

A PLACE IN PARADISE

THE CULT OF MARTYRS IN GAZA

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The boys at the beach know what they are doing. They throw stones far beyond the surf, where they're neatly swallowed by the sea with barely a ripple. The boys don't look for flat stones, which would skip well. They choose thick, squared chunks of rock because they fly further and have a harder impact. That's what they've learned on the streets of Gaza, on the frontlines of the Intifada. For eight years, the boys of Gaza were Yassir Arafat's "little generals." They threw stones at the occupation army, built barricades, and when the soldiers came after them with tear gas and bullets, the TV crews filmed them running. The whole world knew the boys of the Palestinian uprising.

Officially there is peace in Gaza. The little generals at the beach wear jackets and ties and their hair is neatly combed. Up the beach at the Hotel Palestine the adults are celebrating a wedding today. Earlier, when the boys threw stones at a tin can, to hear the sharp noise it made, they got smacked, like all little boys. So they came down to the beach. There are heaps of garbage and the water smells of rotten fish. But at least nobody bothers them.

After a while the little generals tire of throwing stones into the sea. They hide their fists in their pockets and wander along the shore in search for a new diversion. A little ways up they come across the crazy guy, an adolescent boy with ruffled hair and a torn T-shirt. He stands with legs wide apart, one arm stretched out like a gun, and makes shooting noises. "Hey," the boys shout, encircling him. "Where is the enemy?" The crazy guy looks at them with alarm. "Bang" he says and shoots out at the sea. Then he runs away.

These days nobody seems too concerned about the little generals, the crazy guy, or any of the young Gazans. According to a study of the "Community Mental Health Program" in Gaza, 95 percent of all youths under 18 have sustained severe psychological trauma as a result of the war over Israeli occupation. "A lot of our young men were fighting on the streets by the age of 6 or 7," the head of the project Dr. Mustafa el-Masri quotes from his paper. "We have to overcome 27 of occupation, seven years of Intifada. A whole generation got shell shocked." Not a pressing issue, as long as there are still staggering obstacles to peace and prosperity: the ongoing occupation of Palestinian land, the terrorist attacks against Israel, the lack of infrastructure in the autonomous regions of Gaza and Jericho, where even basics like water are still problems, the frequent closures of the Autonomous Regions, the settlements, the heated negotiations about the West Bank. Why should anybody care about young boys being traumatized?

Certainly not Arafat. When he returned to Gaza over a year ago, he had to be reminded to mention the little generals in his homecoming speech. The UN and the aid organisations are busy enough to deal with the structural problems of the rebuilding of the Palestine State. It is the fundamentalists, the Imams and activists of Hamas, the most feared Muslim organization in the Middle East. They give the little generals and young men of Gaza a reason to live. And a reason to fight. They turn the frustration of young Gazans into the highly focused aggression of the Jihad, the Islamic holy war they fight with any means possible.

"To die for Allah is the highest form of happiness," Fadil says. The 20-year-old has a sure, fervent look on his face, as though he has just solved all the world's problems. Fadil is a student at the Islamic University of Gaza. A handsome young man with amber eyes and curved lips, Fadil is a superstar. Every evening he travels all over the Gaza Strip with his band Shuhada - the "Band of Martyrs." They are 10

young men, five singers performing Muslim popular songs, and five who play revolutionary theater pieces mocking the day to day politics of Gaza life.

The group found their name two years ago when an Israeli undercover unit attacked the crowd during one of their concerts. Two band members were killed in the melee. After that the band stopped singing wedding songs. Now they spread the message of Hamas - a call to Holy War.

Like most young Gazans Fadil learned early on what it means to be at war. At 12 he was one of the little generals on the front lines of the Intifada. One afternoon he went out with his friend Musa. They wanted to avenge the death of a neighbor who had been killed in a riot. About a hundred boys and young men marched toward an Israeli military post, hurling bottles and stones. The soldiers stopped shooting in the air and aimed at the rioters.

Musa was hit in the neck. Fadil carried him to a garden, ran back out on the street. He caught a bullet in the leg. At the hospital somebody told him, "Musa's dead." Fadil sighs as he remembers: "I didn't know what to make of it. The pain tore me apart." For a whole year Fadil stayed away from the streets and barricades. He was full of fear. Then one day at the mosque he met a Hamas recruiter. This man seemed to have all the answers, told him about the hero's death, the honors awaiting the martyrs in heaven. "That's when I knew that I can only do Musa justice if I die fighting like him."

Fadil hasn't even come close to earning this honor. Fadil is not supposed to fight. His leaders want him to sing. Out there in front of the stage his audience is waiting: About 500 men and boys. The men have stern faces; the older ones are wearing full beards. They all belong to Hamas. Originally Hamas was a splinter group of the Muslim Brothers, a fundamentalist group founded in Egypt in the 30s. Israeli secret police supported Hamas to create a Palestinian counterweight to the PLO. The experiment went awfully wrong: backed by Iran, Hamas became a merciless opponent of Israel. It's armed wing operates with calculated terror.

Here in the Sheikh Radwan neighborhood, the Islamists are the majority: a firm block of power against the peace agreement, a group born out of the Intifada, and popular disappointment in Arafat, who they believe sold the people, the Koran and the Intifada to the Israelis. As long as the Israeli army controls the main roads of Gaza, as long as armed Jewish Settlers occupy 40 percent of the Gaza strip, as long as the borders to the outside world are sealed, Hamas rejects peace.

The stones and knives of the Intifada are long gone. Hamas has become more sophisticated; their methods including assassinations, car bombs and suicide attacks. However one of its most powerful weapons is benevolence. In the poor areas of Gaza they are building Allah's state. They feed the poor, run hospitals and clinics, build mosques and schools, where they teach the ways of the Koran in the most literal sense. That's how Hamas preempts Arafat's chance of winning the support of his people. Hamas offer solutions. That's also how they recruit a generation of young men eager for holy war.

At this moment the sons of Hamas are sitting quietly on plastic chairs. A stage has been erected in the middle of the street, between the three-story cinderblock barracks that are typical of Gaza. Although the occasion is a wedding there is not a single woman or girl in sight. They are hiding behind darkened windows, trying to get a peek at the festivities. Fundamentalist women are not allowed to mix with men outside their families.

The evening starts. An Imam reads from the Koran, an activist gives a speech. Both damn the Jews, the usual party program at a Hamas wedding. Yusuf the groom, a frail man who runs a vegetable stand, stands behind the stage, excited and joyful, serving glasses of water to his guests.

In the unfinished house next to the stage Fadil and bandmates are rolling out prayer carpets. Abu Hamsr, who writes the short theater pieces for the group, is leading the prayer. "Allah O Akbar." God is great. They prostrate, bow, hold the palms of their hands heavenward, going through the 10-minute ritual, then the singers climb on stage. Behind them is a backdrop of banners showing paintings of masked Palestinians with machine guns and caricatures of fearful Israelis.

The five start to sing. They praise the names of the fallen assassins of Gaza: "Imad Aqel, Sallah Jadallah
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- forward, heroes of the Qassam brigade!" The crowd is exploding. Young men chant "forward!" Little boys jump up, throw their arms in the air, pointing the forefingers of their right hands toward the sky. This is the hand sign of Hamas meaning: "There is only one God, Allah the merciful." Fadil lets his voice tremble like a muezzin calling the faithful to prayer. "We will never leave this land. Revenge is our mission." The others join together for the chorus: "Forward, heroes of the Qassam brigade!" Every time the word Qassam draws a scream from the crowd. It starts to sound less like cheering and more like a war cry, whipping them into a frenzy.

The music is spartan; five singers in unison, accompanied by a cheap drum machine. "The Koran does not allow us to use instruments," Nabeel had explained before the concert. "Before we have an Islamic state in Gaza in which the Koran lecturers' decisions will be law, we can't decide for ourselves if we can play instruments." But their message is stronger than their music anyway.

Hit songs are dedicated to the heroes of Hamas: Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, who leads the movement from his jail cell; the fugitive "engineer" Yehiya Ayash, who straps TNT packages onto suicide bombers; Imad Aqel, former head of the Qassam Brigade whose portrait decorates restaurants and living rooms all over Gaza; Sallah Jadallah, who masterminded the kidnapping of Israeli officer Nashon Waxman.

In the Gaza Strip these martyrs are not only the icons of the fundamentalist fight, they are its saints and pop stars. Western pop culture is literally non-existent here. The Imams preach against movies, dancing, and theater. The last movie house in Gaza was burned down by Hamas during last November's riots against Arafat's Palestinian Authority. Even the secular boys of the PLO eschew western music.

Although for them it's a matter of taste, and not of ideological purity. And still all elements of pop culture can be found in the cult of martyrs. Little boys sell portraits of the assassins on T-shirts, key chains, and photo cards. Even by western standards Shuhada are mega stars. Upon release their martyrs music tapes sell 5,000 copies in a couple of hours. For most young men and boys martyrs are mythical figures and role models. That's what they hear in the streets, in the mosques, and in the songs of the Shuhada.

Nabeel announces the next song: "This is a present for our martyr Sallah Jadallah." He points to the largest of the banners behind him. It shows a slim man in a sweater standing before the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the third most important place in the Muslim world, the holy grail of the Jihad. "Sallah you are a flower, a rose, the best of all men," Shuhada sings. "Sallah you have sacrificed your life for the paradise of Allah." Now everybody in the audience has thrust his right hand in the air, forefinger raised. Sallah Jadallah was from this neighborhood, just five blocks away.

Two boys in the audience stare at the stage in silence. Sallah Jadallah was their brother. "We are very proud about Sallah," the younger one says, a 15-year old with black curls and large velvet eyes. "He is a hero. Allah will honor him." A couple of men step over to the brothers and shake their hands.

The next day intense heat scorches Gaza. Sheikh Radwan is a middle class area that looks like a slum. The streets are dusty tracks, the houses bare multistory barracks of concrete and cinderblocks. From the nearby lake of sewage a stench wafts through the neighborhood. The few people on the street seek the shadow of awnings and doorways.

Sallah Jadallah's family lives in a two story building with bare gray walls. On the roof flies the old Islamic flag of holy war, a green banner with white Arabic letters. Next to it the black flag of Hamas. On the other side of the street the different Islamic organizations have used the wall of a schoolyard as a book of condolence. "Hamas congratulates the family of the martyr and pledges eternal revenge" says a graffiti in black. One in green reads "The Islamic Jihad mourns the kidnappers of Waxman, the heroes of the Qassam Brigade." A colorful spray-painting shows the masked Sallah Jadallah holding the ID card of the kidnapped soldier, just like in the video that was shown on newscasts all over the world. Next to it a testimony of revenge: "The Qassam Brigade takes responsibility for the assault in Ramallah that killed two soldiers".

Sallah's father is Sheikh Jadallah Jadallah, one of the founders of Hamas. On the second floor he greets
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visitors in a windowless room that is furnished with heavy leather couches and a metal coffee table. Two pictures hang on the wall: portraits of Sallah and his brother Khaled, who was killed in the Intifada. All day long the Sheikh sees people from the neighborhood. Despite the midday heat the 56-year-old Sheikh wears a heavy gray caftan. His face is friendly, framed by a kaffiyah and thick metal-rimmed glasses. His charisma is that of a wise man. As Imam of the White Mosque, he is an important spiritual leader in this community. He is also a hero of the Holy War. Three years ago he was one of the 400 Hamas men who were deported to the Lebanese mountains by the Israelis and who lived in tents for over a year.

When asked about his son, the Sheikh doesn't pause for a second. "Of course the pain of missing my son is great," he says. Very slowly he lifts his cup and sips a little of the thick brown brew. "The pain is not as great as my pride though," he continues. Pride? Sheikh Jadallah smiles. "The martyr's death is the greatest present a Muslim can give his god." So he wants his sons to be martyrs? He brings them up to fall in the fight for Allah, the war against Israel and secular rule? He shakes his head and escapes into Imam talk: "To become a martyr is the wish of every Muslim. This wish is a very important part of our faith."

Like so many Palestinians Sheikh Jadallah explains suffering with martyrdom, anti-Israeli fervor with the violent loss of loved ones. His own father had been killed in 1948, when his family was forced out of their village by the Israelis. His uncle, brothers and friends died in the wars and during occupation. That gives his rhetoric force. Seventy percent of all Gazans are refugees like Sheikh Jadallah who have similar stories. Worn out from their nation's long history of displacement and struggle, they have nothing left but the belief of the great reward in Paradise.

The story of Sheikh Jadallah's son Sallah began like the stories of most Hamas activists during the Intifada. Like most boys in the neighborhood Sallah and his older brother Khaled regularly went out to attack the Israeli army with sticks and stones and bottles. Sallah was 17 back then, Khaled 19. One evening an army patrol arrested a 10-year-old boy just two blocks away from the Jadallah residence. The boy's mother came running to the jeep crying and tried to convince the soldiers to let her son go. Boys from the neighborhood started to collect stones and scream insults at the soldiers. It all happened very fast. Sallah and Khaled stood on a roof and started to pelt the patrol with stones, the soldiers opened fire, Khaled was hit with one shot and fell down bleeding heavily. Sallah carried his brother to a nearby garden. On the street a mob started to form. An ambulance came, but the soldiers panicked and chased it away. Khaled bled to death in Sallah's arms. That's when Sallah pledged revenge.

To his friends Sallah seemed normal. He was a slender boy, quiet, shy almost. He regularly went to the mosque and to school, even started training as an X-ray technician. But at night he would go out in the streets and work for Hamas. First he led a group who plastered the walls of Gaza with graffiti and flyers of Hamas slogans. Soon his organizational talents were noticed and he was sent out to smuggle fighters into the West Bank neighborhoods, to falsify id cards and rent apartments as safe houses.

The young activist's name appeared on the wanted lists and before long he was arrested. Most arrests of Palestinians were followed by one or two weeks of interrogation. During his first appearance before the Israeli officers Sallah flipped. He jumped on the officer's desk and started to dance wildly. The soldiers locked him in a dark isolation cell, but every time they took him to the interrogation room Sallah started his St. Vitus' dance. Through some fellow prisoners he smuggled a message to his family out: "Don't worry, I'm just pretending."

Sallah stuck to his role. In court he played his madness so convincingly his mother broke down in tears even though she knew of his masquerade. After the suit was over, the army took him to an insane asylum. There he perfected his role, running naked and screaming around the courtyard, pouring his food rations on his head, babbling nonsense. Two years he stayed in the asylum, playing the madman. When he was released Imad Aqel, the head of Qassam, made Sallah Jadallah head of the unit for special assignments. From now on the slim young man was in charge of the hard-core guerrillas who handled

the most delicate missions.

First Sallah organized kidnappings. On the weekend, when Israeli soldiers hitchhiked to their family's homes, Hamas cars with Israeli license plates picked them up on the highways. One time Sallah and two brigadiers went to the old city of Jerusalem and opened fire on the guards of Ariel Sharon, the former defense minister. The attack failed, but Sallah escaped.

At home not even his family knew of his new role inside the Qassam brigade. His friends still saw him as the shy, serious young man. He even got a job as sound man for foreign television crews who liked his calm and polite manner. Until the day when one of Sallah's close comrades was captured, and gave in under torture. This time Sallah was made one of Israel's most wanted. He returned home briefly to kiss his parents good-bye, then he disappeared.

The Sheikh and his family hadn't heard anything about him for four weeks when the news program showed a video that the kidnappers of Israeli officer Nashon Wachsmann had sent to a wire agency. It showed a masked man next to the 19-year-old soldier. "You are a prisoner of Hamas," the masked figure told Wachsmann. "Tell the world you are alright." Sallah's family was frozen in shock. There was no doubt: the voice, the clothes - the masked man was Sallah Jadallah. He and two fellow brigadiers had picked up Wachsmann, who had been hitchhiking on a highway. Now they kept him in a safe house in the West Bank.

A few days later the kidnapping ended in disaster. An elite unit of the Israeli army had snooped out the safe house. Whilst Rabin's government still negotiated with Hamas, the soldiers attacked the apartment building. The first attack failed, so they started to pound the house with rocket propelled grenades. Neither Wachsmann nor his kidnappers had survived.

The next day the Izzedine al-Qassam Brigade came to the house of the Jadallah family to pay tribute. Twenty guerrillas, unmasked, waving Kalashnikovs. This was considered a great honor, since tributes are normally paid by just three or four masked men. For minutes they fired their weapons, saluting the martyr. All of Gaza was in an uproar. The Imams praised Sallah Jadallah's name in the mosques. Gaza had a new hero.

Honor, praise, and worship are the soul of the martyr's cult, the moving force behind the suicide missions. Still, the absence of mourning seems strange with dozens of young men killed. It's not that it's not felt. Inside Hamas mourning and pain are not allowed. Nobody knows that as well as Miss Fatima, the mother of Imad Aqel, who was the leader of the Qassam brigade, before he was killed in 1993. His specialty had been to ambush army patrols at night and not leave anybody alive. After he had killed over a dozen Israeli soldiers, the Hamas leadership made him leader of the Qassam brigade. Shortly after he was the most wanted man in the Middle East. It took an entire army battalion to track him down. At a friend's house they surrounded him. Imad Aqel jumped from the roof of the building, shooting at the soldiers with a pistol. Hundreds of bullets riddled his body.

With her second son Adel, Fatima Aqel lives in a sparsely furnished barrack inside one of Gaza's poorest neighborhoods. The whole house is decorated with images of her martyred son. There photos of Imad posing with a machine gun in front of a poster of the Dome of the Rock, images with pistols and the portrait before a red background that is seen all over Gaza. "I miss my son every minute of the day," says the 60-year old woman. Her second son looks at her sternly, so she continues reciting martyr ideology: "I thank God Allah the merciful that he had granted my son a hero's death." Her words don't ring true. But her son is satisfied.

On a Friday, the Muslims' day of prayer, Sallah Jadallah's and Imad Aqel's names are mentioned in the preachings of the Imams. The open field in front of the Philistine Mosque one of the strongholds of Hamas is filled with worshippers. The inside has been crammed with men for hours. The walls and columns are plastered with flyers bearing the faces of martyrs. Eight and nine year old boys worm their

way through the crowd, offering martyr's paraphernalia for sale.

After prayer the faithful convene at the square. Merchants with donkey carts are selling mint tea, humus and T-shirts. Near the steps is a stall with rows of tapes. Speeches of famous Imams, and music by groups like the Shuhada. The new leader of the Qassam is here. He mingles inconspicuously, a friendly man, stocky but fit, wearing a purple sweat suit. Just now he doesn't want to talk politics, because he brought two of his little sons. One of his deputies is willing to talk though. No name, no clear description of his job. All that can be known is, he belongs to the high command of the Qassam.

The brigadier is a big man with heavy, round hands. He sports a full beard that makes him look almost Iranian. Dressed in a pink checkered shirt and dark pants he blends into the crowd, despite his towering height.

He lives in numerous places, but is willing to meet at his family's apartment in one of the narrow side streets of Gaza City. The usual unfinished houses, cinderblock monotony, hardly anybody on the street. The brigadier serves the coffee himself, because he doesn't want the women in the house to encounter a male stranger. The living room is furnished with plastic sofas, a desk, a computer, the portrait of Imad Aqel. Pearls of sweat glimmer on the brigadier's forehead. His eyes wander around restlessly. Life underground has made him nervous.

"What are the goals of the Qassam Brigades?" The brigadier holds his eyes still for a moment. "Our first goal is to obey the will of Allah. Our second is to force out the Israelis from Jordan to the Sea." - "But isn't the peace agreement a first step towards a solution?" - "That was a compromise by political forces. There can only be peace if the Jews are willing to live in a state of God." - "But aren't there other ways than violence?" - "The prophet has said the holy war will last forever. Here and in eternity."

Hamas rhetoric is limited to the repetitive fundamentalist slogans. Even personal questions are answered with rhetoric. "What drives you to the martyr's death?" - "When a man finds spiritual maturity he knows there are only two ways - victory or a glorious death. A martyr's death is the highest form of religious fulfillment." - "So you see a suicide attack as a spiritual experience?" The brigadier smiles and nods.

That is the essence of Hamas.

Since Hamas lack manpower and hardware for a real offensive, their means are mainly suicide bombings and assassinations. "Do you think you can chase out the Israeli army with singular attacks?" - "Our operations are designed to spread terror." - "But how do you pick your targets? If it's a war, why do you hit civilians?" - "For the Mujahedin every Jew is a target." - "The last months have been quiet, Hamas worked mainly on building a social network and infrastructure. Don't you think that is the right way?" - Hamas is like the ocean. We come in waves. If it's quiet, we just collect forces for the next wave of attacks. We will strike again. In Israel, Jerusalem, and in the West Bank."

A few days after the interview police apprehend two suicide bombers in Beersheva - Riyadh Saber and Wissam Rabbah, the latter a member of the family Imad Aqel had visited the day he died. Their truck was rigged with 260 kilograms of TNT, twice the amount of explosives used in the Oklahoma bombing. That same evening Shuhada sings at a wedding in Gaza: "Palestine will be free. Our blood will drench her land. Jihad is the way. Allah is our goal."

When a bomb factory blows up in Sheikh Radwan, the rift between Arafat's authority and Hamas gets deep. "Nobody has the right to build bombs in a residential neighborhood." Arafat proclaims in front the TV cameras. The same day he steps up his efforts to keep a lid on the tensions in Gaza. Members of his secret police Muhabarat patrol every street in the Gaza strip. The police forces stop bothering with the procedures the European trainers taught them. They just kick in the doors of Hamas homes and put suspects in jail cells.

Shuhada goes underground for a while. At a construction site where Nabeel works during the day, he tells of chases and searches. "Hamas is declared public enemy number one," he says. "But we want to

continue praising the glory of martyrs." He is already working on it. A few weeks later Shuhada is back on stage. A set of new songs appeases the authority. Songs about the martyrs of the Fatah, the military wing of the PLO. That even broadens their audience. In Gaza the martyr's cult knows no ideological boundaries.

Every progress of peace talks between the Israeli government and the PLO seems to be followed by intensified attacks of the Islamists. Suicide bombers of Hamas blow up a settler's bus in the Gaza strip and a public one in Tel Aviv. 15 people die. Every time the Imams of Gaza praise the names of the new martyrs. The hero's death as key to paradise. The same way the Japanese emperor had sent his kamikaze bombers into battle, and the Iranian Ayatollahs their children. There will be no peace. The martyrs obey the word of God. You can't negotiate with that.

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