‘Try to kidnap the settler. If you can’t, murder him’: Terrorists recount attack

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The suspected killers of an 18-year-old yeshiva student in the West Bank in August told investigators they did so due to “the suffering of the Palestinian people” and “the situation at Al-Aqsa [Mosque],” according to transcripts of their interrogation obtained by the Yedioth Ahronoth newspaper.

Cousins Nasir and Qasseem al-Asafra were indicted earlier this month in the August 9 murder of Dvir Sorek near the Gush Etzion Junction. They were arrested in their homes in Beit Kahil, near Hebron, two days after the killing. Qasseem is believed to have driven the vehicle while Nasir stabbed Sorek to death.

“For months I’ve been going to pray at the mosque and hearing of the situation in al-Aqsa, that Muslim Palestinians are barred from entering and settlers are allowed,” Qasseem told investigators. “Also there is the construction in the settlements, and our land being raped by the Israeli occupier. I always wished to die as a martyr.”

The Al-Aqsa Mosque on Jerusalem’s Temple Mount is the Holiest site in Judaism and third holiest site in Islam, and the source of constant tensions between Israel and Palestinians. The latter often accuse the Jewish state of attempting a creeping takeover of the holy site, which Israel denies, and clashes frequently erupt at the sensitive compound.

Friday sermons in West Bank mosques are seen by Israel as a steady source of incitement for violence and hatred.

Qasseem said he bought a stun gun some time before the killing, planning to use it for an attack.

“About 10 days before the attack I met in the neighborhood with Nasir, my cousin. I asked to speak with him alone,” he said.

Nasir said the two “talked about the situation in the West Bank and the suffering of the Palestinian people, the occupation and the worshipers at the Al-Aqsa Mosque and he offered me to take part in an attack.”

Qasseem said he then showed his cousin his stun gun and “told him I wanted to carry out an attack against settlers. And then Nasir told me he’d bought a knife, I think about 20-25 centimeters long.”

The two agreed to kill a settler together.

On the day of the planned attack Qasseem got up early and went to work in the Israeli city of Rehovot. His line of work was not mentioned, though Palestinians who work in Israel are often employed in construction.

In the evening after coming back home he showered and took his wife and kids to his grandparents. He told his wife he was going on some errands.

“I called Nasir and asked him to meet me by the road. I picked him up… and we drove to the Gush Etzion Junction,” some miles north of their hometown. “We talked and I suggested that we kidnap a settler and hide him,” Qasseem said.

Asked if they considered holding a victim for ransom, Qasseem said “not at all” — the plan was always to kill the man, but the two saw the potential of “confusing” and “tiring” security forces as they searched for the missing person as an added benefit.

“I told him I would wait in the car and ‘You try to kidnap the settler with the stun gun, and if you succeed we’ll take the settler and put him in the trunk…if you can’t kidnap him, murder him.'”

The two waited in the car at the junction for some 20 minutes until they saw Sorek, who had just gotten off a bus at the junction.

“We were looking for certain details like a settler cap and *peyot*” to identify the person as a settler, Qasseem said, referring to the Jewish skullcap and traditional sidelocks.

Qasseem then drove right up to Sorek and Nasir jumped out of the car.

“I got out of the car with the stun gun in my left hand and the knife in the hip of my pants,” Nasir said. “I tried to shock the settler but I couldn’t activate the stun gun and then the settler tried to push me back, and I pushed the settler and he fell on the floor. At that moment I pulled out the knife and started stabbing the settler in his upper body in the chest area. He tried to defend himself by covering his face and upper body with his hands. Then he remained still and didn’t move and I got into the car.”

The two quickly drove off, with Qasseem dropping his cousin off and taking the knife home. “After Nasir tried to clean it there were still blood stains. I put it above my children’s closet. I parked by my house and went to pray with my family.”

Sorek’s body was found hours later on the road leading to the religious seminary in Migdal Oz where he was studying as part of *hesder*, a program that combines military service with Jewish study.

Besides the two cousins, three others were indicted this month for helping plan and prepare for the attack. Qasseem’s wife Inas was charged last month with assisting the group beforehand and after the deadly stabbing attack. The group was accused of carrying out the attack on behalf of the Hamas terror group.

According to the IDF, in addition to Nasir and Qasseem, the other members of the cell were Ahmad al-Asafra, Yusef Zahour and Mahmoud Atouna.

“The accused formed the cell, which is part of the Hamas terror group, in order to carry out attacks against Israeli targets. As part of their activities, the members of the cell carried out training exercises and lookouts, and armed themselves with knives,” the army said.

According to the indictment, Qasseem also carried out a stabbing attack in Beersheba in 2011 in which two Israelis were injured but he was never caught. He will also be charged for that attack.

The IDF has informed the families of four of the cell members that it plans to demolish their homes — a form of punishment Israel says is an effective deterrent against future attacks, but that has been criticized by human rights groups as a forbidden form of collective punishment and by some defense analysts as an ineffective and potentially counterproductive measure.

The military said it had yet to decide whether to demolish the home of the fifth cell member, Atouna.