

PROLOGUE

My Muslim Brothers

It was in Athens during the chilly winter of 1987 that my life lost its rhythm. The circumstances were simple enough: we sat in a dingy apartment drinking tea, just me and two members of the Muslim Brotherhood, all of us young and intense, bearded, and underfed.

Of course, you might think, this should make anyone nervous. After all, the Brothers were radioactive, banned across the Middle East. Compounding matters, as an evangelical American and a resident of Israel since my teens, I represented the two species that the Brothers despised the most—namely, Zionists and Crusaders.

This they could have found out easily, as everyone was obliged to carry their passport on their person in those days. Mine was doubly cursed: it was a US passport issued in Tel Aviv and it was laden with Hebrew stamps that confessed to years of resident Zionism.

Even without these provocations, however, there was reason to be nervous in Athens. This was when the city was a cauldron of disaffected souls, a noxious blend of Leftist European radicals and Levantine revolutionaries. They all dreamed of what wasn't, and of bringing that vagary into existence by any means—even if that meant dying or killing for it.

In the mixing pot, we had the unsavory home-grown 17 November anti-capitalist Greeks alongside a cadre of equally austere and bland Maoist Kurds. Then there were the Arab flavors of the secular PLO and the

Islamists like my Muslim Brothers. Not to be left out, there were Christian Armenian terrorists in town, too, attracting in turn the Turkish agents who wished to neutralize them. While the Turks had assassinated Armenian militant chief Hagop Hagopian in Athens in 1988, the Israelis did even better: they killed two different PLO bosses in 1986 as part of the ongoing "Operation Wrath of God," Israel's response to the Munich Olympics massacre.

All and sundry had safe houses in Athens, whence plots were hatched, staged, and enacted. In 1985 alone there were two notorious hijackings: one by the pious Hizbollah, which ended gruesomely in Beirut; and one by a PLO offshoot, the Abu Nidal Organization. If that weren't enough, the NI7 was in the middle of a string of assassinations, including that of Captain George Tsantes, head of the Joint United States Military Assistance Group. Many more bombers and prospective bombers, intent on fulfilling plots elsewhere, used Athens as home and muse.

None of this was a secret when I made plans to visit the Brothers. After all, President Reagan had only recently urged that American-based airlines "review the wisdom of continuing any flights into Athens." Yet here I was, knocking on the Muslim Brothers' door with a Bible in my hand and an incriminating passport in my pocket.

Nervous? On the contrary—I was maniacally happy to be there and expected great things.

I liked the Brothers. They would make good Christians, I thought. And unlike the PLO and Kurds, who tilted heavily to the agnostic and materialistic Left, the Brothers bore a saintly aura. They were misguided, yes. But I reckoned they were men of God, just like Reagan had when he embraced the otherwise unhuggable Afghan mujahideen.

My thinking was that if radical Muslims in Afghanistan had proved themselves to be God's agents by virtue of their hatred for the Soviets, I could also assess the Brothers by their enemy, Syrian president Hafez al-Assad. Not only was he their foe, but he was also an iconic enemy of Israel, the enemy of America, and therefore the enemy of Christ's Kingdom. And as we know, in the Middle East especially, the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Despite being Israel's archenemy, Assad was viewed as the devil incarnate by Muslims like these Brothers. Not only was he an ally of the Soviets who waged a merciless war against fellow Muslims in Afghanistan, Assad had also laid siege to the Brotherhood stronghold of Hama for twenty-seven days straight. It was uninterrupted slaughter, and when he was done (having killed an estimated 20,000 people), Assad paved over the carnage, effectively and

unwittingly building a city-sized mausoleum to the martyrs. Mention Hama in the Middle East and you were met with grave nods.

Why was Assad so brutal? What did he fear? Clearly, he recognized a potent political threat; but more than that, he saw a spiritual threat to his crass and cynical despotism. The Brotherly mission was driven by faith—pure and unimpeachable—something a secular-materialist like Assad could never comprehend, but which I understood perfectly.

The Brothers' dream was both nostalgic and utopian. The goal was to establish an Islamic realm free of Western vices like interest rates, secular law, scientism, sexual confusion (meaning choice), and what was termed "shopping-cart" religious beliefs. (Their prophet, Sayyid Quṭb, deplored the West's idea that religion is a set of optional, personal convictions.) It was to be a head-to-toe Quranic theocracy, and secular nationalists such as Assad, Nasser, or Saddam Hussein stood in the way.

At the time, I couldn't disagree with any of that. After all, I also looked for the Kingdom of God to be brought to Earth as many evangelicals do. We sought to affect culture and government. Our solutions were radical and maximalist. The only part the Muslim Brothers had wrong was believing that Islam was the solution. If they only knew Jesus! My visit was intended to introduce them to the Messiah, and I dreamed they would embrace the Good News I was to bring. Their destiny was to bring Jesus' Kingdom of God to the Arabs.

You are thinking what a fool I was, and I can understand why. That my errand was quixotic goes without saying. I neither recognized its futility nor countenanced the slightest concession to decorum. I showed up wearing scout boots made by my kibbutz, their Hebrew logo clearly stitched on the outside. Why not? It was part of my message, and I was not ashamed of Israel. I was proud and sure of one thing—Israel's role in the End Time as a light to nations and a catalyst for global salvation. Like that of the Brothers, my thesis was simple: Only with God's rule would the earth be changed into eternal Paradise. The lordship of Jesus was to come nation by nation and soul by soul.

When I approached the door to their apartment, this hallucination held fast. I was not abashed bearing down on the windmill. In fact, until my moment of arrhythmia, I never succumbed to the fear of kidnapping and death, which was a real possibility. And I did not soften my evangelistic message once I crossed the threshold. No, my crisis was far, far worse. It was the horror of a child who plays peek-a-boo, seeing the reassuring face revealed over and over again with giggles and joy, and then, on the last turn,

finds a different face—the face of a stranger, or worse, just a mask. The crisis I experienced was the terror of cognitive dissonance, the unraveling of reality's fabric.

All I can do is describe the moment, which had started nicely as we sat hunched over our tea. My hosts were nothing but kind, and I'd started giving my Brothers the Good News—hallelujah! Then it was, as I said, as if a mask had been removed and I saw something horrifically unexpected. I saw it without warning or analysis; it was just there. It was like the first time you see the dead—you see and now you know something that words have nothing to do with. What I saw was myself.

What got me was the realization that had I been born in his place, I would be him. I would have preached Muhammad and hated Israel in my quest for End Time salvation. After all, he had come to the meeting with the same intention as mine: we both came as part of a plan to redeem the world and make it into Paradise. Both of us gave up normal pursuits to achieve it and both of us were ready to die for it and, if necessary, see others die. His message was my message: The world would be made new! God's rule is at hand! The prophecies would be fulfilled! Right now! It is the Last Day and eternal salvation! Be gone, secular philosophy! Repent, you atheists and abortionists! Jesus is coming to Jerusalem to win the Last Battle! (My Brother agreed even with that—Muslims believed the prophet Jesus would return and fight for them.)

As otherness and enmity vanished where it should have been most pronounced, I no longer knew who I was nor who he was. In that moment, if the clock on the wall had melted, I could not have been more unhinged. More truthfully and more frighteningly still, this melting exposed my reality as a desert filled with passing mirages, nothing but a sociological construction, a matrix of agreed-upon illusions and stories and futile hopes. I was the priest of an ancient cult. My reality, previously solid like my god, cut from stone, had shattered. My dream of Paradise was false. If it had not been real, was anything? Was there something beyond the fantasies we construct, the stories we tell ourselves, and so many other counterfeit securities conjured by our imaginations and hewn by our own hands?

It was a deep plunge from that towering solidity through the floor and foundation of existence. Over the next days, I pursued a panicked excavation as far as I could go and there was nothing there: just atomic particles, constant flux, and emptiness.

I would never be the same. But I would later find a love for this desert of emptiness and a foundation beyond constructed reality and the absence of

its certainty. Like Abraham, I'd go out in faith from the false security and unreliable foundations of my manmade city to look "forward to the city that has foundations whose designer and builder is God." This would take time, and that process is what I hope to trace for you over the course of this story. I hope you find here some illumination, some grace for living, and some compassion for others so that, in our modest lives at least, the human experience may fulfill its promise.

