

MaozNews

The Baruch and Bracha Maoz Newsletter

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Converted from Islam – A Testimony

Masab, son of Palestinian West Bank Hamas leader Sheikh Hassan Yousef, glances at the friend who has accompanied him to the restaurant where we met. They whisper a few words and say grace, thanking God and Jesus for putting food on their plates.

It takes a few seconds to digest this sight: The son of a Hamas MP who is also the most popular figure in that extremist Islamic organization in the West Bank, a young man who assisted his father for years in his political activities, has become a Christian. A few seconds later, he is savoring his meal, explaining that he hasn't been eating much recently because of financial problems. During the past week he has been living with the friend, a Christian he met at church. "Without him," he says, "I would have become homeless."

The younger Yousef is well aware of the implications of this interview, and how likely it is to offend his family. "I know that I'm endangering my life and am liable to lose my father, but I hope that he'll understand this and that God will give him and my family the patience and willingness to open their eyes to Jesus and to Christianity. Maybe one day I'll be able to return to Palestine and to Ramallah together with Jesus, in the Kingdom of God."

We met for the first time about four years ago, outside the military prison at the Ofer Camp, only about half a kilometer from the family home in the town of Bitunia, near Ramallah. His father was not a member of the Palestinian Parliament at the time. He was, however, one of the founders of Hamas in the West Bank and one of the prisoners' leaders; soon to be released after several years' imprisonment for membership in the organization. I wanted to interview him and, to arrange an interview, had to speak to his eldest son, Masab. Masab was expected to take an active part in running his father's political affairs in the future.

When we meet in the prison parking lot, I was surprised by his unusual appearance, which deviated from the dress code expected of relatives of senior Hamas leaders. Beardless and sporting a Western haircut, jeans and a motorcyclist's leather jacket. But the media uproar that accompanied his father's appearance made me forget his "improper" apparel. He has hardly changed. He is 30 years old and lost several kilos ("because I don't eat much"), his hair is short; he is tanned and looks like just a young Israeli in California.

"As a child I was brought up in a very religious family, hatred of Israelis was my daily bread. The first time I encountered them was at about the age of 10, when soldiers entered our home and arrested my father. Until then I had never been separated from him. We didn't know anything about the circumstances of his arrest. His membership in Hamas was secret, and we didn't think he was one of its founders. I didn't understand anything about politics or religion. I only knew that the Israeli army had arrested my father repeatedly. For me, father was everything: a good, loving man who would do anything for me. He took care of us, bought us gifts, gave of himself. Then the soldiers entered our house and took him away from me.

In high school I studied Islamic law. In 1996, when I was 18, I was arrested by the Israel Defense Forces because I was the head of the Islamic Society in my high school. It's a kind of youth movement of the organization. My process of awakening began."

"Until then I knew Hamas through my father, who lived a very modest and loving life. At first I admired the organization, primarily because I admired my father so much. But, during the 16 months in prison I was exposed to the true face of Hamas. It's a negative organization. As simple as that. A fundamentally bad organization. I sat in Megiddo Prison and discovered who the real Hamas was. Their leaders in prison were treated better than the other prisoners. They received the best food, were allowed more family visits and towels for the shower. They have no morals, they have no integrity. But they aren't as stupid as Fatah, which steals in broad daylight in front of everyone and is immediately suspected of corruption. [Hamas activists] receive money in dishonest ways, invest it in secret places, and outwardly maintain a simple lifestyle. Sooner or later they use this money and manipulate the people.

"Nobody knows them and how they operate as well as I do. For example, I remember how the family of Saleh Talahmeh, a member of the military arm of Hamas who was assassinated by Israel. Saleh was forced to beg for financial assistance because the family was left with nothing after his death. Hamas abandoned that family and those of other shaheeds [martyrs], while the senior members of the organization abroad wasted tens of thousand of dollars a month on securing their own comfortable living." "My father is a nice, friendly man. But I discovered how evil his colleagues are. After my release I lost faith in those who ostensibly represented Islam." Were you tortured? "No. I enjoyed immunity because of my father's status."

'Jesus Loves Me'

Masab-Joseph has five brothers and two sisters. He is in regular contact with them. Until recently, he refrained from telling his family that he had converted to Christianity. At the time of this interview, his father did not know. In spite of the secrecy, Masab sounds like a veteran missionary calling upon entire communities to change.

"You'll see, this interview will open many people's eyes, it will shake Islam from the roots, and I'm not exaggerating. What other case do you know where a son of a Hamas leader, who was raised on the tenets of extremist Islam, comes out against it? Although I was never a terrorist, I was a part of them, surrounded by them all the time."

Four years ago, Masab decided to convert. "Only those Christians with whom I met and spent time knew about my decision. For years I helped my father, the Hamas leader, and he didn't know that I had converted, only that I had Christian friends."

I remember how you dressed at the time. How were you accepted in Hamas? "You have to understand, I was never one of them. Although I helped my father and accompanied him, I was always opposed to the use of terror. Hamas members didn't like me. I didn't come to pray in the mosques, I hung around with strangers. They didn't like my leather jacket or my jeans. But I helped my father and conducted his affairs because he's my father, not because he's a leader in Hamas. I'm not a Hamas activist who converted to Christianity. That's not the story. I wanted to help my father understand that harming innocent people is forbidden and through him perhaps to change other people's thinking."

What is Hamas' attitude toward Christians? What is your father's attitude? "When I was with my father, I pushed a moderate Hamas leader into making logical decisions, such as stopping the attacks and agreeing to a two-state solution of our conflict with the Israelis. I felt responsible. It was better for me to be there rather than a gang of fools who would poison his mind. I tried to understand those people, their thoughts, to change them from inside through a strong person like my father, who admitted to me in the past that he does not support suicide attacks. He thinks that harming innocent people gives the organization a bad name. He once said to me that when he sees an insect outside the house he is careful not to harm it, 'so what can I say about harming civilians?'

"But within Hamas there were other leaders, mainly from the Gaza Strip and Damascus, who believe they must continue suicide attacks as an effective means of achieving their goals. The problem is that they are stronger than my father in terms of their status in the organization. What helped stop the attacks in the final analysis was Israel's attacks against the Hamas leaders."

How involved was your father in making decisions in Hamas? "He had no connection to the military arm, but they always consulted him about strategic decisions. The Hamas leadership did not make decisions only according to the opinion of the organization leaders in Syria or Gaza. However, you have to remember that the Hamas leadership in Damascus was in control of the organization's money. It had the greatest influence on organizational policy. They were also the only ones free to contact one another, unlike the leadership in the West Bank and Gaza, so that they also served as go-betweens for all the Hamas groups. Incidentally, although they now claim that the revolution in Gaza was not planned, I can tell you from personal knowledge that a year earlier, in the summer of 2006, they said to one another that if tension with Fatah continued, they would take control of the Strip."

Regards to Israel

Masab-Joseph has a bachelor's degree in geography and history from the Al-Quds Open University in Ramallah. He has difficulty finding work. When he was working in his father's office, he encountered Hamas leaders as well as members of the Palestinian and Israeli security services and Israeli journalists, who often spoke with the sheikh. He does not conceal the fact that he supported contact with the Israeli media and has almost warm feelings for Israel. "Send regards to Israel, I miss it."

You miss Israel?! "I respect Israel and admire it as a country. I'm opposed to a policy of killing civilians, or using them as a means to an end, and I understand that Israel has a right to defend itself. If the Palestinians don't have an enemy to fight, they will fight each other. In about 20 years from now you'll remember what I'm telling you, the conflict will be among various groups within Hamas. They're already beginning to quarrel over control of money."

"You Jews should be aware: You will never, but never have peace with Hamas. Islam, is the ideology that guides them. Islam will not allow Palestinians committed to that world view to sign a peace agreement with the Jews. They believe that the Prophet Mohammed fought against the Jews and that they must continue to fight them to the death. They have to take revenge of anyone who refuses to submit to Mohammed. The Jews are compared in the Koran to monkeys and the sons of pigs. "Peace with Israel contradicts Islamic law and the Koran, which declare that the Jews have no right to remain in Palestine."

Is that the justification for the suicide attacks? "More than that. An entire society sanctifies death and suicide terror. In Palestinian culture, a suicide terrorist becomes a hero, a martyr. Sheikhs tell their students about the 'heroism of the shaheeds' and that causes the young people to imitate the suicide bombers, in an effort to achieve glory. I'll give you an example. I once met a young man named Dia Tawil. He was a quiet boy, an outstanding student. Not a Muslim extremist and not radical in his ideas against the Israelis. I never heard extreme statements from him. He didn't even come from a religious family: His father was a communist and his sister was a journalist who didn't wear a head covering. But Bilal Barghouti [one of the heads of the military arm of Hamas in the West Bank] didn't need more than a few months to convince him to become a suicide terrorist." (Tawil, 19, blew himself up in March 2001 next to a bus at the French Hill junction in Jerusalem.)

"Do you know that Hamas was the first to use the weapon of suicide bombers against civilian targets?" he continues. "They are blind and ignorant. It's true, there are good and bad people everywhere, but Hamas supporters don't understand that they are led by a wicked and cruel group that brainwashes the children and gets them to believe that if they carry out a suicide attack they'll get to Paradise. No suicide bomber will find himself there and no virgins are waiting for him after he has carried out an attack. Hamas has to understand that Islam was created by people and not by God."

Were there good people in Hamas? "In my eyes there were all cruel, ugly inside. But I think that Mahmoud Zahar [one of the leaders of Hamas in Gaza] is one of the worst. I miss Ramallah, People with an open mind. I liked to walk around among the buildings, the restaurants, the people, to feel the night life. I have many friends there whom I would like to see and I don't know whether I'll be able to do that at all. I mainly miss my mother, my brothers and sisters, but I know that it will be very difficult for me to return to Ramallah soon."

Cloudy Future

In spite of his financial distress, the severance from his family and the loneliness, during the entire interview Masab sounded determined and confident. "I hope that I'll succeed one day in becoming a writer, in order to write about my personal story and about the Middle East conflict. At the moment, my ambitions are only to find work, a place to live. I have no money, I have no apartment. I was about to become one of those homeless people, but people from the church are helping me. I'm dependent on them."

Why did you leave? After all, there are other Christians in Ramallah. "I left behind a great deal of property in Ramallah to achieve true freedom. I wanted to get to quiet surroundings that would help me open the eyes of the Muslims and reveal the truth to them about their religion and about Christianity, to take them out of the darkness and the prison of Islam. In that way they'll have an opportunity to correct their mistakes, to become better people and to bring a chance for peace in the Middle East. I don't give Islam a chance to survive for more than 25 years. In the past they scared people and in that way they prevented anti-religious publicity, but today, in the modern age, they won't be able to hide the truth any longer. I hope that someday God will give the opportunity to meet the right one. She will have to be a believing Christian, and if she's a Jew who converted, even better."

There are things that Masab-Joseph is still afraid to talk about. In the middle of the meeting he wanted us to go outside the restaurant in order to make sure that I wasn't carrying listening or recording devices. "Many will hate me for this interview, but I love them all. I invite all, including the terrorists, to open their hearts and believe. I'm trying to establish an international organization to teach Christianity, love and peace in the territories. I would like to teach young people how to love and forgive/ That's the only way our nations can overcome past mistakes of and live in peace."

(main source: HaAretz)

Important Changes

Baruch is no longer responsible for **GTNews**. **MaozNews** will continue to be written and published, carrying news of the Soli Deo Gloria ministry, of the Christian and secular Israeli scene and articles on relevant themes. Contrary to former notice and in response to general request, veteran recipients of **GTNews** need not subscribe to **MaozNews**. They will continue to receive this publication unless they request to be unsubscribed.

Baruch is in the process of transferring his electronic mail to a new address. In matters regarding the church, please write to office@GandT.org.il Baruch will continue to receive this mail and deal with it until January 2008. In personal matters relating to Baruch, his family or his ministry, please write to bmaoz@gmx.com.

We recommend that our readers update their contact lists accordingly.

The Maoz Web Page is presently being designed. We hope to have the web site online before