Hamza Abu Howidy

in cooperation with Judith Poppe

Seashells at the Shores of Gaza
- Testimonies and Memories from a Shattered Land

S. Fischer Verlag
Publication: April 2026
240 Pages

Raised in Gaza amidst religious extremism and indoctrination, Hamza Howidy's yearning for freedom put him on a collision course with Hamas. In 2019, he joined protests against their rule and paid the price: imprisonment, torture, and forced exile.
Now 27, he is a vital voice from the Palestinian exile community, refusing to be co-opted in a world defined by polarization. His story defies easy labels, chronicling a journey from indoctrinated youth to a peace activist who mourns victims on all sides. By courageously condemning the violence and corruption of Hamas while also challenging Israeli attacks on civilians, he champions empathy as an act of resistance.

His memoir, *Seashells at the Shores of Gaza*, serves as a powerful bridge. It is a rare testament to the cost of speaking truth to power that forces readers to confront the complex humanity behind the headlines and offers an urgent plea for a democratic, peaceful future.

Praise

"A glimpse into a world that often remains closed to us... Freedom comes at a price – and yet it is worth believing in a better tomorrow."
Güner Balci, Bestseller author of *Heimatland*

"A book that hurts, enlightens, and – despite everything – offers hope."
Hamed Abdel-Samad

About the Authors

Hamza Howidy, born in Gaza in 1997, is a Palestinian journalist and activist living in exile in Germany. An early participant of the "We Want to Live" protest movement, he was arrested and tortured multiple times before fleeing to Germany in 2023. He is now a freelance writer and commentator, known for his non-violent, pragmatic approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, criticizing both Hamas and the Israeli occupation. His work has appeared in *taz*, *Times of Israel*, *Newsweek*, and *AsiaNews*, and he has spoken at the Bundestag and various conferences.

Judith Poppe, born in 1979, is a journalist and author specialising in the Middle East. She studied literature and cultural anthropology in Göttingen and completed a doctorate on Israeli literature. She has lived, researched, and worked in the United States, Israel, and the West Bank. From 2019 to 2023, she reported from Tel Aviv and the Palestinian Territories as a correspondent for *taz*. She now works as an international editor with a focus on human rights and social movements. Her writing appears in newspapers, magazines, and collected volumes.

Hamza Abu Howidy

In collaboration with Judith Poppe

SEASHELLS AT THE SHORES OF GAZA

Testimonies And Memories From A Shattered Land

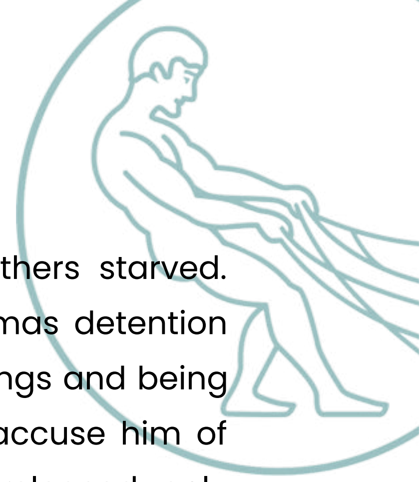
Contents

Chapter 1: The Scent of Jasmine and Gunpowder – Growing Up in Gaza

Hamza reflects on the trauma of October 7, 2023, noting that the images of violence were not new to him, but a repetition of the brutality he witnessed as a child in Gaza. He recounts the 2007 civil war between Fatah and Hamas, where, as a ten-year-old in the Al Rimal neighborhood, he saw Hamas fighters dragging a body behind a motorcycle—a "decisive military solution" that turned Gaza into a place of fear. Despite his father's deep hatred for Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamza was sent to the elite, Hamas-run "Dar Al Arqam" school for its educational quality. There, he received strict religious indoctrination but also began to ask dangerous questions that labeled him a rebellious student.

Chapter 2: We Want to Live – Rebelling Against Hamas

In 2019, driven by the stark inequality between the wealthy Hamas elite and the impoverished population, Hamza joins the "We Want to Live" (Bidna N'ish) protests. He describes the corruption of leaders like Ismail Haniyeh



and Yahya Sinwar, whose families lived in luxury while others starved. Hamza is arrested during the protests and taken to a Hamas detention center in Jabalia. He endures severe torture, including beatings and being suspended by chains (the shبح position), as interrogators accuse him of collaborating with foreign intelligence. He is eventually released only through the intervention of his father's childhood friend, a Hamas minister.

Chapter 3: The World on the Horizon – Encounters That Change Everything

Traumatized by torture, Hamza struggles to reintegrate but finds solace in a secret, illicit relationship with "Yasmine," a religious young woman. He begins a journey of intellectual defiance, reading banned books by authors like Benny Morris and Edward Said to understand the history of the conflict beyond Hamas's narrative. Crucially, he strikes up an online friendship with "Omer," a secular Israeli. This dialogue humanizes the "enemy" for Hamza, as Omer acknowledges the Palestinian "Nakba" while explaining the Israeli perspective on security. After surviving the 2021 war—which kills his friend Ayman—and enduring a second arrest and torture session for protesting in 2023, Hamza realizes he must leave Gaza to survive.

Chapter 4: The Middle East in My Luggage – My Escape

In August 2023, Hamza says goodbye to his family and crosses the Rafah border into Egypt, narrowly avoiding arrest when a border guard overlooks a banned book by Sayyid Qutb in his luggage. He flies to Turkey and navigates the smuggling networks in Izmir. The chapter details his terrifying crossing of the Mediterranean in an overcrowded rubber dinghy. In a moment of self-sacrifice, Hamza gives his life jacket to a fellow Gazan who cannot swim. After a perilous journey where the engine fails, they are saved by a Somali refugee who steers them to the rocky shores of Samos, Greece, where Hamza is placed in a refugee camp.

Chapter 5: Between Two Stools – My Life in Germany

From the refugee camp, Hamza watches the horrors of October 7 unfold. Unlike many around him who celebrate, he publicly condemns Hamas's atrocities on social media, leading to death threats from fellow refugees. He eventually moves to Germany, hoping for safety, but finds himself caught between polarized extremes. He is attacked by pro-Palestinian activists in Heidelberg for being a "traitor" and receives police protection in his refugee home after a CNN interview reveals his location. Despite the hostility, he becomes a vocal peace activist. With the help of a Jewish American friend, Jacob, he successfully raises money to help his family evacuate Gaza.

Chapter 6: Carrying On

Hamza navigates the ongoing grief of the war, including the death of his close friend Abood and the killing of his friend Refaat's father in Gaza. He grapples with the complexity of German historical responsibility, culminating in a visit to Auschwitz, where he acknowledges Jewish suffering without negating his own people's pain. The book concludes with Hamza's vision for a future Gaza: a rebuilt, prosperous "start-up nation" living side-by-side with Israel, connected by trains and trade rather than tunnels and rockets. He reaffirms his commitment to peace and his refusal to let the conflict strip him of his humanity or his friendships.

Sample translation (by Alexandra Roesch)

Chapter I

The Scent of Jasmine

There are things your memory never lets go. It locks them away in a dark room, until another horror flicks the light back on.

On 7 October 2023, I watched along with the rest of the world as Hamas fighters stormed Israeli towns and kibbutzim, shot civilians, dragged bodies behind motorbikes, and filmed themselves in bloodstained living rooms. I stared in disbelief, not because it was unimaginable, but because I had seen almost identical images before.

Not in Israel. In Gaza. In my Gaza. In my neighbourhood, Al-Rimal. Back then, in 2007, I was just ten years old. I heard screams and gunfire outside and was naïve enough to leave my family's home on Abdel Qader Al-Husseini Street. I thought there might be something to see. My father rushed out, grabbed me and pulled me back inside. "No-one leaves the house," he said. "Not unless we have no choice." That was when I realised: this wasn't a protest, it wasn't a skirmish. It was something darker. From our balcony I smelled gunpowder in the air and saw cartridge cases scattered across the street. Supporters of Fatah, desperate, tore off their uniforms from the Palestinian Authority in the hope of hiding their allegiance before Hamas fighters spotted them. I saw a PA policeman frantically digging at the base of a tree to bury his weapon. Other men banged on doors, begging their neighbours to let them in. Some were lucky. Others weren't.

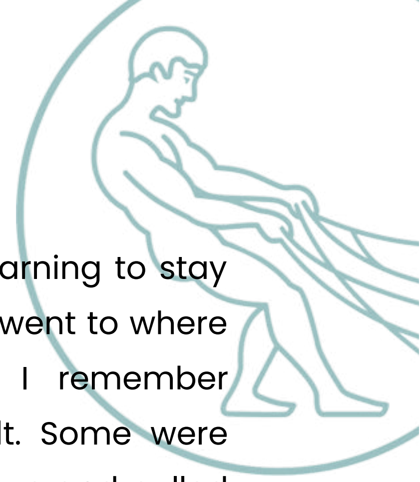
Al-Rimal, the district where we lived, was the most beautiful part of Gaza. It had been built in the 1930s and 40s on what had once been sand dunes

and sea breeze. The houses were different from the rest of Gaza – European in style, elegant, with small gardens hidden behind iron gates. Running through our neighbourhood was Omar Mukhtar Street, Gaza's own Champs Élysées. Here you found the best the city had to offer: shops everyone talked about, restaurants where families marked special occasions, and Al-Joundy, the street market famous throughout the Strip. During Eid and New Year the place was thronged with families. Children darted between stalls, and adults strolled in their finest clothes. And then there was Kazem's ice-cream parlour. On summer nights, when the heat was unbearable, families queued for it – from Jabalia in the north and Khan Younis in the south, from the refugee camps, everyone came to Al-Rimal just for Kazem's ice cream. Wherever you lived in Gaza, you knew Kazem.

That was my world. Wide, tree-lined streets, the scent of jasmine from people's gardens, the sound of the sea just a few blocks away. Al-Rimal felt like what the whole of Gaza could have been – prosperous, beautiful, full of promise. But Al-Rimal was also home to many employees of the Palestinian Authority, and several government buildings stood there. In the battle for control of Gaza in 2007, Hamas laid siege to our neighbourhood and set up checkpoints throughout.

It was the height of the conflict between the secular-socialist Fatah and the Islamist Hamas. Since the turn of the millennium, the PLO and its strongest faction, Fatah, had steadily lost ground, while Hamas, born out of the Muslim Brotherhood, was gaining influence. In the 2006 elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council, Hamas defeated Fatah. In March 2007, the two factions attempted a unity government, but three months later it collapsed into open warfare.

Armed, masked men with green headbands patrolled the streets, deciding who was allowed to move and where. Just a short walk from Al-Rimal lay the district of Al-Saraya, home to many government buildings, including the parliament which Hamas had seized in 2006. Al-Saraya became an



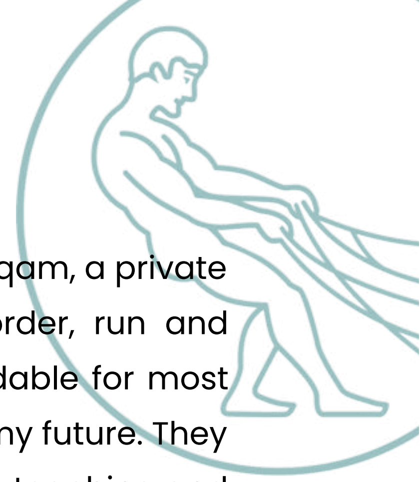
open-air execution ground. A few hours after my father's warning to stay indoors, my curiosity got the better of me. I slipped out and went to where crowds had gathered, determined to see for myself. I remember motorcycles dragging bloodied bodies across the asphalt. Some were already dead. Others were still moving when they were tied up and pulled away. Screams echoed between buildings, then vanished into the roar of engines.

Hamas called this massacre *Hassem* – the decisive military solution. Their fighters used the word with pride, as if it were some noble battle, though in truth it was nothing but executions. Behind it stood a cadre of preachers, among them Hamas cleric Younis Al-Astal, who hurried to bless the blood. Within hours they issued religious fatwas that justified every bullet, every mutilation, every execution in broad daylight. They told the gunmen not to hesitate, not to ask questions. They declared it not only permissible but a duty to kill fellow Palestinians who belonged to Fatah or were deemed "traitors". They deemed it sacred.

Anyone could be accused. Anyone could be targeted. People disappeared; some re-emerged, broken. Hamas turned Gaza into a place ruled by fear, where theology was used to cover the bloodstains.

At the time I couldn't make sense of it. I was too young to grasp what "coup" meant, but old enough to know that something had broken – not just between two factions, not just between Hamas and Fatah, but within us.

So when I saw what Hamas did on 7 October – their pride in killing, the ideology behind it, the silence that followed – it didn't feel like a new atrocity. It felt like repetition. The same cruelty, the same logic, only now visible to the whole world.

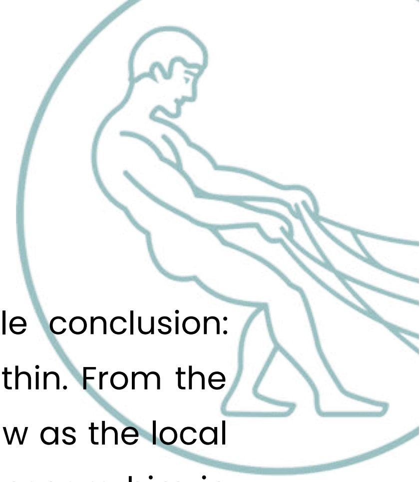


When I was six years old, in 2003, I started school at Dar Al Arqam, a private religious school just a few kilometres from the Israeli border, run and financed by people close to Hamas. The fees were unaffordable for most families in Gaza, but my parents saw it as an investment in my future. They chose Dar Al Arqam because it offered both strong academic teaching and religious instruction: smaller classes, more individual attention, better resources than public or UNRWA schools, which were often overcrowded and underfunded. The first UNRWA schools had been set up in the 1950s by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East. This had been intended as a temporary measure for Palestinians displaced in the 1948–49 war around the creation of Israel. Yet three-quarters of a century later, Gaza still relied on UNRWA's support.

Dar Al Arqam, by contrast, enjoyed a certain standing in the community, and my father wanted me to gain a solid grounding in Islam and the Qur'an in that structured setting.

My father was an intellectual, a computer engineer. He had first studied in Cairo, then gone to Birmingham for a Master's degree in computer science, where he also worked as a teaching assistant. In Britain, he came into direct personal contact with the Muslim Brotherhood for the first time. Like many immigrants he was looking for community, for meaning, for something familiar in a foreign country – above all for a connection to the Arab diaspora there. The Brotherhood tried to recruit him, at first gently, through invitations to religious lectures and charity events.

He went to some of these meetings, seeking belonging, but it did not take long before he realised the truth about them. The Brotherhood's methods became clearer with time. They applied ideological pressure, but their political message was obvious to him: a political machine disguised as religion, driven by power rather than faith. What he saw at those gatherings – their lack of principle, their secretive methods, their grandiose visions of a unified Islamic state – disturbed him deeply.

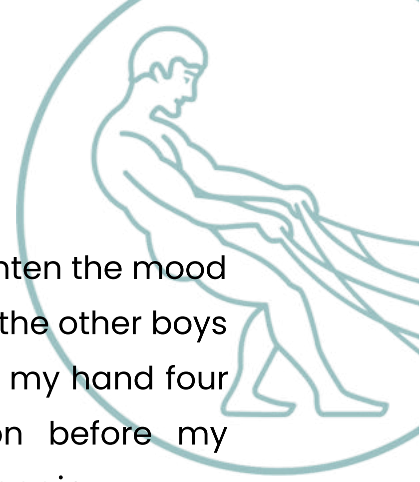


The experience left its mark. He reached an unshakeable conclusion: political Islam does not save societies, it eats them from within. From the start this conviction shaped his view of Hamas, which he saw as the local offshoot of the same destructive project that had tried to ensnare him in Birmingham. His hatred of Hamas was not abstract but personal, and it only deepened over the years in Gaza, with every arrest, every explosion, every curfew and humiliation we endured in the streets. All of it confirmed his belief that Hamas did not protect Palestinians but devoured them.

And yet, in Gaza – where choices were often between bad and worse – he still believed the religious focus of Dar Al Arqam was preferable to the chaos and poor conditions elsewhere.
At Dar Al Arqam we studied the usual school subjects – mathematics, Arabic, science – but we also delved into Islamic law, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (*hadith*), and memorising the Qur'an. I stayed there for six years, long enough to commit a third of the Qur'an to memory and consistently earn good grades. That alone made me stand out. But that was not the only thing. I asked too many questions.

I remember one teacher in particular: Abu Malik. He was tall and humourless. I can barely recall ever seeing him smile, even when the whole class erupted in laughter. In winter he carried a stick – thin, wooden, always ready to hand. An "unacceptable" haircut, a missing uniform item, a poor grade, lateness, incomplete homework or even just a distracted look while reciting the Qur'an – punishments came quickly, without warning, and always in public. I wasn't the only one to feel the sting. Every pupil braced themselves mentally for blows when they stepped into the classroom. Other teachers used corporal punishment too. The culture of beatings pervaded the entire school.

Every morning at Dar Al Arqam began the same way: a strict assembly in the courtyard, where all pupils stood silently in rows before being allowed

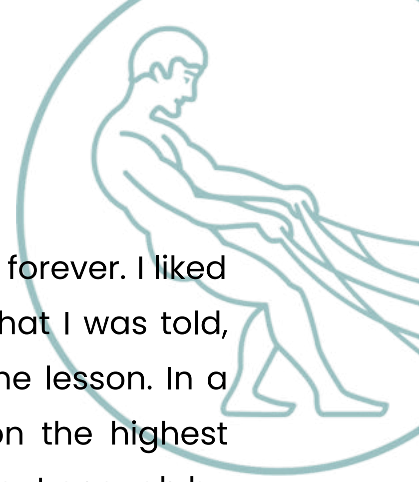


into the building. During one of these gatherings I tried to lighten the mood by standing on one leg for several minutes, hoping to make the other boys laugh. They did. Abu Malik did not. Without a word he struck my hand four times. The physical pain was sharp, but the humiliation before my classmates reduced me to tears. I never tried anything like it again.

Then there was my classmate Mohannad Mushtaha, one of the "bad boys", always sitting at the back, always ready to laugh at what our teachers treated with reverence. One morning, just before Abu Malik arrived, Mohannad decided to mock one of the Hamas *anasheed* – the chants we were obliged to sing each week during school assemblies. *Anasheed* are Islamic songs, usually performed without instruments. Hamas had developed its own versions to spread ideology and fire up supporters. The one that caught Mohannad's eye was *Shedd hizaamak ya istishhadi* – "Tighten your belt, oh martyr" – a song that glorified suicide bombers and martyrdom with chilling lines urging them to "cover the square in blood" and embrace death.

Instead of repeating these violent lyrics with the awe and passion expected of us, Mohannad grinned and sang his own parody: *Shedd hizaamak ya Hamsawi, wa 'abbi al-saaha ruz* – "Strap on your weapon, oh Hamas man, and flood the square with rice." Most of the class burst out laughing, admiring both his wit and his nerve. The image of Hamas fighters scattering rice instead of blood struck us as brilliantly absurd. It was a jab at what he saw as hypocrisy: that those who glorified death often had full stomachs and lived far from the battles they preached, while others died for their ideology. He sang softly, more parody than protest, but we all heard it – and we all knew how dangerous it was.

Seconds later Abu Malik entered. Without warning he struck Mohannad across the face. The crack echoed through the room, followed by silence. The entire class held its breath, fear etched on our faces.



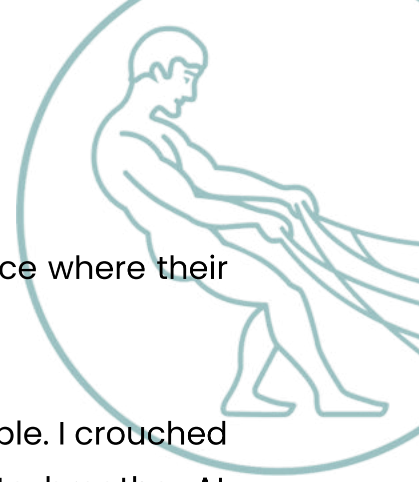
I stayed silent too. But I was not the kind of boy to stay quiet forever. I liked to ask questions about religion and politics, to challenge what I was told, even when it made teachers uncomfortable or disrupted the lesson. In a setting where conformity was prized and religious devotion the highest currency, I was a difficult student. Too spirited and never devout enough by their standards.

It was around this time that I began overhearing conversations that sowed the first seeds of doubt in me. My father's office was in the same building as our garage, which was separate from the main house and open to both the street and our garden. He always kept it locked. Inside, it was like a small library, filled with books – technical volumes from his work with Gaza's municipal administration, religious texts, political works in Arabic and English. Six to eight people could sit around the two desks. My father regularly welcomed the same group of friends there, all men of stature in senior positions.

It became a habit for me to watch these evening gatherings. I would sneak into the garden and crouch behind the wall that separated the garage from the office. Through a small window I could see my father and his guests while I hid in the dark. Voices rose and fell, tea glasses clinked, chairs creaked. I learned to tell my father's voice from the others.

One evening stands out. The conversation turned to political Islam, and I could hear the tension building in my father's tone. Suddenly he burst out: "Give me one example! Just one successful project by these Islamists! Wherever they go, they bring only destruction!" His voice rang through the office. I pressed myself closer to the wall, frightened by his anger but unable to pull away.

The silence that followed was deafening. His friends, usually quick with opinions, said nothing. My father let his frustration spill out: "They talk about abolishing nationalism, about building a great Islamic state united by



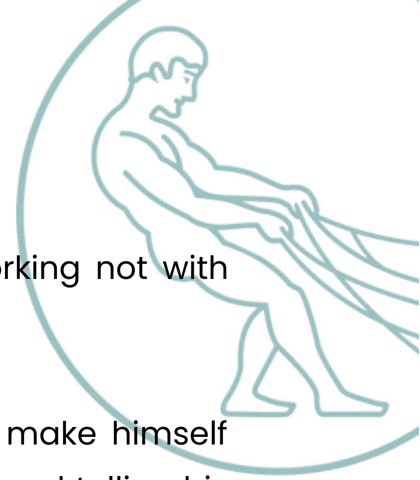
ideology. But where has that ever worked? Show me one place where their long-term plans have brought anything but chaos!"

His friends had no reply. They could not name a single example. I crouched in my hiding place, too afraid to move, too afraid even to breathe. At eleven, I didn't understand what an "Islamic state" meant, but the very idea sounded ominous, especially since my father was so passionately opposed to it. His anger frightened me, but it planted a thought: what was this ideology that was being fed to me, and why wasn't I allowed to question it?

I crept back into the house and told my mother nothing of what I'd overheard. Whenever my father's guests returned, I listened again, sometimes only for a few minutes, but gradually I became aware that the world was far more complicated than my teachers claimed.

My father paid a price for his stance against Hamas. It cost him his job in municipal government. In 2019, nearly 61 years old, he gave up his post as technical adviser for Gaza's municipalities. He would have liked to continue, but the pressure from Hamas authorities on how and where local government could operate had become unbearable. Hamas dictated everything, blocking projects he wanted to carry out – such as burying power lines underground, and introducing house numbers across Gaza. When his staff tried to begin the work, Hamas security forces stopped and interrogated them. My father turned to contacts in the administration. They told him he needed official approval. He applied – and the approval never came.

Of course Hamas's real concern was that no-one should stumble across their tunnels while at work. Everyone knew of the tunnels, dug over years into a vast spider's web beneath the whole of Gaza. But most people had no idea where exactly they ran. Haunted by the fear of Israeli spies, Hamas trusted no-one and acted with care. When digging began, the entrance would be visible, but once inside they created another opening from below

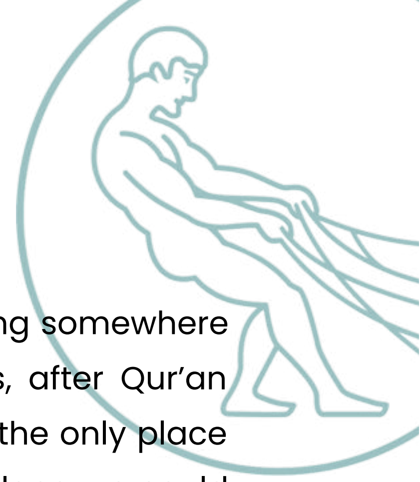


and buried the original. They made little noise, usually working not with machines but with simple tools.

My father felt that by following their instructions he would make himself complicit. So he chose to give up his work. But he never stopped telling his friends what he thought. And I never stopped listening.

My questions grew sharper when I met Refaat Abdo, a classmate who was one of the first to notice my doubts. We shared an unspoken unease about the world of our school, about the constant religious instruction and the obedience demanded of us. We were careful not to voice our deepest concerns even to each other. Instead, we allowed ourselves milder debates – whether music was truly forbidden in Islam, for instance. We both loved songs and could not understand why something so beautiful should be banned by God. But some thoughts were too dangerous to say out loud, even between us. The deeper, more direct questions gnawed at me: why did our version of Islam feel so aggressive, why did it confine us so tightly? If God was merciful, why did we live in constant fear of his punishment? Why did it feel like a terrible sin to question religious rules, when curiosity came so naturally to us?

After school we would meet in the yard or in the neighbourhood. Refaat lived about ten minutes away, and it comforted me to know that someone nearby shared my troubles. We led a double life that drained us. We took part in prayers and tried sincerely to be good Muslims, while quietly nursing our doubts. I threw myself into memorising the Qur'an. Refaat's obligations were stricter still. His father was an imam, a man respected in the community for his authority and seriousness. Alongside prayers at the mosque, Refaat had to attend endless lessons and sermons and join social activities for the faithful – football games after prayer, table tennis tournaments, extra sessions memorising the Qur'an with others. Because of his father's standing, Refaat couldn't miss any of it without notice or gossip spreading through the community.

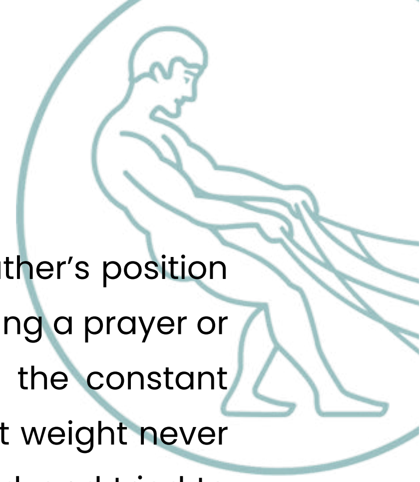


We dreamed of music and freedom, of meeting girls, of living somewhere without the constant weight of fear and guilt. Sometimes, after Qur'an lessons at the mosque, we escaped to the beach. It felt like the only place in Gaza where we weren't under constant watch, the only place we could breathe freely. Near our family business – the Abu Howidy Hotel and wedding hall – we sat watching passers-by, talking in ways we could never do at school or at home.

We tried to catch the eyes of girls. We weren't looking for anything improper, only the chance of friendship, of conversation, of spending time together the way young people did in the films we watched in secret. The girls who caught our attention were those who looked back at us, who perhaps smiled or seemed open rather than turning away with instant disapproval.

I was drawn to girls who seemed free, especially those who didn't wear the hijab and were willing to talk to boys outside their families. In Gaza's conservative society, even casual conversations between unrelated young men and women were frowned upon, so it felt like discovering something precious and rare to find girls who were kind and approachable.

But guilt usually crept in on the way home, growing heavier each day. We had spent hours memorising verses, reciting *hadith*, praying with concentration to be the pious Muslims our families and teachers expected. And yet here we were, stealing glances at the beach, imagining conversations with girls we could never befriend. At night, lying in bed, I tortured myself with questions: what did God think of these thoughts? Would he reward us for memorising the Qur'an or punish us for our wandering eyes and forbidden desires? Was he watching us at that very moment, noting each time our minds strayed from devotion to the ordinary longings of teenagers?

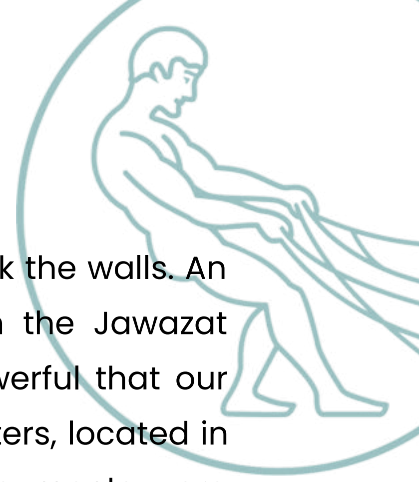


Refaat's fear was even greater than mine. Because of his father's position as imam, he lived under scrutiny I never had to endure. Missing a prayer or a lesson was not seen as laziness but as failure. He bore the constant burden of living up publicly to his father's expectations. That weight never left him. Not even when he later moved to Denmark, married, and tried to build a new life far from everything we had known.

The day we first faced real danger was the day everything changed for our generation. Until then, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict had existed for me only in schoolbooks or political songs. It was part of the atmosphere, but still abstract. I had never seen a tank. I had never heard an airstrike.

That lasted until one morning in late December 2008, when Refaat and I were sitting in class at Dar Al Arqam, taking our Arabic exam. As always, he sat behind me, so he could copy my essay and get himself good grades. Suddenly the windows rattled violently. Panic swept the room. We rushed to the window, and there we saw them: Israeli tanks advancing on Gaza City. Refaat gripped my arm. We were too frightened to speak. That day, seeing tanks together, feeling real fear for the first time, bound us in a way we could not yet understand.

Chaos erupted in the school. Some teachers vanished within minutes. Others stayed, trying to shepherd the younger pupils to safety. We older students were left behind, unsure what to do. Then, by chance, a small private bus stopped nearby. Refaat, the others and I ran towards it in desperation. The driver didn't belong to the school – he had simply seen us and opened the door out of pity. But he too was panicked. We all lived in different parts of the city, and he had no idea how to get us all home safely. After a short, chaotic drive, he dropped us in a street near Gaza's Old City – a busy area with shops and taxis. From there, each of us had to find our own way home.

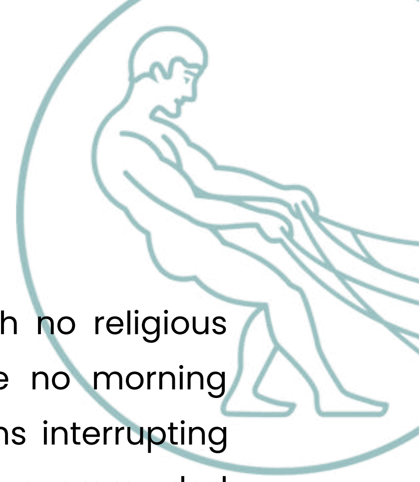


Shortly after I reached my house, a massive explosion shook the walls. An Israeli airstrike had hit the former police headquarters in the Jawazat district, far from where we lived, yet the blast was so powerful that our house shook as if it had been struck directly. The headquarters, located in what was known as the Passport Quarter where travel documents were issued, had been hosting a graduation ceremony for Hamas police officers. Dozens were killed instantly, hundreds more wounded. I still remember the silence afterwards, the tension in my parents' eyes. It was the first time I truly felt what war meant.

The conflict had been brewing for weeks. After a failed Israeli operation in Gaza in November, in which six Hamas fighters were killed, the situation escalated dramatically. Hamas and other armed groups had begun firing dozens of rockets daily at cities in southern Israel – Sderot, Ashkelon and Beersheba. Israel declared it could no longer tolerate the threat to its citizens and launched Operation Cast Lead.

From that moment, the conflict was no longer just a slogan or a classroom topic. It was collapsing buildings, rattling windows, tanks rolling past my school. The day the war began changed me profoundly. My hatred of Israel deepened. I saw its air force bomb Gaza. I heard the explosions. I felt the fear in my own body. The conflict was no longer abstract – it had a sound, a smell, immediate consequences for my life.

Soon after, my parents decided to withdraw me from Dar Al Arqam. Their choice was more practical than ideological. It was not driven by open criticism of the school's Hamas-leaning education, though they certainly had misgivings. Rather, the school's location, close to the Israeli border and near several Hamas training sites, was too dangerous. In Gaza, geography meant everything. Airstrikes regularly targeted police stations, training camps and Hamas facilities, and Dar Al Arqam lay uncomfortably close to several of them. The school was a potential target, and my parents were unwilling to take the risk.



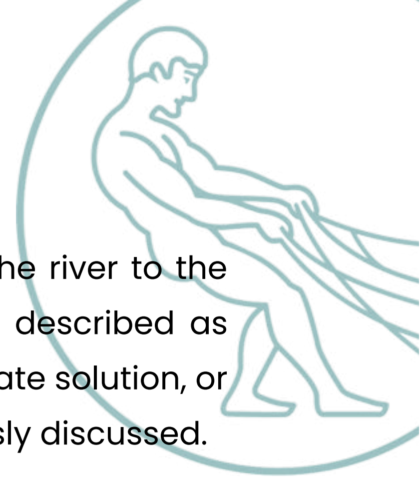
I transferred to Salah Al-Din, a nearby UNRWA school with no religious affiliation and no links to a political faction. There were no morning *anasheed* glorifying martyrdom, no *hadith* drills, no sermons interrupting lessons. Just classrooms, textbooks and the usual chaos of an overcrowded public school. It was the kind of school I had only heard about from neighbours – more neutral than Dar Al Arqam, less intense, less religious. A place where pupils did not feel part of a divine mission.

Yet the transition brought mixed feelings. I left behind the school where I had grown up, the friends with whom I had memorised the Qur'an, the routines I knew by heart. For all the fear and restrictions I had endured there, Dar Al Arqam had given me structure and order. Salah Al-Din was different – classrooms packed to bursting, worn-out facilities, the building reeking of damp stone and dust. Some days there was no electricity. At times the noise from adjoining rooms made it impossible to follow even half of what the teacher was saying.

Gradually I began to wonder whether switching schools had simply meant trading one form of control for another.

At the UNRWA school, and later at the state secondary school I attended, teaching was less religious but strongly nationalist. Teachers officially belonged to no political faction. The schools were not run by Hamas or the Palestinian Authority. They existed in a strange grey zone: some teachers leaned towards Fatah, others were known Hamas sympathisers, many simply tried to do their job while steering clear of politics. The same applied to the headteachers – their affiliations varied, but the schools presented themselves as neutral, even if political undercurrents were always present.

We were no longer taught to glorify martyrs in God's name, but instead to embrace the idea of a historic Palestine in its entirety. The maps in our lessons did not show Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and

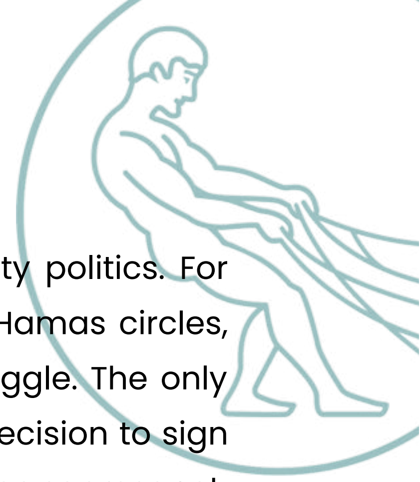


certainly not Israel. They showed a single Palestine “from the river to the sea”. Cities we had never seen – Haifa, Jaffa, Acre – were described as temporarily lost, awaiting recapture. The concept of a two-state solution, or recognition of a Jewish state’s right to exist, was never seriously discussed.

The heroes we were told to admire had changed. In place of religious martyrs we were urged to revere figures like Dalal al-Mughrabi. Her face appeared in textbooks, her name was daubed on walls, and she was held up as a national heroine – a symbol of sacrifice and courage. What we were not told was that in 1978 she had taken part in an attack in which dozens of Israeli civilians, including children, were killed after a bus was hijacked on the coastal highway. It was one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in Israel’s history. That fact was absent from our curriculum. She was not portrayed as a terrorist, but as a fighter who had given her life for Palestine. Her reputation was beyond question – it had to be venerated.

The nationalism we were taught was not only bound up with violence, it was dressed in beauty as well. We memorised the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish, and I sincerely loved his words. His verses on exile and longing were breathtaking, especially his love poems to Rita, the Israeli woman he had loved. Yet even in this tenderness, even in his most human moments, Darwish’s message was the same: separation was inevitable, resistance the only path, coexistence impossible. His poetry made separation sound poetic, even romantic, but it was still separation. We were taught to see his love story with Rita as beautiful precisely because it was doomed – because Palestinians and Israelis could never truly be together. Even love, in Darwish’s world, had to serve the cause of resistance.

And then there was Yasser Arafat. The founder of the Palestinian national movement stood above all criticism, his portrait hanging like that of a secular saint on classroom walls. Questioning him or the nationalist narrative was unthinkable. That applied not only in Fatah-run or Palestinian Authority schools. Even under Hamas rule, even among Hamas supporters,

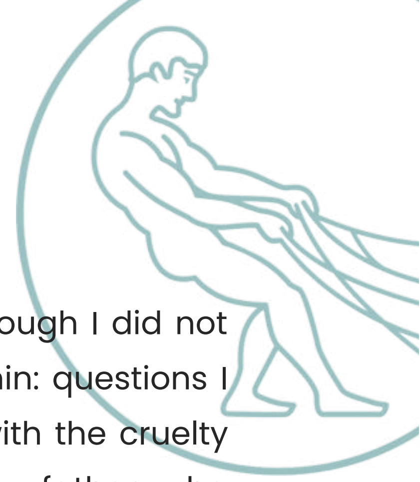


Arafat remained untouchable. His legacy went beyond party politics. For the overwhelming majority in Gaza, including many within Hamas circles, he was still the embodiment of Palestinian identity and struggle. The only criticism voiced, and even that only cautiously, was of his decision to sign the Oslo peace accords with Israel. Beyond that, his status was sacrosanct. To challenge Arafat was not only to challenge history but to break with the collective narrative in which Palestinians had been raised.

And so I, too, became increasingly nationalistic during my years at the UNRWA school. I absorbed these ideas instinctively rather than questioning them. This was down to a fundamental problem shared by all schools in Gaza: they never taught us to think critically. We were expected to accept whatever was put before us unquestioningly, whether it was religious teaching at Dar Al Arqam or nationalist narratives at UNRWA.

I devoured everything I could about Palestine and Israel. The maps, the slogans and the poems were no longer abstract but preparation for a future I was almost certain to face. Beneath the daily routine of lessons and homework, the hatred I had carried since the war of 2008 deepened. I had seen buildings collapse under bombardment and heard the explosions with my own ears. So when I read about resistance or liberation, I took those ideas in uncritically, never questioning whether such resistance was necessary or what methods it might demand.

The notion of armed struggle was no longer a debating point but part of a future I believed would soon be mine. I began to see myself within those stories of resistance, imagining myself hurling stones at Israeli soldiers, taking part in confrontations that would test my courage and resolve. In some versions of these daydreams I died as a martyr. In others I became a fighter or a hero whose actions would be remembered. Whatever shape they took, they always involved battle. I was convinced that one day I would have to defend my country by any means necessary. It felt less like a choice and more like destiny closing in.



Yet other forces were tugging me in different directions, though I did not recognise them as such at the time. Some came from within: questions I could not suppress, or a vague unease when confronted with the cruelty around me. Others came from other people, above all my father, who carried a quiet wisdom and a sense of right and wrong that reached beyond politics or slogans. He wanted me to be thoughtful, not merely obedient. And he opened up the English-speaking world to me and my siblings. At home, English was not just a school subject but part of daily life. At times we spoke only English at home, sometimes just my father and me, sometimes the whole family. It was never formal or forced, but playful and spontaneous, and it gradually shaped the way I thought.

We often watched children's channels like Cartoon Network, CBeebies and Disney Channel, picking up vocabulary almost without trying. I remember watching Tom and Jerry, Art Attack and Dora the Explorer. Sometimes I stopped to ask my father the meaning of a word; sometimes I repeated a line laughing, without needing a translation. I began borrowing small English books from the library on Al-Wehda Street, not far from where we lived. It became a quiet habit to leaf through short novels, picture books, anything I could make sense of. English opened doors to other worlds, allowed me to imagine a life outside Gaza, to think in patterns not framed by slogans of resistance. It gave me an outsider's view of Gaza, a glimpse of how others perceived what we were living through.

The convictions my father had reached in Cambridge about political Islam became part of our upbringing at home in Gaza. He insisted on teaching us secularism, not as a Western import but as a necessary pillar of any reasonable, functioning society. In our conversations he often said things like, "No religion should ever govern a state. No imam should decide your future." While other children sat in mosque circles memorising hadiths, we were taught about the Enlightenment and the separation of religion and

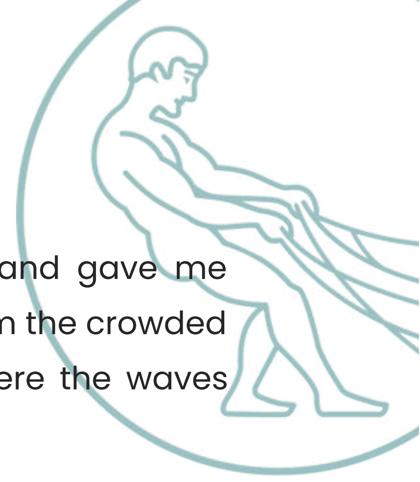
politics. He believed the only antidote to the poison of the Brotherhood was critical thought, free will and a state free from religious rule.

Perhaps he also believed in the value of irony. When having six children at home became too much for my mother, my father would take us out, sometimes just me. He would buy us the finest grapes in Sheikh Ajleen and we would drive towards the beach. “Do you want to listen to our enemy?” he would ask with a sly smile, before turning the radio to Hebrew songs. Gaza lies close enough to Tel Aviv that you can tune into the same stations. My father preferred Israeli music to the Arab songs on our stations, which he found too nationalist. Not that he wasn’t nationalist himself, but he wanted music to remain outside politics, to be enjoyed for its own sake. Unlike me, he understood the Hebrew lyrics. Like all Gazans of his generation, he spoke Hebrew. Before the Strip was sealed off, he had known some Israelis personally, when they honeymooned at our family’s Abu Howidy Hotel by the beach or came into Gaza City to shop. He stayed in touch with some of them, and they would write during escalations to ask after him.

He never liked the Israeli soldiers who came to the hotel at night to dance. That was before Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 and the evacuation of its settlements. “In the morning they harass us,” he would say, “and in the evening they want to dance with us.” Still, they were admitted to the hotel. “One couldn’t refuse them anything,” he explained.

Perhaps those contacts shaped me in the long run. Perhaps they made it slightly less remote for me, compared to others of my generation, to imagine speaking to Israelis. Not then, when I was small, but later, when I had learnt more.

And he taught me something else at the beach. One summer morning during the school holidays, when I was about ten or twelve, my father decided to drive us there to escape the stifling heat at home and the



endless power cuts that turned our house into an oven and gave me headaches. He took us to a secluded stretch of coast, far from the crowded spots where most families gathered, to a quiet beach where the waves rolled in gently and you could hear your own thoughts.

While my parents sat at a table away from the water, I wandered along the shore as always, collecting shells. I had always loved unusual shells, those that stood out from the ordinary ones scattered across the sand. That morning something at the water's edge caught my eye: a perfectly curved shell, spiralling inward like a tiny staircase. Thrilled, I ran back to show my parents.

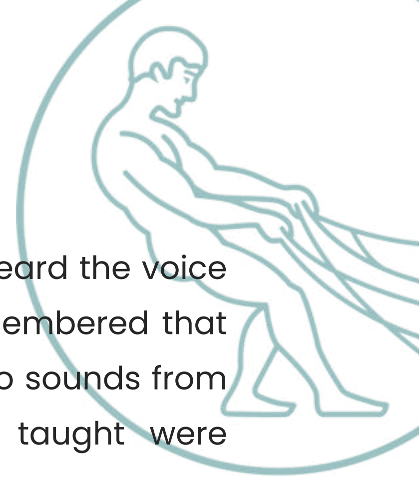
"Hold it to your ear," my father said, smiling softly. "Then you can hear the sea's voice, the waves, even when you're at home."

I pressed the cool shell to my ear, and what I heard left me speechless: the sound of waves, the ocean's voice, captured in this small, delicate shape. I was convinced I was hearing the sea itself, as though the shell could carry distant sounds across time and space.

From then on I kept it close, listening again and again, each time astonished that something so small could contain something so vast.

That shell taught me that distant voices can reach you, if only you listen closely enough. It showed me that beauty and wonder often lie hidden in the most unassuming things, that stories are everywhere: in the objects the sea washes ashore, in words carried off by the wind, in the experiences of people I would never meet.

Without knowing it, my father had taught me to be curious about the world beyond what I could see. I did not yet understand that he was instilling in me something profound: that if you listen carefully, you can hear distant voices, other worlds and perspectives that seem out of reach. Perhaps he

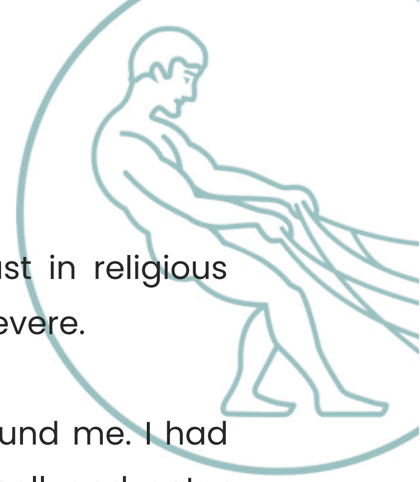


only wanted my headache to ease. But years later, when I heard the voice of an Israeli stranger – the “enemy” – on my phone, I remembered that shell. Without realising it, he had prepared me to be open to sounds from unimaginable distances, even from places I had been taught were forbidden.

And then, as I entered my teens, something deeper began to shift. For a long time I had been proud to call myself a former pupil of Dar Al Arqam. But that pride gradually ebbed until I no longer wanted any part of that identity. Religion lost its hold over me. At first it wasn’t an intellectual rejection but something personal, emotional. I had seen too many English-language films in which teenagers expressed their feelings freely, listened openly to music, spoke without shame to the opposite sex, and simply enjoyed being young. To me, their lives looked spontaneous and unburdened, unlike my own world where all of this was forbidden. Everything I found attractive in those films – a song, a casual conversation between young people – was labelled “haram”. Even watching such scenes felt like a sin. The desire alone made me feel I had failed as a Muslim.

Then came a scandal that shook me more deeply still. It must have been 2012, my final year at the UNRWA school, when a nearby mosque called Al Kenz became the centre of a neighbourhood controversy. Word spread that the imam, supposed guardian of moral and religious instruction, had sexually abused children. He was stripped of his role, for under Hamas rule such figures are usually dealt with internally, through reprimands or dismissals, without any public reckoning. It was never reported in the media, but whispered from shop to shop, from flat to flat, at family gatherings. Everyone knew.

The man entrusted with teaching the Qur’an and the hadiths had violated those sent to him for spiritual growth. It was not just a crime but a betrayal, and it made me question the entire structure of religious authority. If corruption like this was hiding behind sermons and religious lessons, what



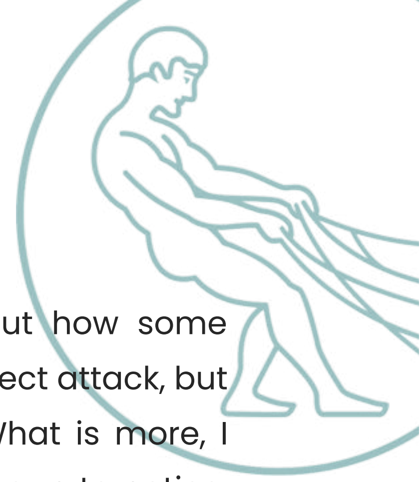
else was being concealed? The scandal shattered my trust in religious figures and sowed doubt in the system I had been raised to revere.

And yet I could not fully abandon God. A deep fear still bound me. I had grown up believing that if I died a martyr I would skip hell and enter paradise directly. That was the promise we had been taught: no judgement, no punishment, no questions. Only eternal reward. I feared hell so much that I wanted that guarantee. Martyrdom was not just resistance to occupation but insurance against divine retribution. It made the afterlife appear more secure than life itself, assuring me I would not be held accountable for my sins and doubts.

At the same time I knew I was playing at religiosity rather than living it. I memorised the Qur'an, learnt hadiths faster than many of my classmates, impressed teachers with my eloquence in religious discussions. But I was not the most devout pupil. I did not stay behind after school for extra prayers, nor did I weep during impassioned sermons. I was adept at navigating the system, but not loyal to it. I could play the part convincingly, but only later did I realise I had been acting, doing what was expected while keeping my unformed questions to myself.

In this period of growing doubt I met Mustafa, who sat a few rows behind me at school. In Gaza's atmosphere, where not only uniformed officials but also a heavy silence enforced what could not be said aloud, it was rare to find someone who questioned things as you did. Facebook, however, offered a glimpse into people's true beliefs.

I remember scrolling late at night and stumbling on Mustafa's posts. They weren't radical or dramatic, but something in them caught my attention. They were secular, liberal, honest, slightly outside the norm. He quoted books and quietly criticised events in our neighbourhood, and you could see he was trying to look beyond the narrow world around us. In Gaza, such intellectual curiosity was rare and potentially dangerous.



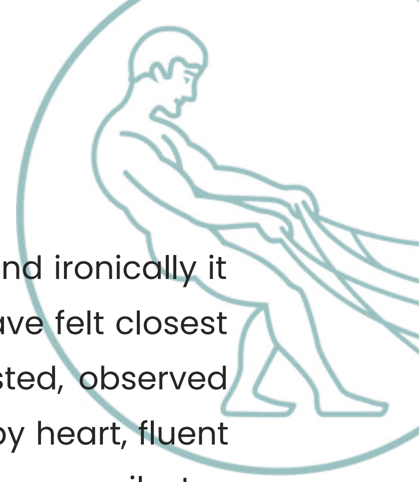
One evening he posted something subtle but brave about how some people hid behind religion to justify their power. It wasn't a direct attack, but a thoughtful observation. I knew exactly what he meant. What is more, I realised he saw the same cracks in the system that I had begun to notice. At that moment I knew I could speak to him without filtering every sentence.

A few days later I stayed behind after class and mentioned something he had written online. I no longer remember the exact words, but I remember the feeling of finally entering a space where I didn't have to lie. From that moment we felt drawn to one another, kindred spirits and quiet allies in a place where conformity was the price of safety. Finding someone like Mustafa was a rare stroke of fortune in my life, vital for my intellectual growth.

We didn't need to say everything aloud to understand each other. A glance in class, a message online, the walk home after school – small moments that created a quiet trust. We were young and uncertain of our future, but we both felt we were not alone in our discomfort with the world around us. We questioned the same slogans and found in each other permission to doubt the narratives we had been taught to accept without question.

Mustafa was remarkable for his brilliance, discipline and thoughtfulness, and became one of the few people I trusted completely. His mind worked like mine, though he was often quicker and sharper. He never needed to raise his voice to be heard; people respected him not for flaunting religiosity but for a moral clarity that would not bend to power. Yet behind his calm surface, Mustafa was tormented by the same questions that plagued me.

Something in us was breaking, and in the end I was the first to be unable to bear the contradictions.



In 2015 it all collapsed for me. It was my final school year, and ironically it happened during Ramadan. The month in which I should have felt closest to God became the month I turned away completely. I fasted, observed every ritual, and I could already recite a third of the Qur'an by heart, fluent in its rules and verses. I was part of a religious community, a pupil at a school founded on Islamic principles, but I was weary – physically from the long days without food, emotionally from the endless devotion. I was tired of feigning awe when I felt only confusion, tired of rituals that left me empty, tired of repeating ideas that no longer made sense to my developing mind. Still, I could not find words to express these doubts coherently, not even to myself.

Then one evening I discovered Hamed Abdel-Samad, when one of his YouTube episodes appeared in my recommendations. Out of boredom, curiosity, or both, I clicked on one of his videos and what I saw changed my understanding of religion forever. Abdel-Samad, the Egyptian-German intellectual, dissected Islamic history with a directness I had never encountered before. His show آية وتعليق (Verse and Commentary) dared to question the role of religion in the Arab world with a simplicity that was devastatingly effective.

His tone was calm, yet laced with sarcasm I would never have allowed myself, with irreverence and, most dangerously, absolute clarity about contradictions within the faith. What made his critique so compelling was not only intellectual rigour but his ability to take verses I had read hundreds of times and articulate what I had secretly thought but never dared to say. He didn't just question Islam, he dismantled it systematically, exposing problems I had been forbidden even to acknowledge.

Within days I was watching one episode after another, headphones on late at night, the volume low, as though I were viewing something obscene or criminal. It felt dangerous, like a betrayal, but I couldn't stop. I had never heard anyone speak of Islam with such precision and scorn, least of all in

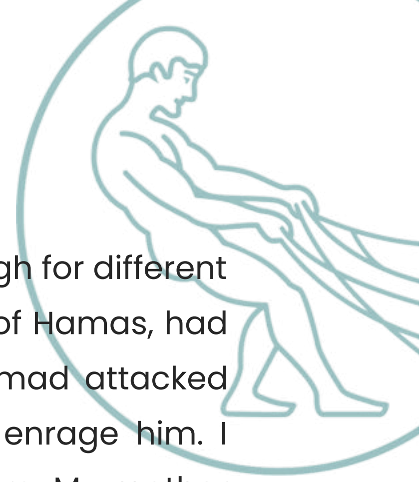
Arabic. He didn't merely disagree with its teachings – he made the sacred look small, flawed, absurd.

One episode hit me hardest: his analysis of Surah Al-Ahzab, verse 37 of the Qur'an, where God commands a man to divorce his wife so that Muhammad may marry her. At school this had always been explained as divine wisdom, an example of God's perfect plan. Abdel-Samad exposed it as lust disguised as revelation. Once I saw it that way, I could no longer ignore the implications.

What kind of God intervenes in human affairs not to protect the weak, halt violence or end hunger, but to let his prophet take another man's wife? I had been taught to regard such verses as holy, to recite and revere them. But Abdel-Samad's interpretation pulled the ground from under me. If this verse was problematic, what else had I believed that was, in truth, nothing more than control cloaked in piety?

What followed was not peace but a strange mix of relief and emptiness. I was freed from the burden of fasting eighteen hours a day and bowing five times in prayer, practices that had long felt more like discipline than devotion. I could listen to music without guilt, breathe without excuses for my thoughts and desires. But freedom carried a heavy cost: I no longer knew who I was or what I believed at all.

If religion was false, what else in my life was built on lies? Politics, nationalism, history, the stories of resistance and martyrdom now seemed questionable too. I began to doubt not only God but also the Palestinian narrative; not only my faith but the entire structure of identity I had grown up with. I had been told for so long what to believe that I no longer knew what it meant to think for myself and, left alone with my thoughts, I was afraid.



At first I told no one, not even Mustafa. Nor my parents, though for different reasons. My father, despite his liberal politics and rejection of Hamas, had remained a believer. He criticised political Islam; Abdel-Samad attacked Islam itself. I knew such a fundamental challenge would enrage him. I feared his disappointment, but his anger frightened me more. My mother was less religious and might have protected me rather than reacting in fury, but I couldn't bear to burden her with the knowledge that her son had lost his faith.

I still went to the mosque occasionally, still attended ceremonies, because in Gaza you cannot simply stop believing without grave social, political, even legal consequences. Apostasy is no private affair but a public declaration that can destroy your relationships and endanger your safety.

Fortunately, my family's growing distance from the mosque gave me some cover. As Hamas increasingly corrupted religious spaces, turning them into military centres and recruitment hubs, my family began to avoid them out of political objection. While they had a problem with Hamas in the mosques, I had a problem with the mosque itself. This overlap let me withdraw without arousing suspicion.

At home it was harder to keep up appearances. When my father led family prayers, I usually found excuses not to join: "I've already prayed," or "I'll pray later." Sometimes I claimed I hadn't yet performed the ritual ablutions (Wudu) that were required before prayer.

Ramadan was the hardest, when I had to fast for more than twelve hours, though I no longer believed in the reason. The physical strain was bad enough, but the emotional toll of maintaining a practice I secretly rejected felt like a kind of mental torture.

Over time my younger brothers Mohammed and Aboud may have noticed changes in my behaviour, but they quietly understood rather than

confronting me. My parents never guessed the depth of my transformation, and even now, years after leaving Gaza, they do not know I lost my faith entirely.

In 2016, soon after graduation, I introduced Mustafa to Abdel-Samad's videos. We began watching together, and a year after I had abandoned my faith, when Ramadan came round again and those around us immersed themselves in ritual and televised sermons, Mustafa and I sat side by side watching episodes uploaded during the holy month. For most in Gaza such material was offensive, blasphemous. For us it was oxygen in a place where free thought was barely possible.

I cherished those nights of intellectual exploration with someone who understood. I loved that someone else was seeing the same videos, absorbing the same arguments, questioning the same core beliefs that had shaped our lives. Mustafa was the only person who responded as I did. He did not shy away from these challenging ideas, but instead confirmed my doubts. He gave me the language to explore these concepts further, so I didn't feel completely alone with my questions. He questioned things alongside me, giving me the words to carry on. It was the start of something new.

This file is the property of S. Fischer Verlag GmbH. It is legally privileged and / or confidential and is intended only for the personal use of the addressee(s). No addressee should forward, print, copy, or otherwise reproduce this file in any manner that would allow it to be viewed by any individual not originally listed as a recipient. The permanent storage and the use of the content of this file in artificial intelligence applications (e.g. for the creation of summaries and summaries of the summaries of the work or translations, even of extracts) are not permitted. Unfortunately, data sometimes ends up in illegal channels even without intent or is used without your used for the training or improvement of AI applications. Please ensure that you can guarantee the security and confidentiality of the material and prevent the risk of unauthorised use. Delete this pdf-file after having it read and /or printed. If the reader of this message is not the intended recipient, you are hereby notified that any unauthorized disclosure, dissemination, distribution, copying or the taking of any action in reliance on the information herein is strictly prohibited. If you have received this communication in error, please immediately notify the sender and delete this message.

All rights reserved, including the right to use the content for text and data mining, § 44b UrhG.