



ONCE AN ARAFAT MAN





ONCE

THE TRUE STORY OF

AN

HOW A PLO SNIPER

ARAFAT

FOUND A NEW LIFE

MAN

TASS SAADA

WITH DEAN MERRILL



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

Visit Tyndale's exciting Web site at www.tyndale.com

Contact Tass at www.onceanarafatman.com, or visit his organizations' Web sites at seedsofhopeinc.org and www.hopeforishmael.org.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Once an Arafat Man: The True Story of How a PLO Sniper Found a New Life

Copyright © 2008 by Taysir Abu Saada. All rights reserved.

Adapted from the book *Ich kämpfte für Arafat*, published by Brunnen Verlag Basel under ISBN-13: 978-3-7655-1408-1.

Cover photo of face copyright © by Oleksandr Gumerov/iStockphoto. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of Jerusalem copyright © by Boris Katsman/iStockphoto. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of stone wall copyright © by Duncan Walker/iStockphoto. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of armed man copyright © by Arne Thaysen/iStockphoto. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of Yasser Arafat copyright © by sxc.hu. All rights reserved.

Author photo of Taysir Saada copyright © 2008 by Jaymes Schrock, Scribbles and Scribes Ink. All rights reserved.

Author photo of Dean Merrill copyright © 2002 by Joel Metzler. All rights reserved.

Designed by Erik M. Peterson

Edited by Cara Peterson

Published in association with the literary agency of Riggins International Rights Services, Inc., 1960-J Madison Street, Suite 343, Clarksville, TN 37043.

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®.

Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Saada, Tass.

Once an Arafat man : the true story of how a PLO sniper found a new life / Tass Saada ; with Dean Merrill.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4143-2361-9 (hc)

ISBN-10: 1-4143-2361-1 (hc)

1. Saada, Tass. 2. Christian converts from Islam—Biography I. Merrill, Dean. II. Title.

BV2626.4.S23A3 2008

248.2'46092—dc22

[B]

2008027390

Printed in the United States of America

14 13 12 11 10 09 08

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

DEDICATION

To my parents, six brothers, and four
sisters in the Middle East, who will
always be my beloved family.

To my wife, Karen, who showed me
what true love means.

To my son, Ben, his wife, Addie, and my
daughter, Farah—I am so proud of you.

CONTENTS

Foreword	ix
Note to the Reader	xv
Acknowledgments	xvii

Part 1 | HOW I LEARNED TO HATE

CHAPTER 1	The Second Battle of Jericho	3
CHAPTER 2	The Making of a Troublemaker	9
CHAPTER 3	A Cause Worth Fighting For	19
CHAPTER 4	Growing Up Fast	29
CHAPTER 5	Young Warrior	39
CHAPTER 6	Sidelined	51
CHAPTER 7	Stranger in a Strange Land	65
CHAPTER 8	Putting Down Roots	77
CHAPTER 9	A Slow Unraveling	87

Part 2 | HOW I LEARNED TO LOVE

CHAPTER 10	Surrender	103
CHAPTER 11	New Day	115
CHAPTER 12	Farming Lessons	125
CHAPTER 13	Living on the Edge	139
CHAPTER 14	Arafat Once More	157
CHAPTER 15	Showdown at the Airport	171
CHAPTER 16	Back to the Barricades	185
CHAPTER 17	Behind the Curtain	195

Part 3 | ROAD MAP TO RECONCILIATION

CHAPTER 18	For the Middle East	205
CHAPTER 19	For Us All	221

Notes	231
About the Authors	233

FOREWORD

LET ME BE BRUTALLY HONEST.

Tass Saada was a killer. That's why the first section of this book was incredibly difficult for me to read. This is not *Anne of Green Gables*. This is not *The Sound of Music*. If you're looking for a light, romantic story about growing up in the gorgeous splendor of Prince Edward Island, Canada, or about climbing every mountain in Austria—singing as you go—then move on, dear reader. This book is not for you.

Tass and his closest friends murdered Jews in Israel. They murdered civilians and soldiers alike. They attacked Christians in Jordan. Sometimes they tossed hand grenades at their homes. Sometimes they strafed God-fearing homes with machine-gun fire. They once tried to assassinate the crown prince of an Arab country. They nearly succeeded. And they did all this willingly. They did so eagerly. Tass certainly did. His nickname was once *Jazzar*—"butcher." It was a moniker he relished.

Born in Gaza and raised in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf in a world of radical Islam and violent Palestinian nationalism, by his teenage years Tass was a cauldron of seething, roiling hatred. His family was close to the Saudi royal family. He once met Osama bin Laden. He became personal friends with Yasser Arafat, a man he long regarded as a hero, and happily killed in his name. In part one of the book you hold in your hands, Tass takes you inside the world he once loved. It is not pretty. Indeed, for me it was painful in a way that is almost impossible to convey adequately in the vocabulary of the English language.

If Tass's story ended there, there would be no way I could endorse it, much less write its foreword. But it doesn't end there. In his amazing grace, God gave Tass Saada a second act. And a third.

What follows, then, is the unforgettable story of a jihadist who found Jesus, of a violent revolutionary who was radically transformed one day by the power of the Holy Spirit and became a man of peace

and compassion. At its core, this is a story of the greatness of our great God. It is the story of a man who fell in love with a Savior who loves Arabs as well as Jews. The God of the Bible is crystal clear to all who will listen: he loves us all with an unfathomable love, with an everlasting love, with an unquenchable love. His love is so amazing, so divine that he actually offers all of us—Jew and Gentile alike—the free gift of salvation through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. He wants to adopt each one of us into his own family. He wants to bless us. He wants to take care of us. He wants to heal us and change us and make us like him. And then he wants to empower us to be a blessing to others.

Tass said yes to that love, and he was changed forever. I won't spoil it for you by giving all the good stuff away. Suffice it to say: Read this book quickly! Get through the first section as fast as you can and get to the turning point. See how God not only changed Tass's life but his family's as well. Be at his side as he is called into the ministry, as he shares the gospel with Yasser Arafat, and even as he shares the message of Christ's love and forgiveness with his parents and brothers, who all want to kill him. As the story progresses, see Tass and his lovely wife, Karen, as they reach out to the poor and needy in Gaza and the West Bank in the name of Jesus. And watch how Tass's heart changes towards the Jews. This part I can personally vouch for.

Tass and I met on a Saturday night in January 2008. I had been invited to preach at a Messianic Jewish congregation in Jerusalem that night. My sermon title was "What God Is Doing among the Muslims." This is not a typical message for a Jewish audience. But after much prayer, I felt the Lord wanted me to share with my Israeli friends what he had told me to share with my Jordanian friends when I had preached in Amman not long before: We need to get serious about obeying Jesus' command to love our neighbors and our enemies. We can only do this when we have the power of the Holy Spirit flowing through our lives. But when we do—when we truly obey the words and model of Jesus—heads will turn. People

FOREWORD

will be shocked when they see us love those who hate us. Then they will ask questions. Their hearts will be softened. They will be curious to know more about the God we serve. And then, hopefully, they will want to know this God personally for themselves.

We are already seeing it happen, all over the Middle East. More Muslims are coming to faith in Jesus Christ over the last ten to fifteen years—and particularly since 9/11—than at any other time in human history. The question for Israeli believers and for all of us who claim to be followers of Jesus is this: What role does the Lord have for us in strengthening our brothers and sisters who come to Christ from a Muslim background, and how can we actively love our neighbors and our enemies when humanly speaking this is impossible?

That was the message I came to share in Jerusalem, and who was the first couple I was introduced to that night as I came in the front door of the congregation? Tass and Karen Saada. When I was told who they were, I could hardly believe it. When they gave me an executive summary of their story, I was deeply moved. Here we were, a former aide to PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and a former aide to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, hugging each other—not trying to kill each other—in the heart of Jerusalem. All because of the work Jesus had done to give us hearts of love rather than hatred.

I had a sense that this was the beginning of a story, not the end. So the next day we decided to travel together with several other colleagues to the Israeli city of Ashkelon. There we visited a hospital that treats Jews and Arabs wounded in the ongoing border skirmishes that have plagued that region for so long. As we met with the hospital administrators, we both presented checks from our respective ministries to help finance the purchase of desperately needed medical equipment. When the doctors and staff asked why we had come to bless them, we both told them our stories. Tass explained that he had been born just a few miles south of where we were gathered, and raised with a desire to kill everyone in the room where we were sitting.

“You really worked for the PLO?” asked one doctor.

Tass nodded.

“Then what happened? What changed you?” another asked.

Tass gave all the credit to Jesus Christ. He briefly explained how God had changed his heart and given him a love for the Jewish people. And then he stunned us all. He asked the hospital staff to forgive him for what he and the Palestinian people had done over the years to harm them. It was a powerful moment. Everyone was in tears. These Israelis had never seen anything like it, and honestly, neither had I.

As you read this book, please pray for Tass and Karen and their family and team, and enlist others to pray for them too. Pray for their safety. Pray for continued courage. Pray for wisdom and discernment. Pray Colossians 4:2-4 for them:

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.

Pray for open doors for the Saadas to share the good news of Christ's radical love with many more in Gaza, the West Bank, and throughout the Muslim world. Pray, too, that the Lord would bless them with the physical, spiritual, and emotional strength and energy they need to do his work, and that he would bless them with the financial resources they need to advance the gospel and care for the poor.

Finally, please pray about what God is calling you to do. Are you loving your neighbors? Are you making disciples of *all* nations, as Jesus commands us in Matthew 28:18-20? Are you praying for the Palestinian people, and for Muslims everywhere, to find new life and new hope in Jesus? Are you investing in the work of ministries like Hope for Ishmael?

You and I are living at a remarkable moment in human history. Before Jesus returns, God the Father is drawing men, women, and

FOREWORD

children to himself as never before. He is doing something absolutely astounding and unprecedented among the Muslim people. Why not join him? Why not be part of the spiritual revolution that is saving souls and making true peace in Jesus' name? Personally, I cannot think of a greater adventure of which to be a part. Perhaps the fact that you are about to read this book suggests you think so, too.

—JOEL C. ROSENBERG
Washington, DC
July 2008

Joel C. Rosenberg is the founder of The Joshua Fund, a humanitarian relief organization whose mission is “to bless Israel and her neighbors in the name of Jesus, according to Genesis 12:1-3.” He is also the *New York Times* best-selling author of six books, including *The Last Jihad* and *Epicenter: Why the Current Rumbblings in the Middle East Will Change Your Future*.

NOTE TO THE READER

HAVE YOU EVER ACTUALLY MET A PALESTINIAN? I admit I had not, until I began working on this project. Like many other Americans, I had simply drawn a few conclusions (mostly negative) from what I saw or read in the news. These were the people, I told myself, who didn't like Israel and kept fussing about it year after year.

Then I met Tass Saada. I was brought face to face with his gentle spirit and that of his gracious wife, Karen. I heard the story of how he had been born in a refugee tent, gotten pushed around from place to place as he grew up, and was finally radicalized into taking up arms against what he viewed as the unfairness of it all. I put myself in his shoes. I would no doubt have felt the same as he did, and taken action.

But that was only the beginning. I became intrigued with his coming to the United States at age twenty-three, getting married, and succeeding in the business world. His midlife discovery of what to do about the fires of hatred that burned inside him fascinated me. The longer he talked, the more I saw a grand purpose for this man's life.

The Tass Saada I know today is not a hater. He's more of a big teddy bear who understands what will bring calm to the Middle East. He knows that political bantering can go only so far. He sees beyond the shouts and bomb blasts to the true wellsprings of harmony that will relieve bitterness and result in lasting peace.

In this he offers a parable for every human being's private turmoil. Many of us, like the adversaries in the Holy Land, have people in our lives we simply wish would go away. But of course, that isn't going to happen. So what do we do next? Read on. . . .

—DEAN MERRILL,
coauthor

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A BOOK IS NEVER CONCOCTED OUT OF THIN AIR. It is the product of a life. And a life such as mine has been greatly shaped by people who came alongside me.

None of this would have been worth writing without the incredible influence of **Charlie Sharpe** during more than thirty years now. He came into my life when I was a new immigrant, and he stayed with me until he led me to life's most important crossroad. Since then he has continued to be my mentor, my spiritual counsel, my great friend. I will always appreciate him and his wife, **Laurie**, for their impact on my life and work.

My story first appeared in book form in the German language under the title *Ich kämpfte für Arafat* (2007), published by Brunnen Verlag, a Swiss publisher. Many thanks to **Christian Meyer** and **Vera Hahn** as well as coauthor **Daniel Gerber** for making this happen.

Then **Cindy Riggins** made the vital connection with Tyndale House to consider an English rendition, which you now hold in your hands. There, **Jon Farrar** and his colleagues became excited about the potential. I am grateful for them all.

The conversion to English turned into a complete rewrite as well as an update and expansion. For this, I want to thank **Dean Merrill**, who brought his journalistic skill to bear. In the process, he has become a dear friend and brother.

Neither German nor English is my mother tongue, of course. That is all the more reason why I am thankful for those who have helped me communicate in these languages.

—TASS SAADA



PART 1

**HOW
I
LEARNED
TO
HATE**

THE SECOND BATTLE OF JERICHO

THE MORNING SUN FELT WARM ON MY BACK as I crouched behind a large pile of shrubbery I had scraped together, overlooking the Jordan River valley. Jericho, perhaps the world's oldest city, lay across the river in the distance. Here on the east side, my comrades and I had spent the night in a chilly cave along this range of hills. Now we were up early and excited about the surprise we would deliver to the advancing IDF (Israel Defense Forces) troops. My sleek, high-powered Simonov rifle with its telescopic sight lay beside me on the ground as I gazed down upon the quiet town of al-Karameh.

The dirt roads that meandered among the humble, mud-brick homes with flat roofs were empty on this morning of March 21, 1968. Most of the roughly fourteen thousand residents had left—not because of the warning pamphlets the Israeli planes had dropped the day before, but because we had told them what we planned to do. Now the town was eerily silent. No donkeys brayed in their pens; not an infant whimpered for its mother. Nobody could see our seven thousand or so Fatah fighters hidden behind stone walls or under tarpaulins, amid date trees and olive groves—a reception committee waiting to roll out a blood red carpet for the invaders.

A trained sniper at seventeen years old, I stood ready to do my job, waiting up on the hill for the opportune moment. I would pick off any IDF machine gunner who dared to stick his head up out of a tank or jeep. A soft breeze moved through the grass. I stared intently at the Allenby Bridge in the distance, the main crossing from the Israeli-controlled West Bank to the Jordanian territory where we sat.

Sure enough, the first vehicles in the convoy now came into view, their camouflage colors making them difficult to detect. This was the same IDF that had so humiliated the Arab armies nine months before in the infamous Six-Day War. We Palestinians had been peppering them ever since with hit-and-run attacks—a grenade here,

A trained sniper
at seventeen
years old, I stood
ready to do
my job.

a three-minute skirmish there. Now they had decided to storm our training camp at al-Karameh in force. They wanted to take out our operation wholesale, and maybe even get our heroic leader “Abu Ammar”—Yasser Arafat—in the process.

They figured most of us guerrilla fighters would have pulled back and away from the showdown, like so many times before. They had no idea that the wily Arafat had switched strategies this time, saying to us, “We will make a stand in this place. We will fight with honor. The whole of the Arab people are watching us. We will crush the myth that the IDF is invincible!”

And they certainly did not expect the newest tactic we would use today for the very first time: suicide bombers. We had gotten volunteers who were willing to make this their final battle for Palestinian justice. They now waited on rooftops in their bulky vests loaded with explosives until the moment came to jump into the streets below.

DEADLY SURPRISE

The growling of the IDF engines grew louder. My heart began to pound. I positioned myself for steady action as I peered through my

scope. The enemy convoy reached the edge of the town. I picked out my closest target, trained the weapon on his head, and ever so carefully squeezed the Simonov's trigger.

At nearly the same moment, my comrades below began firing from their hiding places. The firefight exploded all at once. The noise was deafening. At that time, the Israeli infantry had no flak jackets, so we were able to wound or kill them right away. All hell broke loose that morning in al-Karameh.

Of course, we began taking our own casualties, too. Every Fatah fighter knew that would happen. None of us counted on surviving the day. We were fully prepared to die. We might never see the moon again, but we would regain our honor. That was, in fact, the meaning of this town's name, *Karameh*. It was the Arabic word for "honor" or "dignity."

The street battle raged on at full force while I kept picking off targets from the hillside. Minutes passed, perhaps even a full hour. There was no subtlety to our approach; we were going with every thrust we had to inflict mortal damage on the Jews. Then a massive bomb blast shook the entire valley. Our troops had blown up the Allenby Bridge, cutting off the escape route if the IDF tried to pull back. The Israelis were now trapped on our side of the Jordan—the east side—and would have to fight to the death. Only a miracle of Joshua-at-Jericho-sized proportions would save them now.

A few minutes later, my commander shouted at me with alarm in his voice: "Do you hear that? Helicopter gunships are coming!" I had been too focused on my targets to notice. "Get off this hill!" he ordered. "If you stay here, they'll blow you to bits from the air! Get down into the town with everybody else!"

I scrambled down the hill to join my comrades in the fight. There the conflict grew increasingly close range. There was hardly room to use a weapon. It became a hand-to-hand brawl with fists,

We might never
see the moon
again, but we
would regain
our honor.

knives, and even rocks. We put our karate and judo training to use immediately. The two sides were so intermingled that their helicopter gunners couldn't sort us out. At that point, I was fighting on sheer instinct. There was no time to think or strategize. I simply kept bashing the nearest IDF soldier before he could bash me.

I could tell the enemy was bewildered by our bravery. They had expected us to act more like classic guerrilla fighters, feinting and withdrawing. Instead, here we were in a no-holds-barred fracas. Guys were screaming, blood was splashing, the wounded were moaning, and all of us were jumping over an increasing number of dead bodies to keep up the attack. I glanced down at several cuts on my arm but paid little attention. The kick of adrenaline was too strong for me to worry about injuries.

We Fatah fighters were in fact more agile than the IDF since we carried less gear than they did and could therefore run faster. We also had our bayonets already fixed on our weapons and ready to use while the Israelis were still fumbling to get theirs off their belts and attached. At times they literally ran into our knives.

Whenever they tried to regroup behind one of their tanks, a suicide bomber would leap down from a rooftop with a thunderous explosion of nails and other metal bits. Blood spattered, and body parts flew through the air.

Occasionally throughout the afternoon, there would be a short lull in the fighting while the Israelis barricaded themselves inside a house. We would then quickly set up in the house across the street, from which we would open fire again. We stormed building after building.

BRAGGING RIGHTS

Somehow, after seven hours of gruesome combat, a ceasefire was called. I still do not know who arranged that or how it was done. The IDF withdrew and headed downriver to find another bridge they could use for returning to the West Bank. The smoke over al-Karameh began to clear. "We won! We won!" we shouted, slapping each other on the back. "We stood up to the Jews and beat them!"

We danced around the four IDF tanks we had destroyed, along with three half-tracks, two armored jeeps, and even one airplane.

The symbolism for us was huge. We had done what the regular Arab armies had failed to do three times: in 1948, 1956, and the previous year. We would be featured the next day in the world's headlines. We had shown that we Palestinians were no longer just a pitiful clump of refugees. We were a proud and courageous people who had been robbed of our homeland and were on the march to take it back.

I was especially thrilled to commandeer a Willys Jeep that the Israelis had left behind. A vehicle of my own! I invited some of my comrades to jump in for a quick drive through the town.

As evening approached, we turned our attention to counting our losses. My unit of eight now numbered only three. Across the town, we went about the somber task of gathering and burying the dead. We mourned the fact that these friends were gone forever. It hurt deep within our souls, and we swore we would avenge them.

The longer we worked, the more we realized we had paid a high price on that day. We eventually tallied 128 dead, several dozen wounded, and 150 missing. These numbers, we had to admit, were probably greater than the losses suffered by the IDF.

But it was all worth it, we told ourselves. The Israelis had come from Jericho, looking for a fight, and we had given them far more than they had ever expected. Our cause was now catapulted to a whole new level.

More than anything, we could hold our heads high in the presence of the man in a checkered headdress who had watched the entire battle from a hilltop not far from where I had begun the day. He had seen our bravery, our determination, our sacrifice. The Israelis had wanted desperately to find him that day and kill him, but they had failed. His leadership stood intact. Yasser Arafat was alive and well, and we revered him more than ever.

NOTES

Chapter 2: The Making of a Troublemaker

1. Ruby, Robert, “A Six-Day War: Its Aftermath in American Public Opinion,” Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, May 30, 2007, <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=218>. Curiously, European and Asian nations are sharply different from the United States on this question. Examples include, with Israeli sympathies appearing first, Palestinian second Great Britain 24–29; France 38–38; Spain 9–32; India 20–22.

Chapter 5: Young Warrior

1. Gideon Rafael, *Destination Peace: Three Decades of Israeli Foreign Policy: A Personal Memoir* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1981), 203.

Chapter 18: For the Middle East

1. *Zondervan TNIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 32.
2. *The New Bible Commentary: Revised* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 96.

Chapter 19: For Us All

1. Sande, Ken, “Getting to the Heart of Conflict,” posted on www.peacemaker.net; adapted from his book *Peacemaking for Families* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2002), italics added.
2. Ibid.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



TASS SAADA is a former Muslim and founder of Hope for Ishmael, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to reconcile Arabs and Jews. Born in 1951 in the Gaza Strip, Saada grew up in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. He worked under Yasser Arafat as a Fatah fighter and sniper. Years after immigrating to America, he became a Christian.



DEAN MERRILL has been published in over forty magazines and has coauthored more than twenty-six books. Some of his well-known titles are *To Fly Again* and *New York Times* best seller *In the Presence of My Enemies*, both written with Philippine missionary and terrorist-abduction survivor Gracia Burnham.