aspects of Shari’a”—Islamic religious law. “This is not suicide but martyrdom. It is a duty of Muslims.” Islamic Jihad bombers, Shami explained, are not men who seek suicide. “We do not take
depressed people. If there were a one-in-a-thousand chance that a person was suicidal, we would not allow him to martyr himself. In order to be a martyr bomber, you have to want to live."

A recent poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion found that seventy-six per cent of Palestinian respondents approved of suicide bombings that targeted Israelis. And Palestinian religious leaders have for some time been praising the virtues of suicide in the service of their cause. Three years ago, the Mufti of Jerusalem, Sheikh Ekrima Sabri, who is the leading Muslim official in Palestinian-controlled territory, explained to me the role of martyrdom in Islamic thinking. "The Muslim embraces death," he said. "Look at the society of the Israelis. It is a selfish society that loves life. These are not people who are eager to die for their country and their God. The Jews will leave this land rather than die, but the Muslim is happy to die."

The attacks have also won support in the wider Arab world. In a column published in May in the Egyptian newspaper Al-Ushu (and disseminated by the Middle East Media Research Institute, in Washington, D.C.), the writer Amru Nasif called for mass suicide attacks against Israelis, and volunteered himself for a suicide mission. "Let us do some mathematical calculations," he wrote. "Two hundred and fifty Palestinians have signed up for martyrdom operations, and it is not impossible to raise this number to a thousand throughout the Arab world. The average harvest of each act of martyrdom is ten dead and fifty wounded. Thus, a thousand acts of martyrdom would leave the Zionists with at least ten thousand dead and fifty thousand wounded." Nasif also pleaded with Allah to let him "become a shahid" and grant him "the honor of reaping as great a harvest as possible of Israeli lives."

Many Palestinians worry about the glorification of suicide bombers. Ziad Abu-Amr, an expert on Islamic movements at Birzeit University, in the West Bank, and the chairman of the political committee of the Palestine Legislative Council, sees his Gaza constituents embracing suicide attacks as a response to their desperation.

"The entire society is drifting toward religiosity, not necessarily because it has discovered God in the last eight months but because—in the sombre climate of destruction—war, unemployment, and depression cause people to seek solace, and they're going to Allah," he said. "On Friday, at the time of prayer, the streets are blocked now because of the number of people going to mosque. This is a new phenomenon."

One of Abdullah Shami’s sons, Hussam, is eighteen years old. I asked Shami if he wants Hussam to become a suicide bomber. "Of course I do," he said. "But it's his own choice. I won't push him in either direction."

As the interview ended, Mahmoud, Ahmed, and Muhammad joined us in the sitting room. Ahmed, the three-year-old, is chubby-cheeked and insouciant. He was wearing a striped yellow shirt, shorts, and sandals, and his hair had been neatly combed before he entered the room. It was impossible for me to understand the impulse that would prompt his father to contemplate sacrificing this child.

"All children who are born eventually die," Shami said. "And death is painful, except in the case of martyrs, who feel no pain as they commit the act that leads to their martyrdom." He added, "Our bodies are the only weapons we have. We don't want to use our bodies as weapons. Maybe you should tell the Israelis to send us other weapons, like Katyushas. Then we won't use our bodies against them anymore." As I left, Ahmed gave me a black Islamic Jihad flag as a keepsake, and slapped me five.

On the morning of May 7th, Israeli surveillance aircraft patrolling the eastern Mediterranean began tracking the movements of a Lebanese fishing trawler called the Santorini. The Mediterranean is a parking lot of fishing boats and cargo ships and yachts, but the Santorini raised suspicions early. "It was a fishing boat that was not fishing," the commander of Israel's Navy, Admiral Yedidia Ya’ari, said one day at his office in Camp Rabin, the headquarters of the Israeli Defense Forces, in Tel Aviv. Soon enough, two Israeli missile boats, joined by two attack boats, intercepted the Santorini on rough seas. Soldiers from Flotilla Thirteen, the naval commando unit, boarded the boat, meeting no resistance from the crew of four. The boarding party quickly discovered thirty-nine barrels filled with Katyusha rockets, anti-tank grenades, and Strella missiles. The crew consisted of veteran Lebanese smugglers, but they were in the employ of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, an extremist group based in Damascus and headed by an aging terrorist named
Ahmed Jibril. The barrels were to be set in the water off Gaza at a preselected site—a kind of floating dead drop, Ya‘ari said—where they would be retrieved by Palestinians sailing from Gaza.

At a press conference in Damascus a few days later, Jibril, while conceding that the weapons were his, said that the Santorini was the fourth boat he had dispatched to Gaza and only the first to be intercepted. Weapons such as Katyushas and SA-7 Stellas pose little threat to the Israeli Army: they are strategic, not tactical. “These are pretty crappy weapons,” Ya‘ari said, “but the SA-7 can take down a Boeing 747.”

The seizure of the Santorini was a significant event—a foreshadowing of the sort of conflict that Abdullah Shami hopes to see. The Palestinian revolt, which is known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada, after the mosque that sits atop the Temple Mount, in Jerusalem, has gone through three phases so far. The first was the seemingly spontaneous eruption of rock-throwing and protest that followed Sharon’s visit to the Temple Mount last September, when Sharon was still the opposition leader. Then came a phase in which Jewish settlers and Army outposts in the West Bank and Gaza—as well as the Gilo neighborhood of Jerusalem—came under Palestinian rifle fire. The third phase was spearheaded by Hamas and Islamic Jihad: the suicide bombings, as well as mortar attacks launched against targets in Gaza and inside Israel by other factions. Today, the conflict teeters between ceasefire and a fourth phase, this one of violent escalation. The use of strategic weapons could initiate the kind of cataclysmic fighting between Israelis and Palestinians that would lead to a full-blown regional war.

“There are three scenarios,” Boaz Ganor, the terrorism expert, said. “One, Arafat stops the violence. Two, there’s an ongoing war of attrition and Arafat waits for an Israeli mistake—an Israeli shell is bound to hit some schoolchil-

dren. This leads to an international outcry that requires Israel to make more concessions. Three, Arafat decides to escalate, starting a war. If he has the ability to shoot down an El Al plane, or to launch Katyushas from the West Bank into the Tel Aviv suburbs, he would force a powerful Israeli response. The disturbing part is that it is all in Arafat’s hands.”

Israeli intelligence experts are convinced that forces controlled by Arafat were to be the ultimate recipients of the weapons on the Santorini. But Arafat’s ways are mysterious, and it is difficult to shake from the Israelis hard proof—if it exists—of his intentions. In recent days, under American pressure, Arafat has ordered his security services to clamp down on certain types of anti-Israel attacks. In so doing, he undermined his own claim that he could not control the violence of the past nine months. But it also seems true that there are groups operating against Israel that exist outside his direct control. Among these, along with Hamas, are Jibril’s Popular Front and the Lebanese Hezbollah, which is sponsored by Iran and whose allies itself with Islamic Jihad. And factions loyal to Osama bin Laden, who many believe is trying to insert himself into the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by violence, are not beholden to Arafat. So many splintered organizations make any Palestinian agenda confusing to the point of stupefaction, but it is fair to say that the ideological gaps among all these groups have lately shrunk, with disturbing consequences.

In order to find out what Ahmed Jibril was planning for his intercepted shipment of rockets, I went one afternoon to a meeting of his Popular Front. The meeting was held at a wedding hall called the Casablanca, which is situated in the heights of Ramallah, on the West Bank, just north of Jerusalem. The meeting drew a large crowd, roughly five hundred people, including representatives from the main religious and secular fighting groups. Strung on a wire running across the ballroom were posters featuring the tired face of Jibril, a secularist who is more closely associated with the Red Army and the Baader-Meinhof gang of the nineteen-seventies than with the bin Ladens and Islamic Jihads of today.

The program was ponderous; each
THE WORD "I"

Harder to breathe
near the summit, and harder
to remember
where you came from,
why you came
Winter's
harder, and harder to say
the word "I"
with a straight face,
and sleep—
who can sleep. Who has time
to prepare for the big day
when he will be required
to say goodbye to everyone, including
the aforementioned pronoun, relinquish
all earthly attachment
completely, and witness
the end of the world—
harder in other words
not to love it
not to love it so much

—Franz Wright

faction leader spoke in praise of Jibril
and of the Palestinians killed in the current uprising. The local Hamas chief,
Hassan Yusuf, rose to celebrate the poll
results that showed strong public support
for suicide bombings. Yusuf earlier
told me that, shortly after a Hamas bomber
killed several Israelis at a shopping mall in Netanya in May, he and his
followers handed out candy at their
mosque in celebration.

The Casablanca was humid and filled
with smoke, and men with guns circu-
lated through the crowd. Sweet Turkish
coffee, distributed in small plastic
cups, kept everyone awake. Then Mar-
wan Barghouti entered the hall, flanked
by uniformed men carrying AK-47s.
His presence caused a stir; he is the
Fatah leader of the uprising in the West
Bank, and is often mentioned as a possi-
ble successor to Yasir Arafat. It was sur-
prising to see Barghouti at the Popular
Front meeting. He is, after all, a Fatah
man; Fatah is Yasir Arafat’s faction, and
Arafat and Ahmed Jibril are antagonists.

But Barghouti, whom I have inter-
viewed several times over the past
months, has changed. At the outset of
the uprising, Barghouti was fond of not-
thing that he counted among his friends
several members of the Israeli Parlia-
ment. He no longer makes such claims.
Just two weeks ago, Israel accused him of
being directly involved in the killing of
a Greek Orthodox monk who was shot
to death outside Jerusalem by gunmen
who apparently mistook him for an Or-
thodox Jew. Barghouti is said to have
provided the gunmen with their weap-
ons, a charge he has denied. The day
before the Popular Front meeting, I
had talked to Barghouti in his office,
on the third floor of a five-story resi-
dential apartment building in Ramal-
lah. He is afraid of assassination—one
of his deputies was killed by a missile fired from an Israeli helicopter—and this fear is apparently why he has placed his headquarters between apartments that house families with children. During the interview, I asked Barghouti an obvious question: What would Israel have to do to bring an end to the uprising?

"We need one hundred per cent of Gaza, one hundred per cent of the West Bank, one hundred per cent of East Jerusalem, and the right of return for refugees," he said. I pointed out that former Prime Minister Ehud Barak had, at the Camp David summit last year, offered the Palestinians a series of dramatic concessions: a free Gaza, around ninety per cent of the West Bank, a capital in East Jerusalem, and so on. "No! Nothing less than a hundred per cent is acceptable, he said. And if you get a hundred per cent? Will that end the conflict? Barghouti smiled, and then said something impolitic for a Fatah man. "Then we could talk about bigger things," he said. Such as? I've always thought that a good idea would be one state for all the peoples," he said. A secular democratic Palestinian. "We don't have to call it Palestine," he replied. "We can call it something else."

Perhaps no one better personified the enigma of Palestinian desire than Faisal Husseini, who was the chief P.L.O. figure in Jerusalem and who, at the time of his death, of a heart attack, in late May, was hailed as an exemplar of coexistence—a "political prisoner turned peace advocate," the Times called him. Two years ago, in his office in East Jerusalem, Husseini told me, "The only hope is for the Israelis to give up their dreams, and for the Palestinians to give up their dreams. It is the only way we will free ourselves from our nightmares."

But in his last months Husseini spoke at a conference in Teheran which brought together leaders of Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad. And in a speech delivered in Beirut in April he said, "We may lose or win, but our eyes will continue to aspire to the strategic goal; namely, Palestine from the river to the sea—from the Jordan to the Mediterranean. "Whatever we get now cannot make us forget this supreme truth."

In recent months, it was as if Barghouti and Husseini had fired up a time-travel machine and taken us back to 1968, when the leaders of the P.L.O. still spoke unabashedly of erasing Israel from the map of the world.

Dusk settled over Ramallah, and Ahmed Jibril's followers left the Casablanca. Husam Arafat, Jibril's representative on the West Bank, sat on a folding chair and answered questions. He is a lawyer, humorless and ascetic in appearance. He, too, spoke of a "Palestine from the river to the sea." When I told him I was surprised to see Barghouti at his meeting, he appeared offended, and waved over the Fatah leader, who was surrounded by a clutch of admirers.

"He says you shouldn't be here," Arafat told Barghouti.

"Why?" Barghouti asked me.

"Because Yasir Arafat and Ahmed Jibril are enemies, and because your ideologies are so different."

Barghouti took Husam Arafat's hand.

"We're all fighting together now," Barghouti said.

I asked Barghouti about the Santorini. "It's too bad what happened," he said. "If someone sends you a gift, you should always try to accept it."

After Barghouti and his men left the hall, I asked Arafat why his boss, Ahmed Jibril, was sending rockets to Gaza.

"The General Command decided that it would provide a full range of military services to the uprising," he said. I asked him if he hoped to shoot down planes, but he just smiled wanly and changed the subject.

It turned out that there was something on his mind. "Everyone keeps saying that Hamas and Islamic Jihad invented suicide bombing," he said. "But this isn't true. It was the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command that invented the suicide bombing. We did the first one in 1974, before there was even a Hamas. I think people don't understand the proper role of the Popular Front in the history of the struggle. It was us, not Hamas." I promised him that this fact would be noted.

Headline in the Times.

DEPARTED EXECUTIVE REJOINS LEO BURNETT

What a workaholic!