



SON OF HAMAS

A GRIPPING ACCOUNT OF TERROR,
BETRAYAL, POLITICAL INTRIGUE,
AND UNTHINKABLE CHOICES

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF
WITH RON BRACKIN

To my beloved father and my wounded family.

To the victims of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

To every human life my Lord has saved

My family, I am very proud of you; only my God can understand what you have been through. I realize that what I have done has caused another deep wound that might not heal in this life and that you may have to live with its shame forever.

I could have been a hero and made my people proud of me. I knew what kind of hero they were looking for: a fighter who dedicated his life and family to the cause of a nation. Even if I was killed, they would have told my story for generations to come and been proud of me forever, but in reality, I would not have been much of a hero.

Instead, I became a traitor in the eyes of my people. Although I once brought pride to you, I now bring you only shame. Although I was once the royal prince, I am now a stranger in a foreign country fighting against the enemy of loneliness and darkness.

I know you see me as a traitor; please understand it was not you I chose to betray, but your understanding of what it means to be a hero. When Middle Eastern nations—Jews and Arabs alike—start to understand some of what I understand, only then will there be peace. And if my Lord was rejected for saving the world from the punishment of hell, I don't mind being a reject!

I don't know what the future holds, but I do know that I am not afraid. And now I want to give you something that has helped me to survive so far: all the guilt and shame I have carried for all these years is a small price to pay if it saves even one innocent human life.

How many people appreciate what I have done? Not so many. But that's okay. I believed in what I did and I still believe, which is my only fuel for this long journey. Every drop of innocent blood that has been saved gives me hope to carry on to the last day.

I paid, you paid, and yet the bills of war and peace continue to come. God be with us all and give us what we need to carry this heavy weight.

With love,

Your son

A Word from the Author

Time is sequential—a thread spanning the distance between birth and death.

Events, however, are more like a Persian carpet—thousands of richly colored threads woven into intricate patterns and images. Any attempt to place events into purely chronological order would be like pulling the threads loose and laying them end to end. It might be simpler, but you would lose the design.

The events in this book are my best recollections, sorted out from the maelstrom of my life in the occupied territories of Israel and woven together as they occurred—consecutively and concurrently.

To provide you with reference points and to sort out the Arabic names and terms, I have included a brief time line in the appendices, along with a glossary and a list of players.

For security reasons, I have intentionally omitted much of the detail from the accounts of sensitive operations conducted by the Israel Security Agency, the Shin Bet. The information revealed in this book in no way jeopardizes the ongoing global war on terrorism in which Israel plays a leading role.

Finally, Son of Hamas, like the Middle East, is a continuing story. So I invite you to keep in touch by visiting my blog at <http://www.sonofhamas.com>, where I share my insights on breaking regional developments. I also post updates on what the Lord is doing with the book and in my family and where he is leading me today.

—MHY

Preface

Peace in the Middle East has been the holy grail of diplomats, prime ministers, and presidents for more than five decades. Every new face on the world stage thinks he or she is going to be the one to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. And each one fails just as miserably and completely as those who have come before.

The fact is, few Westerners can come close to understanding the complexities of the Middle East and its people. But I do—by virtue of a most unique perspective. You see, I am a son of that region and of that conflict. I am a child of Islam and the son of an accused terrorist. I am also a follower of Jesus.

Before the age of twenty-one, I saw things no one should ever see: abject poverty, abuse of power, torture, and death. I witnessed the behind-the-scenes dealings of top Middle Eastern leaders who make headlines around the world. I was trusted at the highest levels of Hamas, and I participated in the so-called Intifada. I was held captive in the bowels of Israel's most feared prison facility. And as you will see, I made choices that have made me a traitor in the eyes of people I love.

My unlikely journey has taken me through dark places and given me access to extraordinary secrets. On the pages of this book I finally reveal some of those long-hidden secrets, exposing events and processes that to this point have been known only by a handful of shadowy individuals.

The uncovering of these truths will likely send shock waves through parts of the Middle East, but I hope it will also bring comfort and closure to the families of many victims of this unending conflict.

As I move among Americans today, I find that many of them have a lot of questions about the Arab-Israeli conflict, but very few answers and even less good information. I hear questions like:

- “Why can’t people just get along in the Middle East?”
- “Who is in the right—the Israelis or the Palestinians?”
- “To whom does the land really belong? Why don’t Palestinians just move to other Arab countries?”
- “Why doesn’t Israel give back the land and property it won in the 1967 Six-Day War?”
- “Why are so many Palestinians still living in refugee camps? Why don’t they have their own state?”
- “Why do Palestinians hate Israel so much?”
- “How can Israel protect itself from suicide bombers and frequent rocket attacks?”

These are good questions, all of them. But none of them touch on the real issue, the root problem. The current conflict stretches all the way back to the animosity between Sarah and Hagar described in the first book of the Bible. To understand the political and cultural realities, however, you really don’t have to look much further than the aftermath of World War I.

When the war ended, the Palestinian territories, national home of the Palestinian people for centuries, fell under the mandate of Great Britain. And the British government had an unusual notion for the area, which it stated in the Balfour Declaration of 1917: “His Majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”

Encouraged by the British government, hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants, mostly from Eastern Europe, flooded into the Palestinian territories. Clashes between Arabs and Jews were inevitable.

Israel became a state in 1948. However, the Palestinian territories remained just that—nonsovereign territories. Without a constitution to maintain some semblance of order, religious law becomes the highest authority. And when everyone is free to interpret and enforce the law as he sees fit, chaos ensues. To the outside world, the Middle Eastern conflict is simply a tug-of-war over a small stretch of land. But the real problem is that no one yet has understood the real problem. And as a result, negotiators from Camp David to Oslo confidently continue to splint the arms and legs of a cardiac patient.

Please understand, I did not write this book because I think I’m smarter or wiser than the great thinkers of the age. I am not. But I believe that God has given me a unique perspective by placing me on multiple sides of an apparently insoluble conflict. My life has been partitioned like the crazy little piece of real estate on the Mediterranean known as Israel by some, Palestine by others, and the occupied territories by still others.

My purpose in the pages that follow is to set the record straight on some key events, lay bare some secrets, and if all goes well, leave you with hope that the impossible can be accomplished.

Chapter 1: Captured

1996

I steered my little white Subaru around a blind corner on one of the narrow roads that led to the main highway outside the West Bank city of Ramallah. Stepping lightly on the brake, I slowly approached one of the innumerable checkpoints that dot the roads running to and from Jerusalem.

“Turn off the engine! Stop the car!” someone shouted in broken Arabic.

Without warning, six Israeli soldiers jumped out of the bushes and blocked my car, each man carrying a machine gun, and each gun pointed directly at my head.

Panic welled up in my throat. I stopped the car and threw the keys through the open window.

“Get out! Get out!”

Wasting no time, one of the men jerked open the door and threw me to the dusty ground. I barely had time to cover my head before the beating began. But even as I tried to protect my face, the heavy boots of the soldiers quickly found other targets: ribs, kidneys, back, neck, skull.

Two of the men dragged me to my feet and pulled me to the checkpoint, where I was forced onto my knees behind a cement barricade. My hands were bound behind my back with a sharp-edged plastic zip tie that was cinched much too tight. Somebody blindfolded me and shoved me into the back of a jeep onto the floor. Fear mingled with anger as I wondered where they were taking me and how long I would be gone. I was barely eighteen years old and only a few weeks away from my final high school exams. What was going to happen to me?

After a fairly short drive, the jeep slowed to a halt. A soldier pulled me from the back and removed my blindfold. Squinting in the bright sunlight, I realized that we were at Ofer Army Base. An Israeli defense base, Ofer was one of the largest and most secure military facilities in the West Bank.

As we moved toward the main building, we passed by several armored tanks, which were shrouded by canvas tarps. The monstrous mounds had always intrigued me whenever I had seen them from outside the gates. They looked like huge, oversized boulders.

Once inside the building, we were met by a doctor who gave me a quick once-over, apparently to make sure I was fit to withstand interrogation. I must have passed because, within minutes, the handcuffs and blindfold were replaced, and I was shoved back into the jeep.

As I tried to contort my body so that it would fit into the small area usually reserved for people's feet, one beefy soldier put his boot squarely on my hip and pressed the muzzle of his M16 assault rifle into my chest. The hot reek of petrol fumes saturated the floor of the vehicle and forced my throat closed. Whenever I tried to adjust my cramped position, the soldier jabbed the gun barrel deeper into my chest.

Without warning, a searing pain shot through my body and made my toes clench. It was as if a rocket were exploding in my skull. The force of the blow had come from the front seat, and I realized that one of the soldiers must have used his rifle butt to hit me in the head. Before I had time to protect myself,

however, he hit me again, harder this time and in the eye. I tried to move out of reach but the soldier who had been using me for a footstool dragged me upright.

“Don’t move or I will shoot you!” he shouted.

But I couldn’t help it. Each time his comrade hit me, I involuntarily recoiled from the impact.

Under the rough blindfold, my eye was beginning to swell closed, and my face felt numb. There was no circulation in my legs. My breathing came in shallow gasps. I had never felt such pain. But worse than the physical pain was the horror of being at the mercy of something merciless, something raw and inhuman. My mind reeled as I struggled to understand the motives of my tormentors. I understood fighting and killing out of hatred, rage, revenge, or even necessity. But I had done nothing to these soldiers. I had not resisted. I had done everything I was told to do. I was no threat to them. I was bound, blindfolded, and unarmed. What was inside these people that made them take such delight in hurting me? Even the basest animal kills for a reason, not just for sport.

I thought about how my mother was going to feel when she learned that I had been arrested. With my father already in an Israeli prison, I was the man of the family. Would I be held in prison for months and years as he had been? If so, how would my mother manage with me gone too? I began to understand how my dad felt—worried about his family and grieved by the knowledge that we were worrying about him. Tears sprang to my eyes as I imagined my mother’s face.

I also wondered if all my years of high school were about to be wasted. If I indeed was headed for an Israeli prison, I would miss my final exams next month. A torrent of questions and cries raced through my mind even as the blows continued to fall: Why are you doing this to me? What have I done? I am not a terrorist! I’m just a kid. Why are you beating me like this?

I’m pretty sure I passed out several times, but every time I came to, the soldiers were still there, hitting me. I couldn’t dodge the blows. The only thing I could do was scream. I felt bile rising in the back of my throat and I gagged, vomiting all over myself.

I felt a deep sadness before losing consciousness. Was this the end? Was I going to die before my life had really even started?

Chapter 2: The Ladder of Faith

1955–1977

My name is Mosab Hassan Yousef.

I am the oldest son of Sheikh Hassan Yousef, one of the seven founders of the Hamas organization. I was born in the West Bank village of Ramallah, and I am part of one of the most religious Islamic families in the Middle East.

My story begins with my grandfather, Sheikh Yousef Dawood, who was the religious leader—or imam—for the village of Al-Janiya, located in the part of Israel that the Bible calls Judea and Samaria. I adored my grandfather. His soft, white beard tickled my cheek when he hugged me, and I could sit for hours, listening to the sound of his sweet voice chanting theadhan—the Muslim call to prayer. And I had

plenty of opportunities to do so since Muslims are called to pray five times every day. Chanting adhan and the Qur'an is not an easy thing to do well, but when my grandfather did it, the sound was magical.

When I was a boy, some chanters bothered me so much that I wanted to stuff rags in my ears. But my grandfather was a passionate man, and he carried his listeners deep into the meaning of the adhan as he sang. He believed every word of it.

About four hundred people lived in Al-Janiya in the days when it was under Jordanian rule and Israeli occupation. But the residents of this little rural village had little use for politics. Nestled into the gently rolling hills a few miles northwest of Ramallah, Al-Janiya was a very peaceful and beautiful place. Its sunsets tinted everything in hues of rose and violet. The air was clean and clear, and from many of the hills' peaks you could see all the way to the Mediterranean.

By four o'clock every morning, my grandfather was on his way to the mosque. When he finished morning prayers, he would take his little donkey to the field, work the soil, tend his olive trees, and drink fresh water from the spring that flowed down the mountain. There was no air pollution because only one person in Al-Janiya had a car.

When he was at home, my grandfather welcomed a steady stream of visitors. He was more than the imam—he was everything to the people in that village. He prayed over every newborn baby and whispered the adhan in the child's ear. When someone died, my grandfather washed and anointed the body and wrapped it in winding clothes. He married them, and he buried them.

My father, Hassan, was his favorite son. Even as a young boy, before it was required of him, my father went regularly with my grandfather to the mosque. None of his brothers cared anything about Islam like he did.

At his father's side, Hassan learned to chant the adhan. And like his father, he had a voice and a passion that people responded to. My grandfather was very proud of him. When my father was twelve years old, my grandfather said, "Hassan, you have shown that you are very interested in God and Islam. So I am going to send you to Jerusalem to learn sharia." Sharia is Islamic religious law that deals with daily life, from family and hygiene to politics and economics.

Hassan knew and cared nothing about politics or economics. He simply wanted to be like his father. He wanted to read and chant the Qur'an and to serve people. But he was about to learn that his father was much more than a trusted religious leader and beloved public servant.

Because values and traditions have always meant more to the Arab people than government constitutions and courts, men like my grandfather often became the highest level of authority. Especially in areas where secular leaders were weak or corrupt, the word of a religious leader was considered law.

My father was not sent to Jerusalem simply to study religion; his father was preparing him to rule. So for the next few years, my father lived and studied in the Old City of Jerusalem beside Al-Aqsa Mosque—the iconic golden-domed structure that visually defines the profile of Jerusalem in the eyes of most of the world's people. At the age of eighteen, he completed his studies and moved to Ramallah, where he was immediately employed as imam of the mosque in Old Town. Filled with passion to serve both Allah and his people, my father was eager to begin his work in that community, just as his father had done in Al-Janiya.

But Ramallah was not Al-Janiya. The former was a bustling city. The latter was a sleepy little village. The first time my father entered the mosque, he was shocked to find only five old men waiting for him.

Everyone else, it seemed, was in the coffeehouses and pornographic theaters, getting drunk and gambling. Even the man who chanted the adhan for the mosque next door had run a microphone and cord from the minaret, so he could continue the Islamic tradition without interrupting his card game.

My father's heart was broken for these people, though he wasn't sure how he would ever reach them. Even his five old men admitted they only came to the mosque because they knew they were going to die soon and wanted to go to heaven, but at least they were willing to listen. So he worked with what he had. He led these fellows in prayer, and he taught them the Qur'an. In a very short amount of time, they grew to love him as if he were an angel sent from heaven.

Outside the mosque, it was a different story. For many, my father's love for the god of the Qur'an only highlighted their own casual approach to the faith, and they were offended.

"Who is this child doing the adhan?" people scoffed, pointing to my baby-faced father. "He doesn't belong here. He is a troublemaker."

"Why is this little guy embarrassing us? Only old people go to the mosque."

"I would rather be a dog than be like you," one of them shouted in his face.

My father quietly endured the persecution, never shouting back or defending himself. But his love and compassion for the people would not let him give up. And he continued to do the work he had been called to do: urging the people to return to Islam and Allah.

He shared his concerns with my grandfather, who quickly realized that my father had even greater zeal and potential than he had originally thought. My grandfather sent him to Jordan for advanced Islamic study. As you will see, the people he met there would ultimately change the course of my family's history and even affect the history of conflict in the Middle East. But before I continue, I need to pause briefly to explain a few important points of Islamic history that will help you understand why the countless diplomatic solutions that have been put forward have uniformly failed and can offer no hope for peace.

Between 1517 and 1923, Islam—personified by the Ottoman Caliphate—spread from its base in Turkey across three continents. But after a few centuries of great economic and political power, the Ottoman Empire became centralized and corrupt and began its decline.

Under the Turks, Muslim villages throughout the Middle East were subject to persecution and crushing taxation. Istanbul was simply too far away for the caliph to protect the faithful from abuses by soldiers and local officials.

By the twentieth century, many Muslims were becoming disillusioned and began to look for a different way of life. Some embraced the atheism of the recently arrived communists. Others buried their problems in liquor, gambling, and pornography, much of which was introduced by Westerners who were lured to the area by mineral wealth and growing industrialization.

In Cairo, Egypt, a devout young primary schoolteacher named Hassan al-Banna wept for his countrymen who were poor, jobless, and godless. But he blamed the West, not the Turks, and he believed that the only hope for his people, especially the youth, was a return to the purity and simplicity of Islam.

He went to the coffeehouses, climbed up on tables and chairs, and preached to everyone about Allah.

Drunkards mocked him. Religious leaders challenged him. But most of the people loved him because he gave them hope.

In March 1928, Hassan al-Banna founded the Society of the Muslim Brothers, popularly known as the Muslim Brotherhood. The goal of the new organization was to rebuild society according to Islamic principles. Within a decade, every province in Egypt had a branch. Al-Banna's brother established a chapter in the Palestinian territories in 1935. And after twenty years, the Brotherhood numbered about half a million in Egypt alone.

Members of the Muslim Brotherhood were largely drawn from the poorest and least influential classes—but they were fiercely loyal to the cause. They gave out of their own pockets to help their fellow Muslims, as called for in the Qur'an.

Many people in the West who stereotype all Muslims as terrorists don't know about the side of Islam that reflects love and mercy. It cares for the poor, widows, and orphans. It facilitates education and welfare. It unites and strengthens. This is the side of Islam that motivated those early leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. Of course, there is also the other side, the one that calls all Muslims to jihad, to struggle and contend with the world until they establish a global caliphate, led by one holy man who rules and speaks for Allah. This will be important for you to understand and to remember as we go along. But back to our history lesson. . . .

In 1948, the Muslim Brotherhood attempted a coup against the Egyptian government, which the Brotherhood blamed for the nation's growing secularism. The uprising was interrupted before it could get traction, however, when the British Mandate ended and Israel declared its independence as a Jewish state.

Muslims throughout the Middle East were outraged. According to the Qur'an, when an enemy invades any Muslim country, all Muslims are called as one to fight to defend their land. From the viewpoint of the Arab world, foreigners had invaded and now occupied Palestine, home of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third holiest place on earth after Mecca and Medina. The mosque was built on the site from which it was believed that Mohammad had traveled with the angel Gabriel to heaven and spoken with Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.

Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq immediately invaded the new Jewish state. Among the ten thousand Egyptian troops were thousands of Muslim Brotherhood volunteers. The Arab coalition, however, was outnumbered and outgunned. Less than a year later, the Arab troops had been driven out.

As a result of the war, about three-quarters of a million Palestinian Arabs fled or were expelled from their homes in the territories that became the State of Israel.

Although the United Nations passed Resolution 194, which stated in part that "refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so" and that "compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return," this recommendation was never implemented. Tens of thousands of Palestinians who fled Israel during the Arab-Israeli War never regained their homes and land. Many of these refugees and their descendants live in squalid refugee camps operated by the United Nations (UN) to this day.

When the now-armed members of the Muslim Brotherhood returned from the battlefield to Egypt, the suspended coup was on again. But news of the overthrow plan leaked out, and the Egyptian government banned the Brotherhood, confiscated its assets, and imprisoned many of its members. Those who escaped arrest assassinated Egypt's prime minister a few weeks later.

Hassan al-Banna, in turn, was assassinated on February 12, 1949, presumably by the government secret service. But the Brotherhood was not crushed. In just twenty years, Hassan al-Banna had shaken Islam out of its dormancy and created a revolution with armed fighters. And for the next few years, the organization continued to add to its numbers and its influence among the people, not only in Egypt but also in nearby Syria and Jordan.

By the time my father arrived in Jordan in the mid-1970s to continue his studies, the Muslim Brotherhood there was well established and beloved by the people. Its members were doing everything that was on my father's heart—encouraging renewed faith among those who had strayed from the Islamic way of life, healing those who were hurt, and trying to save people from the corrupting influences in society. He believed these men were religious reformers to Islam, as Martin Luther and William Tyndale were to Christianity. They only wanted to save people and improve their lives, not to kill and destroy. And when my father met some of the early leaders of the Brotherhood, he said, “Yes, this is what I have been looking for.”

What my father saw in those early days was the part of Islam that reflects love and mercy. What he didn't see, what he perhaps has never yet allowed himself to see, is the other side of Islam.

Islamic life is like a ladder, with prayer and praising Allah as the bottom rung. The higher rungs represent helping the poor and needy, establishing schools, and supporting charities. The highest rung is jihad.

The ladder is tall. Few look up to see what is at the top. And progress is usually gradual, almost imperceptible—like a barn cat stalking a swallow. The swallow never takes its eyes off the cat. It just stands there, watching the cat pace back and forth, back and forth. But the swallow does not judge depth. It does not see that the cat is getting a little bit closer with every pass until, in the blink of an eye, the cat's claws are stained with the swallow's blood.

Traditional Muslims stand at the foot of the ladder, living in guilt for not really practicing Islam. At the top are fundamentalists, the ones you see in the news killing women and children for the glory of the god of the Qur'an. Moderates are somewhere in between.

A moderate Muslim is actually more dangerous than a fundamentalist, however, because he appears to be harmless, and you can never tell when he has taken that next step toward the top. Most suicide bombers began as moderates.

The day my father first put his foot on the bottom rung of the ladder, he could never have imagined how far from his original ideals he would eventually climb. And thirty-five years later, I would want to ask him: Do you remember where you started? You saw all those lost people, your heart broke for them, and you wanted them to come to Allah and be safe. Now suicide bombers and innocent blood? Is this what you set out to do? But speaking to one's father about such things is not done in our culture. And so he continued on that dangerous path.

Chapter 3: Muslim Brotherhood

1977–1987

When my father returned to the occupied territories after his studies in Jordan, he was filled with

optimism and hope for Muslims everywhere. In his mind he saw a bright future brought about by a moderate manifestation of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Accompanying him was Ibrahim Abu Salem, one of the founders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan. Abu Salem had come to help breathe life into the stagnated Brotherhood in Palestine. He and my father worked well together, recruiting young people who shared their passion and forming them into small activist groups.

In 1977, with only fifty dinars in his pocket, Hassan married Ibrahim Abu Salem's sister Sabha Abu Salem. I was born the following year.

When I was seven years old, our family moved to Al-Bireh, the twin city of Ramallah, and my father became imam of Al-Amari refugee camp, which was established within Al-Bireh's municipal borders. Nineteen camps dotted the West Bank, and Al-Amari had been established in 1949 on about twenty-two acres. By 1957, its weathered tents had been replaced by wall-to-wall, back-to-back concrete houses. Streets were the width of a car, their gutters flowing with raw sewage like rivers of sludge. The camp was overcrowded; the water, undrinkable. One lone tree stood at the center of the camp. The refugees depended on the United Nations for everything—housing, food, clothing, medical care, and education.

When my father went to the mosque for the first time, he was disappointed to find only two rows of people praying, with twenty men in each row. Several months after he began to preach in the camp, however, people filled the mosque and overflowed into the streets. In addition to his devotion to Allah, my father had a great love and compassion for the Muslim people. And in return, they, too, grew to love him very much.

Hassan Yousef was so likable because he was just like everyone else. He did not think of himself as higher than those he served. He lived as they lived, ate what they ate, prayed like they prayed. He didn't wear fancy clothes. He drew a small salary from the Jordanian government—barely enough to cover his expenses—which supported the operation and maintenance of religious sites. His official day off was Monday, but he never took it. He didn't work for wages; he worked to please Allah. For him, this was his holy duty, his life's purpose.

In September 1987, my father took a second job teaching religion to the Muslim students who attended a private Christian school in the West Bank. Of course, that meant we saw less of him than before—not because he didn't love his family but because he loved Allah more. What we didn't realize, however, was that a time was coming in the days ahead when we would hardly see him at all.

While my father worked, my mother carried the burden of raising the children alone. She taught us how to be good Muslims, waking us for dawn prayer when we were old enough and encouraging us to fast during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. There were now six of us—my brothers Sohayb, Seif, and Oways; my sisters Sabeela and Tasneem; and myself. Even with my father's income from two jobs, we barely had enough money to pay the bills. My mother worked hard to stretch every dinar until it snapped.

Sabeela and Tasneem started helping my mother with the chores when they were very young. Sweet and pure and beautiful, my sisters never complained, even though their toys were covered with dust because they didn't have time to play with them. Instead, their new toys were kitchen utensils.

“You do too much, Sabeela,” my mother told my oldest sister. “You need to stop and rest.”

But Sabeela just smiled and continued working.

My brother Sohayb and I learned very early how to build a fire and use the oven. We did our share of cooking and washing dishes, and we all looked after Oways, the baby.

Our favorite game was called Stars. My mother wrote our names on a sheet of paper, and every night before bedtime, we gathered in a circle so she could award us “stars” based on what we had done that day. At the end of the month, the one who had the most stars was the winner; it was usually Sabeela. Of course, we had no money for actual prizes, but it didn’t matter. Stars was more about earning our mother’s appreciation and honor than anything else, and we always waited eagerly for our little moments of glory.

The Ali Mosque was just half a mile away from our house, and I felt very proud to be able to walk there by myself. I desperately wanted to be like my father, just as he had wanted to be like his father.

Across the street from Ali Mosque loomed one of the largest cemeteries I had ever seen. Serving Ramallah, Al-Bireh, and the refugee camps, the cemetery was five times as big as our entire neighborhood and was surrounded by a two-foot-high wall. Five times a day, when the adhan called us to prayer, I walked to and from the mosque past thousands of graves. For a boy my age, the place was unbelievably creepy, especially at night when it was totally dark. I couldn’t help imagining the roots of the big trees feeding on the buried bodies.

Once when the imam called us to noon prayer, I purified myself, put on some cologne, dressed in nice clothes like my father wore, and set off for the mosque. It was a beautiful day. As I neared the mosque, I noticed that more cars than usual were parked outside, and a group of people were standing near the entrance. I removed my shoes like I always did and went in. Just inside the door was a dead body, wrapped in white cotton in an open box. I had never seen a corpse before, and even though I knew I shouldn’t stare, I couldn’t take my eyes off him. He was wrapped in a sheet, with only his face exposed. I watched his chest closely, half expecting him to start breathing again.

The imam called us to line up for prayer, and I went to the front with everyone else, though I kept glancing back at the body in the box. When we finished our recitations, the imam called for the body to be brought to the front to receive prayer. Eight men lifted the coffin to their shoulders, and one man shouted, “La ilaha illallah! [There is no God but Allah!]” As if on cue, everyone else began shouting as well: “La ilaha illallah! La ilaha illallah!”

I put on my shoes as quickly as I could and followed the crowd as it moved into the cemetery. Because I was so short, I had to run between the legs of the older guys just to keep up. I had never actually been inside the cemetery, but I reasoned that I would be safe since I was with so many other people.

“Do not step on the graves,” someone shouted. “It is forbidden!”

I carefully made my way through the crowd until we arrived at the edge of a deep, open grave. I peered to the bottom of the eight-foot hole where an old man was standing. I had heard some of the kids in the neighborhood talk about this man, Juma’a. They said he never attended mosque and did not believe in the god of the Qur’an, but he buried everybody, sometimes two or three bodies a day.

Isn’t he afraid of death at all? I wondered.

The men lowered the corpse into Juma’a’s strong arms. Then they handed him a bottle of cologne and some green stuff that smelled fresh and nice. He opened the winding sheet and poured the liquid over the body.

Juma'a turned the body onto its right side, facing Mecca, and built a little box around it with pieces of concrete. As four men with shovels filled in the hole, the imam began to preach. He began like my father.

"This man is gone," he said as the dirt fell onto the dead man's face and neck and arms. "He left everything behind—his money, building, sons, daughters, and wife. This is the destiny of each of us."

He urged us to repent and stop sinning. And then he said something I had never heard from my father: "This man's soul will soon return to him and two terrible angels named Munkar and Nakir will come out of the sky to examine him. They will grab his body and shake him, asking, 'Who is your God?' If he answers incorrectly, they will beat him with a big hammer and send him down into the earth for seventy years. Allah, we ask you to give us the right answers when our time comes!"

I stared down into the open grave, horrified. The body was nearly covered by now, and I wondered how long it would be before the interrogation would begin.

"And if his answers are not satisfactory, the weight of the dirt above him will crush his ribs. Worms will slowly devour his flesh. He will be tormented by a snake with ninety-nine heads and a scorpion the size of a camel's neck until the resurrection of the dead, when his suffering may earn Allah's forgiveness."

I couldn't believe all this was happening right by my house every time they buried someone. I had never felt good about this cemetery; now I felt even worse. I decided that I needed to memorize the questions, so when the angels interrogated me after I died I would be able to answer correctly.

The imam said that the examination would begin as soon as the last person left the cemetery. I went home, but I could not stop thinking about what he had said. I decided to head back to the cemetery and listen for the torture. I went around the neighborhood, trying to get my friends to come with me, but they all thought I was crazy. I would have to go alone. All the way back to the cemetery, I trembled with fear. I couldn't control it. Soon I found myself standing in an ocean of graves. I wanted to run, but my curiosity was stronger than my dread. I wanted to hear questions, screaming—anything. But I heard nothing. I moved closer until I touched a headstone. Only silence. An hour later, I was bored and went home.

My mother was busy in the kitchen. I told her that I had gone to the cemetery where the imam said there would be torture.

"And . . . ?"

"And I went back after the people left the dead man, but nothing happened."

"Torture can only be heard by animals," she explained, "not humans."

For an eight-year-old boy, that explanation made perfect sense.

Every day after that, I watched as more bodies were brought to the cemetery. After a while, I actually began to get used to it and started hanging around just to see who had died. Yesterday, a woman. Today, a man. One day, they brought two people in, and then a couple of hours later, they brought someone else. When no one new came, I walked among the tombs and read about the people already buried there. Dead a hundred years. Dead twenty-five. What was his name? Where was she from? The cemetery became my playground.

Like me, my friends were afraid of the cemetery at first. But we dared each other to go inside the walls

at night, and since none of us wanted to be seen as cowards, we all eventually overcame our fears. We even played soccer in the open spaces.

As our family grew, so did the Muslim Brotherhood. Before long, it had transitioned from an organization of the poor and refugees to include educated young men and women, businessmen, and professionals who gave out of their own pockets to build schools and charities and clinics.

Seeing this growth, many young people in the Islamic movement, particularly those in Gaza, decided that the Brotherhood needed to take a stand against the Israeli occupation. We have taken care of society, they said, and we will continue to do that. But will we accept occupation forever? Doesn't the Qur'an command us to drive out the Jewish invaders? These young men were unarmed, but they were tough and hard and spoiling for a fight.

My father and the other West Bank leaders disagreed. They were not ready to repeat the mistakes of Egypt and Syria, where the Brotherhood had attempted coups and failed. In Jordan, they argued, our brothers do not fight. They participate in elections and have a strong influence on society. My father did not oppose violence, but he didn't think his people were in any position to take on the Israeli military.

For several years, the debate within the Brotherhood continued and the grassroots pressure for action increased. Frustrated with the inaction of the Muslim Brotherhood, Fathi Shaqaqi had founded Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the late 1970s. But even so, the Muslim Brotherhood was able to maintain its nonviolent stance for another decade.

In 1986, a secret and historic meeting took place in Hebron, just south of Bethlehem. My father was there, though he didn't tell me about it until many years later. Contrary to some inaccurate historical accounts, the following seven men were present at this meeting:

- a wheelchair-bound Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, who would become the spiritual leader of the new organization
- Muhammad Jamal al-Natsheh from Hebron
- Jamal Mansour from Nablus
- Sheikh Hassan Yusef (my father)
- Mahmud Muslih from Ramallah
- Jamil Hamami from Jerusalem
- Ayman Abu Taha from Gaza

The men who attended this meeting were finally ready to fight. They agreed to begin with simple civil disobedience—throwing stones and burning tires. Their objective was to awaken, unify, and mobilize the Palestinian people and make them understand their need for independence under the banner of Allah and Islam.¹

Hamas was born. And my father climbed a few more rungs toward the top of the ladder of Islam.