

Chapter 4— Islam's "Neglected Duty"

The selection of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania as targets on August 7, 1998, for bombings allegedly arranged by **Osama bin Laden** followed a macabre tradition. Symbols of secular political power were also chosen—perhaps again by **bin Laden—when** an American military residence hall in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, was bombed in 1996 and when a truckload of explosives was ignited in the parking garage of New York City's World Trade Center in 1993. Although many of the bombing sites chosen by the Lebanese Amal and Hizbollah movements in the 1980s and 1990s were military, the actions of **bin Laden—along** with Hamas in Palestine and the al Gamaa-i Islamiya movement in Egypt in the 1990s—were aimed more broadly. They were directed not only at symbols of political and economic power, such as embassies and trade centers, but also at other centers of secular life: residence halls, office buildings, buses, shopping malls, cruise boats, and coffeehouses. In Algeria the inhabitants of whole villages were slaughtered, allegedly by supporters of the Islamic Salvation Front. All of these incidents were assaults on society as a whole.

This series of terrifying events raises a complicated question: why have these three things—religious conviction, hatred of secular society, and the demonstration of power through acts of violence—so frequently coalesced in recent Islamic activist movements? To begin to search for answers to this question, I talked with one of the men convicted of the bombing of the World Trade Center, Mahmud Abouhalima. He was

part of a group of Muslims, most of them from Egypt, who lived on the outskirts of New York City in Queens and Jersey City and came together as a paramilitary organization through their commitment to a visionary Muslim ideology articulated by a remarkable leader, Sheik Omar Abdul Rahman.

Mahmud Abouhalima and the World Trade Center Bombing

Mahmud Abouhalima is a strong, tall man whose striking red hair and beard have led some to call him "Mahmud the Red."¹ He was accused but never convicted of being the cab driver for the bungled getaway following the assassination of Rabbi Meir Kahane in 1990. His relationship with the alleged assassin, El Sayyid Nosair, is well established, however, and he is said to have admitted to an investigator that he tried to buy weapons to defend his group against the Jewish Defense League, an American organization founded by Kahane. The man from whom he allegedly attempted to buy the weapons, Wadiah el Hage, was a Lebanese Muslim living in Texas who later worked for **Osama bin Laden**, and who was arrested in September 1998 for being part of the network involved in the bombing of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.² Though Abouhalima's ties to **bin Laden** are at best obscure, he is well known for his associations with Sheik Omar Abdul Rahman and the group responsible for the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, an act for which Abouhalima himself was charged, tried, and convicted. When I spoke to him on two occasions in 1997, he was serving a lifetime sentence at a federal penitentiary.³

According to some accounts of the World Trade Center blast, Abouhalima was the "mastermind" of the event, a label of notoriety that is sometimes also given to his fellow activist, Ramzi Yousef.⁴ In the trial that convicted him in 1994, Abouhalima was portrayed as crucial to the attack: evidence was presented that placed him at the site of the New Jersey warehouse where bomb materials were collected and assembled, and among the members of the group who stopped at a filling station to refuel the rental truck as it made its final trip to the World Trade Center parking lot the night before the explosion. At the time of the blast itself, at noon on February 26, 1993, some claimed that Abouhalima was across the street from the towers, looking expectantly out the window of the classical-music annex of a record store, J&R Music, disappointed that the bombing caused such little damage.⁵ If the

amount of explosives in the truck had been just a little larger and the truck placed slightly differently in the basement parking area, it would have brought down an entire tower—which most likely would have fallen sideways, destroying the second tower as well. Instead of six people killed, the number perished could easily have climbed to two hundred thousand. It would have included most of the fifty thousand workers and an equal number of visitors on site at the World Trade Center on that fateful day, plus another hundred thousand workers in the surrounding buildings, which would have been destroyed if both towers fell. If indeed Abouhalima had expected that sort of disaster, he must have been disappointed with the relatively modest explosion that resulted, even though its assault on the public's consciousness made it one of the most significant terrorist acts in American history.

The first of two conversations I had with Abouhalima took place in August 1997, when I met with him by special arrangement in an otherwise empty visitor's room of the maximum-security prison in Lompoc, California—which prides itself as "the new rock," a formidable and secure successor to Alcatraz. He was brought into the room handcuffed and accompanied by three guards. Dressed in green prison garb, Abouhalima's figure was indeed striking—tall, red-haired, his face freckled—and his English was fluid and colloquial. He leaned over as he spoke, often whispering, as if to reinforce the intimacy and importance of what he said.

When I talked with him, he was hoping that his conviction could still be appealed, and for this reason Abouhalima avoided discussing particulars related to the trial and to the bombing itself. He claimed to be innocent of all charges, a point that he repeated in letters to me in 1998 and 1999. Moreover, he claimed that he almost never talked with journalists or scholars for fear of being misquoted or—he said—falsely implicated in the crimes that put him in prison. He specifically denied the allegations of direct involvement in the World Trade Center bombing for which he had been convicted. Abouhalima related to me a dramatic moment in the trial when the prosecution's sole witness to his participation in the act—the New Jersey service station attendant on duty the night that the truck carrying the explosives was refueled—was asked to look around the courtroom and identify the tall, red-headed man he had seen with the truck at the time. Instead of pointing toward Abouhalima, the attendant startled the audience by pointing past him toward one of the jurors, saying "it was a person like this one." ⁶ Abouhalima had reasons, therefore, for thinking that the case against

him was fairly slim, and it was understandable that he did not want to discuss the bombing or the events surrounding it.

Although restricted in what he felt he could say, Abouhalima was quite eloquent on the subject that I wanted to discuss with him—the public role of Islam and its increasingly political impact. He also felt free to talk about the subject of terrorism in general and terrorist incidents of which he was not accused, including the Oklahoma City federal building bombing. The trial of Terry Nichols, one of the defendants in the case, was being conducted at the time of my second interview with him, and in response to my questions, Abouhalima discussed the progress of the trial and helped me understand why such a bombing might occur.

"It was done for a very, very specific reason," Abouhalima told me, contradicting any impression I might have had that the federal building was bombed for no reason at all, or for the most general of symbolic statements. "They had some certain target, you know, a specific achievement," Abouhalima said, adding that "they wanted to reach the government with the message that we are not tolerating the way that you are dealing with our citizens." ⁷

Was the bombing an act of terrorism, I asked him? Abouhalima thought for a moment and then explained that the whole concept was "messed up." The term seemed to be used only for incidents of violence that people didn't like, or rather, Abouhalima explained, for incidents that the media have labeled terrorist.

"What about the United States government?" Abouhalima asked me. "How do they justify their acts of bombings, of killing innocent people, directly or indirectly, openly or secretly? They're killing people everywhere in the world: before, today, and tomorrow. How do you define that?" Then he described what he regarded as the United States' terrorist attitude toward the world. According to Abouhalima, the United States tries to "terrorize nations," to "obliterate their power," and to tell them that they "are nothing" and that they "have to follow us." Abouhalima implied that many forms of international political or economic control could be kinds of terrorism. He also gave specific examples of cases where he felt the United States had used its power to kill people indiscriminately.

"In Japan, for instance," Abouhalima said, referring to the atomic bomb blasts, "through the bombs, you know, that killed more than two hundred thousand people." Perhaps it was just a coincidence, but the number of casualties Abouhalima cited in Hiroshima and Nagasaki

was the same number that would have been killed in the World Trade Center blast, according to estimates, if the bombs had been placed differently and both towers brought down, as allegedly planned.

Was the Oklahoma City blast a terrorist response to the government's terrorism? "That's what I'm saying," Abouhalima replied. "If they believe, if these guys, whoever they are, did whatever bombing they say they did in Oklahoma City, if they believe that the government unjustifiably killed the people in Waco, then they have their own way to respond. They absolutely have their own way to respond," he repeated for emphasis, indicating that the Oklahoma City bombing "response" was morally justified.

"Yet," I said in an effort to put the event in context, "it killed a lot of innocent people, and ultimately it did not seem to change anything."

"But it's as I said," Abouhalima responded, "at least the government got the message." Moreover, he told me, the only thing that humans can do in response to great injustice is to send a message. Stressing the point that all human efforts are futile and that those who bomb buildings should not expect any immediate, tangible change in the government's policies as a result, Abouhalima said that real change—effective change—"is not in our hands," only "in God's hands."

This led to a general discussion about what he regarded as the natural connection between Islam and political order. Abouhalima said this relationship had been weakened by modern leaders of Islamic countries, such as those in his native Egypt, as a result of the influence of the West in general and the United States in particular. The president of Egypt, for example, was not really Muslim, Abouhalima implied, since he "watered down" Islamic law. Leaders such as President Hosni Mubarak "said yes" to Islamic law and principles, Abouhalima explained, but then turned around and "said yes" to secular ideas as well, especially regarding such matters as family law, education, and financial institutions, where Muslim law prohibits usury.⁸ He claimed the character of many contemporary politicians was deceitful: they pretended to be Muslim but in practice followed secular—implicitly Western—codes of conduct.

Mahmud Abouhalima's religious influences began at an early age. He was raised in Kafr al-Dawar, a town in northern Egypt near Alexandria, where he attended a Muslim youth camp. It offered him the "first light for understanding what it is to be a Muslim," Abouhalima said.⁹ He took courses at Alexandria University and became increasingly active in Islamic politics, especially the outlawed al Gamaa-i Islamiya, led by Sheik Omar Abdul Rahman.

In 1981, when Abouhalima was 21, he left Egypt—perhaps to escape the watchful eye of the Egyptian internal security forces—and went to Germany on a tourist visa. Egypt's president Anwar Sadat was rounding up Muslim activists at the time, and one week after Abouhalima's departure Sadat was assassinated, allegedly by Abouhalima's former colleagues, supporters of Sheik Omar Abdul Rahman. The sheik himself stood trial, accused of complicity in the act, but was never convicted. During this time Abouhalima was living in Munich, but when the German government tried to deport him in 1982, Abouhalima searched for a way to remain in the country. A rapidly arranged marriage to a somewhat emotionally unstable German nurse living in his apartment building made it possible for Abouhalima to continue his German residency. ¹⁰ In 1985 this marriage dissolved and Abouhalima married another German woman, Marianne Weber.

During his initial years in Germany, Abouhalima said, he lived a "life of corruption—girls, drugs, you name it." He went through the outward signs of Islamic reverence—daily prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadan—but he had left the real Islam behind. ¹¹ After a while, he "got bored" with his wayward existence, began reading the Qur'an again, and returned to a committed religious life. At this time his wife, Marianne, who by her own admission had also been living a dissolute life before she married Abouhalima, became a Muslim as well. Soon afterward, in 1985, he and Marianne came to the United States. They settled in New York City, and a three-month visa turned into an extended stay. His renewed interest in Islam was nurtured by a large and active Muslim community centered on Atlantic Avenue in down-town Brooklyn.

"Islam is a mercy," Abouhalima told me, explaining that it rescued the fallen and gave meaning to one's personal life. This was something that he desperately needed when lured by the lifestyle of secular society, first in Germany and then in the United States. He told a story, a sort of parable, about a lion cub that was raised among sheep. The cub thought he was a sheep until another lion came along and showed him his reflection in a clear pond. That's what his Muslim teachers and his spiritual readings had shown him, Abouhalima said. He was "a Muslim, not a sheep." ¹²

Abouhalima seized the opportunity to prove that he was not a sheep in 1988, when he joined the Muslim struggle in Afghanistan. Although he had been earning his income as a New York City taxi driver, Abouhalima was also serving as a volunteer worker at the Alkifah

Afghan Refugee Center in Brooklyn. There Afghani refugees told of the Mujahedin's heroic struggle against the Soviet-backed government of Najibullah in their homeland. The center was said to have been funded by Osama bin Laden. ¹³ Abouhalima admitted to me that he went to Afghanistan during that time (something he had previously denied) but that he was there solely in a nonmilitary "civil" capacity. According to some accounts, however, he was indeed involved in the military struggle and had volunteered for the suicidal task of minesweeping, going in front of the Muslim troops with a long stick to probe the earth for land mines. ¹⁴ But even if he had not been involved in any direct military way, I said to Abouhalima, it was a dangerous time to be in that country. Why would he want to risk his life for such a cause? "It is my job," Abouhalima explained, "as a Muslim." He said that he felt he had a mission "to go wherever there is oppression and injustice and fight it." ¹⁵

When he returned, his Afghani service had earned him the admiration of many in his circle of Muslim activists, and according to some accounts he continued to wear his military fatigues and combat boots on Brooklyn's city streets. ¹⁶ He became more deeply engaged in Muslim political causes and helped arrange for the leading figure in Egypt's radical Muslim community—Sheik Omar Abdul Rahman—to become established in the United States. The sheik had also been in Afghanistan, and his arrival in July 1990 from the Sudan made significant waves in the militant Muslim community in the New York City area. In fact, he was soon at odds with the man who sponsored his immigration to the United States, Mustafa Shalabi, the leader of the Alkifah Afghan Refugee Center and a friend of Abouhalima. Eventually, however, it became clear that Abouhalima's loyalty in the emerging competition was with the sheik, and when Shalabi was murdered in 1991, Abouhalima was a suspect but was never formally charged. With Shalabi out of the way, the sheik was the unchallenged leader of the New York area's militant Muslim community.

Sheik Omar Abdul Rahman was a blind Islamic scholar who had once been a professor of theology at the prestigious Al Azhar University in Cairo and who was linked with one of Egypt's most revolutionary Islamic movements, al Gamaa-i Islamiya ("the Islamic group"). The sheik was implicated in the assassination of Anwar Sadat and in a series of violent attacks on the government in his native region, the oasis area of Fayoum—charges for which he was eventually acquitted. Suspicions of the sheik's involvement, however, remained. Followers of the sheik

were also believed to be responsible for two more killings in Egypt—the murder of Parliament Speaker Rifaat Mahgoub and a secular writer, Farag Foda—and assassination attempts on Prime Minister Hosni Mubarak and the Nobel-prize-winning novelist Naguib Mahfouz. With the government closing in on his group, Sheik Abdul Rahman repaired to the Sudan and eventually made it to New Jersey. He entered the United States presumably by error; officials at the American embassy in Khartoum did not detect his name on a list of those requiring special permission—although some commentators claim that the sheik had been favored by the CIA because of his support for anticommunist rebels in the Afghanistan war and was allowed to enter the United States as a sort of reward.

In the United States, Sheik Abdul Rahman became established in a small mosque called El Salam ("the place of peace") located above a Chinese restaurant in Jersey City, New Jersey. There he preached against the evils of secular society and helped the struggling members of his flock understand why they were oppressed, both in the Middle East and in the United States. He singled out America for special condemnation because it helped to create the state of Israel, supported the secular Egyptian government, and sent its troops to Kuwait during the Gulf War, all of which the sheik deemed "un-Islamic." ¹⁷

Listening attentively to the words of Sheik Omar Abdul Rahman was a growing circle of mostly male Islamic activists in their thirties who had immigrated to the United States from several Middle Eastern countries. It included Muhammad Salameh, an unemployed Palestinian refugee; Siddig Ali, a Sudanese organizer; Nidal Ayyad, who was trained as a chemical engineer; Ibrahim El-Gabrownny, the president of the Abu Bakr mosque in Brooklyn; his cousin, El Sayyid Nosair, who was imprisoned from charges related to the killing of Meir Kahane; and a man known by various names, including "Ramzi Ahmed Yusef," a Pakistani said to be born in Iraq and raised in Kuwait who had masterminded some of the most imaginative scenarios of recent terrorist history. It also included Abouhalima, who for a time served as the sheik's chauffeur and bodyguard.

I wanted to ask Abouhalima why Muslim activists such as Sheik Abdul Rahman would target the United States as an enemy. Although he did not respond to that question directly—and in fact praised America for its religious freedom, claiming that it was easier for him to be a good Muslim in this country than in Egypt—he did answer indirectly when he talked about how Jewish influence controlled America's news media,

financial institutions, and government. In that sense, Abouhalima explained, although the United States claimed to be secular and impartial toward religion, "it is involved in religious politics already." ¹⁸

Abouhalima made it clear that America's involvement in religious politics—its support for the state of Israel and for "enemies of Islam" such as Egypt's Mubarak—is not the result of Christianity. Rather, it was due to America's ideology of secularism, which Abouhalima regards not as neutrality but as hostility toward religion, especially Islam. He cited the U.S. Department of Justice, which he called the "Department of Injustice." I asked him if the United States would be better off if it had a Christian government. "Yes," Abouhalima replied, "at least it would have morals."¹⁹

Abouhalima's bitterness toward the Justice Department was compounded by its swift prosecution of the case against him and his colleagues in a series of trials. The one that ended on March 4, 1994, focused on the anti-American motives for the assault; it convicted four—Muhammad Salameh, Nidal Ayyad, Ahmad Muhammad Ajaj, and Abouhalima—of bombing the Center and indicted Ramzi Ahmed Yousef as a fugitive in the crime. The second trial, ending on January 17, 1996, convicted nine—including a life sentence for Sheik Omar Abdul Rahman—for their part in what the judge described as a "terrorist conspiracy" of a magnitude comparable with militant fascism and communism.²⁰ The prosecution offered evidence that the circle of Muslim activists associated with the sheik had intended to blow up not only the World Trade Center but also the United Nations buildings in Manhattan, two New York commuter tunnels under the Hudson River, and the Manhattan headquarters of the FBI.

A third trial, begun on May 13, 1996, focused on the fugitive, who had been captured in Pakistan in a dramatic raid on his Karachi hotel room in February 1995. Yousef, whose real name appeared to be Abdul Basit Mahmoud Abdul Karim, was implicated not only in the New York events but also in a series of terrorist plots, including one aimed at assassinating the pope when he visited the Philippines in 1995 and the so-called Project Bojinka, which, if carried out, would have led to the destruction of eleven large U.S. passenger airplanes over the Pacific Ocean in one momentous day in 1995. The trial ended on September 5, 1996, with Yousef's conviction for conspiracy in the case of the Bojinka plot; in August 1997 Yousef again stood trial in New York City, this time for his part in the bombing of the World Trade Center.

After all of these trials, Abouhalima said, secular America still did not understand him and his colleagues. What, I asked him, was missing? What was it that we did not understand?

"The soul," he said, "the soul of religion, that is what is missing." Without it, Abouhalima said, Western prosecutors, journalists, and scholars like myself "will never understand who I am." He said that he understood the secular West because he had lived like a Westerner in Germany and in the United States. The seventeen years he had lived in the West, Abouhalima told me, "is a fair amount of time to understand what the hell is going on in the United States and in Europe about secularism or people, you know, who have no religion." He went on to say, "I lived their life, but they didn't live my life, so they will never understand the way I live or the way I think."

Abouhalima compared a life without religion to a pen without ink. "An ink pen," he said, "a pen worth two thousand dollars, gold and everything in it, it's useless if there's no ink in it. That's the thing that gives life," Abouhalima said, drawing out the analogy, "the life in this pen . . . the soul." He finished his point by saying, "the soul, the religion, you know, that's the thing that's revived the whole life. Secularism," he said, looking directly at me, "has none, they have none, you have none."

And as for secular people, I asked, who do not know the life of religion? "They're just moving like dead bodies," Abouhalima said.

Abdul Aziz Rantisi and Hamas Suicide Missions

Although their targets were not as spectacular as the World Trade Center buildings, the series of suicide terrorist attacks in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv conducted in recent years by Muslim activists associated with the radical Palestinian movement Hamas were equally terrifying—just as vicious in their killing of what are traditionally viewed as noncombatants, and just as desperate in their attempts to gain the world's attention for what was perceived by the perpetrators to be a religious as well as a political cause. Like the World Trade Center event, the intended audience included not just those in the immediate vicinity, but all who observed the media reportage and were horrified by it.

To many who witnessed them even at a distance, the horror of the bombings in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv was compounded by the knowledge

that the bombers purposefully killed themselves in conducting the acts. Who would do such a thing, and why?

The answers to such questions are best given by those directly involved in them. But because anyone who successfully carries out a suicide bombing is by definition unavailable for interviewing afterward, I found that the next best way of hearing their voices is to watch the videotapes that many of them made the night before the missions. Often crudely photographed, these testimonies were filmed by their Hamas colleagues partly to memorialize the young men and partly to show to other potential volunteers as a kind of recruiting device. These tapes are clandestinely circulated within the Palestinian community in Gaza and the towns on the West Bank. I was privileged to see several that are part of a collection gathered by two American scholars, Anne Marie Oliver and Paul Steinberg, who once lived in Gaza and have written a book on the phenomenon of suicide bombings and the valorization of the young men who committed them. [21](#)

One of the most moving videotapes in their collection shows a handsome young man, no more than eighteen years old and perhaps less, looking oddly happy as he talked about the sacrifice that he was about to make. Dubbed "the smiling boy" by Oliver and Steinberg, he was videotaped in an outdoor setting beside a rock and a bush, wearing what appears to be a stylish bluejean jacket, his bushy dark hair and grinning face bathed in sunlight. The mission he and his friend would carry out involved plastic explosives, either strapped around his waist or carried in a knapsack, but he was portrayed holding a gun—most likely included in the video to give him a martial demeanor.

"Tomorrow is the day of encounter," the smiling boy said. It was to be "the day of meeting the lord of the Worlds." He went on to say that he and his colleagues would "make our blood cheap for the sake of God, out of love for this homeland and for the sake of the freedom and honor of this people, in order that Palestine remain Islamic, and in order that Hamas remains a torch lighting the roads of all the perplexed and all the tormented and oppressed [and] that Palestine might be liberated." [22](#)

Another of the volunteers, on a different tape, explained that all people have to die at some time, so one is indeed fortunate to be able to choose one's destiny. He explained that there were those "who fall off their donkeys and die," those "whose donkeys trample them and they die," those who are hit by cars and suffer heart attacks, and "those who fall off the roofs of their houses and die." But, he added,

"what a difference there is between one death and another," implying that the choice of martyrdom was a rare opportunity and that he was fortunate to have it. "Truly there is only one death," he said, repeating the words of a famous Muslim martyr, "so let it be on the path of God." ²³

The young men on these tapes look so innocent, so full of life, that the viewer is moved to try somehow to reverse time and stop them from carrying out their deadly missions. Whatever sympathy they engender is superseded, however, by the sense of loss and remorse for the deaths of their victims, who were even more innocent than their attackers. Unlike the smiling boy and his colleagues, they were never given the choice of whether or not to give up their lives for the sake of these violent missions.

On the morning of August 21, 1995, for example, a packed bus carrying students to classes and police officers to their daily assignments was inching its way from stop to stop in a crowded neighborhood of limestone apartment buildings in the northern section of the city of Jerusalem, near the Mt. Scopus campus of Hebrew University. At 7:55 A.M. a lone Arab passenger sitting in the back of the bus—someone very much like the smiling boy—suddenly reached into the handbag he was carrying and detonated a ferociously explosive bomb. It contained what police later estimated to be about ten pounds of the chemical explosive 3-acetone. ²⁴ It was an extraordinary blast, instantly incinerating the Arab, a visiting American sitting near him, and three Israelis seated nearby. The force of the explosion ripped open the side of the bus and continued outside, destroying another bus that happened to be traveling alongside. In addition to the five killed, 107 others in the two buses and passing along the street were wounded in the attack.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this book, I happened to be in Israel during those days, presenting a paper on religious violence, and I had visited the Hebrew University campus on Mt. Scopus earlier in the week on a bus that followed the same route as the one marked for disaster. The day before the blast I had been talking with members of the Hamas movement in Gaza, attempting to find answers to my questions about the suicide bombings that had occurred earlier in the year in crowded street corners in Tel Aviv. A little over two years later—after several more suicide bombings had occurred, including the savage attacks in Jerusalem's vegetable market and the Ben Yehuda shopping mall in September 1997—I received an articulate explanation for these

missions in a lengthy interview with one of the founders of the Hamas movement, Dr. Abdul Aziz Rantisi.

I met Dr. Rantisi on March 1, 1998, in a village in the southern part of the Gaza Strip that can best be described as only moderately less depressed than the rest of Gaza. ²⁵ Some of Gaza's Mediterranean beaches are quite lovely, but the streets are dusty and pockmarked, crowded with old buses and donkey carts. Dr. Rantisi's attractive new house was on a small hillside in a suburban area. The driveway was filled with cars, and posters related to Palestinian political issues were plastered on the pillars of the entryway.

I was ushered into a comfortable living room containing a row of couches and overstuffed chairs on one side and several formal-looking chairs on the other, and was offered strong Middle Eastern coffee. It seemed clear to me that the room was meant for meetings. At one end of the room were bookcases and pictures of Rantisi when he was the spokesman for a group of Hamas supporters who had been caught in a no-man's land between Israel and Lebanon in 1992. Next to the bookcases was a sort of shrine with several drawings and pictures of Sheik Ahmed Yassin, the spiritual leader of the Hamas movement, whom I had met years earlier. Sheik Yassin was freed from captivity by the Israeli government in 1997 (and again arrested a few months later). But on the day that I met Rantisi the sheik was in Egypt for medical reasons.

When Dr. Rantisi came into the room, he greeted me cordially. A bespectacled, middle-aged man who spoke excellent English, Rantisi seemed very much the professor and medical doctor he was trained to be, and despite the heat he was nattily dressed in a business suit with a vest. When I asked him how he wanted to be described, he said, "as a founder of Hamas." Although I was interested in his views on the connection between religion and politics, I told him I wanted to understand their relation to the current situation. It was not long until the conversation had turned to the matter of suicide bombings.

Dr. Rantisi corrected me. I should not call them "suicide bombings," he said. What he preferred was another term, a familiar Arabic word that he wrote out in my notebook in both Arabic and Roman transliteration: *istishhadi*. "It means 'self-chosen martyrdom,'" Rantisi explained, adding that "all Muslims seek to be martyrs." The term one used to describe this act was important, Rantisi went on to say, because it conveyed its significance. "Suicide bomber" implied an impulsive act by a deranged individual. The missions undertaken by the young men

in the Hamas cadres, he said, were ones that they deliberately and carefully chose as part of their religious obligation. "We do not order them to do it," Rantisi emphasized, "we simply give permission for them to do it at certain times." ²⁶

But why, I wanted to know, would Hamas give such permission? Quite aside from the issue of the permissibility of self-martyrdom, there is the matter of targeting noncombatants. Why would Hamas allow a mission in which innocent civilians, including women and children, were the victims in such horrible attacks?

Rantisi answered in military terms, echoing the words that one of his colleagues used in discussing these matters with me in an earlier interview: "We're at war." ²⁷ He added that it was a war not only with the Israeli government but with the whole of Israeli society. This did not mean that Hamas intended to wipe Israel from the face of the earth, he said, although some members of the movement said as much. Rantisi made it clear that he had no animosity toward Jewish culture or religion. "We're not against Jews just because they're Jews," he said. ²⁸ From Rantisi's point of view, Hamas was presently in a state of war with Israel simply because of Israel's stance toward Palestine—especially toward the Hamas concept of an Islamic Palestine. It was Islamic nationalism that Israel wanted to destroy, Rantisi said, claiming that this political position was buttressed by the attitudes of Israeli society.

For this reason the war between Israel and Hamas was one with no innocent victims. In the beginning, Rantisi said, the military operations of Hamas targeted only soldiers. The movement took "every measure" to stop massacres and to discourage suicide bombings. But two events changed things. One was the attack by Israeli police on Palestinians demonstrating in front of the al-Aqsa mosque near the Dome of the Rock in 1990, and the other was the massacre in Hebron by Dr. Baruch Goldstein in 1994 during the month of Ramadan. Rantisi pointed out that both of these incidents were aimed at mosques, and he thought that Goldstein's attack during Ramadan was not a coincidence. He concluded that these were attacks on Islam as a religion as well as on Palestinians as a people. He was also convinced that despite the Israeli government's denial that it supported the extremist Jews who precipitated the al-Aqsa incident or caused the Hebron massacre, Rantisi was certain that the Israeli military had a hand in them. He pointed out that in Goldstein's attack, Israeli soldiers were standing nearby. Goldstein had befriended them, and he was able

to change his rifle magazine clip four times during the incident without being stopped by soldiers.

Rantisi explained that the young Hamas supporters' acts of self-martyrdom—the suicide bombings—were allowed only in response to these and other specific acts of violence from the Israeli side, acts that frequently affected innocent civilians. In that sense they were defensive: "If we did not respond this way," Rantisi explained, "Israelis would keep doing the same thing."

Moreover, he said, the bombings were a moral lesson. They were a way of making innocent Israelis feel the pain that innocent Palestinians had felt. "We want to do the same to Israel as they have done to us," he explained, indicating that just as innocent Muslims had been killed in the Hebron incident and in many other skirmishes during the Israeli-Palestinian tensions, it was necessary for the Israeli people to actually experience the violence before they could understand what the Palestinians had gone through.

Dr. Rantisi then spoke to me in a manner indicating that his comments were meant not only for me but for the American people he regarded me as representing. "It is important for you to understand," he said, "that we are the victims in this struggle, not the cause of it." He repeated this at the end of my interview, when I asked Rantisi in what way he thought Hamas was misunderstood and what misrepresentations he would like to correct. "You think we are the aggressors," Rantisi said. "That is the number one misunderstanding. We are not: we are the victims."

Rantisi's passionate commitment to the Hamas cause came in large part from his own experience of victimization. "Like most Palestinians," he explained to me, "our family has horrible stories to tell." In his case, one of the stories involved the destruction of his prosperous family's home in a village that was located somewhere between the modern Israeli cities of Tel Aviv and Ashdod. The village, like the family home, was destroyed in the creation of modern Israel. When members of his family struggled against what they regarded as the Israeli occupation of their land, several were killed: Rantisi's uncle, three of his cousins, and his grandfather. In recent years Rantisi witnessed the continued encroachment of Israel into the limited land that Palestinians were allocated. According to Rantisi, one-third of the Gaza Strip is allotted to 1500 Jewish settlers, and the remaining two-thirds to the approximately one million Palestinians crowded there, many as refugees. Such developments have led to frustration. If the Israeli government

continues to allow settlements to be built, Rantisi said, "we should use all means to stop it." ²⁹

In such a context, Rantisi said, the actions of self-martyrs are understandable; they are responses. Another Hamas activist, Imad Faluji, had earlier described them as "letters to Israel." They were ways of notifying Israelis that they were engaged in a great confrontation, whether they had been previously aware of it or not, and that their security as a people was "zero."³⁰ Moreover, Faluji said, these bombings showed that Israel's security "does not lie with Egypt, nor with Libya, nor with Arafat," but "with us."³¹

The notion that Hamas is engaged in a great war with Israel, one with both spiritual and political consequences, was articulated in a similar way by Sheik Ahmad Yassin, the movement's spiritual leader, when I spoke with him at his home in Gaza a number of years ago. Even then the competition between the secular Palestinian Liberation Organization and Hamas was so severe that my taxi driver, a Palestinian from Gaza who was apparently acting on orders from the PLO, took me to the secular movement's unmarked headquarters in Gaza before taking me to Sheik Yassin. I was told that the sheik and his religious nationalism should not be regarded as truly representative of the Palestinian struggle, and it was suggested that I visit an area of Gaza where the PLO was firmly in control—the Jabaliya refugee camp—before visiting the leaders of Hamas. I happily followed this suggestion—although with my PLO-supporting driver at the wheel I had little choice—and only afterward did we proceed to our original destination, Sheik Yassin's modest quarters on a hillside outside Gaza City.

At that time, shortly before he was placed under detention by the Israelis in 1989, Sheik Yassin was living in a motel-like row of rooms that comprised his residence, office, mosque, and meeting rooms. The rooms and the area outside were crowded with a variety of supporters, most of them men in their thirties and forties, who busily talked with one another until the sheik appeared, and then lapsed into respectful silence and crowded into the meeting room. On the wall of the room was the obligatory picture of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and a drawing portraying the Qur'an superimposed on a map: it was drawn with hands extending out of either side of the Holy Book, stretching from Algeria to Indonesia, encompassing the whole of the Muslim world. The drawings indicated two different, though compatible, views of the political significance of Islam—one focusing on a distinctively Palestinian contribution to Muslim culture, the Dome of the Rock, and

the other suggesting a transnational Islamic culture that reached from Africa to Southeast Asia.

The sheik's attendants eased an old-fashioned wooden wheelchair out of the private rooms at the end of the building and wheeled the sheik down the veranda to the public meeting room. Suffering from a degenerative nerve condition for most of his life, the sheik had to be lifted from place to place. He sat with difficulty on the carpet in the meeting room, propped up on cushions, and managed the ritual bowing that accompanies Muslim prayers with the greatest of difficulty, tottering back and forth as he uttered the sacred words. After the prayers were completed he gave a short homily to the assembled group, and then, as the group began to disperse, the sheik responded to my questions—translated by one of his aides—about why Islamic militancy was necessary at this moment in history.

"There is a war going on," the sheik explained. Just as Rantisi described it in my interview with him years later, Sheik Yassin implied that the struggle against the Israeli authorities was the expression of a larger, hidden struggle.

³² When I raised the question of why the secular Palestinian movement was not a sufficient agency to carry out this cause, the sheik was careful in his response. Without directly opposing Arafat, he said that the idea of a secular liberation movement for Palestine was profoundly misguided, because there "is no such thing as a secular state in Islam."³³

This was the position of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, with which the sheik had been associated for many years and which had close ties to the Egyptian movement of the same name. Hamas as a movement began in the late 1980s when the urban, organized strategy of the PLO had floundered and a new struggle emerged from the poorer, rural segments of Palestinian society: the *intifada*, backed by Hamas. The word *hamas* means "zeal" or "enthusiasm," but it is also an acronym for the Arabic phrase that is the formal name of the movement: Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya, or "Islamic Resistance Movement." The term *Hamas* first appeared publicly in a communique circulated in mid-February 1988.³⁴

Sheik Yassin and Dr. Rantisi were involved in the movement from the beginning. Both of them—and therefore the movement—had roots in the Muslim Brotherhood, with which Rantisi was associated when he was a medical student in Alexandria in northern Egypt. One of the first communiqués issued by the movement described it as "the powerful arm of the Association of Muslim Brothers."³⁵ Perhaps for this reason,

Rantisi chafed at the notion that the Hamas movement was similar to Egypt's radical al Gamaa-i Islamiya, headed by Sheik Omar Abdul Rahman, who was convicted of conspiracy in relation to the World Trade Center bombing. "We are not like al Gamaa-i Islamiya," Rantisi told me, "but like the Muslim Brotherhood. We are legitimate." ³⁶

This comment indicated that Rantisi was conscious of the criticism that Hamas reflected only a fraction of Palestinian Muslim sentiment, and the most marginal and radical fraction at that. He pointed out that prominent religious figures had been associated with Hamas from the earliest days of the movement. These included Sheik 'Abd al-Aziz 'Odeh and Sheik As'ad Bayud al-Tamimi, a resident of Hebron who was a preacher at the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, as well as Sheik Ahmed Yassin from Gaza. ³⁷ Yassin, who is described as "a charismatic and influential leader," commanded the Islamic Assembly, which had ties to virtually all the mosques in Gaza. Dr. Rantisi pointed out that the religious legitimacy for the acts of self-martyrdom came from a religious decree—a *fatwa*—issued by a mufti in the Gulf emirates.

In the 1990s Hamas vastly expanded as an organization, and although the heart of the movement still lay in decentralized, local cadres, Hamas developed a fairly sophisticated organizational structure, divided between policy and military wings. Within the latter was a separate organizational structure for the secret cells that recruited and trained the young men who were to become operatives in the missions of self-martyrdom, as Rantisi called them. The men in these cells were seldom known within the wider Palestinian community, and even members of their own families were shocked to discover their involvement, which was often revealed only after the fatal completion of their missions. In a videotape in the collection of Oliver and Steinberg that portrays funeral ceremonies for these young self-martyrs, a group of young men is seen entering the crowd, masked and carrying rifles. The crowd roars in frenzied approval. These were "living martyrs," those who had already committed themselves to self-martyrdom and were awaiting their call to action.

In some cases, young people were recruited for a suicide bombing mission days before the act was to be carried out; they had no previous affiliation with Hamas and virtually no military training. The explosion at a busy street corner in downtown Tel Aviv in 1995, for example, was carried out by a nineteen-year-old student with a backpack full of explosives. The shy, affable young man had been recruited three days earlier by a Hamas supporter who was asked to find an appropriate

volunteer. According to the Hamas organizer and recruiter who was interviewed for a segment on the CBS television program *60 Minutes*, he found someone close at hand: his own cousin, who lived next door.³⁸

A study of suicide bombings conducted by Ariel Merari and other scholars related to the Center for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at Tel Aviv University indicated that most of the members of the suicide cell of Hamas received from three weeks to several months of training. Based on interviews with friends and family members of thirty three of the thirty four successful perpetrators of Hamas suicide missions in Israel in recent years, the study showed that they were recruited through friendship networks in school, sports, and extended families. They were held to their decision by having to commit to one another in friendship pacts and having to write letters that would be sent to their families after their deaths. Their parents and other immediate family members were kept in the dark about the young men's intentions, but the youths died with the knowledge that all would be rewarded: the dying young man would receive seventy virgins and seventy wives in heaven, and his family would receive a cash payment worth twelve to fifteen thousand U.S. dollars.³⁹

Although most Israelis and other non-Palestinians have been aware of the militant side of Hamas through their actions, in Gaza and West Bank towns the peaceful face of Hamas has been more visible. The movement has given support for medical clinics and primary education. Hamas has also provided support for orphans and free food programs and offered cash support to those in need—not only the families of self-martyrs but also those affected by Israeli military assaults on Hamas operatives. When the Israeli government destroyed Palestinian houses as a way of punishing those who supported Hamas's actions, for example, the movement provided the Palestinian families with cash settlements often worth more than the values of the houses.

Some Palestinians have supported Hamas not because they agree completely with its radical platform and actions, but because they believe that Hamas has kept Arafat and the Palestinian Authority on its toes and made the organization stronger than it otherwise would be. "We need Hamas," one student supporter of the movement told me at a seaside cafe in Gaza, adding that the secular Palestinian Authority "compromises too easily." For that reason, he concluded, Hamas is needed as a corrective.⁴⁰ He thought that the strength of the movement is in its religious base. Unlike secular organizations, he said, "Hamas won't change over time," because it was "founded on religious principles."

Modern Islamic Justifications for Violence

The religious principles on which Hamas was founded have given the movement credibility and legitimacy, and they have also given it the most important base of power possible: the ability to justify the use of force. But Islam is ambiguous about violence. Like all religions, Islam occasionally allows for force while stressing that the main spiritual goal is one of nonviolence and peace. The Qur'an contains a proscription very much like the biblical injunction "Thou shalt not kill." The Qur'an commands the faithful to "slay not the life that God has made sacred."

⁴¹ The very name Islam is cognate to *salam*, the word for peace, and like the Hebrew word *shalom*, to which it is related, it implies a vision of social harmony and spiritual repose.

For this reason, Muslim activists have often reasserted their belief in Islamic nonviolence before defending their use of force. According to Sheik Omar Abdul Rahman in an interview shortly after the bombing of the World Trade Center, a Muslim can "never call for violence," only for "love, forgiveness and tolerance." But he added that "if we are aggressed against, if our land is usurped, we must call for hitting the attacker and the aggressor to put an end to the aggression."⁴² In other cases a violent act has been justified as an exception to the rule, as when Muslim supporters of the al-Salam mosque defended the killing of Rabbi Kahane, claiming that this deed did not violate the Qur'an since Kahane was an enemy of Islam.⁴³ In yet other instances, the use of force has been shown to be consistent with Islamic principles. Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini said he knew of no command "more binding to the Muslim than the command to sacrifice life and property to defend and bolster Islam."⁴⁴

The ayatollah was correct that there are some Islamic tenets that condone struggle and the use of force. In addition to the Qur'an's prohibition against killing, there are Muslim principles that justify it. Violence is required for purposes of punishment, for example, and it is sometimes deemed necessary for defending the faith. In the "world of conflict" (*dar al harb*) outside the Muslim world, force is a means of cultural survival. In such a context, maintaining the purity of religious existence is thought to be a matter of *jihad*, a word that literally means "striving" and is often translated as "holy war."⁴⁵ This concept has been used by Muslim warriors to rationalize the expansion of political control into non-Muslim regions. But Islamic law does not allow *jihad* to be used arbitrarily, for personal gain, or to justify forcible

conversion to the faith: the only conversions regarded as valid are those that come about nonviolently, through rational suasion and a change of heart.

Even so, Islam has a history of military engagement almost from its beginning. Scarcely a dozen years after the prophet Muhammad received the revelation of the Qur'an in 610, he left his home in Mecca and developed a military stronghold in the nearby town of Medina. Forces loyal to Muhammad instigated a series of raids on Meccan camel caravans, and when the Meccans retaliated, they were roundly defeated by the prophet's soldiers in the Battle of Badr, the first Muslim military victory. Several years of sporadic warfare between the two camps ended in a decisive Muslim victory in the Battle of the Trench. By 630 Muhammad and his Muslims had conquered Mecca and much of western Arabia and had turned the ancient pilgrimage site of the Kaaba into a center for Muslim worship. The caliphs who succeeded the prophet as temporal leaders of the Muslim community after Muhammad's death in 632 expanded both the military control and spiritual influence of Islam, and over the years the extraordinary proliferation of the Islamic community throughout the world has been attributed in no small measure to the success of its military leaders in battle.

The Islamic sanctioning of military force is not indiscriminate, however. Most historical examples have involved the use of force by an established military or governmental power for the purpose of defending the faith. This is a far cry from justifying acts of terrorism, though there were rogue groups of Muslims in the twelfth century—the Nizari branch of Ismaili Islam—who used what might be called terrorism in establishing a small empire based in the north of Persia near the Caspian Sea. Hardly the models of virtuous society, the members of the order were said to have used drugs and were dubbed *hashshashin*—or, in medieval Latin, *assassini*, "drug users." They expanded their political power by infiltrating their opponent's camps and killing their leaders, often by slitting their throats with a knife. Although their empire was short-lived, they left their legacy on the terminology of political terrorism—the word *assassin*—even though most Muslims would regard them as quite peripheral to the mainstream of Islamic tradition. ⁴⁶

Present-day religious activists look for more traditional Islamic justifications for the use of violence. Dr. Rantisi and Sheik Yassin, for example, justified the Hamas use of violence based on the Islamic sanction for self-defense. Both Yassin and Rantisi expanded the notion to include the defense of one's dignity and pride as well as one's physical well-being. ⁴⁷

One of Yassin's colleagues, Sheik 'Abd al-Aziz 'Odeh, explained that the Islamic *intifada* differed from the *intifada* waged by secular supporters of the PLO in that the Islamic struggle was a moral struggle as well as a political one, stemming from religious commitment. It was also part of a tradition of Islamic protest against injustice. ⁴⁸

This is an interesting idea—that the approval of force for the defense of Islam can be expanded to include struggles against political and social injustice—and it is a relatively new one. Perhaps no writer has had greater influence in extending this concept and reinterpreting the traditional Muslim idea of struggle—*jihad*—than the contemporary Egyptian writer Abd al-Salam Faraj. The author of a remarkably cogent argument for waging war against the political enemies of Islam in the pamphlet *Al-Faridah al-Gha'ibah* ("The Neglected Duty"), Faraj stated more clearly than any other contemporary writer the religious justifications for radical Muslim acts. His booklet was published and first circulated in Cairo in the early 1980s.⁴⁹ What is significant about this document is that it grounded the activities of modern Islamic terrorists firmly in Islamic tradition, specifically in the sacred text of the Qur'an and the biographical accounts of the prophet in the Hadith.

Faraj argued that the Qur'an and the Hadith were fundamentally about warfare. The concept of *jihad*, struggle, was meant to be taken literally, not allegorically. According to Faraj, the "duty" that has been profoundly "neglected" is precisely that of *jihad*, and it calls for "fighting, which meant confrontation and blood."⁵⁰ Moreover, Faraj regarded anyone who deviates from the moral and social requirements of Islamic law to be targets for *jihad*; these targets include apostates within the Muslim community as well as the expected enemies from without.

Perhaps the most chilling aspect of Faraj's thought is his conclusion that peaceful and legal means for fighting apostasy are inadequate. The true soldier of Islam is allowed to use virtually any means available to achieve a just goal.⁵¹ Deceit, trickery, and violence are specifically mentioned as options available to the desperate soldier.⁵² Faraj set some moral limits to the tactics that could be used—for example, innocent bystanders and women are to be avoided, whenever possible, in assassination attempts—but emphasized that the duty to engage in such actions when necessary is incumbent on all true Muslims. The reward for doing so is nothing less than a place in paradise. Such a place was presumably earned by Faraj himself in 1982, after he was tried and executed for his part in the assassination of Anwar Sadat.

This way of thinking, though extreme, was not idiosyncratic to Faraj. He stood in a tradition of radical Islamic political writers reaching back to the beginning of this century and before. Among Sunni Muslims worldwide, the most important radical thinker was Maulana Abu al-Ala Mawdudi, the founder and ideological spokesman for Pakistan's Jamaat-i-Islami religious party. ⁵³ His ideas were echoed by Egypt's most influential writer in the radical Muslim political tradition, Sayyid Qutb. Qutb was born in 1906 and, like Faraj, was executed for his political activities. ⁵⁴ Although he was not as explicit as Faraj in indicating the techniques of terror that were acceptable to the Islamic warrior, Qutb laid the groundwork for Faraj's understanding of *jihad* as an appropriate response to the advocates of those elements of modernity that seemed to be hostile to Islam.

Specifically, Qutb railed against those who encouraged the cultural, political, and economic domination of the Egyptian government by the West. Qutb spent several years in the United States studying educational administration. This experience only confirmed his impression that American society was essentially racist and that American policy in the Middle East was dictated by Israel and what he regarded as the Jewish lobby in Washington, DC. ⁵⁵ Alarmed at the degree to which the new government in Egypt was modeled after Western political institutions and influenced by Western values, Qutb, in the early 1950s, advocated a radical return to Islamic values and Muslim law. In *This Religion of Islam*, Qutb argued that the most basic divisions within humanity were religious rather than racial or nationalist, and that religious war was the only form of killing that was morally sanctioned. ⁵⁶ To Qutb's thinking, the ultimate war was between truth and falsehood, and satanic agents of the latter were to be found well entrenched in the Egyptian government. It is no wonder that the government found such ideas dangerous. Qutb was put in prison for most of the rest of the 1950s, and a state execution silenced him forever in 1966.

These ideas of Mawdudi, Qutb, and Faraj have been circulated widely throughout the Muslim world through two significant networks: universities and the Muslim clergy. The two networks intersect in the Muslim educational system, especially in the schools and colleges directly supervised by the clergy. It is not surprising, then, that many who have been attracted to paramilitary movements such as the al Gamaa-i Islamiya or Hamas were former students or, like Dr. Rantisi, highly trained professionals.

When I asked Dr. Rantisi which writers he most respected, the first name the Hamas leader mentioned was the founder of modern-day Muslim political activism, Mawdudi.⁵⁷ When I posed the same question to Mahmud Abouhalima in the federal penitentiary in Lompoc, at first he gave no specific reply. When I suggested Faraj's name, Abouhalima seemed surprised that I had heard of him, though he corrected my pronunciation. Abouhalima confessed to owning both Arabic and English versions of Faraj's infamous booklet, "The Neglected Duty."

Abouhalima wanted to make certain that I would not use his knowledge of Faraj against him. In Abouhalima's first criminal case, he said, the evidence that he possessed copies of Faraj's book was used to show that he harbored hostile and violent attitudes against the secular government. For that reason, Abouhalima asked me to be careful how I described his attitude toward Faraj. "Do not say 'I was influenced by him,'" Abouhalima instructed me, but rather "I respect him." Then Abouhalima leaned over, put his head close to mine, and whispered, "but he was right, you know."⁵⁸