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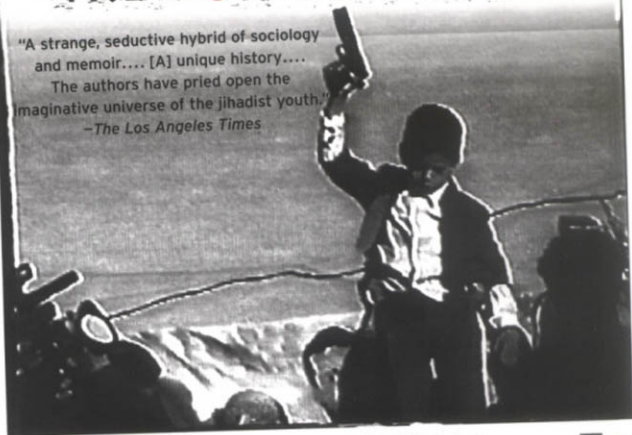
ROAD TO MARTYRS' SQUARE

A JOURNEY INTO THE WORLD OF
THE SUICIDE BOMBER

"A strange, seductive hybrid of sociology
and memoir.... [A] unique history....

The authors have pried open the
imaginative universe of the jihadist youth."

-The Los Angeles Times



ANNE MARIE OLIVER
& PAUL STEINBERG

THE ROAD TO MARTYRS' SQUARE

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**A JOURNEY INTO THE WORLD
OF THE SUICIDE BOMBER**



**ANNE MARIE OLIVER AND
PAUL F. STEINBERG**

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The vast majority of Israelis and Palestinians, we continue to believe, refuse to give in to voices from burning bushes. This book is dedicated to them . . . and to their unwritten future.



A Note on Translation

We have left as is many Arabic words and phrases that have entered the English vocabulary such as *jihad*, “holy struggle” or “holy war,” and *Allahu akbar*, variously translated as “God is great,” “God is greater,” and “God is greatest.” Although these terms are now part of the English language, they are not self-explanatory. *Jihad*, in particular, has been the subject of a great deal of controversy, with some arguing that the term refers solely to “the greater jihad,” an interiorized or spiritual struggle, as opposed to “the lesser jihad,” or holy war. When the word appears in this book, it refers to “fighting by the sword.” Similarly, *Allahu akbar* appears herein primarily as a cry of victory, expression of empowerment, and assertion of God-given grace, as when an enemy is killed, or as an invocation and prayer of dedication upon the death of a martyr, while in everyday life, the phrase expresses a multitude of sentiments, often contradictory—faith, power, astonishment, envy, pride, humility, even mockery. Throughout, we have chosen to leave *Allah* as *Allah* rather than rendering it as the more universal “God,” not only because the word is well known to English speakers, but also because it is the word intended by the authors of the discourse found in this book. Other Arabic terms that occur frequently include *mujahid*, or “holy warrior” *fi sabil Allah*, “on the path of Allah,” and its plural, *mujahidun*. For the sake of simplicity, we have kept the plural of this and like terms in nominative form regardless of actual usage.

A term deserving special note is *suicide bomber*. Although it neglects the homicidal aspect inherent in suicide bombings, its meaning is widely understood, and we have used it. The word preferred by Palestinians is *shahid*, which appears

here in translation as “martyr.” The term is problematic, given that it can be used to signify approval of a person or action. In this work, we are merely replicating the usage of Palestinians during the intifada, as in the book’s title, which makes reference to “Martyrs’ Square,” an actual place as well as a figure. Derived from the verb *shabada*, “to witness,” *shahid* possesses rich cognates such as *ash-shabadatain*, “the double witness,” the formula uttered by the worshipper with index finger raised toward the end of the second *rak’a* (prostration) of the Islamic prayer cycle, and *shahida*, a word that means both “tombstone” and “index finger,” and in the media of Hamas, “trigger finger” as well. In addition, it is the name given to the “one-way sign,” the fist with the index finger raised heavenward, used by Islamist activists to signify their allegiance to the ideology of the Islamic Movement.

Last, we would note that the declamatory style of writing that characterizes many intifada texts poses particular problems for the translator. Entire paragraphs are not infrequently composed of one long sentence, continuing for a page or longer. Typically, many clauses are strung together with little attention paid to continuity of tense or person. To reproduce exactly this kind of rhetoric would result in an unreadable text; to translate it into fluid English would be to lose much of the flavor of the genre. We have aimed for a middle course.

*O madmen of Gaza
A thousand welcomes
to madmen
if they liberate us.
Truly, the age of political reason
slipped away long ago
so, then, teach us madness . . .
—Nizar Qabbani*

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.

—Wittgenstein

*And he turned away from them, and said, O my sorrow for Yusuf!
And his eyes became white on account of the grief, then he repressed it.*

—Qur'an 12:84, "Yusuf"

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Introduction

For six months at the beginning of the intifada, we lived with a Palestinian family in the Gaza Strip. Having recently arrived in the region (separately and from opposite coasts), we knew Gaza and the West Bank largely through what we'd read. We were open to large numbers of often competing forces and ideas, and gladly talked to anyone who would talk with us—nationalists and Islamists, leaders and followers, stone throwers and spokesmen, militants and bystanders.

We later settled in the Armenian Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, whose massive stone walls were something of a cryptographic puzzle, covered as they were by layers of graffiti that would appear seemingly out of the blue, disappearing often as quickly. We soon began photographing and translating the messages, which proved far more interesting than we initially could have imagined, offering a new means for understanding the uprising and a way of bypassing the scripts usually reserved for journalists and researchers, scripts that by then we knew well. Although the beginnings were largely haphazard, by 1990, we had something of a project going; by 1996, we'd amassed a substantial collection of the political ephemera and underground media of the intifada—graffiti, posters, martyr cards, videotapes, and audiocassettes.

Graffiti comprised one of the very earliest media used during the intifada and came to cover not only the walls of the West Bank and Gaza Strip but almost every conceivable surface. The graffitiists were mostly young men in their teens and twenties whom Palestinians referred to as *shabab* (singular, *shabb*), a word connoting testosteronic swagger and street machismo and perhaps best translated as “the guys.” One of the major tasks of the shabab in the early days

of the uprising, as they saw it, was informing and mobilizing the general public. With conventional modes of communication heavily censored by the Israeli military government, and Palestinian newspapers and other media remaining largely in the hands of an older and more cautious elite, graffiti quickly came to be used for this purpose. Palestinians referred to it, some with a wink, as “our newspaper.” The Israelis, as quickly, recognized the power of the medium and declared the posting of graffiti illegal.¹ If the graffitist were wearing a mask, he could be shot and killed.

Graffiti frequently reproduced lines from the leaflets of the Unified National Leadership (UNL), a nationalist umbrella group, and those of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, the two major Islamist organizations in the territories. While many messages were highly formulaic, consisting of elaborate greetings, calls for national unity, factional advertisements, and territorial markers, graffiti actually served a wide variety of functions. It was used, among other things, to announce strike days, call for boycotts, and warn accused collaborators. Regardless of content, messages were commonly erased or edited within days, sometimes hours, by passing Israel Defense Forces (IDF) patrols or, less often, by Israeli settlers and competing Palestinian factions. Only in the more isolated villages, where Israeli patrols rarely ventured, did messages avoid being whitewashed, sometimes staying up for months—a fact that often made it difficult to pinpoint when they had been posted.

Less ephemeral than graffiti were the posters and sometimes massive canvases that filled funeral tents, public squares, and mosques throughout the Bank and Strip. Although some were printed on underground presses, many posters were simply photocopied drawings, often taped together to form long banners. When more time was available, activists created elaborate canvases, making do with whatever materials could be had—bed sheets and house paint, newspaper clippings and fluorescent highlighters, poster board and crayon. Whatever their media, artists visualized elemental themes and long-standing obsessions—life and death, suffering and revenge, martyrdom and apocalypse, Paradise and Hell.

As the intifada evolved, the often predictable slogans of the early days gave way to more sophisticated media—audiocassettes of political music, videotapes of the interrogations of collaborators and the last words of suicide bombers, martyr books recalling hagiographies. The transformation was sudden and rather unexpected, beginning in the early 1990s, when Hamas produced its earliest video on the group’s military wing, the Battalions of ‘Izz ad-Din al-Qassam, named after one of the influential clerics and leaders of the Arab Revolt in Palestine against the Jews and the British. We collected these media as well, smuggling them out of Gaza under the suspicious gaze of IDF soldiers and, later, the Palestinian Authority (PA). In the end, we spent about six years off and on archiving the political ephemera and street media of the intifada in Jerusalem and 125 of the cities and villages of the West Bank and Gaza Strip,

seeing it as our task to record or collect material before it disappeared; in many cases, our record is the only one that exists.

If collecting and translating were difficult, writing was especially so, due to the often macabre nature of much of the material as well as the many problems inherent in writing about political and religious issues that take the form of Manichaean dramas. Anyone who has tried to write about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, tried to understand both sides of that conflict, will know what we mean when we compare it to walking through a minefield. Every term carries within itself a preemptive judgment—a burden evident not only in fateful dyads such as “Judea and Samaria” versus “the West Bank and Gaza Strip,” “terrorist” versus “militant,” “Palestinian” versus “Arab,” “Jew” versus “Israeli,” and so forth, but also in the overabundance of determiners, capital letters, and exclamation marks that pepper discourse on the conflict. Every choice is forced; there are no neutral terms. An ideological proclivity—indeed, often an entire worldview—is marked in the most minute of details—the choice, say, between “territories” and “Territories,” “Occupied Territories” and “occupied territories,” “the occupied territories” and “the Occupied Territories.” For the writer who refuses to submit to this sort of determinism, the result is exhaustion and often paralysis.

Part memoir, part travelogue, part journey into the underground media of the intifada, part exploration of the links between martyrdom and “identity politics,” this book is neither a political analysis nor a prescription for foreign policy. We do not attempt comparisons, whether with the Japanese kamikaze pilots of World War II or the suicide squadrons of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. We do not provide a history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nor do we chronicle other forms of violence within that conflict—that of extremists in the Israeli settler movement, say, or Kach, the radical right-wing Israeli party headed by the late Rabbi Meir Kahane and barred from the Knesset in 1988 for its racist platform—subjects for other books. No doubt, these groups exert tremendous influence on Israeli society at large, driving the wider culture in dangerous, even catastrophic directions. During the time we lived in the region, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by Yigal Amir, and Baruch Goldstein, an American doctor and Kahane follower, mowed down twenty-nine Muslim worshippers in the Tomb of the Patriarchs in what soon became known as “the Hebron Massacre.” These acts were widely regarded with revulsion by Israeli citizens and condemned as acts of lunacy and terror by Israeli politicians, right and left. Be that as it may, Goldstein’s monument continues to be rebuilt in Kiryat Arba, no matter how many times the Israeli army knocks it down; and there are more than a few people among the more ardent champions of the settler movement who will mutter something about a higher purpose guiding the hand of Rabin’s assassin. At this point, however, due largely to the heterogeneity of Israeli society and its strong secular tradition, people

like Yigal Amir and Baruch Goldstein have failed to inspire admiration in the larger population, much less mass movements in the state of Israel.

And beyond. For here is a conflict that magnetizes not only Israelis and Palestinians, but also people around the globe—pilgrims, spiritual accountants, disaster groupies, conspiracy buffs, armchair revolutionaries, frustrated fascists, apocalypticists, spymasters, victimologists, and saviors manqué—as well as those who don't yet know they are true believers. Indeed, it would not be too far off the mark to say that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has itself become the crux of a new religion, piggybacking the old, transmuting its power while denying its origins. Call it *religion*, call it *ideology*, but the flow of life and history is always being punctured here from above, transforming everything into parable, morality play, and prophecy. Indeed, the vertical, or grandiose, element is one of the most fundamental characteristics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even when, or perhaps especially when, the most banal events are related, the language inevitably references God, and even when scripture, that most vertical of languages, is not directly quoted, it lingers in the background, tenacious and determinative.

In a not dissimilar way, although the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is barely a hundred years old, it is treated by expert and layperson alike as “ancient” or even “timeless.” This mythology should be questioned. Its basis is often simply ignorance. Many cannot seem to separate the present conflict from the biblical narratives they grew up hearing. Perniciously, reliance on the notion of “from time immemorial” signals a predestination and fatality, too often serving as a justification for whatever needs to be justified.

We do not pretend to have escaped the lures and pitfalls of writing about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; we but note that we are aware of their existence and have tried to avoid them. We gave serious thought, for instance, to the question of whether to include the names of the suicide bombers that appear in Part III,² as well as their victims, in the end deeming it necessary. Indeed, almost every term in this book has been debated not only between ourselves but also with others. As with so much of the material in our collection, people tended to see what they wanted to see—some insisting on flowers where there was blood; others seeing blood where there were flowers.

In Part I, we tell the story of our introduction to Hamas and Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, the movement's late founder, spiritual leader, and symbol. It is also a recollection of our time in Gaza and the West Bank during the intifada, a personal account of bewilderment, betrayal, conversion, adolescent absolutism, witness, the limits of witness, and what could be called “the literalist quest.”

In Part II, we offer a portfolio of some of the major scripts of the intifada through examples drawn from our archive. From the beginning, the uprising was presented as the fulfillment of long-cherished scripts of jihad, martyrdom, self-sacrifice, and victory. Youth, in particular, saw these scripts as programs to be actualized, their truth instantiated with each death occurring under their banner.

In Part III, we focus on the videotaped last words of one cell of Hamas suicide bombers, weaving scenes from the tape with interviews with their families, themselves last words of sorts. Our intent is not to provide insight into “the mind of the suicide bomber,” an impossible task, but rather to explore the transformative power granted those who not only speak the old scripts but also carry them out.

Our focus throughout is Hamas (“zeal” in Arabic), a movement whose motto appears as “the eighth subject” of the group’s covenant: “Allah is its goal, the Prophet its ideal, the Qur’an its constitution, jihad its way, and death in the service of Allah its aspiration.” Not only did Hamas pay the most attention to the production and dissemination of media in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the first intifada but it also shaped the uprising in a way unlike any of the other Palestinian factions that participated in the intifada, nationalist or Islamist. These factions included Fatah, the largest and most popular subgroup within the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), founded and led by Yasir Arafat; the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), a Marxist group that was the faction of choice for those who rejected what they saw as the conciliatory policies of Fatah, but who were not particularly religious; the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), a left-wing faction that split off from the PFLP in 1969; the Communist Party (Hashaf), renamed in October 1991 “the Palestinian People’s Party” (PPP), a faction that has long argued for moderation; and the Islamic Jihad, a militant Islamist group. Hamas initiated suicide bombings in 1994 and led them until the Aqsa Brigades of Fatah, Hamas’ primary political and military rival, also began carrying them out during the second intifada. By then—indeed, by the end of the first intifada, we would argue—suicide bombings had gathered their own apocalyptic momentum.

Having the last word is, of course, the essence of all forms of power; and in suicide bombings, we see this truth exhibited in radical form. Hamas has long advocated suicide bombings, disregarding all conventions by which the acceptability of killing is calculated. “Glory does not build its lofty edifice except with skulls,” wrote the famed Palestinian Islamist ‘Abdullah Yusuf ‘Azzam³ in “Martyrs”; “honor and respect cannot be established except on a foundation of cripples and corpses.”⁴ Killed by a car bomb in Peshawar, Pakistan in 1989, ‘Azzam is considered the quintessential mujahid and martyr by members of Hamas. He was the commander of the Palestinian “Afghans,” the name given to Arabs who volunteered to fight in Afghanistan against the Soviets, many of whom saw the jihad in Afghanistan as the prelude to a greater jihad to be fought against Israel, holding as their slogan, “The road to Palestine leads through Afghanistan,” reminiscent of the PFLP’s erstwhile slogan, “The road to Palestine leads through Jordan.”⁵ ‘Azzam is also believed to have been the mentor of ‘Usama bin Laden, the two later together founding Maktab al-Khidamat, a recruiting office for young men aiming to become mujahidun—an office that, in many respects,

can be seen as the precursor of al-Qa'ida, which bin Laden set up shortly after he and 'Azzam parted ways in the late 1980s.

One would be hard pressed to find a more unanswerable rhetoric than that of Hamas or a more unanswerable act than the murder-suicides, the "happy deaths," rehearsed and carried out by the young men of its suicide squads. Since Oslo, Hamas has increasingly found itself on the defensive; significantly, it was at this critical turning point that "hunters" and suicide bombers began to displace the stone throwers and demonstrators of the early years of the uprising. The visceral rhetoric of many of the texts examined in this book can be said to represent a final attempt to have the last word, to invest an increasingly threatened program with the aura of physical reality, as though the "tears and screaming and death" of the enemy—to quote one of the movement's documents—could compensate for the lack of a blueprint, as though the ultimate proof of the movement's effectiveness were the degree of fear it inspires in the enemy.

The rhetoric of Hamas has long been characterized by a peculiar blend of self-righteousness and the lurid, the visceral and the abstract, grandiosity and matter-of-factness. It is precisely through such rhetoric, one could say, that the organization has successfully relegated substantive issues to the shadows of irrelevance. Those who seek to understand Hamas and like movements but ignore the scripts they use to lend their agenda the force of prophecy and divine command neglect a major means by which they have chosen to distinguish themselves. "Indeed, our words remain dead until we die in their cause," wrote Said Qutb, the seminal Islamist thinker and Muslim Brother, whose writings continue to inspire mujahidun in Palestine and around the world, "so they remain alive amongst the living." The logic is circular. The more scripts are invested with the power to determine life and death, the more they are sacralized; the greater the number of people willing to die on their behalf, the more power they accrue. This is, of course, the literalist project, which initially promises to jumpstart change in overdetermined systems through the actualization of texts, but which almost inevitably results in a radical constriction of the world. Literalism, it should be clear, is more than "just" a philosophy of language. It is capable of creating and destroying worlds. It closes the door on confusion and uncertainty but also on what could be called the salvation of accident, the ways in which contingency facilitates freedom, allowing people to move in multifarious directions, a feeling as necessary for language as it is for life itself—for life, that is, to be felt as life.

Far from being an aberration, suicide bombings are the most complete realization of a particular rhetoric and ideology; for many years, they were a, if not the, primary means by which Hamas attempted to differentiate itself from the PLO. By the end of the first intifada, they had become thoroughly institutionalized. The families of bombers were given compensation packages by Hamas and Iraq, martyr videos featured advertisements for coming attractions, and bereaved families could purchase ready-made martyr plaques with appro-

priate Qur'anic scriptures and a blank space in which to paste a photo of their beloved dead. By the second intifada, dubbed "al-Aqsa intifada," lengthy indoctrination and training sessions for suicide bombers were no longer deemed necessary. Indeed, the script was so well known that someone who wanted to become a bomber, it was said, was simply given a bomb; he decided the coordinates for himself. More significantly, the practice jumped across the nationalist/Islamist divide when in 2002, the Aqsa Brigades of Fatah also began carrying out suicide bombings. Soon enough, the group began doing something that Hamas had never done by sending out young women as well as young men on these missions. In the winter of 2004, Hamas followed suit and sent out its own female suicide bomber, a twenty-two-year-old woman from a wealthy family in the Gaza Strip and the mother of two young children, one of whom, reportedly, was not even yet weaned. Before her martyrdom, she posed with her three-year-old in coordinating outfits and headbands inscribed with sacred writing against an elaborate Islamist backdrop. She held an assault rifle in her hand; the child held a rocket-propelled grenade. After she blew herself up, Sheikh Ahmad Yasin hailed the act as "a new development in resistance against the enemy."⁶

Support for suicide bombings went far beyond the military wings of the nationalist and Islamist movements. Parents dressed their babies and toddlers as suicide bombers and had them photographed in local photography studios. Children marched with suicide belts around their chests. University exhibitions included one that recreated an actual suicide bombing carried out in the Sbarro restaurant in Jerusalem, replete with pizza slices and bloody body parts. The Palestinian Authority named popular soccer tournaments after martyrs belonging both to Fatah and the rival Hamas, with even the suicide bomber who blew himself up during an Israeli family's celebration of Passover, killing thirty of them, thus honored. On public TV, the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation aired videos of men being lured away by the *hur*, the beautiful virgins of Paradise promised to martyrs, as if they were commercials or public service announcements. If the term *cult* did not suggest a fringe phenomenon, we might begin to speak of a cult of martyrdom; as it is, the devotees of death on all fronts have become too numerous and too diverse for us to do so any longer.

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PART ONE



Saint Yasin

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1. Welcome to Planet X

When we first moved to Gaza in 1988, not long after the intifada had broken out, Sheikh Ahmad Yasin of the Islamic Resistance Movement—better known by its acronym *Hamas*—was virtually unknown. By the time we left the area five years later, a series of suicide bombings had made him famous around the world, and ordinary people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip had begun to express some degree of sympathy with the man and the movement. Even good friends began to renounce the leftist ideology of their youth, gave up occasional drinking sprees, got married, and got religion. Getting religion obviously didn't mean you were necessarily a Hamasawi, a Hamas devotee, but in the highly politicized world of the Bank and Strip, the lines between the two were easily blurred.

The first casualty in our circle was Yusuf—poet, musician, luftmensch, and longtime member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Yusuf had enticed us down to Gaza to be teachers in a school that never seemed to materialize. He would lead us to a cinderblock shell of a room somewhere in the camps, and there, standing among small mountains of sand and glass and shreds of fiberglass roofing, announce, “And here we will have a blackboard . . . and here we will put a bookcase . . . and here . . .” In his mind, the place just needed a little spring cleaning.

Instead of starting a school, we spent most of our time talking about “the situation” and “our dear cousins,” as Yusuf ironically referred to Jews, and going on “adventures,” as he liked to call busting curfews and generally being reckless.

We mean the word in a benign, nonfrivolous way, a sort of openness to risk and life, for Yusuf lived every moment as though there might be no tomorrow, as though at any moment he might open his hands and give you everything he had and never look back. There are people in the world like that, their every word and gesture bespeaking a rare and true curiosity, an exuberance of spirit, a munificence directed toward the greatest and smallest of things.

Those were heady days on "Planet X"—a kooky, sci-fi-like phrase one of Yusuf's brothers had discovered in a BBC English course book and applied to Gaza, as in "Welcome to Planet X!" The phrase, invariably uttered in a mock-epic tone, aptly captured the isolation of Gaza, a thin strip of land sandwiched between Egypt, Israel, and the Mediterranean Sea, crammed with somewhere around a million Palestinians, the majority refugees. The words also served as a disdainful commentary on the massive McDonald's-style "Welcome to Gaza" arches that the Israeli civil administration had erected in Arabic, Hebrew, and English at the entrance to the major cities in the Strip after the 1967 war (a war in which Israel had defeated the armies of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria over the course of six days and had been left holding the Sinai peninsula, Gaza Strip, West Bank, and Golan Heights). It also symbolized the small and fragile universe the three of us had created around ourselves, the strangeness that descended whenever one of us did something that threatened that universe.

Yusuf's conversion was of this order. A year after we left the Strip and moved back to Jerusalem, his twinkling style suddenly turned serious and foreboding. He abandoned his romantic quests, got married, and began to frequent the mosque on a daily basis. An explanation of some sort was necessary, but Yusuf didn't have the words for it. "I grew tired, my friends," he said with a sigh and embarrassed smile, as we stood together before a pen containing a fattened white goat that would soon be sacrificed for an upcoming feast. Later, he would say that an angel had come to him in a vision and commanded him to change his ways. It didn't last.

Not long after, our friend 'Ali grew a beard, which by then had become the major corporeal marker of the Hamas disciple. We'd been friends with 'Ali since 1987, and had spent so much time together that his family had practically adopted us. Unlike Yusuf, his old college buddy, 'Ali was not big on adventures, and we mostly just hung out together in the small house rented by his family in a little town in the West Bank not far from the Green Line, the old ceasefire line of 1948 separating Israel from the West Bank and Gaza.

The flat held two large sofas, twin beds, a TV, and a refrigerator. There was no running water. Nine people slept in the two rooms that comprised the apartment, sometimes more. On any given day, there might be sixteen people scattered in and around the house, barely able to move. The refrigerator was the centerpiece of the house, its hinge, so to speak, for it was situated an inch or two from the front door in the three-by-three space that connected the two rooms of the house. If its door were open, you could neither enter nor exit the house nor could you go from the living room to the bedroom, and vice versa.

Outside, there was a garden, which contained an outhouse, a plum tree, and the tattered remnants of a yellow couch from which one had an unobstructed view of an Israeli settlement. Its white houses with their huge plate-glass windows and synthetic red pan-tile roofs glittered like Lego constructions; when hit by the sun in the right way, they would send blinding reflections across the wadi, like messages with no content.

Once a week on Saturday, 'Ali's mother, who in keeping with local tradition was called *Im-'Ali*, or "mother of 'Ali" after her eldest son, would set off in the morning to buy a couple of chickens, returning home hours later from the neighborhood oven with a huge moveable feast balanced neatly on her graying head. Before lunch, 'Ali's father would kneel and pray on the concrete path in front of the apartment, oblivious of the wild sounds emanating from the window directly above him—Ninja avengers, Egyptian belly dancers, Kung Fu kings, Indian lovers, Syrian partygoers, Israeli actors playing Arab terrorists in cheesy Globus-Golan movies, Hamas suicide bombers. A video was constantly playing. They were all pirated, of unknown generation, barely visible through the bootleg fuzz. You really got your money's worth out of the Indian ones, which could last for up to four hours. It was after watching a version of *Boyz n the Hood* that 'Ali started calling his little part of the West Bank a "hood" without a trace of irony.

Once in a while, we'd talk 'Ali into going out with us. It wasn't his favorite thing to do. Sometimes, we'd be stoned. Sometimes, children would stop our rental car at the entrance to a village and demand to know our political affiliation. "What are you," they'd demand to know with kiddie bravado, "Fatah or Hamas?" Sometimes, they'd warn us not to enter the village, saying that if we did, we'd be killed.

'Ali's sister Nadia would often accompany us on these expeditions, and we'd stop here and there and visit friends of hers scattered across the Bank. Once, she took us to a very powerful "witch" who possessed a magic well and whose husband walked around with a pistol on his hip—a sure sign that he was an Israeli collaborator. The witch told us that the jinn that lived in her well—it was a red jinn, to be exact—could grant us any wish we desired, but that it would need to "borrow" a hundred-shekel note for its efforts. At the time, one-hundred shekels was a huge amount of money for us, so we hemmed and hawed a bit. "Come on, come on," said Nadia, elbowing us, her eyes becoming as wide as saucers, as though our hesitation were embarrassing her, "do you think you'll never see it again? Give it to her. Come on!" And with that, she handed the witch a crisp hundred-shekel note of her own, an act that made the prospect of seeing our money again a little brighter. So we handed a note to the witch, which she then appeared to slip in an envelope and burn with great ceremony, the flames licking preternaturally high in the air. We never saw the money again. Moreover, our wish was not granted.

Another time, Nadia took us to a village north of Nablus to meet a local PFLP artist who proudly showed us an idyllic scene he'd recently painted in his

best friend's bedroom—a little man fishing beneath a setting sun. The artist had seemed quite charming till we learned that he ate his daily hummus out of an ancient Roman skull he'd disinterred from its final resting place in the hills above his home, and he had recently broken all the fingers, one by one, of a guy he'd accused of collaboration, a guy who but a couple of months before had hosted us for the night.

If you expressed a little shock at such things, 'Ali would cluck his tongue and shake his head and say that there were good people and bad people in the world. This was his most basic philosophy by which he explained the craziness around him. Goodness and badness, moreover, were fairly evenly distributed across the planet, in his mind, and had nothing to do with religion per se; otherwise, he wouldn't be hanging out with unbelievers like us. He was a guy of few words, but he would argue with any visitor who had succumbed to the Manichaeanism of the intifada. He spoke when it was his nature to be silent, and kept friends who made him not a little suspect. "Bring'em to Kalandia [Refugee Camp]," his neighbors down the road once told him, "and we'll show you what to do with them!"—"them," of course, being us.

When he called to say that he too had become religious, it was a sad day. When we saw him again, his nationalist mustache had been permanently supplemented with an Islamist-style beard (he had gone back and forth for awhile); he was reading Garaudy, the French convert to Islam and Holocaust denier, for pleasure; and he had finally given in to his mother's wish that he marry the sister of his brother's wife, a cousin from the camps of Gaza. He said that at long last he had acquired peace of mind.

By then, the once fuzzy line between being religious and being a Hamasawi was for most people virtually nonexistent. The very presence of a beard was a strong and unmistakable signifier of a radical political as well as religious affiliation, and the two could no longer be separated. What had happened? Sometimes we could almost blame ourselves. At our instigation, 'Ali had helped us translate masses of Hamas propaganda—leaflets and documents, videotapes and audiocassettes, stuff we'd collected over years of fieldwork in the Bank and Strip. Had the stuff been so potent it had managed to pull even him over?

'Ali had drawn his own green line. Thenceforth, we could only look across to a place beyond and remember. If we would remain friends to the end, it was because 'Ali's jump into Islamism felt less like betrayal, a transgression of the unwritten rules by which we lived, than it did suicide.

2. Look with Your Ears, My Friend

The induction ceremony had been held shortly after we first arrived in Gaza, which suddenly promised to live up to its reputation as the worst place on earth. Asked if we liked "adventure," Yusuf had led us into Beach Camp, then