

The
HOLY WARRIORS
Abraham Rothberg

A novel of terrorism and
international intrigue

Also by Abraham Rothberg

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All of Islam is politics. — Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini

Politics, as the word is commonly understood, are nothing but corruption. — Jonathan Swift

I cannot bear the men who rush up to me, put a pistol to my head and cry, 'Be my brother or I'll kill you!'
— Nicolas Chamfort

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A Novel by Abraham Rothberg

Chapter 1: The Holy Warriors

Hani Hashem walked unhurriedly into the Seminary, knowing he'd been on enough campuses in England and in Cairo so his gait, his abstracted look, his battered leather briefcase that appeared laden with books, would make him unremarkable. The Seminary was built like a fortress, a huge, red-brick Georgian square with a single tower rising high above it. It looked like a mosque, and for one crazy instant, Hani thought he heard the *muezzin* calling him to prayer. The entranceway was an arch, shaped like those Hani knew his ancestors had left in Cordoba and Granada more than five hundred years ago before the Christians had finally swept them out of Spain back into Africa. At the same time as they had driven out the Jews, those same hypocritical, turn-the-other-cheek Christians who were always accusing Arabs of being anti-Jewish. The people they drove out

of Spain the Christians liked to call Moors or Saracens, as though they couldn't bear to recognize that they were Arabs and Muslims. The Jews had also managed to forget it was those selfsame Moors who under their rule allowed them to live in Spain for hundreds of years of peace and prosperity in what Jews themselves called their "golden age".

"Well, times change, and five hundred years is a long time ago," Hanı told himself, as he entered the building and, avoiding the elevators, began the climb to the Seminary library. He felt the muscles in his thighs and in his calves knot so tightly, as they had when he was training in the Libyan desert, and he barely kept himself from stopping to massage them. No one questioned him, or asked for identification, perhaps because he was bearded, like so many of them, and had one of their little black skullcaps on. Why that should make him more nervous, he wasn't sure, although perhaps it was because he could so easily be taken for a Jew. He looked like them, the same dark eyes and swarthy skin, the same prominent beaked nose and black hair. A Semite after all.

When he entered the library reading room, a few heads were raised from their books, but did not seem to see him. It was as if, recognizing one of their own, they looked right through him back into their books. Like Arabs, the Jews, too, were People of the Book. A few nodded, whether at what they were reading or at him Hanı wasn't certain, so he nodded silently, gravely, making believe he too was unseeing, but on tip-toe alert, seeing everything and everyone around him.

Following a short stocky man into the stacks, he veered away, only to encounter a nervous thin woman with thick eye-glasses and had to avoid her too. Finally, he found a secluded part of the stacks where there was no sound except, at some distance, the hum of an air-conditioning unit. Hanı stepped up on one of the library ladders and laid his briefcase on the second shelf from the top. Up there, he could see all around him. No one was nearby; no one was aware of him. Slowly, he undid the clasps on his briefcase and carefully slid out the explosive device, the timer, the roll of tape.

When he finished taping the bomb behind the volumes on the top shelves, where it was least likely to be discovered, Hanı noticed that those books were copies of the Jews' Torah,

some newly rebound, others worn and tattered as if they had been fingered by generations. Hani was taken aback, then recalled the Koran's curse on the Jews as unworthy of being true Sons of Abraham. *Those to whom the burden of carrying the Torah was entrusted, yet refused to bear it, are like a donkey with books.* Hani laughed aloud, then glanced around to see if anyone had heard him. Cautiously, he set the timer, checked it twice against his wristwatch, then closed the clasps on his briefcase and stepped down.

Sauntering out of the library, looking neither left nor right, yet keeping his eyes peeled, he walked down a few flights and went to a men's room on the far side of the building. He locked himself into a stall until the man at the urinals left. Then, adroitly, he taped the second bomb behind the toilet tank and set the timer for seven minutes after the bomb in the library was to go off. As he looked at his watch, he was stunned to see that all of it had taken less than forty minutes, yet he felt like he'd been in the building for hours. His hands were trembling, his hair under the little skullcap plastered to his scalp. He walked out of the stall to one of the sinks, washed his hands and face twice, but his body remained drenched with sweat. He could smell it, smell his fear in it, and when he caught a glimpse of himself in the toilet mirrors, he saw the face of a stranger.

Forcing himself to move without haste, he made his way out of the building, through the courtyard and under the arch. Once again, no one paid attention to him. The briefcase was now light in his fist, and Hani wanted to toss it into the air, to cry out his triumph, but instead made himself walk sedately away towards where Mahmoud would be waiting.

Mahmoud drove around the corner right on time, as planned. Hani ducked into the seat next to him. "Everything went well?" Mahmoud asked.

Rigorously keeping the triumph out of his voice, Hani replied, "As planned."

"Allah is great."

"Thus speaks Allah the Divine," Hani echoed. He reached into the back seat, set down his briefcase and picked up another almost identical to it but heavy. He got out of the car, closed the door and through the open window said. "Now the Christians."

“Now the Christians,” Mahmoud confirmed.

Hani skimmed off the skullcap and tossed it into the car. “For whom I will not need this little hat.”

The Christian theological seminary was only a block from the Jewish one, and after Mahmoud drove off, Hani went towards it. Again, he made for the library, the section where the Biblical texts were. Once again, no one asked him for identification, but here, when they looked up from their books, they looked at him, and Hani was sure they noticed him. The blue-eyed, blond-haired, sharp-featured people in the reading room and stacks were more alert, and he didn't look at all like them.

There were more people in the stacks here, so it was harder for him to find a suitable place. Finally, he found an isolated corner and set to work. Because more people were around, and he felt more conspicuous, he placed the device at waist level where he could manage more quickly, his hands working, his fingers remembering on their own what they had done a hundred times before. When his hands told him the job was done, his hands and brain seemed separated, his brain elsewhere and packed in ice. He felt so dizzy he thought he might faint, but he braced himself against the bookshelves until he could check the timer against his watch, once, twice, three times to be sure. Now his mind was in control again, but if he could keep his hands steadier, he couldn't keep his bowels from quaking. Only one more, he told himself, and the job would be done. Anxiously, he checked all the connections still another time, then felt inside the briefcase for the last device. It took what seemed like a very long while to walk from the stacks out into the reading room and then into the corridors.

And then it took an even longer time to find the seminary chapel where in one of the very last rows, he sat with his head resting on the bench in front of him, waiting for his heart to stop hammering, for his breathing to slow. At last, he knelt, and in that church of the American colonialists, he taped the bomb under the bench in front of him, making sure it could not be seen. Again, his hands worked as if they were things apart, swift and skillful, yet when he took them out from under the bench, they were at first a stranger's fingers he saw. Yet in a moment they belonged again to him. He pressed his palms

together, closed his eyes and, still kneeling, prayed to Allah the Vanquisher, Allah the Avenger, Allah of the Ninety-Nine Names, ending his prayer with the traditional Allahu Akbar: God is great.

When his heart stopped pounding and the dizziness departed, he sidestepped out of the row into the aisle, then realized he'd forgotten his briefcase. As he went back to retrieve it, his knees buckled, his legs refused to carry him a step further, but he knew those feelings from other operations. The fear was always the same, shaking him like a chill, burning him like a fever, and as before he knew that if only he held himself in check, he could conquer it. Repeating the Allahu Akbar again and again, until the words ran together into meaningless sounds, he made his way out of the building and walked blindly up Broadway to where Mahmoud was waiting. He got into the car and sat paralyzed until Mahmoud asked, "As planned?"

"As planned," he replied, his words stiff.

The beads were cool comfort, and by the time they were halfway across the bridge, Hani began to glance back through the rear window. It wasn't until they parked to look back at Manhattan for perhaps another twenty minutes before Hani saw the billow of flame and heard the distant thunder of explosions. Only then did he cry out, "Thus speaks Allah the Sublime!" and wrapping the prayer beads around his fist, he counted off the names of Allah.

Mahmoud gave the triple knock, and they waited nervously until they heard the bolts. Omar let them in, closed the door and threw the bolts before he embraced them, kissed them on the cheeks. "You did it!" he exulted. "The infidels already have it on the television news." Bringing his voice down, he asked, "How did it go, Hani?"

"As planned, but it seemed to go on forever."

"And the cars, Mahmoud?"

"The one we used is parked in an out-of-the-way place in the mall. When they find it, Omar, they will find nothing. I wiped every thing clean twice over, even what we didn't touch."

"And our car?"

"Parked in the alley."

"Did anyone follow you?"

“Hani kept watch. No one.” Mahmoud put out his hand for his *zik̄er* beads, and Hani handed them back to him. “To be sure, we drove around for a long time, which is why we are late.”

“Come, look at the television. CNN already is showing your deeds.”

“Allah be praised,” Mahmoud intoned, running the beads through his fingers, deftly, compulsively.

In the living room, the television was on with the sound turned off. Hani saw the buildings still burning. Two bearded men were running out of the seminary, their clothes on fire, black skullcaps burning on their dark hair, their mouths open in what Hani knew was a wild shriek. Firemen were rushing towards them with blankets when the camera switched to the other seminary where ambulance attendants in white uniforms were carrying a blonde woman whose right leg dangled off the stretcher, dragging on the ground as if about to fall off. Hani watched one of the attendants try to lift the leg back onto the stretcher and it came off in his hands.

Hani turned and ran for the toilet. After he vomited, he continued to retch for a long time, then had a spell of hiccups before he was able to get hold of himself. Again and again, he washed his hands and face, yet still he felt flushed, hot, burning as if he too were on fire. When he returned, the Colonel was waiting in the living room, his arms wide. Hani felt the comfort of his embrace, of his mustache brushing his cheeks, before the Colonel stepped back and chanted:

*God is most great,
I declare that there is no God but God.
I declare that Mohammed is His Prophet.
Come to prayer.
Come to success.*

They washed, each of them separately, then knelt together and prayed, the Colonel, Mahmoud, Omar and he, bowing, prostrating themselves, facing towards Mecca so far away. Yet even as he proclaimed the greatness of Allah and the lowliness of man in His presence, Hani silently begged God to forgive him for what he had done that afternoon.

After they rose up, it was as if Hani saw the Colonel for the very first time, a stranger with a body like a block of stone, immovable. The Colonel looked old yet ageless, but Hani knew he couldn't be much more than forty because the Colonel had told them how he had fought the Israelis in 1973 when he was only nineteen-years-old. Although they knew his name was Youssef el-Zayat, none addressed him by name, only by rank. He exuded an air of authority, of command, as though even now he remained a soldier only, in the service of the Prophet, but sometimes Hani had the mutinous thought that the Colonel was only in the service of death. His face had creases so deeply etched into the bone, a face older than time, a face resurrected from the tombs of the Egyptian Pharaohs, that it seemed the Colonel belonged to another era, building pyramids with slave labor or astride a war camel swathed in a burnoose charging across the desert sands, proclaiming, *God is great, God is most great*, and with flashing strokes of his scimitar slicing off infidels' heads.

Whenever such thoughts afflicted him, Hani felt like a traitor to Islam and deliberately turned his mind to other matters. Now he asked, "How about the others, Colonel? Will they continue operations tonight?"

"Tonight Moussa's group begins."

"Do we go with them?" Mahmoud asked.

"Tonight you rest, Mahmoud. You have done your day's work, and a good day's work it was. Time for you to regroup for your next operation."

When the Colonel prepared to go out, Omar and Mahmoud were already asleep. Hani saw him take the small machine-gun and half a dozen clips from under the broom-closet floorboards, then the grenades. Hani remained seated on the floor in front of the television, the news broadcasts repeating the same scenes of the explosions and casualties at the seminaries until the Colonel flicked the set off. "Enough, Hani. In war, in life itself, to dwell too long on what has happened is not wise."

Hani leaned against the cushions and closed his eyes, but the sight of those burning men and that legless blond woman remained with him. "Be proud, Hani," he heard the Colonel say. "Your father would have been proud of you for

what you have done for Islam today. You are a true warrior of the Prophet.”

Hani tried to recall his father, but could remember only the face in the photograph his mother kept in her bedroom. The Jews had killed his father in that same 1973 war; in fact, the Colonel had been one of his father’s junior officers then. But if the Colonel was right that it did no good to dwell on the past, why was he always reminding them of what Jews had done to his family in Shatila when he fought in Lebanon, reminding Hani that the Jews had killed his father? Like the Imam, the Colonel never let them forget what Americans and Jews, what infidels, had done to Arabs and Muslims.

“I can no longer remember my father’s face,” Hani admitted. “I was only eight-years-old when the Jews killed him.”

“Your duty as a son and an Apostle of Allah is to remember his deeds, Hani, not his person.” As the Colonel spoke, he took a packet of leaflets and dropped them into his shoulder bag with the machine-gun and the clips. “If I am not back by day after tomorrow, you are in command. You know what has to be done.”

“Yes, Colonel.”

“And you will do as I instructed.”

“You will return, Colonel.”

“If Allah wills it.” The Colonel put on his dark green parka, pulled the hood over his head and slung his shoulder bag. Even in what he wore he seemed to favor the symbols of their struggle, of their Islamic faith and Arab heritage, the green for the Prophet, the hooded coat as close to the *jelaba* as one could find in the West. The Colonel nodded and went out.

One of the reasons he had joined the Apostles of Allah was because the Colonel had served with his father, because they had crossed the Canal together in ‘73 and inflicted on the Jews their first defeat by Arab armies. Now, not for the first time, Hani wondered if that would have been his father’s wish. His uncles told him it was the only road open to him for avenging his father’s death, for repaying the Jews. Among his father’s former comrades-in-arms, though, they spoke only of their fear and hatred of war, their desire for peace. Hani remembered his father’s adjutant, Abdul Nashibi, telling him of the scorched bodies of Jews hanging from their burning tank

turrets, others, their uniforms aflame, rolling in the desert sands to staunch the flames. Such things had turned Abdul's stomach. Just as those burning Jews bolting out of the seminary today had turned his stomach, just as the blonde girl's broken body made it difficult for him to breathe.

"They tell you about how glorious is battle, how that is where a man finds his manhood." Nashibi's voice was like cloth tearing. "It wasn't like that, Hani. It was a butcher shop, a slaughterhouse, as if all of us, Egyptian and Jew alike, were only animals to be ground into meat."

But his father's brother said Abdul Nashibi had long since turned away from Allah, that he was one of those who, with Nasser and his officers — and, his uncle implied, like his father — sought to tear Egypt from its Islamic roots. Only when all Arabs returned to their Islamic roots, his uncles maintained, would they conquer the Jews, would they build a just, peaceful society governed by *shariah*. The other fighters, too, had seen their faith in Allah waver. Because of that, they had lost the final battle with the Jews, even if at first they had won such a great victory by crossing the Canal, breaching the Bar-Lev Line, and driving the Jews back into the Sinai. "They say Allah failed them, but believe us, Hani," his uncles assured him, "it was they who failed Allah." His uncles asked him to pray with them. They washed and knelt to face Mecca, prostrating themselves and praying for Allah's blessing: *Surely*, they chanted, *man grows insolent, for he thinks himself sufficient unto himself. Surely he must return unto his God.*

Just before Hani left for the training camp, his first one near Benghazi, his mother pleaded with him not to go. She called his uncles foolish old men who wanted to avenge their brother even if it meant sacrificing their nephew. "You are my only son, Hani, your father's only son. I do not want your father's name to be erased, your seed to be wasted on the battle field." She begged him not to devote his life to killing and to death. Only after he rebuked her, reminding her that it was she, not his father, who had brought him to Islam, so that even before his duty to her or to his father's memory, his first duty was to Allah — he was a soldier of Islam, committed to war against the infidels, Egyptians, Americans or Jews alike — did she finally show him his father's last letter. Although Hani left

for Libya anyway, he had never been able to erase the lines from his memory; he remembered his father's letter word-by-word as he could not remember the features of his father's face, remembered them as he would a prayer, or a curse.

"Tell my son," his father had written his mother, "that Jews are not very different from us. They are only men, not giants or demons. We have beaten them on the battlefield, if only for a short time. Neither are they monsters who love war, who love to kill. In the last days of battle, while we are waiting for negotiations by those who never hear the sound of battle or the cries of the wounded and dying, by those who sit in Cairo and Jerusalem, in Moscow and Washington, and decide when and how we shall fight and die, put down our arms, advance or retreat, many of us fraternized with some of the Jews. Like us, they did not talk of making war, only of going home to their wives and children, their mothers and fathers.

"They have us surrounded now, know they can batter us to death or starve us out, for we have little ammunition, food and water left. In less than a week, they could be in Cairo, but most I talk to want only an end to the killing. One of these Jews, speaking to me in excellent Arabic, said, 'In the name of Allah, the Compassionate and Merciful, let us end this killing. We shall only be saved and purified by prayer and acts of mercy.' It seemed to me then as if the Prophet himself were speaking.

"There will be more fighting before the generals are ordered to disengage. This I know. And more of us and of them will die. This I know too. But believe me, it will be a waste — of lives, of substance, of time...."

The next day his father was killed. The Colonel said it was from a Jewish artillery shell, but Abdul Nashibi told him it was from an Egyptian mortar round that "went astray". What the truth was, Hanı never knew, but he preferred to believe his father was killed by the Jews. For his father's bravery, the government gave his mother a posthumous decoration, which she kept in her bedroom in a little box next to his photograph, though she never opened it.

Restlessly, Hanı paced the rugs, sat, stood, turned on the TV, silently so as not to wake the others, then turned it off when, again, the pictures of their day's work appeared on the

news. He told his beads, he prayed, but he couldn't fall asleep. Wearily, he lay down on the couch and made himself go loose and flowing, like the Nile, remembering that tonight the Colonel would strike again. And tomorrow or the day after, they too would buffet the infidels once more. Once and for all, the enemy would know the power of the sword of Islam; once and for all, they would taste the bitterness of tears.

Abraham Rothberg is the author of seven published novels, among them *The Heirs Of Cain*, *The Thousand Doors*, and *the other man's shoes*. He has also published two books of history, a collection of short stories, two children's books, and a volume of literary criticism.

His short stories, essays, poems and articles have appeared in many publications and been reprinted in a number of anthologies and textbooks, including *The Best American Short Stories*, where three of his stories appeared. He was twice winner of the John H. McGinnis Award, once for fiction, a second time for nonfiction. The Rochester Literary Prize for a body of written work was also conferred on him.

A native New Yorker, Rothberg has traveled widely on three continents and worked at a variety of jobs in industry, government, publishing, journalism, and university teaching.