

AS A GRADUATE STUDENT HUSSEIN HAMDANI'S ACADEMIC STUDY OF HAMAS TOOK HIM TO THE WEST BANK AND GAZA WHERE HE LIVED AND STUDIED UNDER ISRAELI ARMY CURFEWS AND FREQUENT SIEGES ON HIS UNIVERSITY. BUT LITTLE HAD PREPARED HIM FOR HIS UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER WITH SHAYKH AHMED YASSIN.

# MY TEA WITH THE SHAYKH

For many years, Hamas was my passion. Although my dissertation work was decidedly academic, as an activist for Palestine I wanted to see the struggle for self-determination from the ground up. So when I was given the opportunity to spend a semester at Birzeit University in the Occupied West Bank to study Islamic movements in the Holy Land, I readily accepted.

Before my arrival in the West Bank, I met some Hamas members in Jordan, who assured me that my research would not be in vain. "The brothers," they said, "will find you." It was not long before Hamas members spotted me around the Birzeit campus, looking for some leads. These young men were passionate, intelligent and full of conviction.

One morning, the brothers told me that we were going to the Gaza Strip. We caught a cab from Ramallah to Gaza City. My friend refused to inform me as to why we were going. Once we arrived there, my friend instructed the driver to take us to "Shaykh Ahmed" and he knew precisely where he was going.

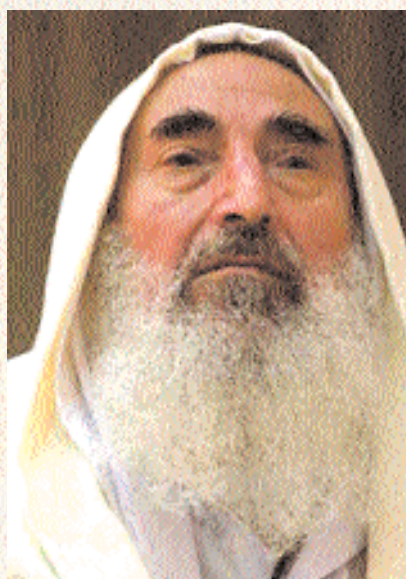
At first I was quite nervous. I was not prepared to see the Shaykh Ahmed Yassin. I imagined that in my first encounter with the leader of Hamas that I would be wearing a long white jalabiyah, wear expensive oud perfume and I would bring the Shaykh a gift as is the custom amongst Muslims. Instead, I was wearing blue jeans and a T-Shirt that read "The Property of the Toronto Maple Leafs". Several hours in the car, a dozen checkpoints and the blazing sun overhead had left me tired and sweaty. It was no way to see a Shaykh. But there was no time to wash-up or change, we were about to enter the Shaykh's house.

The house was surprisingly ordinary from the outside. It was simple and small. In comparison, Yasser Arafat's complex, on the other side of the city, was a fortress and the area for several hundred metres around it was strictly off-limits. Many Palestinians would tell me that the difference in the size of their homes paralleled the image of the two men in Gaza: Shaykh Ahmed was a humble man of the people; Chairman Arafat was seen as aloof, unconnected and, above all, corrupt.

We entered the room where many men were sitting. At the far end of the room sat Shaykh Ahmed, on a small chair, while others sat around him. I saw the bemused expressions of some the seated men. "Who's the foreign kid with the American t-shirt?!" they seemed to ask themselves.

I went directly to shake the Shaykh's hands. My friend introduced me as a Yemeni living in Canada. The Shaykh turned, smiled and said, "Why would any Yemeni leave such a beautiful land to go to such a cold country?" I laughed.

We made our way to the empty spot on the floor. On Shaykh



Yassin's request, piping hot mint tea and some biscuits were brought for us. Someone asked the Shaykh about the founding of the Hamas movement. I remember his answer distinctly. He said that the outbreak of the Palestinian uprising - the original Intifada in December 1987 forced the Ikhwan (The Muslim Brotherhood) to make a decision about its role in the national struggle. According to the Shaykh, historically the Palestinian Ikhwan focused almost exclusively on teaching and training, and stayed well away from the national liberation struggle. However, as a result of the uprising, this approach had to be revisited.

On 9 December 1987, the Shaykh held a meeting at his house of the prominent leaders of the Islamic Centre in the Gaza Strip. In addition to Shaykh Yassin, six others were present including the recently murdered, Abdal Aziz al-Rantissi. This group decided that an organisation

committed to armed struggle must be established and must partake in the Intifada. Shaykh Yassin mentioned that it was his idea to use the moniker Hamas.

I knew this story. Most people do. But hearing Shaykh Yassin tell it brought the narrative to life. It was like sitting at the feet of history. And for the Palestinians around me it represented the hope that the occupying forces could be defeated.

The Shaykh was small in size, paralyzed and weak, with a surprisingly high pitched voice. He smiled constantly and had a gentle regard for all his guests. He asked the people what their opinions were on the matters being discussed. He listened attentively and seemed to care genuinely for what they had to say. His humble home framed a man who seemed to have little arrogance and love of power and in turn was shown great deference and respect. His house was constantly filled with visitors and his family and students spent the day serving his guests. I know from the months I stayed in Palestine that he commanded incredible loyalty in the streets. Yet, sitting in his house he made me feel like we were just brothers in faith.

He asked me how the Muslims in Canada were doing. He was surprised and fascinated to hear that there were many mosques and Islamic centres in the country. He asked me to tell the Muslims there to keep Islam firm in their hearts and to always seek repentance from God.

After more discussion and several rounds of tea and fruit, the Shaykh lead all of us to the local mosque for Maghrib prayers. The mosque was a short walk from the Shaykh's house. It was the first and last time I had an opportunity to meet Shaykh Ahmed Yassin - the people's Shaykh. It was on the way back from this very mosque that he was murdered. ■