IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ROME

IS THE UNITED STATES FOLLOWING THE HISTORY OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE?

PHILIP J. TARNOFF
Creating a book of fiction is a major undertaking that can take as much as a year for its completion. It is a year of considerable effort that requires more than the outline of a story. The transition from ideas to reality includes the creation of believable characters, filling in the details of the story, and identifying memorable conclusions. During the year that this work occurred, the author relied on the patience of his family as well as inspiration from others. For these reasons, the acknowledgments of this book may be its most important section, since without such support the book might not exist.

First and most important, I would like to express my appreciation to my wife, Nancy, for her support and patience while the book was being written. She exhibited commendable patience with my many hours at the computer and additional hours of daydreaming required to develop the complex tale contained in the following pages.

Writing is not a social occupation. It is necessary to live in the story as it develops, rather than associating actively with those around you. In the Footsteps of Rome is a particularly complex story with action that is global in nature. As a result, it was necessary to research and describe the environments of seven countries on four continents. More than seventy characters are introduced and described here. Truly a daunting task to develop credible details describing the places and people that you will meet as you read the book. Thus the need for daydreaming and research to support the writing.

Many book clubs are social gatherings where members gather to share refreshments and casual conversation about their latest selection. Depending on the makeup of the group, the books being discussed may be mysteries, love stories, war
stories, or historical fiction. The book club that was the source of inspiration for this book is different. Its focus is on more thoughtful novels that address historical trends, philosophy, human nature, and political science. The club includes Robert Long, Chester Wagstaff, Lynn Russell, David Rowland, Jeff Davis, and myself. Together, our discussions have been thought-provoking and educational. Without realizing it, the discussions of this club have served as a source of inspiration for the storyline and conclusions of this book.

Selections of the club relevant to this book have included: The Cave and the Light, by Arthur Herman; Why Niebuhr Matters, by Charles Lemert; Plain, Honest Men—the Making of the American Constitution, by Richard Beeman; and From Dawn to Decadence—1500 to the Present, by Jacques Barzun. In one way or another, these resources describe the evolution of civilization through the eyes of Plato, Socrates, and many other philosophers, political scientists, artists, and scientists who influenced the development of civilization and its governments. They also described the process, philosophies, debates, and theories that underlie the United States Constitution. The reader is encouraged to scan these texts to extract the wisdom they contain. Pertinent sections of these texts are quoted in the following pages.

Although the story focuses on the conflicts between the United States and the terrorist organizations of the Middle East, it hints of some parallels between this conflict and the invaders of the Roman Empire. However, the readings of the club made it clear that modern governments, as we know them today, began with the experiments of the Greeks with various forms of government. One of the conclusions of the club as well as the following story is the fact that external forces such as the uprisings in the Middle East will ultimately lead to drastic changes in our current form of government. The current turmoil in Washington, DC, supports this conclusion. This was the nature of the subjects discussed by the book club. I am indebted to its members for their assistance in understanding the forces at work as well as the likely outcomes.
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The Roman Empire

According to legend, the City of Rome was founded in 753 BC by Romulus, the son of the gods Rhea and Mars. The city’s initial location was the Palatine Hill, one of the well-known Seven Hills of Rome. Although there are several versions of the story, it is generally believed that Remus, Romulus’s twin, was killed by his brother during a dispute over the initial location of the city.

From that ancient time until the conquest of the last state of its Eastern Empire by the Ottomans in AD 1461, the Roman Empire experienced successes and failures unmatched in the history of the world. During 2,200 years of existence, the empire was ruled by more than 160 emperors. For more than 700 years prior to that, Rome’s government underwent many changes, from monarchy, to military rule, to a republic. As a republic, the city was governed by the senate, which in turn reported to a variety of magistrates and consuls. In fact, Julius Caesar’s leadership was as a military leader rather than as an emperor or an elected official.

In its later days, the Empire was divided into an Eastern Empire with Rome as its capital and a Western Empire with Byzantium as its capital. The Eastern Empire, which is known as the Byzantine Empire, survived for a thousand years after the fall of the Western Empire. This preface and the following book refer only to the Western Empire, although many of its conclusions are also applicable to the Eastern Empire.

Many historians consider AD 410, the year that the Western Empire was overrun and sacked by the Visigoths, as the date of its downfall. Others consider AD 476 to have been the final year of the Western Empire. This was the year that the Odoacer,
a German leader, led an uprising that deposed Emperor Romulus Augustulus. Whatever the date, the lifespan of the Western Empire was impressive, with a duration of approximately 1,200 years.

The lifespan and accomplishments of the Roman Empire are remarkable, considering its many struggles. The Empire’s longevity in the absence of a well-defined system of governance is also noteworthy. Its single most impressive accomplishment was the establishment of an Empire whose rule controlled the peoples and lands of three continents. This achievement was the product of an army whose superiority was unquestioned, not because it possessed better technology, but because of its unsurpassed resources, leadership, and tactics.

The Romans’ military successes were accompanied by the construction of buildings, aqueducts, amphitheaters, roads, walls, cities, and palaces. Many of their buildings and civil works exist to this day. The infrastructure of aqueducts and roads remains visible throughout Europe. Consider the fact that the Romans constructed more than 40,000 miles of stone-paved roads and a total of 250,000 miles of all types of roads. These roads enabled the effective rule of their expansive empire. It is interesting to note that the 47,000-mile US Interstate Highway System is comparable to the extent of the Roman construction of paved roads. The justification for this system, like that of the Romans, was the efficient movement of military equipment and troops. In 1956, when President Eisenhower announced the legislation that established the Interstate System, he also justified it on the basis of the movement of military equipment and troops. For that reason, it was known as The National Defense Highway System.

The Romans’ intellectual contributions are equally impressive. They are responsible for the introduction of Latin throughout Europe, a language that has influenced many of our existing languages. They also introduced the Roman alphabet that is in use in most of the Western world. Their system of laws, including the Justinian Code, forms the basis for our modern legal system.
Comparison of the United States with the Roman Empire

There are many differences between the Roman Empire and the United States, not the least of which are their relative appetites for empire building. During the nineteenth century, the United States was a relatively isolated country whose populace was inwardly focused toward the expansion of the seemingly limitless continent. Our initial experience with foreign conquests occurred as a result of the Spanish-American war of 1898, during which America’s resounding defeat of the Spanish led to the country’s graduation from that of a second-tier world power to that of a significant force within the community of nations. When the war ended, US troops occupied Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, all of which could potentially have been absorbed as US possessions representing the beginnings of a US empire. Instead, only Puerto Rico and Guam became US Territories, while Cuba was granted independence. A great debate raged over the status of the Philippines. Some favored returning the islands to Spain, others wanted to retain strategic regions of the Philippines as military outposts, while others favored adopting the archipelago as a colony. After fifty years of arguments and conflict, the Philippines became independent, with the US retaining several regions for military installations.

Comparison of the US Empire with that of the Romans, British, and French reveals significant differences in priorities. At the end of the Spanish-American War, the United States occupied 162,000 square miles of land that was home to 1.8 percent of the world’s population. This so-called empire was short-lived in that the United States granted Cuba its independence and was continuously plagued by Philippine uprisings until also granting that country its independence fifty years later. By comparison, the British Empire dwarfed that of the US. It covered thirteen million square miles of land that was home to twenty percent of the world’s population.

In 150 AD, the Roman Empire included two million square miles occupied by thirty-five percent of the world’s population. Comparisons between the Roman and British empires
can be misleading, since the known world was significantly smaller in 150 AD than it was in 1900. However, it goes without saying that empire building was a central element of the British and Roman civilizations, whereas the questionable American empire was merely the indirect by-product of the country’s wars.

There are other significant differences between the US and Roman civilizations. On June 21st, 1788, the US Constitution was ratified and has defined this country’s government since that time. Unlike the Romans, the United States has been consistently structured as a tricameral democracy that has been adjusted from time to time to reflect the circumstances of the times. In spite of these adjustments, our system of government remains fundamentally unchanged. Before one becomes too smug over the long-term success of government within the United States when compared with the chaotic Roman government, it should be acknowledged that the United States has been in existence for a mere 240 years, while Rome’s Western Empire existed in various forms for approximately 1,200 years—more than five times longer.

With the benefit of the Constitution’s guidance, US leadership transitions have generally been peaceful. Eight of the country’s forty-three presidents have died in office, either through assassination or disease. In all cases, the transfer of power has been smooth, proceeding along the lines defined by the Constitution. By contrast, fifty-five of the 160 Roman emperors died of natural causes. The remaining 105 died in office. The majority of these were assassinated or died in battle. In all cases, the death of an emperor was followed by significant turmoil and major changes in governance.

There are many other obvious differences between the US modern society and the Roman Empire. Some are the result of technological progress, others from the continuous restructuring of the political boundaries of the world. In spite of these relatively superficial changes, the underlying characteristics of human nature that influence a country’s actions and decisions have not changed much during the intervening 1,000 years.
Human behavior is, to a great extent, governed by emotions. Some theorists have described human emotions as “discrete and consistent responses to internal or external events . . .” This definition is a useful way to understand the behavior of nations as well as individuals. Recent research into human emotions has established that mankind suffers from the basic emotions of happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust. Since these emotions influence both individual and group behavior, their continued existence as a fundamental human trait suggests that the behavior of groups as well as supergroups (i.e., nations) will remain consistent and predictable throughout the generations. This is the fundamental relationship on which George Santayana’s maxim is based: *Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.*

**Repeating the Past**

Santayana’s maxim serves as the basic theme for this book. While the superficial differences between the United States and the Roman Empire are significant, there are startling similarities between the two, which are a result of the consistency of human emotions and behaviors. The following list of similarities is a demonstration of consistent human nature. Scholars studying the Roman Empire have concluded that these items are the fundamental weaknesses that caused its collapse. The fact that these weaknesses are shared by the United States is cause for concern. For convenience, the comparisons are written in the past tense, although obviously, the description of the United States should be in the present and future tenses.

- Both were ruled by tricameral governments that included a president or emperor, a legislative body, and courts.
- The balance of power among their three branches of government tended to shift with time, primarily depending on the inclinations of the president/emperor. It should be noted that the potential for shifting power was a concern of the framers of the US Constitution.
• In their prime, both countries were leading world powers with the ability to influence the actions and well-being of the other parts of the world.

• In both Rome, and recently the United States, Christianity was less tolerant of other religions. An example from Rome was Emperor Theodosius, who ended the Olympic Games because they honored Zeus rather than Christ. Many examples exist in the United States of politicians, who in the name of Christianity and fear of outsiders, have proposed discriminatory actions against Muslims.

• As their citizens became more secure, and their quality of life improved, attention shifted from their occupations, participation in governance and religion, to diversions such as sports, games, and theater. The majority of the populace was content to go about their daily affairs and let their governments take care of them.

• The defense of both was supported by mercenary armies whose loyalty and effectiveness depended on their salaries and quality of life.

• High taxes led to unrest among the general population. Taxes to support their military activities accounted for much of their budgets. As military spending increased, civil infrastructure was allowed to fall into disrepair.

• Public distrust of their government resulting from the incompetence of the senate and congress, as well as the excesses of their emperor and president.

• Perhaps most significantly, both the United States and the Roman Empire were attacked by multiple enemies whose home countries were difficult to identify. The nature of the enemy attacks shifted with time, making it difficult to defend against the next onslaught.

Neither the Western nor the Eastern branches of the Roman Empire were attacked by a single well-defined enemy. Nor were their enemies the simple barbarians often described by legend. Rather the Roman Empire was beset by multiple heterogeneous
groups in uncoordinated attacks that were staged to take advantage of some perceived weakness.

The barbarians from the north were quick to recognize the decay of the Western Empire. One after another they launched attacks on various parts of the crumbling empire. Attackers included the Visigoths, Vandals, Angles, Saxons, Franks, Ostrogoths, and Lombards. As the invading hordes succeeded in their attacks, they laid claim to their captured lands. For example, the Angles and Saxons overran the British Isles, while the Franks settled in France.

In 476, Romulus, the last Roman Emperor of the Western Empire, was deposed by Odoacer, a Germanic leader. He was the first barbarian to rule in Rome. His rule represented the end of a single unified government in Europe.

The attacks of the barbarians were motivated by a desire to be free from the despotic rule of the Romans. They also wanted land for farming and some degree of hegemony over their lives. They achieved their goals with their successful attacks. But the price they paid was a chaotic existence in a troubled land.

It should be noted that the term barbarian was not intended as a pejorative term as it is today. The word has its roots in the Greek word barbaroi, referring to someone who was not Greek. In their case it was a reference to the Medes and Persians. The Romans could be considered barbaroi to the Greeks. The Romans repurposed the word to mean someone who was not Roman, such as the barbarians.

Like the Romans, the United States is confronted by many hostile groups seeking to weaken it or end its existence. While the complete disintegration of a country as large and powerful as the United States would undoubtedly require years if not centuries to occur, the process by which it takes place is insidious. The initial cracks in the country’s veneer initially go unnoticed. Gradually they enlarge until both friends and enemies alike recognize that deterioration has begun. While friends might politely criticize, enemies will undoubtedly develop strategies that take advantage of its weakened condition.
The list of those who are overtly hostile to the United States is long. It includes the many warring factions of the Middle East as well as rogue states such as North Korea, Libya, and Iran. As the conflicts in the Middle East progress, many of the so-called warring factions are likely to become full-fledged rogue states in their own right. But as the Roman’s experience with the barbarians demonstrates, a hostile faction does not require the trappings of a nation to be a legitimate enemy. It can be a tribe or a sect or an ethnic group and still inflict significant damage. In spite of their stateless status, organizations such as ISIS and al-Qaeda are well funded and run by clever people. They have demonstrated their ability to organize and effectively challenge the best armies in the world.

The similarities between the Roman Empire and the United States demonstrate that chinks are appearing in the US armor. They are significant chinks, but it is not too late to repair them. If action is not taken soon, the United States could well follow in the footsteps of the Roman Empire, and it could conceivably occur within our children’s lifetimes. Nothing in the tale related by this book is science fiction. The events it describes could occur tomorrow or next week. It’s time to begin repairing the chinks.
CAST OF CHARACTERS

Members of ISIS (Iraq and Syria):

Aabis  
Ali’s close friend from infantry training. In Arabic, Aabis means lucky

Ali  
ISIS soldier and representative to Bis Saif. In Arabic, Ali means greatest

Gen. Hussain  
ISIS general to whom Mohammed reports

Mohammed  
Ali’s platoon commander

Moiz  
Ali’s close friend from infantry training. In Arabic, means he is a protector

Members of Boko Haram (Nigeria):

Abalunam (Aba)  
Udo’s best friend in Baga. In Nigerian, means don’t argue with me

Fela  
Mayor of Baga. In Nigerian, means warlike

Gen. Modukuri  
Leader of Boko Haram, with headquarters in Maiduguri

Ibiba  
Udo’s younger brother. In Nigerian, means it will be good

Maduka  
Major in the Nigerian Army

Udo  
Second male son of his family and Boko Haram representative to Bis Saif

Ugo  
Udo’s driver from airport. In Nigerian, means eagle, strength, and royalty
Members of Hamas (Palestine):

Abdul Nasser   Engineer in the missile laboratory
Gen. Murtaja    Hamas commander and sponsor of Hasan
Hasan Jouda    Hamas representative to Bis Saif, developer of missile guidance system
Ossama        Director of the missile lab and Hasan’s immediate superior
Shadi         Hasan’s predecessor at the lab and currently a Hamas web designer

Members of Bis Saif (Worldwide, headquarters in Jakarta, Indonesia):

Abu Ahmed-al Kuwaiti  Adam’s close friend and supporter in Bis Saif
Adam al-Zhihri   Leader of Bis Saif
Leroy Williamson  Adam’s African-American friend and Bis Saif’s technical expert
John Smith      Bis Saif’s contact with the British MI-6, aka Cecil Breathwaite

Members of MI-6:

Cecil Breathwaite Bis Saif spy, aka John Smith
Stan Comstock    Breathwaite’s supervisor

JCN employees and their relatives:

Bill Jaski        JCN President
Jack Vermeer      JCN Security Officer
Jahmir Al Saadi  Computer developer, JCN employee, Iraqi heritage, nicknamed James
Jane Smith        Bill Jaski’s administrative assistant
Joan Toner        JCN Contracts Manager
Kelly Jaffari     Jahmir’s girlfriend and employee of JCN
In the Footsteps of Rome

Lilliane Jaffari  Kelly Jaffari’s mother
Marylou Sachler  JCN chief scientist
Rick Stringer  Jahmir’s friend, co-developer at JCN
Sami Jaffari  Kelly Jaffari’s father, whose home is in Timonium, MD
Sean Casey  JCN Corporate Attorney

Members of the United States Government and Their Relatives:

Adm. Arnold DeForce  Director—National Security Agency
Al Kaplan  Lead analyst—Central Intelligence Agency
Brad Nelson  Majority Leader—US House of Representatives—Democrat
Christopher Jeffers  President of the United States—Republican
Donald Squito  Junior member of the House, from Orange Co., California—Republican
Gen. Elliott Drake  Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff—US Department of Defense
George Wilson  Director of National Intelligence (DNI)
Glenn Jeffers  Christopher Jeffers’ father
Jan Adams  The president’s administrative assistant
James Proctor  Director—Federal Bureau of Investigation
Janice DeBeers  Director—Department of Homeland Security
Kevin Goldberg  Program Manager—Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency
Lee Sanders  Special Agent in Charge—Federal Bureau of Investigation
Loren Sanderson  Governor of the State of Minnesota
Mary Lou Jeffers  Christopher Jeffers’ mother
Matthew O’Brien  Director—Central Intelligence Agency
Melissa Jeffers  Christopher Jeffers’ wife and first lady of the United States
Philip J. Tarnoff

Paul Greenburg  Minority Leader—US
    Senate—Democrat
Paul Lynd  President’s press secretary
Robert McIntyre  Majority Leader—US
    Senate—Republican
Sam Papas  Department of Justice and expert on
    Constitutional law
Thomas McAllen  Director—Defense Advanced Projects
    Agency
Wayne Zyder  Minority Leader—US House of
    Representatives—Republican

US Citizens:

Bear  Leader—First Baptist Church anti-Muslim group
Bill Solenski  Cyber security expert—Google
Brian Klenger  Youngest member—First Baptist
    Church anti-Muslim group
Charles Ardley  Beekeeper—University of Maryland
Damian Johnson  African-American member—First Baptist
    Church anti-Muslim group
Dave Crain  Analyst—National Highway Transportation Safety Admin. FBI informer
David Powers  Chief Executive Officer—PJM Interconnections
Earl  Member—First Baptist Church anti-Muslim group
Gus Waters  Anti-Muslim activist
Joanna Crain  David Crain’s wife
Megan Crain  Crain family eleven-year-old daughter
Steve Crain  Crain family eight-year-old son
Tex  Member—Hadad-Mahmood Mosque
    Muslim terrorist group
**Foreign Leaders:**

Moshe Tamer  
Prime Minister—Israel  
Paul Akerman  
Ambassador—Israel  
Sutanto  
President—Indonesia

**Groups**

*The Leadership Group:*

Brad Nelson  
Majority Leader—US House of Representatives—Democrat  
Paul Greenburg  
Minority Leader—US Senate—Democrat  
Robert McIntyre  
Majority Leader—US Senate—Republican  
Wayne Zyster  
Minority Leader—US House of Representatives—Republican

*President’s War Cabinet:*

Adm. Arnold DeForce  
NSA  
Gen. Elliott Drake  
DOD  
George Wilson  
DNI  
James Proctor  
FBI  
Janice DeBeers  
DHS  
Matthew O’Brien  
CIA
Can Thine Enemies be Loved?

The history of religion is for Gibbon intimately connected to the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, but religion is hardly his only theme. We encounter also “Barbarians” (a term loosely applied to those outside the empire, who often coveted the riches they saw); mercenary militarism (without efficiency, bravery, or patriotism); oppressive taxes (levied unfairly and exacted most mercilessly from those least able to pay); corrupt politicians, tyrannical government, and endless warfare against the enemies of the Roman order, both at home and abroad. These themes are not without resonance today.

Critical forward by Hans-Friedrich Mueller to Edward Gibbon’s classic, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.
CHAPTER 1

THE BARBARIANS

Kirkuk, Iran

Ali was crouching behind a rock on a hillside overlooking Kirkuk when the mortar shell exploded. Even after months of a rigorous training program provided by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, as it was popularly known, he was not prepared for the concussion. It sucked the air out of his lungs and deafened him. He had no idea how long he lay on the ground trying to regain his breath. He knew the fight was necessary if they were ever going to rid the continent of the United States and its allies, or the great white Satan, as it was popularly known. But he was scared.

As a high school student in Raqqa, Syria, with an abiding interest in the unlikely combination of computer programming and American-style baseball, Ali was as well-suited for the ISIS battleground as Winston Churchill would have been for life as a ballet dancer. Although he had an athletic build and the dark complexion characteristic of Syrian Arabs, his interests were far from military pursuits. Life was difficult in Raqqa. However, if one ignored the intermittent electric power, wildly fluctuating prices, and constant sounds of mortar and gunfire, it was generally bearable. But Ali was looking for a better life and had joined the ISIS movement over the objections of his parents shortly after President Assad’s Syrian troops had raided his house and stolen his most precious possession—his computer. This occurred shortly before Raqqa fell to the Islamic State, which had claimed it for their headquarters. The vandalism of the Syrian troops, the omnipresence of ISIS, combined with pressure from his peers, and the appeal of a better life with
regular meals, clothing, and a small weekly stipend had made his decision an easy one.

His initial experience in the ISIS boot camp had included both indoctrination into the Sunni version of the Muslim religion and combat training. Ali’s admission into the training program as well as his continued existence on this earth required a satisfactory answer to four questions: (1) What is your name? (2) Where do you live? (3) How do you pray? (4) What music do you listen to? The subtle differences between the responses to these questions would determine whether one was a Sunni or Shia Muslim and whether one would experience the reward of admission into the ISIS army or torture and death.

During the indoctrination that accompanied the training program, Ali learned that the overall objective of the ISIS movement was the establishment of a caliphate that would eventually oversee all of the Muslim world. A desirable by-product of the fight to establish the caliphate would be the defeat or weakening of the West, specifically North America and Europe. As he listened to the lectures, Ali concluded that ISIS was staging a historical reenactment of the past glories, with the intent of recreating the golden years of the caliphs that ruled from AD 632 to 661, during which the caliphate controlled the entire Muslim world. Ali left boot camp for the hazards of the battlefield with many doubts about the jihad’s ability to succeed with such a grand plan. However, he wisely kept his thoughts to himself, not even sharing them with the two close friends he had made in the camp: Moiz, who had been appropriately named with the Arab word meaning gives protection, and Aabis, who, it turned out, was inappropriately named using the Arab word for lucky. Neither of his new friends shared his dual love of computers and baseball, preferring the game of soccer, which they played endlessly with other recruits during their few free moments from the rigorous ISIS training regimen.

Dazed from the concussion of the mortar shell explosion, Ali sat up and began looking for his AK-47 rifle, which had been blown out of his hands. He saw it lying a few yards away and stood up to retrieve it, an action that brought an immedi-
ately shouted reprimand from Sergeant Mohammed, his platoon commander. “Get down! Are you crazy? Do you want to get killed?” The reprimand was accentuated by a burst of gunfire from the nearby suburbs of Kirkuk. The combination of the gunfire and reprimand elicited a rapid response from Ali, who dove to the ground behind the rock that had been his shelter, fortunately suffering nothing more serious than a scraped knee. He looked across the rocky field that separated the troops of the Islamic State from the peshmerga, as the Kurdish troops defending Kirkuk were known. At the far side of the field was a large grove of small hardwood trees and underbrush, and beyond that were the southern suburbs of Kirkuk.

Ali once again began his efforts to retrieve his rifle and to look for his two good friends, Moiz and Aabis. He saw Moiz slowly regaining consciousness from the explosion. Moiz waved weakly to indicate he was OK. In spite of his name, Aabis was not the lucky one. He was lying on his back with his eyes wide open, staring at the sky—lifeless. Suddenly Ali wished he was safely back in his room at home with his computer rather than crawling on a battlefield strewn with bodies and wounded fighters who had fallen attempting to revive the distant memory of the caliphate.

His musings were cut short by a loud command from Mohammed. “Check your rifles and get ready to attack on my signal.” He saw Mohammed talking on the radio and realized that his platoon was part of the regiment that was going to be the backbone of the attack. Mohammed then raised his arm and quickly lowered it, shouting “Allahu Akbar!” (“God is great!”). Using his shout as inspiration, the troops took up the cry, left their cover, and charged the hidden Kurdish troops defending the Kirkuk suburbs, screaming “Allahu Akbar” as they ran. The noise and confusion was overwhelming. Machine-gun fire from the Kurdish lines mowed down many of the ISIS troops. Their return fire and the explosions from the grenades being launched by both sides added to the chaos. Above the noise of the weapons fire came the screams of the wounded as they lay bleeding on the battlefield. Most would die from the lack of adequate medical attention, a deficiency of the ISIS army in the field.
This was not the first time the ISIS had attacked Kirkuk. A similar attack had been staged in 2015, which was beaten back by the combination of Kurdish and Iraqi forces. This time their attack was from a different location, trying again to overwhelm this Kurdish peshmerga army position in the southern suburbs in order to capture Kirkuk. Once that was completed, it would be on to Baba Gurgur, eight miles to the north, where the second largest oil fields in the world were located. If ISIS could capture the Baba Gurgur fields, they could influence worldwide oil prices and establish a virtually unlimited source of income for themselves. The oilfields were an elusive prize that was too tempting for ISIS to ignore.

It was equally important for the Kurds to prevent ISIS from succeeding. The Kurds had long claimed the Kirkuk region as their ancestral home and were determined to continue its governance. With the support of Iraqi troops, they had successfully defended the city against the ISIS attacks in the past, even though ISIS was well equipped with armored vehicles and accompanied by many willing suicide bombers.

The current attack did not appear to be succeeding any better than the previous 2015 attack until a distant dust cloud and the sound of diesel engines signaled the arrival of a brigade of ISIS armored vehicles along with a few tanks that had been captured during previous battles. A cheer went up from the ISIS ground troops when they realized that they would soon be receiving armored support. The ISIS mechanized company formed a battle line that slowly advanced on the suburbs. As they moved along, the troops took up positions behind the vehicles, using them as shelter from the incoming machine gun and mortar fire. Ali was relieved to realize that with the support and the sheltering vehicles, he might actually survive this battle.

But the peshmerga were not without their own resources. In addition to their scattered machine gun and mortar positions, they had the support of Iraqi tanks as well as the air forces of the allied countries from the West. The elation of the ISIS troops began to fade when a shot from an Iraqi tank destroyed one of their armored vehicles, killing most of the ground troops that
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had been using it for cover. In spite of their losses, the ISIS troops continued to advance until they were within 100 yards of the Kurdish positions.

At that point the situation began to deteriorate. The sound of jet aircraft and helicopter blades could suddenly be heard over the noise of the diesel engines and explosions. Everyone in the ISIS army knew that this meant the arrival of allied air support, with missiles and rapid-fire guns. The Apaches were first to arrive, making a low, high-speed pass over the battlefield while the troops vainly fired their rifles at them. This first pass was presumably made to assess the situation, although the veterans among the troops knew that the assessment had already been made by drones that overflew the area while they were focused on the ground-level fighting. The first pass was followed by two additional helicopters, which fired their Hellfire missiles and M230 chain guns at the armored vehicles, with devastating effect. Four Hellfire missiles were fired. One missed its target while each of the remaining three hit a vehicle, which disintegrated in a ball of fire, killing their crew and most of the nearby troops. Additional vehicles were disabled by the chain guns firing their 30 mm armor-piercing ammunition at a rate of 300 rounds per minute. Suddenly, standing close to an armored vehicle didn’t seem as if it was a very good idea.

Ali made a zigzag dash across the 100 yards separating the ISIS lines from the grove of trees on the outskirts of the suburbs they were attacking. Although he heard the impact of bullets around him as he ran, Allah must have been protecting him because he arrived in the grove unscathed. Many of the ISIS fighters who had remained in the open did not fare as well. Ali watched with horror as the Apaches were replaced by a pair of F-16 fighters armed with M-61 Gatling guns firing at a rate of 6,000 rounds per minute, which produced a virtual curtain of bullets. The jet fighters appeared and systematically raked the field in which the remaining troops were exposed. He heard an authoritative voice sounding the retreat and watched the remnants of the ISIS force along with its supporting armored company leave the battlefield. He knew he should join them, but
was afraid to recross the open space between the grove and the retreating troops. He thought he could wait until nightfall and return to camp under cover of darkness.

His wait in the grove seemed an eternity. He was closer to the Kurdish lines than he was to his own army. When the ISIS troops retreated, Ali heard cheers erupting from the Kurds. He heard them talking softly and then assembling for what was presumably a midday meal. He spent his time improving the quality of his hiding place while trying to ignore his empty stomach. By the time he had finished covering himself with mud and branches, he was all but invisible.

The afternoon crept by until late in the day when he heard groups of Kurds walking through the grove looking for wounded or dead ISIS troops. When they found a dead soldier, they searched him for valuables, took his rifle and ammunition, and added them to a growing pile in the back of a battered pickup truck. If the soldier was not dead, they shot him, and then repeated the process. Watching this activity did not calm Ali’s already frayed nerves.

The soldiers with the pickup truck picked their way through the grove, gradually coming closer to Ali’s hiding place. He lay under his pile of brush, scarcely daring to breathe. As the Kurds shuffled past him, they were distracted by an unexploded rocket lying on the ground and stopped to examine it. Eventually they tossed it into the pile of bodies in the back of the pickup and then drove on, continuing their ghoulish activity. After they drove off, silence enveloped Ali’s grove. He could hear the sounds of the soldiers in the camp on the outskirts of Kirkuk, but he was alone.

His solitude didn’t last long. He heard the sounds of a motor again, which could have been the same pickup truck or its decrepit twin. Ali briefly wondered whether the Toyota factory produced a line of pre-worn pickups with dirt, dents, and at least one cracked window, as these were the only types of trucks he had seen either in Kirkuk or while he was at the ISIS training camp.

This pickup was being used for a different purpose. The soldiers with this truck were burying land mines or improvised
explosive devices (IEDs) throughout the grove. Obviously they were expecting another ISIS attack, and IEDs would be an effective defense against the first wave of infantry. Ali forgot his discomfort as he watched the activity with great interest, trying to memorize the location of each device. He momentarily forgot that technically he was a deserter, an offense that was punishable by execution in most armies, including the ISIS. His focus had shifted to that of discovering a way in which he could warn his fellow soldiers about the location of the IEDs.

Ali did not have much time to develop a plan. He suddenly heard shouts of “Allahu Akbar!” from the ISIS lines. The ISIS commanders recognized the importance of attacking a second time shortly after the allied planes and helicopters had left since they had to return to their base to refuel. The limitations on flying time was a major handicap of the allied forces, and one that was well recognized both by the allies and their enemies.

Ali tore off his black shirt and, with the help of his field knife, began cutting it into squares. Each square he attached to a stick that he stuck in the ground next to an IED. He finished his labor with multiple scratches on his exposed upper body, mud from his hiding place, and bleeding hands from burying the sticks. As he marked the last IED, he heard the sounds of a radio and an advanced platoon coming through the grove. He rushed to meet them and was almost shot by his comrades, who thought he was a remaining Kurd. He raised his hands and shouted, “I am Ali. I am one of you. I am in Mohammed’s platoon.” Two of the ISIS soldiers grabbed him, threw him to the ground, and searched him. When they saw his AK-47 with the ISIS markings and realized that he was speaking Syrian, the advanced guard relaxed and let him sit up. Without explaining why he was there, Ali immediately began telling them about the IEDs and the manner in which he had marked their location. He showed them the nearest IED and his marking. Members of the platoon complimented him on his ingenuity and began questioning whether he had marked all of the IEDs that had been buried. Ali felt that the ones he had marked constituted a safe lane through the grove, and that if the approaching ISIS troops stayed within the
boundaries defined by the marked sticks that had been within his field of vision from his hiding place, they would be safe.

Ali’s discussion led to a long radio conversation between the platoon commander and the ISIS headquarters. Ali would be responsible for working with the platoon to disable all of the marked IEDs. They had a total of fifteen minutes to complete the work, at which time, the army would begin to move through the safe passage they had established. Ten minutes after the conversation, the ISIS army appeared, dashing quietly through the space between their encampment and the grove. They moved quietly and, without any urging, funneled themselves into the lane containing the disabled IEDs. As they left the grove, they quietly spread out and lay in the shrubbery at the edge of the suburbs.

The Kurds had relaxed following their earlier victory over the ISIS troops. They were standing in small groups talking, cleaning their rifles, or rebuilding fortifications. The first shot from the ISIS troops quickly changed the atmosphere. The battle took place in the close quarters of the Kurds’ camp, with small arms firing responsible for most of the deaths and injuries. ISIS brought their armored vehicles through Ali’s lane, as it was now called, and began destroying the Kurdish camp. It was a short battle, which ended with the Kurds fleeing into the heart of Kirkuk.

Ali, still shirtless, but with his unfired AK-47, stood mutely witnessing the battle. “So what happened?” Mohammed said as he walked up to him. “I thought you had been killed in the first battle since you weren’t with us after the retreat.”

Mohammed was a big man with a square frame and a black beard. With his black ISIS uniform, he was an imposing figure. Behind his back, the troops called him The Tank. Ali was intimidated by Mohammed, realizing that he had the power of life and death over friends and foes alike. Thinking quickly, Ali replied, “I hurt my leg and fell while we were retreating. I ended up hiding in the woods, and from there witnessed the burying of the IEDs. I couldn’t let my friends be slaughtered by these devices, so I took a chance and marked them.” He made it a point to limp as he edged away from Mohammed.
“Ali, you’re a hero with the troops. I’m not sure whether you’re a hero or a coward, but it’s easier to give you credit for the good you’ve done and ignore the doubt. That’s what I intend to do. But one more act of cowardice and desertion, and I will personally see to it that you are shot.”

The ISIS troops paused on the outskirts of Kirkuk to consolidate their position and wait for reinforcements while they dug in and buried their dead. During the ensuing battles for the city itself, Ali was accompanied by his close friend Moiz. The two had become close since the death of Aabis, and on many occasions the two had covered each other during assaults on Kurdish strongholds.

At the end of each day of battle, Mohammed would lead them in their evening prayers, which included the recital of prayers to Allah, thanking him for their victories of the day and acknowledging his greatness while they performed the traditional ceremonies of bowing, prostrating themselves, and sitting while the prayers were recited.

Two days later, when additional troops arrived, ISIS continued its progress toward the goal of capturing the entire city. They realized this would be a slow process involving house-to-house fighting with significant losses incurred by both sides. But ISIS had encountered similar circumstances many times in the past and was prepared to patiently execute their plans while they wore down the enemy. After several weeks, the Kurdish troops retreated, leaving the city under ISIS control. Now all that separated them from the Baba Gurgur oil fields was eight miles of desert, an environment in which they excelled.

As they advanced toward the oil fields, they were continually harassed by air attacks. The attacks slowed their progress until they were forced to retreat to the relative shelter of the city and the protection of its civilian population. They remained in this position, cursing the effectiveness of the Western air forces. Perhaps, in time, Allah would provide them with an effective defense against these aerial weapons.

Kirkuk was a city of less than 400,000 inhabitants. Before the battle, its broad streets had been well lit and clean. Land
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was inexpensive, which resulted in a city that was spread out, with few high-rise buildings. Many of its citizens worked in the nearby oil fields. These features favored ISIS governance, since surveillance of the general public was simplified.

Although they had not been able to capture the Baba Gurgur fields, ISIS occupation of Kirkuk was not without benefit. ISIS had developed effective procedures for governing defeated provinces that involved imposition of strict Sunni Muslim law while levying heavy taxes on their citizens. Kirkuk was destined to feel the heavy hand of ISIS rule.

But the ISIS troops had not abandoned the idea of capturing the oil fields. In the evenings, the generals would gather to discuss various alternatives for making the hazardous eight-mile march while avoiding the punishing allied air attacks. On many occasions the discussions would continue into the early hours of the morning, but invariably failed to produce a plan for a successful assault on the oil fields.

Ali had successfully been reintegrated into his battalion and avoided contact with Mohammed at every opportunity. On one occasion he encountered Mohammed as he walked to his tent in the ISIS camp. As he did at every opportunity, Mohammed reminded Ali that he was being watched, and one false action would result in severe punishment. Ali knew what this meant, but his face remained expressionless. While the threats were being delivered, he silently thanked Allah for saving him from an ugly fate. Little did Ali realize that Mohammed’s reprieve would provide him with the opportunity to change the world.
Udo lived in one of the small communes that formed the town of Baga. Located in the northeast corner of Nigeria, Baga is part of the State of Borno. Fifty years ago, Baga had been located on the shores of Lake Chad, a large body of water bordered by Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, and Niger. The lake served as a source of the fish that fed the surrounding areas. But a lengthy drought had dried up the lake to the point that Borno was no longer near the water and relied on agriculture for its sustenance. Because of its isolated location and the poverty of its residents, Baga had been ignored both by the Nigerian government and various terrorist groups. Its people were allowed to live a relatively poor but peaceful existence.

Udo lived in a round mud hut with a cone-shaped thatched roof that was one of several similar dwellings within a walled compound. The inhabitants of the compound made their living farming millet and other grains and some peanuts. It was hard work. They were all related, having a common father and a mother who was one of his father’s three wives. Udo’s name identified him as the second son of his father’s first wife. At nearly six feet tall, thin, and with dark black skin, his looks were similar to those of his eight brothers and sisters.

In spite of their relative isolation, the people of Baga realized that sooner or later they would receive the attention of Boko Haram. The terrorist organization was essentially the Nigerian branch of al-Qaeda. It had been founded in Maiduguri, a city also located in the State of Borno, by Mohammed Yusuf, ostensibly as a school and religious complex for poor Muslim families. In fact, it was an Islamic State school that
had been created to recruit potential jihadists. Using a political platform that denounced political corruption and police activities, Mohammed was able to rapidly build the organization that ultimately became known as Boko Haram.

Although Boko Haram had been active throughout Borno, and essentially ran the state’s government, Baga had been left alone. Life had continued peacefully there, with the residents tending their farms and educating their children. Udo gave little thought to politics and was content to help support the extended family of which he was a part. Then one hot summer day, while he was hoeing the millet, his younger brother Ibiba suddenly appeared, grabbed his own hoe and began to hack at the weeds while he spoke.

“Udo, you’re living a comfortable existence. Enough food on the table and some money for clothing and medicine. Our family is more comfortable than people living in other parts of Borno. Did it ever occur to you how easily and quickly this could all come to an end?”

“Ibiba, I thought your name means it will be good. Your words don’t sound like optimism to me. But seriously, I think about these things all the time. I’m just not sure what to do about them. What do you think we should do?”

“My friends are assembling a vigilante group that will be armed to repel attacks from Boko Haram. You know their reputation for kidnapping, murder, rape, and ordinary theft. We can’t leave ourselves at their mercy. We want you to join us. In fact, we want all the men of your age to join us. Will you do it?”

Udo chewed his lower lip while he considered Ibiba’s proposal. “I need to think about it.”

Ibiba raised his hands in frustration and then lowered them and slapped his thighs. “I can’t believe you need to think about it. While you’re thinking, our mothers could be raped and our brothers and sisters kidnapped. We don’t have time to waste while you think.”

“What will we use for weapons? Are we going to throw rocks at them? And how many of us are there? I’m hoping it isn’t just you and me, brother.”
“No, we won’t have to use rocks. There are a few rifles among us. Mostly single-shot 22s. But our most important weapons are our knives, which we all own and know how to use. We can acquire some rifles from those that we kill. They’re armed with automatic weapons, such as the AK-47. There are about fifty of us so far, most of whom you already know. Now will you join us?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“You really don’t. Even if you said no, Boko Haram would eventually force you to join us. Either that or you’d be dead. We’re meeting tonight with a representative from the Nigerian armed forces. The meeting will be in the grove of trees beyond the old cemetery when the moon is just over the horizon. Be there!”

The remainder of the day passed slowly for Udo as he reflected on the change in his life that this discussion might cause. He loved his peaceful farming existence with his family. Lately he had been seeing a girl from another family and was anxious to continue the courtship. The bride price for his wife-to-be was quite high, so he was hoping that additional income from fishing might help him earn the needed money. He had dreams of buying or building a boat that could be used to renew their fishing heritage on Lake Chad and provide him with the money he needed for his wife-to-be. But all of this would have to wait until the threat from Boko Haram could be neutralized.

That night, Udo quickly ate his simple dinner, and, using the excuse that he was tired from his hoeing, went to his corner of the hut and lay down. He watched the shaft of light coming through the opening in the wall that served as a window travel slowly across the floor. The position and intensity of the light would tell him when the full moon rose over the horizon. As he lay on his sleeping mat, he thought about the other residents of the hut, his mother, whom he loved deeply, his sister, and one brother. His father would join them occasionally, which was a festive occasion since his father was a fun-loving man who often brought simple gifts for the siblings. Eventually the rest of the family retired to their mats, and soon the chorus of heavy breathing and snoring signified that the entire clan was asleep.
The rectangular patch of light on the floor of the hut finally began to brighten and signified that the moonrise was about to occur. He quietly rose from his mat and left the hut. As he walked through the sleeping commune, Udo reflected on its serenity and the ease with which all of this could be lost. He left through the gate of the commune’s wall and walked quickly and quietly to the graveyard on the outskirts of the community. He never liked to walk through the graveyard, particularly at night, and took a circuitous route around the outer edge of the cemetery that eventually brought him to the grove where the meeting was to occur.

As he entered the trees, he heard a low whisper from his brother. “Over here, Udo.” He followed the sound of Ibiba’s voice through the brush and almost collided with him before he saw him. Ibiba was dressed in dark brown clothes, and that, combined with his dark, almost black skin, made him invisible in the shade of the trees. Ibiba, like Udo, was tall and very dark, almost black.

When he recovered from his shock and embarrassment, Udo realized that there were just four of them: his brother, two strangers, and himself. He had expected at least a dozen of the young men from the compounds of Baga. “Where are our vigilantes?” he asked Ibiba in an accusing voice.

“We thought it best not to involve them in this discussion. Let me introduce you to these gentlemen.” Turning to the shortest and lightest color of the group, Ibiba said, “I’d like you to meet Major Maduka of the Nigerian army. He’s here to coordinate their activities with ours, and to discuss providing needed arms.” Ibiba then motioned to the last member of the group and said, “You may already know Fela, our head man.”

Udo responded that he was glad to meet both men. He did not pay much attention to politics and had never met Fela. He was awed by the presence of Maduka, who was the highest-ranking soldier he had ever met. He was also elated to realize that the army would provide them with the arms they needed to defend themselves against the Boko Haram. He decided this might be a worthwhile meeting after all.
During the next hour, Maduka explained his ideas about their need for arms. He also described a brief training program that should be conducted to establish some semblance of discipline among the inexperienced mob of vigilantes that Ibiba had assembled. Then he became deadly serious. “I’ve saved the best for last. Our intelligence says that we have no more than a week to prepare for the arrival of the first Boko Haram hoodlums. Baga is one of the few areas of Borno that they don’t control. This is really important symbolically to them. As you know, their movement began in Borno, and they already control most of the state.”

He let the bad news sink in before he added a little bit of good news. “While you don’t have much time, the hoodlums do not appear to think that you will try to defend yourselves. My intelligence says that they will probably fill two pickup trucks with their so-called soldiers and roar into town firing their guns in the air, thinking that they will intimidate you. If you surrender, they’ll spend the rest of the day murdering or conscripting the fighting-age boys and men, raping and kidnapping the women. They will also steal everything that isn’t already attached. Since they aren’t expecting any resistance, it is within your ability to ensure that they disappear without a trace. This is all that will save you. If word of your resistance gets back to the main Boko Haram force, they will attack you more violently in the future. Remember, they rule by terror.”

With the soldier’s speech as a prelude, the four of them began planning the resistance. They discussed the positioning of their vigilantes, the armaments needed, and the manner in which they would prevent the escape of any of the Boko Haram hoodlums. In spite of their farming culture, the men of Baga possessed many hunting skills that had been passed on to them by their ancestors. The rifles finally arrived, six days after the meeting in the cemetery. Until their arrival, the potential Baga vigilantes practiced their warfare with sticks and tree branches. They also spent time digging pits, cutting down trees, and arranging rope traps. The rifles were mostly AK-47s in various states of operability. There were also a few single-shot 22 rifles
and various other older weapons. Udo and Ibiba were busy during their week of preparation bolstering the courage of their fellow vigilantes and constantly pointing out that they had the advantage of surprise and knowledge of the surrounding area.

The week passed uneventfully. But on the eighth day, they were not disappointed. A runner taking a shortcut through the fields arrived to announce the presence of two small dust clouds in the distance, followed by a much bigger cloud. The vigilantes who had been waiting for the past forty-eight hours quickly took their positions. To outward appearances, everything in the town was normal. Chickens scratched in the paths connecting the compounds, women did their wash by the muddy stream that meandered through the town before emptying into Lake Chad, and small children attended school. As soon as the two pickup trucks causing the smaller dust clouds rounded the last curve in the rough road leading to the center of town, everything changed. Women and children all disappeared from the village and into the surrounding countryside. Anything of value or perceived value had been removed from the compounds and buried in the woods.

The first dust clouds in the form of two pickup trucks arrived with mufflers that had been removed to maximize the noise and terrify the populace of towns being raided. They roared into town with the rabble who were the soldiers firing their guns in the air. Occasionally, one of them would throw a grenade in some arbitrary direction with the intent of further terrifying the local inhabitants. They knew that they were outnumbered, but they were not worried because they knew that they were being followed by the main Boko Haram force, which would arrive shortly. It was the presence of this larger force that Major Maduka had failed to mention, perhaps because he had not known about it, although his motives would never be known.

The vigilantes began firing at the soldiers from their protected positions in the structures of the town. A few soldiers were hit and one was killed, but the Boko Haram return fire and grenades also did considerable damage, setting the thatched roofs of several huts on fire.
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The vigilantes had not realized that they would soon be under attack by the main force until their attention was drawn to its presence by machine gun fire erupting from the armored personnel carriers (APCs) that led its advance. Realizing that their small number armed with a few old rifles would be no match for the advancing line of more than 100 soldiers, combined with the withering fire from the APCs, they fled into the brush and open fields that surrounded the town, only to be shot or captured by the pursuing Boko Haram troops. What followed could only be called a massacre. The troops spread out and combed the surrounding countryside until they had rounded up all the citizens of Baga. The young men were herded into the central square, where their hands were tied and they were blindfolded. The women and children were herded into a compound for the later enjoyment of the victorious troops. The elderly were summarily executed because they were of little value.

Udo was one of the few who had escaped. He had been quick to recognize the arrival of the Boko Haram troops and had climbed a large tree within one of the living compounds. The tree had been one of his favorite hiding places when he was a boy, and he had never been discovered due to its thick foliage. The troops searching for the fleeing citizens of Baga had failed to look up, an oversight which saved his life and that of Abalunam, whom he knew as Aba, a boyhood friend who shared his secret. Udo burned with rage at the Nigerian major who had encouraged resistance rather than flight. He felt that the major had been responsible for the massacre of his family and other relatives, whose execution he had watched from his treetop vantage. With a flash of insight, Udo suddenly realized why Nigerians joined the Boko Haram. Was the entire Nigerian government as incompetent and corrupt as its army?

Udo whispered, “Aba, we’ve got to spend the night here until things settle down below.” Abalunam agreed and the two of them spent an uncomfortable and unhappy night in the tree watching the drunken revel below, which included murders and assaults on the citizens of Baga who had been their friends and relatives.
“Udo, what are you going to do after this?”
“Believe it or not, I’m thinking about joining them.”
“Are you crazy? They’re nothing more than a gang of murderers and rapists. Don’t you remember that a few years ago they kidnapped more than two hundred schoolgirls from Chibok, right here in our State of Borno?”
“They may not be that bad. Don’t forget, they began as a religious school. Armies are known to pillage the cities of the vanquished and to kidnap in order to raise money. What’s happening here is not that unusual and could be considered letting off steam.”
“Why would you join them?”
“I think I would like to join anyone who fights the incompetent Nigerian central government, which is the primary objective of Boko Haram.”
“I’m not convinced. Soon I’m climbing out of this tree and walking to Maiduguri. It’s a short walk, and I have some relatives there who will take me in.”
“I wish us both luck. Whatever happens will be the will of Allah.”

With that, Abalunam slowly climbed down the tree and disappeared into the dark behind the shed near their hiding place. The problem with escaping notice in Baga is that it is flat, arid, and there are few hiding places. Abalunam followed the fence lines along the boundaries of the family compounds and took cover in sheds and behind abandoned cars.

It was easy to guard Baga, since even in the dark, any movement became obvious, and many Boko Haram soldiers had grown up in similar regions. The soldiers, who were determined to wipe out all traces of the Baga resistance, quickly spotted Abalunam and ended his life before he had walked even a kilometer. Udo heard the shot and correctly interpreted its result. He mourned the loss of his friend, but was numb from mourning the loss of his brother and the rest of his family. He had no more grief to dedicate to those who were special in his life. He decided to remain in the tree until after sunrise.
Around mid-morning, Udo’s hunger and his bladder got the best of him. After careful consideration, he took off his shirt and used a small branch to improvise a white flag, thinking it might save his life. He then remained in the tree watching the troops pack their gear and the spoils of their victory. Waiting until the main body of the Boko Haram army had departed, he took his white flag, climbed down from the tree and hid in the brush until he saw a soldier, who was obviously an officer and sober. He held his white flag high and stood in the path being used by the officer, who was startled to see him and who quickly unholstered his pistol. Udo stood perfectly still, knowing he shouldn’t move until the officer relaxed from his firing position. After a few minutes of silence, he said in a quiet voice, “I am alone and unarmed. I come to you because I want to join your army.”

The surprised officer slowly lowered his pistol as he replied, “If you’re sincere, welcome, friend. If you are lying, you will be shot. Come with me.”

Udo was led to the center of activity, where a temporary encampment had been established. His new acquaintance introduced him to another officer sitting at a camp table in a command tent, who said curtly, “Follow me. I’ll introduce you to your comrades.” And with that, Udo joined Boko Haram.

Udo’s career with Boko Haram was unremarkable. He was given a rifle and a shirt and subjected to some cursory training. Occasionally he participated in minor skirmishes against the Nigerian army, but most of his time was spent patrolling captured territories in various locations throughout the country.

It would be several months before his reliability and intelligence came to the attention of General Modukuri, who was often frustrated by the lazy and illiterate state of his troops. Udo had been taught to read by his mother, and by his nature was an organized and conscientious individual. These characteristics exhibited themselves during many of his assignments, one of which involved gathering intelligence on the movements of Nigerian army troops as they prepared to counterattack Boko Haram positions near Lake Chad. Udo, who knew the area well, had been able to provide the general with accurate infor-
mation on the number of troops, their armaments, and their encampments. Most important, while hiding in the brush one day, he overheard two officers discussing plans for an attack on a nearby Boko Haram installation. This information proved invaluable to the general, who repositioned his troops to avoid a major attack by the army.

Because of his good fortune, Udo was soon promoted to work at the general’s headquarters in Maiduguri organizing future offensives. Udo enjoyed his work, which allowed him to avoid participation in future field operations, such as the one that he had witnessed in Baga. While he could rationalize the violence that characterized Boko Haram as temporary bloodlust resulting from the adrenaline produced during battle, it contradicted the principles of the Muslim religion that served as his moral foundation.

His interaction with General Modukuri brought the two of them into contact with increasing frequency. As a result of their interaction, Udo gradually realized that the violence characterizing the army’s operations was not temporary bloodlust from the heat of battle, but rather the very foundation of the Boko Haram cause. Although he tried to ignore his doubts, they persisted. But Udo was stuck. If he deserted the organization, he had little doubt that they would track him down and kill him.

Little did Udo realize that joining Boko Haram would provide him with the opportunity to change the world in spite of the uncertainties he harbored.
CHAPTER 3
RAFAH, GAZA STRIP, PALESTINE

The laboratory, if you could call it that, was located in the basement of a partially destroyed three-story apartment building in the central district of Rafah. With its mild climate and access to the Mediterranean Sea, Rafah would be considered a resort city, if it hadn’t been filled with the misery of refugees from the decades-long war with Israel and the changing relationships with Egypt.

Far from the snooping eyes of the Israeli government, with a climate that would attract talented scientists and engineers and with access to the universities of Egypt, Rafah was the ideal location for the laboratory. The Hamas and their various Palestinian collaborators recognized the need for such a laboratory after their multiple wars with Israel, during which they had been outgunned and defeated by their enemy’s superior technology.

The Palestinians were wary of the unreliable assistance they were receiving from their Arab allies, whose friendship and support depended on the political situations in their own countries as well as their desire to appease the West. So at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Hamas decided to marshal their limited funds toward the development of more effective missiles that could be used for both air defense and the destruction of ground targets in Israel. Missile technology had advanced significantly during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and Hamas wanted to be part of the community of nations with access to that technology. Besides, they realized, if they could develop effective weapons, they might be able to sell them to their Sunni Muslim compatriots throughout the Middle East. The reasoning was unassailable.
Growing up in a middle-class family, Hasan Jouda was one of the lucky Palestinians. His father was a physician and his mother was a nurse. They lived in a comfortable house in Kahn Yunis, a city of approximately 180,000 near the southern end of the Gaza Strip. Because of its location and relatively small size, the city had escaped much of the fighting that had destroyed the City of Gaza and to a lesser extent Rafah. From the day of his birth, Hasan’s parents were determined to send him to college. They felt that college was the only way he would escape the grinding poverty and lack of opportunity in the Gaza Strip. Fortunately, Hasan excelled at his studies, which simplified his acceptance at a number of different universities in the Middle East. He selected Alexandria University, in Egypt, both because of its location in historic Alexandria and its strong computer science curriculum, which included graduate work in computer vision—computer interpretation of images—a subject that had always intrigued him.

While a student in Alexandria, Hasan was introduced to the fundamentalist Islam practiced in Egypt, and a powerful political force in that country ever since the Arab Spring. Nearly ninety-five percent of the Egyptian population was Muslim, and the vast majority of these Sunni. Hasan was encouraged to visit the mosque regularly, where he was indoctrinated with the religious and political philosophies of the country. When he completed his education, he returned home as an Islamic radical, much to his parents’ consternation, as well as a competent computer engineer, much to his parents’ pride in his academic achievements.

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Not surprisingly, job opportunities in the Gaza Strip for college graduates specializing in computer vision were scarce. Hasan found occasional work as a website developer, and for a brief period he had a full-time position providing software support for the Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City. But neither of these activities satisfied his intellect, and none of them allowed him to
work toward his stated goal of improving the lives of the Palestinian people. He also viewed the unpleasant one-hour commute from Rafah to Gaza City as an unproductive waste of time.

Hasan’s fortunes changed one day when an injured Hamas general was brought to the hospital for treatment. General Murtaja had been working at his office when it was struck by bombs dropped during an Israeli airstrike. The airstrike had been conducted as a reprisal for a recent Palestinian bombing of a school bus in Jerusalem.

General Murtaja’s wounds were serious but not life-threatening. Because of his position, he received a private room in the overcrowded hospital, as well as access to the Internet from his personal laptop computer. The room had lime green walls, a single chair, and a hospital bed. It was also unique in that it had a private lavatory, a luxury in the overcrowded hospital.

The general rang for a nurse, expecting an immediate response as he was accustomed to receiving from his troops when he issued a command. By the time that the overworked nurse appeared, Murtaja was in a rage. “Where have you been? I’ve been pushing this stupid button for fifteen minutes. A man could die in here before receiving the attention he needs.”

The nurse was tired and frustrated with the shortage of personnel, medicine, and doctors in a hospital that was overwhelmed with injured from the latest Israeli bombing attack. “General, I know you’re important, but you’ll have to wait your turn. You’re right, many are dying from lack of attention, and spending my time attending to your needs does not help the dying.”

Murtaja was taken aback but not intimidated by the aggressive response of the petite nurse in the wrinkled, sweat-stained white uniform. “Is there a computer technician in this hospital that can help me connect to the Internet? I can’t get this crappy computer to work. It’s important that I be able to communicate with my commanders. If we can’t defend this city, there won’t be a hospital for your patients.”

“There’s a new technician here that seems to know what he’s doing. His name is Hasan, and I’m sure he can help you.”
“Well what are you waiting for? Why don’t you get him for me?”

Without another word, the nurse turned on her heel and stalked out of the room, leaving General Murtaja fuming. Murtaja was a big man who looked and acted the part of a high-ranking army officer. His complexion was the color of tanned leather, as you would expect of someone who had spent most of his adult life in the dessert. He spoke in a booming voice that carried up and down the halls, silencing the normal chatter of the hospital.

Hasan appeared about thirty minutes following the general’s exchange with the nurse, just in time to prevent another eruption. Hasan looked the part of a computer nerd, with his thin, gangling build and dark-rimmed glasses. He would have been handsome with another fifty pounds on his thin frame, but at his current weight, he seemed almost emaciated. Like the nurse, he was overwhelmed by his workload, impatient to begin his work and get on to the next customer.

As he booted up the general’s computer and focused on entering the settings needed for connection with the Internet, Murtaja engaged him in small talk. “Where did you learn to work with computers?”

“I guess I’ve been doing it all my life. I was fortunate that my parents could afford to buy me a computer. They could also afford to send me to college, where I majored in computer science.”

Murtaja was interested in this highly educated citizen of Rafah. He felt that the path to Palestinian success would be a path that included improved education for its citizens. He forgot his impatience with the slow service of the hospital and continued his questioning. “What university did you attend? And what did you learn there?”

As he worked, Hasan warmed to the subject of his educational background. “I attended Alexandria University in Egypt. It was a great school, with many brilliant professors. I received an advanced degree there, specializing in image processing.”

Murtaja could not believe his good fortune. Image processing was the one skill that was badly needed for their missile
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development program. Here was a young engineer with knowledge that was needed to support Hamas’s ongoing efforts to develop an improved guided missile that could be used to close the technology gap between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Even better, he discovered that Hasan was a devout Sunni Muslim, with strong antagonism for the West. Murtaja then subjected Hasan to intense questioning, all of which he handled well. At the end of their conversation, Hasan was offered a position with Hamas, which he enthusiastically accepted.

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After work, following the general’s instructions, Hasan rode his bicycle to a partially destroyed apartment building in the southwestern section of the city, within view of the Mediterranean Sea. He found the door hidden behind a pile of rubble and, as Murtaja had directed, rapped quietly three times. The armed soldier at the door asked for his identification and ushered Hasan into the facility, which did not have the luxury of possessing either a reception area or individual offices for the staff. In fact, the entire facility consisted of three large areas separated by cinder blocks, which appeared to have been scavenged from the many destroyed buildings in Rafah. The guard shouted “Nasser” and an engineer emerged from behind a missile positioned on a stand in the middle of the first and largest room.

Nasser had obviously been expecting Hasan’s arrival, because he strode up to him with a broad grin and a handshake. Nasser began the tour of the laboratory facilities by showing Hasan the Suquur missile on which he would be working, a missile named in Arabic after the hawk, which swoops out of the sky to kill its prey.

Nasser explained to Hasan that the development of the Suquur was only partially successful. Nasser was tall, thin, and nervous. He was dressed in worn jeans and a nondescript black tee shirt emblazoned in white with the crossed swords of the Hamas logo. He explained that he had worked on the Suquur for three years. His specialty was missile propulsion systems.
Thanks to Nasser’s work, their weapon had the range needed to reach the Israeli heartland but not the needed accuracy. During their tests, they had launched the missile west over the Mediterranean Sea, aiming at a barge that had been moored approximately five miles from shore. The missile not only failed to destroy the barge, but seemed to be making a U-turn back toward the launch site, an event that caused no end of consternation on the part of the flight crew and the visitors in the viewing stands. Clearly an improved guidance system was needed, and Hasan was to be given the opportunity to lead its development.

His equipment was barely adequate to satisfy his assignment. It consisted of a high-end PC and printer, along with a lab bench, an assortment of hand tools, integrated circuit chips, and a rat’s nest of cables. He concluded that his predecessor had not been terribly neat and wondered what had become of him. His impressions were confirmed by Nasser, who indicated that Shadi was the name of the engineer who had preceded Hasan. Shadi was a computer nerd who knew about developing websites, and had indeed done some impressive work for Hamas. But he did not recognize his own limitations, and as a result, when the opportunity to develop software for a missile guidance system came up, he had immediately volunteered for the job. Because of his failure, he had been returned to web development.

Hasan immediately began work. He emailed his professor at Alexandria University for a copy of the pattern recognition software that he had been given while at the university. He then looked through the engineering drawings left by Shadi to determine the manner in which the computer chip mounted in the missile nose cone would receive video signals from the cameras also mounted in its nose, and send commands to the control surfaces that determine the missile’s direction and flight attitude (roll, pitch, and yaw). This combination of equipment was used to change a missile from that of a propelled rock to an intelligent device capable of seeking out and homing in on a predefined target. Hasan understood this and worked for several weeks under continuous pressure from Ossama, the ironically named director of the laboratory.
After several months of twelve-hour days, Hasan believed he had everything working. He had been given access to a prototype Suquur sitting on a test stand in a room adjacent to his laboratory. It took him several days to get the computer chip to move the control surfaces. It took several additional weeks to get the video system to communicate with the same chip. When he tried to load his image-processing software, he discovered that the computer chip did not have either the needed storage capacity or processing power to interpret the video images. As a result, it was necessary to redesign the entire system of electronics that made up the missile’s brain, a difficult task to fit additional chips into the cramped space available within the missile’s nose cone.

On the day of the test, Hasan joined Nasser, Ossama, and General Murtaja in the small shack at the edge of the launching area. Until that day, Hasan had not realized that Ossama reported to General Murtaja. But their relationship was obvious from Ossama’s obsequious attitude toward the general.

The shack was intended as much to shield the observers from the hot sun as it was to protect them from the blast of the missile launch. It was a crude, one-room structure made of cinder blocks and a tin roof, surrounded by discarded oil drums filled with salt water taken from the nearby sea. Inside was a table, which held Hassan’s computers, along with simple instrumentation that included a thermometer, an anemometer for measuring wind speed, and several video monitors. Chairs were positioned around the table for the convenience of the observers. The room smelled of a combination of machine oil, cigarette smoke, and the perspiration of the observers.

Hasan was sweating both from the heat and from nervousness about the success of the test. He feared that a failure would jeopardize his position as the primary developer of the missile’s guidance system. As if reading his mind, Ossama said, “Well Hassan, we’ve got a lot of confidence in you. In the name of Allah, I hope this test will be a great success.”

Hasan nervously replied, “Sir, I’m optimistic that the missile will hit its target, but please remember that we are in the early
stages of development. This is still research. Even the Americans, with their advanced technologies, have experienced many failures of their missiles during their early stages of development. Success is only achieved with great patience.”

General Murtaja, anxious to support his protégé, supported Hasan. “Ossama, it would indeed be a blessing if this test succeeded, but sometimes it takes many trials before one achieves one’s goal.”

Ossama responded, “These missile firings are expensive. We can only afford so many of them.” He then lapsed into a sulky silence while Hasan and Nasser nervously busied themselves with their instrumentation.

The test being conducted was a repeat of the test that resulted in the reassignment of Shadi as a website developer. A barge that was to serve as the target had been towed approximately five miles offshore, where it was anchored awaiting the arrival of the unarmed missile. Cameras on the barge were to record the incoming missile’s trajectory. The towing vessel had retired to a position several miles from the barge.

Everyone’s pulse rate quickened as the launch crew, located in a bunker closer to the launch pad, began their backward countdown. When the count hit zero, there was a flash of light that disabled the cameras nearest to the missile and a roar that seemed to last forever. After a couple of seconds, the Suquur slowly left the ground, accelerating as it roared out over the Mediterranean. As he followed the missile’s trajectory, defined by its vapor trail, Hasan quietly mouthed a silent prayer to Allah that the missile would hit the target. To Hasan’s initial relief, the arc of the vapor trail was straight and true, heading due west toward the barge as Hasan had programmed the initial phase of the flight, which was controlled by a GPS chip in the missile’s nose cone. The cameras on the barge picked up the image of the approaching missile, which then continued its flight, passing over the barge and flying due west until it ran out of fuel and crashed into the ocean, several miles beyond.

Hasan’s heart sank with the obvious failure of the Suquur’s image-processing system to identify the barge and home in on
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its target. He had wisely included telemetry equipment in the
missile that transmitted the video images being picked up by
the cameras in the nose cone. As a result, he had a record of
the information being received by the image-processing soft-
ware that could be analyzed and used for future corrections. He
recorded the video stream on one of the computers, which was
taken to the basement laboratory for analysis.

There was a palpable silence in the shack. Without saying a
word, Ossama stood up and walked out the door to his waiting
car. General Murtaja also left, patting Hasan on the shoulder as
he walked past him. Nasser began packing up the equipment,
saying, “Don’t worry, Hasan. It would have been a miracle to
have succeeded with so complicated a task on the first try.”

“Yes. But it would have been a nice miracle if it had hap-
pened. Do you think that Ossama will reassign me? He never
liked me, and at times I had the feeling he wanted me to fail,”
Hasan said.

“That’s not true. Ossama is like that with everyone. He’s
the type of person who expects his people to produce miracles.
He’s better at scolding for failures than he is for praising good
success.”

The two packed their equipment in the van and returned to
the laboratory.

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Forgetting about his fear of Ossama, Hasan immediately
unpacked his equipment and went to work. His first interest was
the video tapes. Had the camera been working? Did it record
the presence of the barge? Was it an equipment problem or a
software problem?

When he placed the flash drive on which the video telemetry
was stored in his computer and began playing it back, he was
horrified. He shouted, “How stupid am I?” so loudly that Nasser
came running.

“What’s wrong?”

“Look at this video picture.”

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Nasser looked at the screen of the computer on which the video was being played and saw an image of the sky alternating with images of the ocean and then back to the sky. He was puzzled. “What is this?”

Hasan replied, “Don’t you see what happened? The missile was rolling as it flew. The camera was mounted on the missile, so as the Suquur rolled, the camera was looking at the sky half the time and at the ground the other half of the time. It never received a continuous image of its target. I don’t know why this did not occur to me. Obviously, I took the wrong courses in college.”

“You certainly made a beginner’s mistake. But how can they expect you to be an expert in the field without any prior experience? They keep firing people because they fail without ever giving them the time to learn anything. I certainly hope they leave you alone long enough for you to succeed.”

The two of them stood by the monitor and watched the video as it played for the three minutes of the missile’s flight. Nasser was just interested in the rotating image, while Hasan watched to see whether the camera in the missile had picked up any images of the barge as it rotated in its flight. In that respect he was fortunate. The camera was pointed at the sea for a brief period of time as it passed over the barge. The image he saw further discouraged him, since the barge was barely discernable in the glittering waves that surrounded it. The straight lines of the barge’s freeboard were not distinguishable within the surrounding waves, which obscured its characteristic shape. He doubted that his software would recognize this object as its target.

He would have to go home, eat some supper, and think about ways to solve the problem.

That night Hasan awoke with a start. His mind was working while he slept and wouldn’t let him forget that the missile’s GPS system had pointed it on a straight and true course, while the image-processing software had failed. Why hadn’t this occurred to him sooner? Why not feed the coordinates of the target into the software and use the GPS for guidance? Because of his background in video image processing, he had automatically
assumed that this would be the technology needed for missile guidance. But it was the wrong technology for this application.

Although it was only 4:00 a.m., Hasan was so excited that he got dressed, had an orange for breakfast, and rushed out to the laboratory. Nasser found him that morning bent over the computer keyboard programming a new guidance system that relied exclusively on the coordinates provided by the GPS chip.

It all sounded so simple. But the implementation was not. Nasser and Hasan worked through the day and into the night in order to figure out how the missile should anticipate its arrival at the right coordinates and begin its descent so that it reached the ground at the appropriate location. The two spent hours at the whiteboard in their lab, working on the complex equations that defined the three-dimensional flightpath.

Ossama walked into the lab while they were excitedly working. Not being able to resist taking a dig at Hasan, he said, “Well, my college genius, are we working on another failure?”

Hasan ignored the barb and continued to focus on the translation of the equations on the white board into computer code. But Nasser could not resist a reply. “Why don’t you give the kid a break? He’s learning on the job without much equipment and no experience. I don’t think that pestering him will improve his work. Furthermore, we’ve figured out what went wrong, and I think we’ve got a good solution.”

Rather than replying to Nasser’s defense of Hasan, Ossama asked, “Does this mean we’ll be ready for another failure soon? I hope we don’t have too many additional failures, since we’re running out of test missiles and money.”

Nasser did not wait for Hasan to answer, but said, “I think we’ll be ready for a test within two weeks. The solution to the problem greatly simplifies the equipment in the missile and will be easy to implement.”

“Good, then I’ll see to scheduling the test fourteen days from today. General Murtaja is becoming impatient, in spite of his support of Hasan.”

Time passed rapidly. Once again Hasan and Nasser spent twelve-hour days reconfiguring the missile hardware and test-
ing the software. Their tests were comprehensive, to the point at which they even mounted the missile electronics on Hasan’s jeep, driving it around Rafah to see how it would perform on a moving platform.

They were up all night on the evening of the thirteenth day, getting ready for the second test. During their frantic work to prepare the missile for its test, Hasan said to Nasser, “I wish you had consulted with me before you told Ossama that we only needed two weeks. We could use some more tests, and we need to be certain that the coordinates of the barge’s location are correct.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll make it. I spent a few minutes of our valuable time at the Mosque praying to Allah for success.”

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Daylight once again found the two engineers in the shack with Ossama and General Murtaja. As they worked to set up their equipment, their superiors spoke quietly, chain smoked, and drank Turkish coffee. The barge remained anchored as it had been during the previous test. Hasan carefully entered the barge’s coordinates of latitude 31° 22’ 34.15” N, longitude 34° 10’ 25.82’ E into the missile guidance system, and with that they were ready to go.

Finally, in the late morning, Hasan radioed the launch crew that they were ready for the test. As before, the backward countdown began. The launch proceeded with the firing of the missile, the destruction of the launchpad camera, and the Suquur soaring into the deep blue Mediterranean sky.

Hasan and Nasser held their breath as they watched it begin its three-minute flight to the barge. As before, it correctly headed due west toward the barge. But unlike the previous test, the missile began an arcing descent as it neared the barge, and, as reported both by the camera on the barge and the observers on the boat monitoring the tests, it splashed down an estimated fifty feet beyond the barge. Hasan and Nasser were elated. They
could hardly wait to review the telemetered video data to review the test.

Ossama and Murtaja exhibited restrained elation at the results of the test. Ossama asked Hasan, “That was a lot better, but why did it still miss the barge?”

Ignoring his lack of enthusiasm, Hasan replied, “That was within the kill range of the missile, wasn’t it? If we had a real warhead, the barge would have been sunk.”

During the next few days, Hasan and Nasser reviewed the video and reviewed all their calculations. After exhaustive work, they uncovered the problem. Their calculations had been based on the weight of an armed missile rather than one with a dummy warhead. That difference could explain the reason for overshooting the target.

They explained the situation to Ossama and the general, both of whom were satisfied that Hasan had succeeded. A few days later, Hasan received the word that the leadership of Hamas had decided to begin mass-producing the Suquur. He was also informed that he would be honored for his work.

Little did Hasan realize that his development of the Hawk guidance system and the honors he had received would provide him with the opportunity to change the world.