

# “Israeli Kindness Changed my Life,” says Hamas Escapee

**Gay, Christian-convert son of a Palestinian militant family says he found compassion where he least expected it, and most needed it**

[This article, written in January, 2015 for The Times of Israel, is reprinted with permission. An update and an account of HP’s conversations with John Calvin follow. Ed.]

## Elhanan Miller

A Palestinian teenager was arrested in Tel Aviv in late 2006 for illegally entering Israel. It was the third time the 15-year-old from Nablus had crossed into Israel, fleeing his abusive father. Now 24 years old, openly gay, and a convert to Christianity, he is fighting for his life to remain a refugee in Canada.

The boy belonged to an aristocratic family, in Palestinian Islamist terms. His maternal grandfather, Said Bilal, was the head of the Muslim Brotherhood in Nablus, who oversaw the activities of its Palestinian branch, Hamas. His uncle, Muaz Bilal, was condemned in 2002 by an Israeli court to 26 life sentences for dispatching suicide bombers into downtown Jerusalem in the late 1990s, killing 21 Israelis and injuring 300 in two separate attacks. Two other uncles, Bakr and Obada Bilal, a military Hamas field commander and an explosives expert, respectively, were released from Israeli prison as part of the Gilad Shalit prisoner swap in October 2011.

The trouble at home started when, as a teenager, he began questioning the beliefs and actions of his parents, both ardent Hamas supporters.

“I ended up having a big fight with them, and ran to Israel,” the youth told *The Times of Israel* in a phone conversation Monday from Edmonton, Canada, where he eventually sought political asylum. A tragic experience in an Israeli prison cell that night sparked a chain of events which would turn the teenager’s be-


lief system on its head, leading him to convert to Christianity and change his name to John Calvin, after the 16<sup>th</sup> century French theologian.

“A horrific incident happened to me in jail. I was raped by a Muslim man, and ended up getting assistance from Jewish psychiatrists and from the jail administration, which helped me through the worst thing that ever happened to me in my life. That ended up changing my life entirely. The entire staff tried to help, including the prison warden... They tried to keep it quiet because of the culture in jail and even followed up with me after my release. This was not the image I grew up with about Jewish people.”

Calvin, who requested that his original name be withheld for fear that his family would track him down and harm him, said he was taught to believe that Jews were “monsters whose goal in life is to kill and destroy us in every opportunity they get.” But far from attempting to destroy him, Calvin’s jailers showed “humanity and compassion,” he said.

“I lost faith in everything I knew. My belief collapsed on itself and was absolutely destroyed. From that point on, I had to develop my own beliefs and ideologies [after being] exposed to the truth – that Jewish people were not the monsters I was taught they are. They were actually normal people who showed humanity and compassion in my time of need.”

He defined his upbringing as “extremist,” quoting by heart an Islamic oral tradition (*hadith*) he was taught in high school stating that “he



John Calvin, a gay, Christian Palestinian asylum seeker, who currently resides in Canada, says he fears for his life after he was issued a deportation order on December 31, 2014.

*Photo credit:  
CTV News Edmonton screen shot*

**JOHN CALVIN**  
FACING DEPORTATION

who dies without having waged one attack for the sake of Islam has died as an infidel.”

“At home, we’d memorize the Qur’an and study Islamic doctrine. We were a faith-based family,” he said.

Upon his return to Nablus, Calvin distanced himself from his family, and would only visit their home once a week. He took up a job as a shoemaker, eating and sleeping in the workshop. At around the same period, Calvin, the eldest of four brothers, began taking an interest in Christianity, secretly reading the Bible away from his parents’ watchful eyes.

By the time he was 19, he was ready to formally convert. But when in March 2010 his mother caught him speaking on the phone to a priest whom he had called to inquire about baptism, all hell broke loose. After he confessed his Christian beliefs to his parents, his father tried to stab him with a knife, and Calvin jumped out the window to escape. He hid in another West Bank city, where he joined a Christian community and began to attend church services.

There, he met a Canadian pastor who offered him a scholarship for a Bible college in Toronto, which he rejected. But in June that year in Ramallah, he happened upon his father, who physically assaulted him. Calvin was arrested and sent to a Palestinian Authority jail in Nablus for “disrupting the public peace.” He was placed in a cell with over 60 convicts, many of them Hamas members, some on death row.

“For the first time in my life I saw that prisoners were allowed to carry steak knives in jail,” he said. “When I first entered, the inmates gave me three days to repent and convert back to Islam or be killed for apostasy.”

Calvin said that the PA jail administration was aware of his predicament but nevertheless informed the dangerous inmates of his background, also allowing Muslim clerics to enter his cell and try to convert him back to Islam, but to no avail. A month later he was released from jail, still a believing Christian. No charges were leveled against him, and he never faced a judge.

After a short stay with his grandmother – whom he describes as “the first lady of Hamas,” and who also tried to convince him to return to the Muslim fold – Calvin learned of his father’s plan to kill him. Friends helped him flee to Jordan, where he accepted the scholarship to study in Canada. In late December 2010 he arrived in Toronto, later moving to Alberta to conclude his theology studies in 2012.

Calvin arrived in Canada on a student visa, requesting refugee status in June 2011. But in

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July 2012 his case was suspended by Canada Border Services Agency, when the Ministry of Public Safety decided that Calvin's association with his family in Nablus prior to age 18 constituted membership in Hamas, which Canada designates a terror organization.

Following a legal back-and-forth with CBSA over the past two years, Calvin was informed on New Year's Eve 2015 that his refugee request had been denied and he could be deported within 30 days, after an immigration official found that he had knowingly assisted Hamas by transferring coded messages through Israeli checkpoints and even shooting at IDF jeeps, as he testified to Canadian immigration. Calvin told Canadian daily *Edmonton Journal* that he did not understand the messages he conveyed and never shot the gun, given to him as a birthday gift by his grandfather at age 14.

Calvin is now contesting the deportation order in federal court, with the help of friends who have launched a crowdfunding campaign for him, as well as an appeal to Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. He is certain that he will be killed if he is deported back to the Palestinian territories.

"A deportation order is the equivalent of a death sentence. Even if it wasn't because I'm Christian, it would be because I'm gay," said Calvin, who came out to his parents in a phone call from Canada two years ago. "I said: 'I'm gay and deal with it. I don't really care what you think.'"

He still sometimes calls his mother – who separated from his father in 2012 – from a masked phone number. "Even in Canada I'm not absolutely safe from my family's harm," he said.

Calvin realizes how similar his story is to that of the "Green Prince," Mosab Hassan Yousef, the son of Hamas leader Hassan Yousef, who converted to Christianity and fled to the

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United States after serving as an informant for Israel's internal security agency, the Shin Bet.

"We met at a party of a mutual friend in Canada. He seems to be a kind, decent person, though I don't really know him," he noted. "However, in my case I did not work with Israeli intelligence."

Recalling his experiences in Israel eight years ago, Calvin's message was optimistic.

"Don't judge a book by its cover," he said. "Sometimes the smallest, simplest act of kindness and compassion can change someone's life forever, like myself."•

*Elhanan Miller is the Arab affairs reporter for The Times of Israel.*

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