

Palestinian boy loses his sight after Israeli troops shoot him in the eye

Paramedics told Mohammed's mom he was shot in the eye by IDF troops during a demonstration. She felt relieved. At least he's alive.

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Ambassadors Garden. The northern entrance to El Bireh, a city abutting Ramallah in the West Bank. A huge Palestinian flag flaps in the breeze above the tall stone monument at the intersection near the City Inn Palace Hotel, broadcasting imaginary independence. Nearby is a modern shopping mall and the Al-Huda gas station, across the way are the Israel Defense Forces' Coordination and Liaison Office and the settlement of Beit El. A bubble in the shadow of the occupation.

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Ambassadors Garden is a small, relatively well-tended playground along the main road to El Bireh. Colorful slides and swings, a few stands selling candy, which are closed on this weekday. A girl is sitting on a bench, across the way a young man is talking on a cell phone, two women arrive in a car with their children. Quotidian midday tranquility.

The remnants of burnt tires at the edge of the garden are a jarring note among this semblance of serenity, as is the trampled fence next to the public toilets, which are painted pink and in a state of neglect.

It's quiet here now, but things were tempestuous a month ago, on Friday, February 9, one of the recent "days of rage" in the West Bank. A few dozen children and adolescents made their way to the road that day, throwing stones at the IDF soldiers positioned opposite them. The 20 or so soldiers who were scattered on the hills around the road opened fire in order to push the children back toward the playground. All sorts of ammunition were used: live rounds, rubber-coated steel bullets and of course tear-gas grenades. The youngsters retreated to Ambassadors Garden, the soldiers hot on their heels.

Two soldiers stood on the crushed fence near the pink bathrooms, and opened fire. It was about 2 P.M.

Fourteen-year-old Mohammed Nubani was standing in the sandy area next to the swings, about 20 meters away from the soldiers. Suddenly he felt a powerful blow to the face. Blood spurted from one eye. He pressed his hand against his eye, trying to quell the searing pain; blackness swirled around him

and he grew dizzy but somehow managed to stay on his feet. He had no idea what was happening. Nor did he see the soldier who had fired the bullet coated in black rubber that smashed into his eye socket and lodged there.

Mohammed's friends helped evacuate him: A Palestinian ambulance that was parked nearby – as is standard procedure at demonstrations – rushed him to the Government Hospital in Ramallah. The hospital doesn't have an ophthalmology department, so after initial treatment, the wounded boy was moved to Rafidia Hospital in Nablus.

During a three-hour operation, the bullet was removed but Mohammed's eye seemed doomed. Four days later he was transferred to St. John of Jerusalem Eye Hospital in East Jerusalem, in yet another desperate attempt to save his sight.

The Nubani family lives on the third floor of a middle-class apartment building in the lower section of El Bireh, on the last street before the Psagot settlement. Boasting a winery and homes with red-tiled roofs, Psagot is just a few hundred meters away, across the valley, perched with crass defiance over the outer edge of the Palestinian city. You see Psagot when you look out of the window from any home on this street in El Bireh. Behind this first row of homes lies the Palestinian national soccer stadium.

Brown-velvet sofas and matching chandeliers, a shiny ceramic floor. Mohammed's father, Ahmed, 48, is a building contractor in Ramallah; his mother, Nibin, 41, wearing traditional attire, is a homemaker. Mohammed has three sisters and a brother, ranging in age 2 to 20. The littlest one, Jory, is already wearing gold earrings. Mohammed is the second youngest.

The Nubanis are building a new house in the village of Surda, not far away, and will soon move there. On one occasion, when Mohammed visited the construction site, he discovered that Israeli soldiers had taken over the skeleton of their new home. When he tried to protest, they detained him for a few hours. The soldiers left the site a few days later.

Nibin warns us not to tell Mohammed the truth about his eye: She and Ahmed haven't yet told their child that it will never regain vision. They don't want him to give up hope.

The boy is at school when we arrive. He'll be home soon; it's his first day back since he was wounded. He's in the ninth grade at a local boys' school.

That Friday, four weeks ago, like other Fridays, was not a school day. Mohammed woke early, had breakfast and went to the mosque to pray. Usually he goes with his father, but that day he went alone. After lunch he said he was going to play with friends, close to home. At 2 o'clock the

paramedic in the ambulance that took him to the hospital called his mother to inform her that her son had been wounded and was being taken to Ramallah.

“Where was he wounded?” Nibin asked, frightened. After being told that it was an eye injury, she tells us, she felt somewhat relieved: At least he’s alive. She called her husband, and the two of them rushed to the hospital; a few hours later, they accompanied Mohammed to the Nablus hospital.

They show us a fragment from the rubber bullet that slammed into their son’s eye, along with the medical report from the Jerusalem hospital. The bullet struck Mohammed’s optic nerve and probably destroyed it. This week he was examined by a British eye specialist who works in a clinic in Anabta, next to Tul Karm; he too could offer them no hope.

The doorbell rings. Mohammed is home. He’s wearing a quasi-military camouflage sweatshirt with a hood, and has a blue schoolbag draped over his shoulder. He has a bit of trouble making his way to the living room. His right eye is covered with transparent plastic, but he’s pressing on the healthy left eye. It hurts. It’s obvious that he has a hard time seeing. He has a modish haircut and his voice is squeaky, like that of a younger child; there’s still no sign of facial hair. A boy. He rubs the plastic bandage covering his eye, embarrassed and shy in the presence of the strangers in his home. He blinks; his good eye is tearing up.

“How was school?” his mother asks. His head really hurt, he replies, looking like he’s about to cry. It’s hard for him to open his healthy eye, he adds. “Did you go to all the classes?” Nibin wants to know. He says he did, but it was really hard for him.

It emerges that not even one teacher or guidance counselor talked to him about what happened, on his first day back at school after a month.

“Do you want to go to school tomorrow, too?” his mother asks. He doesn’t know, he tells her. “You seem confused,” she says, and he answers, “Yes, everything is strange for me” – perhaps because of the strangers, perhaps because of the return to school and the effects of the trauma. He’s obviously still suffering.

“You have to go to school, you’ve already missed a lot of material,” Nibin adds. His father is silent.

Mohammed is stingy about providing details about his Black Friday. He went with a friend, they wanted to see the demonstration, he didn’t throw stones.

A relatively long distance of more than a kilometer as the crow flies separates his home high up on the hill from the playground below where he was shot.

“I was standing there and suddenly I felt something hit me hard in the face. I didn’t shout, I didn’t cry, but it really hurt,” he says, almost in a whisper.

The IDF Spokesperson’s Unit stated, in response to a request for comment from Haaretz: “On February 9, 2018, there was a public disturbance at the ‘Ayosh’ Circle, within the purview of the Binyamin Division. The force took measures to disperse the demonstration. We are not aware of any claim of a Palestinian being wounded. In the event that additional information is received, it will be checked out in depth.”

Mohammed Nubani, a 14-year-old boy, half-blind, a victim of the occupation.

“Think what feelings he will develop against those who shot him in the eye – what he will feel when he grows up,” says a friend of the family, Nasser Shehadeh, from the nearby Qalandiyah refugee camp, who’s come to visit. “Only when the occupation ends will we all see with two eyes,” he offers, as a punch line.