

## Book Review

### Son of Hamas<sup>1</sup>

Reviewed by Major David L. Adamson\*

*Islamic life is like a ladder, with prayer and praising Allah as the bottom rung. The higher rungs represent helping the poor and needy, establishing schools, and supporting charities. The highest rung is jihad.<sup>2</sup>*

#### I. Introduction

*Son of Hamas* reveals the firsthand account of Mosab Hassan Yousef, a child of Islam, against the backdrop of the Arab-Israeli conflict and chronicles his journey from high ranking member of Hamas to Israeli informer as well as his gradual conversion to Christianity.<sup>3</sup> The author, Mosab Yousef, is an unusually reputable source because he is the son of Sheikh Hassan Yousef: one of the founding members of the Hamas organization.<sup>4</sup> The author's stated purpose is to expose secrets, correct some historical inaccuracies, and to leave the reader with hope that the impossible, —peace in the Middle East—can be accomplished.<sup>5</sup> A close examination of the author's conversion to Christianity as well as the evolution of his relationship with his father regarding strict adherence to the principles of Islam are the linchpins for understanding this work and evaluating the success of the author's purpose.

#### II. My Father was Islam to Me

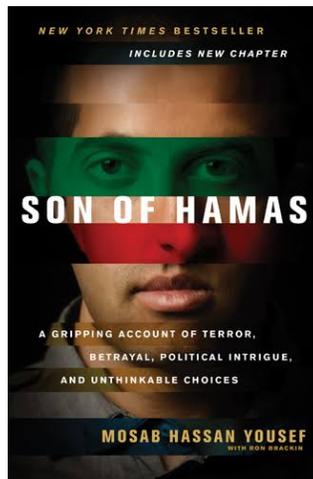
Yousef's love for his father never waned, even as his belief in the faith his father represented slowly eroded.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the reading of this work, there is an expectation of a moment when the author's tone towards his father

changes from one of respect and reverence to disgust. This change never took place. Instead Yousef slowly came to terms with a man who would not commit violence himself but condoned the killing of innocents in the name of Islam.<sup>7</sup>

Although he held up his father "as an example of humility, love, and devotion,"<sup>8</sup> his father's casual manner of endangering children, even his own, shocked Mosab.<sup>9</sup>

Mosab struggles to reconcile his profound admiration of his father with Sheikh Hassan's ability to rationalize carnage and the death of innocents.<sup>10</sup> After the initial abuse and borderline torture,<sup>11</sup> Mosab learns to respect and admire his Shin Bet handlers and he concludes that his father never taught him to respect others because he did not know how to himself.<sup>12</sup> Mosab's admiration for his father also generates a blind spot in his analysis.

On the one hand Mosab holds up his father as his "everything" and "[his] example of what it meant to be a man,"<sup>13</sup> yet he never held him accountable for his role in resurrecting Hamas during the Second Intifada. He describes men like his father as "leaders who had led [their people] and their children like goats to a slaughter and then ducked out of range to watch the carnage from a comfortable distance."<sup>14</sup> Hamas leadership utilized popular sentiment to stir religious



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<sup>1</sup> MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF WITH RON BRACKIN, *SON OF HAMAS: A GRIPPING ACCOUNT OF TERROR, BETRAYAL, POLITICAL INTRIGUE, AND UNTHINKABLE CHOICES* (2010).

<sup>2</sup> YOUSEF, *supra* note 1, at 11–12. This quote, which innocuously appears early in the book, reveals the essence of Mosab's journey from Muslim to Christian.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at xiii.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 5. Hamas was founded in 1986 and the author closes the chapter with the ominous words, "And my father climbed a few more rungs toward the top of the ladder of Islam." *Id.* at 19–20. Mosab is trusted at the highest levels of Palestinian leadership to include attending meetings with Yasser Arafat. *Id.* at 141.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at xv.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 105. The author places his father on a pedestal as the ideal Muslim. He speaks of his father as a Muslim who represents the beauty of Islam and not the side that espouses jihad and conquest. *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* The author believes his father is a moral man and the influence of Islam has allowed him to split hairs on issues of morality. *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 78.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 147. Mosab asked his father why he sent children to die and his father responded, "They want to go. Look at your brothers." *Id.* Mosab comes to learn that Islam demands warfare from its followers. *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 59. A man who could not harm an insect had found a way to rationalize the "explo[sion] [of] people into scraps of meat, as long as he didn't personally bloody his hands." *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 1–4. (describing Mosab's initial capture and the beating Israeli forces inflicted on him).

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 118–19. The exposure to this unknown virtue, tolerance, greatly affects Mosab. The fact that the Israelis, his enemy, showed him this lesson planted a seed that grows throughout the work. *Id.* at 118.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 141. Mosab gushes about the pure motives of his father and his unflinching desire for peace. *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 144. The love he has for his father blinds the author. While other leaders of Hamas receive his unrestrained scorn, Mosab's love for his father insulates the man from Mosab's criticism.

zealots into lethal action such as when a Hamas member undertook a suicide bombing mission in the city center of Netanya and wounded thirty Israelis.<sup>15</sup> Mosab grew increasingly critical of Hamas and the escalating violence but spared his father the criticism a leader in the Hamas organization objectively warrants. The insulating cocoon of love which shields Sheikh Hassan from criticism is finally pierced through Mosab's growing understanding of Christianity.

Although Sheikh Hassan lived up to all of the ideals Mosab attributed to Muslims, Mosab discovered that when viewed through the lens of the teachings of Jesus his father's actions were found wanting.<sup>16</sup> Their relationship is a significant constant throughout the book. Mosab's love for his father endures even as his faith changes. To understand Mosab one must understand his love for and complicated relationship with his father. Yet to truly understand the pendulum and character of Mosab's journey one must understand the evolution of his relationship with Allah and Jesus.

### III. The Road to Conversion

Religion permeates the work. From the initial idyllic scene in the village of Al-Janiya,<sup>17</sup> to Mosab's religious basis for initially refusing to work with Shin Bet,<sup>18</sup> to his baptism,<sup>19</sup> to his recent blog entry where he states unequivocally that "ISIS is Islam, exposed in all its cruelty and ugliness, unchanged since Muhammad,"<sup>20</sup> religion is paramount. To

understand his religious evolution is to know his thought process and better understand his work.

Mosab's conversion shows him that force of arms cannot win the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and that conflict is the nature of Islam.<sup>21</sup> Mosab eloquently juxtaposes the nature and goals of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) with the goals of Hamas.<sup>22</sup> An analysis of the failure of the Camp David summit, whereby Arafat rejected a deal that offered him 97% of the contested territories<sup>23</sup> supports Mosab's position that "For Arafat, there always seemed to be more to gain if Palestinians were bleeding."<sup>24</sup> Hamas's brand of Islam had come to replace old-style Arab nationalism and thus what was once secular in nature had morphed into a hybrid of the "extreme elements of nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism."<sup>25</sup> Mosab is further disillusioned when the supposedly ideologically pure members of Hamas become political.<sup>26</sup> From Muslims torturing Muslims,<sup>27</sup> to members of Hamas threatening to kill Mosab if he does not lie about his father running for office on the Hamas ticket,<sup>28</sup> the Islamic faith continues to disappoint Mosab. He eventually concludes that forgiveness is the only possible way to achieve peace.

### IV. Love Your Enemies

When Mosab opens the Bible and reads "love your enemies" it changes his life and dramatically alters his view of how to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>29</sup> It is enlightening to contrast Mosab's new found position with then Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who in 2004 championed the killing of Sheikh Ahmed Hassin, a spiritual

<sup>15</sup> AHMED QURIE, PEACE NEGOTIATIONS IN PALESTINE: FROM THE SECOND INTIFADA TO THE ROADMAP 27 (2015).

<sup>16</sup> YOUSEF, *supra* note 1, at 157. Mosab's heartbroken with the understanding that a true follower of Jesus would not only not directly participate in violence but use his influence to stop it. *Id.* His father as a leader in Hamas possessed significant influence, however, never tried to stop the killing. *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 5–8. Mosab describes his affection for his grandfather, the imam of his village, as well as the study of his father. *Id.* It is clear from an early age that the Muslim religion loomed enormously large in his life. *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 82. The Shin Bet recruited Mosab at a young age. *Id.* While in there custody, angry and confused, Mosab found conviction in the inflexibility of Islam stating "Islam forbids me to work with you." *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 228. Towards the end of the novel Mosab is compelled to embrace Christ and becomes baptized. *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> Mosab Hassan Yousef, *Behold the Face of Islam*, SON OF HAMAS: WORDPRESS (Feb. 18, 2015, 11:23 PM) <https://sonofhamas.wordpress.com/2015/02/18/behold-the-face-of-islam/#comments>. This most recent entry on Mosab's blog illustrates the completion of Mosab's religious conversion. No longer does Mosab see Islam as a religion of beauty and peace, but a religion of war, rape, and dominance as, so he exclaims, the prophet Muhammad intended. *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> YOUSEF, *supra* note 1, at 124. Mosab explores a hypothetical whereby the Palestinians got their wish and Israel ceased to exist and Jews fled the Holy Land. He concludes that nothing would change and that conflict is the nature of Islam. "We would still fight. Over nothing. Over a girl without a head scarf. Over who was the toughest and most important." *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 58. "For Israel, the [Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)] nationalists had been simply a *political* problem in need of a *political* solution. Hamas, on the other hand, Islamized the Palestinian problem, making it a *religious* problem. And this problem could be resolved only with a *religious* solution. . . ." *Id.* (emphasis added). Whereas politics is the art of compromise, by taking a political problem and making it a religious one Hamas effectively ensured that peace talks would fail because only total victory would satisfy their base and religious convictions.

<sup>23</sup> URI BEN-ELIEZER, OLD CONFLICT, NEW WAR: ISRAEL'S POLITICS TOWARD THE PALESTINIANS 77 (2012).

<sup>24</sup> YOUSEF, *supra* note 1, at 127.

<sup>25</sup> S. DANIEL ABRAHAM, PEACE IS POSSIBLE: CONVERSATIONS WITH ARAB AND ISRAELI LEADERS FROM 1988 TO THE PRESENT 68–69 (2006).

<sup>26</sup> YOUSEF, *supra* note 1, at 225. Mosab describes former leaders of Hamas who run for office as greedy and seeking "money, power, and glory." *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 100. Hamas members tortured fellow Muslims by "shov[ing] needles under . . . [their] fingernails." *Id.*

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 235. Hamas leaders threatened to kill Mosab if he did not lie about his father's willingness to run for political office. *Id.* Islam forbids lying. *Id.* When Sheikh Hassan learned of the death threats against Mosab he relented and agreed to run for office out of love for his son where he swept into parliament carrying several other members of Hamas with him. *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 122. The author describes being "thunderstruck" by the idea of loving his enemy and states that "this was the message I had been searching for all my life." *Id.*

leader of Hamas and paralyzed wheelchair dependent old man.<sup>30</sup> Mosab has come to realize through the doctrine of “love your enemies” that men are not the enemy.

Mosab knows that the “enemies are ideas,” and ideas cannot be destroyed or occupied into submission.<sup>31</sup> Mosab was able to discard his lifetime affiliation with Islam after discovering the teachings of Father Zakaria Botros.<sup>32</sup> Al Qaeda declared Father Botros “one of the ‘most wanted’ infidels in the world” and declared a \$60 million dollar bounty on his head.<sup>33</sup> With his conversion complete, he found hope in an unlikely source.

Mosab’s key to peace in the Middle East may perhaps be found in his interaction with his Bible study friend Amnon.<sup>34</sup> Amnon was an Israeli citizen who grew up Jewish and after being exposed to Christianity turned his back on the Jewish faith, became baptized, and ignored the mandatory call to service with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF).<sup>35</sup> Amnon maintained that he is “called to love [his] enemy” and that his faith would not allow him to take part in a futile and lethal call to service.<sup>36</sup>

Mosab found profound beauty in Amnon’s refusal to serve the IDF. Mosab’s musings in this chapter are the closest he comes to offering a Middle East solution: “I didn’t believe that everybody in Israel and the occupied territories needed to become a Christian in order to end the bloodshed. But I thought that if we just had a thousand Amnons on one side and a thousand Mosabs on the other, it could make a big difference.”<sup>37</sup>

The novel concludes with a powerful catharsis between Mosab and his father and a return to the author’s initial purpose of instilling hope in a seemingly hopeless situation.

Mosab calls his father from the United States while Sheikh Hassan is in prison and even though Mosab had betrayed his upbringing and converted to Christianity the hardline Sheikh tells Mosab “you are still my son.”<sup>38</sup> His father’s piety continues to shock Mosab who then reveals that he has worked for the Shin Bet for ten years and assumes the fatherly demeanor telling his father “I love you. You will always be my father.”<sup>39</sup> In his closing thoughts the author holds himself up as an example of what’s possible, if he, a man who grew up dedicated to the extinction of Israel, can love and forgive his enemies.<sup>40</sup> Religion may not be the answer, but religious virtues of truth and forgiveness are the solution to Middle East peace if bitter enemies are just “courageous enough to embrace it.”<sup>41</sup>

## V. Conclusion

Anyone looking for an insightful firsthand account of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the modern era should read this book. Military personnel would specifically benefit from the author’s perspective regarding the intransigence on both sides as well as an understanding between political and religious objectives. An understanding of religious objectives, i.e. those that demand total victory, is of contemporary note regarding the conflict in Syria.<sup>42</sup>

The message of hope is consistent throughout and although subtle, the Yousef’s true and evolved feelings on Islam are hinted at in the opening quotation of this review.<sup>43</sup> Mosab expounds on the metaphor of Islam as a ladder: “A moderate Muslim is actually more dangerous than a fundamentalist, however, because he appears to be harmless, and you can never tell when he has taken that next stop toward

<sup>30</sup> RAMZY BAROUD, *THE SECOND PALESTINIAN INTIFADA: A CHRONICLE OF A PEOPLE’S STRUGGLE* 97 (2006). After killing Sheikh Yassin with a missile that left his wheelchair mangled, Mr. Netanyahu stated “Even if in the short term there will be a harsh response from Hamas, in the long term the effect will be to rein in Hamas and the rest of the terror organizations because their leaders will know that they will be destroyed.” *Id.* These words are a harsh contrast from the author’s words regarding the never-ending cycle of revenge killing “An eye for an eye—and there were no shortage of eyes.” YOUSEF, *supra* note 1, at 175. Mosab now realizes that violence only begets more violence. *Id.*

<sup>31</sup> YOUSEF, *supra* note 1, at 236. At the time Mosab realizes that “our enemies are ideas” he realizes the futility of “winning” in a conventional sense and his role in the conflict. He then tells the Shin Bet that he wants out. *Id.*

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 227. Zakaria Botros, through systematic analysis gave Mosab the ability to truly embrace Christ. Mosab goes so far as to say that Father Botros was able to expose “the entire [Qur’an] as cancerous.” *Id.* Just like the first time Mosab read the Bible and was exposed to the doctrine of “love your enemies,” his discovery of Father Botros cannot be understated. *Id.* In addition to embracing Christ, Father Botros’s teachings doubtlessly paved the way for his more radical views as revealed in his blog post in February 2015. See *supra* note 21.

<sup>33</sup> Raymond Ibrahim, Al Qaeda Declares Coptic Priest Zakaria Botros “One of the Most Wanted Infidels in the World,” *JIHAD WATCH* (Sept. 10, 2008, 2:00 PM), <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2008/09/al-qaeda-declares-coptic-priest-zakaria-botros-one-of-the-most-wanted-infidels-in-the-world>. Zakaria Botros challenges the assertions of Islam and believes all followers

or Islam are spiritually lost. He reaches Muslims through a multi-media campaign including the Internet, phone, satellite radio, and television. *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> YOUSEF, *supra* note 1, at 206.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.*

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at 207. Amnon’s persistent refusal to do his tour of duty with the Israeli Defense Forces resulted in his imprisonment. *Id.* Amnon was jailed for trying to protect Palestinians while Mosab was trying to protect Jews. *Id.*

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* Mosab theory syncs well with the doctrine of “love thy enemy” and “turn the other cheek.” *Id.* If there were more men like Amnon and Mosab perhaps then the never-ending conflict would abate. *Id.* Mosab ends his musing of a thousand Amnons and Mosabs on each side by leaving the reader with the poignant question: “And if we had more . . . who knows?” *Id.*

<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 245.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.* at 245–46.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at 247–49.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.* at 250–51 (emphasis in original).

<sup>42</sup> BEN-ELIEZER, *supra* note 23, at 77.

<sup>43</sup> YOUSEF, *supra* note 1, at xiii.

the top. Most suicide bombers began as moderates.”<sup>44</sup> To Mosab, jihad is a natural extension of being a Muslim. His chilling metaphor calls to mind the Boston Marathon bombings where two seemingly assimilated young Muslim men became terrorists. That incident validates Mosab’s metaphor of Islam as a ladder. The evolution of his faith after publishing *Son of Hamas* is even more explicit.

The tempered language and metaphor of the ladder is cast aside for explicit denunciations of Islam in Mosab’s blog.<sup>45</sup> Since publishing *Son of Hamas*, Mosab’s views have continued to evolve to the point where he equates the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) with Islam stating that ISIS truly is following in the footsteps of the prophet Muhammed.<sup>46</sup> Gone is the confused soul in *Son of Hamas*. The book comes across more credible and less preachy as it covers Mosab’s evolution. If he had portrayed himself as militantly anti-Islam and stated throughout that “Islam is not a religion of peace” it would have hurt the integrity of the work.

Overall the author’s purpose is achieved through an interesting first-hand narrative and an important reminder that “an eye for an eye” revenge killing can continue perpetually unless somewhere the cycle is broken. Both sides have blood on their hands and the reader is left hoping that each side embraces forgiveness and has the courage to be the first to extend an open palm in friendship. Whether or not Mosab finds peace and fulfillment in his religious conversion, his contribution to the literature of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the unique perspective it offers along with his message of hope is an important addition and worthy of study and reflection.

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<sup>44</sup> *Id.* at 12.

<sup>46</sup> *Id.*

<sup>45</sup> Yousef, *supra* note 20.