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Former al-Zawahiri disciple backs alternate Islam

By DAVID HOROVITZ

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His name is Tawfik Hamid and he was born in Cairo 47 years ago into a secular Muslim family.

His elementary school education included the routine exposure, at age nine, to the Koranic verse that urges "Do not think of those that have been slain in God's cause as dead. Nay, they are alive! With their Sustainer they have sustenance" - the blueprint for martyrdom.



Tawfik Hamid. Photo: Courtesy

From that day onward, again unremarkably, Hamid began to dream of becoming a *shaheed*, a martyr - and thereby guarantee himself entry to a paradise where, he wrote later, he could "eat all the lollipops and chocolates I wanted, or play all day without anyone telling me to study."

At Cairo University medical school in the late 1970s, by now in his late teens, he joined the Jamaah Islamiyah fundamentalist organization and his transformation was completed: "I started to grow my beard. I stopped smiling and telling jokes. I adopted a serious look at all times and became very judgmental toward others... My hatred toward non-Muslims increased dramatically, and jihadi doctrine became second nature to me."

He fell under the spell of an older fellow student, "One of the fiercest speakers I had ever heard... His rhetoric inspired us to engage war against the infidels, the enemies of Allah."

This fierce speaker was Ayman al-Zawahiri, the oft-described lieutenant or No. 2 to Osama bin Laden in al-Qaida.

But although invited to follow al-Zawahiri's lead, and travel with other students to Afghanistan for training in jihad, Hamid shrank back.

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enter the practicalities" - making tentative plans to blow up churches and mosques in Cairo. "I knew of other plans to kidnap a police officer and bury him alive, and the brutality didn't match my personality," he said by way of explanation. "My father was really an atheist; his way of thinking was to critique. And the moment I hesitated, that critical thinking, his approach, started to work in my mind."

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And now, almost 30 years later, this one-time impressionable jihadi recruit this week emblemized his longtime transformation from extremist Islam by visiting Israel. Dr. Hamid arrived here on Sunday night, and spoke to *The Jerusalem Post* on Monday morning. And he had a message for Israel's imminent presidential visitor.

"Al-Zawahiri wants to subjugate the whole world to Islamic law," Hamid said. "The critical change he has achieved is to encourage jihad not at the national level but at the individual level - a more barbaric interpretation of an already barbaric concept." And that mindset will prevail, warned Hamid, unless the free world defeats it.

Hamid, who left Egypt 13 years ago and now lives in the US, was speaking the day after a spokesman for al-Zawahiri's al-Qaida urged its adherents to "receive the crusader slayer Bush... not with flowers or clapping but with bombs and booby-trapped vehicles."

He said that what President Bush needs to understand - and I think he does largely understand this - is that defeating Islamic terrorism has to include a variety of integrated tactics." These comprise everything from the use of military force when necessary, to a commitment to alternative energy that will financially weaken the Islamic fundamentalist regimes, to conditioning any concessions by Israel to the Palestinians on the "demonstrable, sustained abandonment of incitement in the media, the mosques and the education system."

But what is most crucial, stressed Hamid, a former preacher who quoted long verses from the Koran at will throughout the interview, is defeating Islamic fundamentalism at the ideological level. This requires formulating and providing an alternative interpretation of the Koran to the violent interpretation to which he was exposed and that he says is so uniformly taught to Muslim youngsters in this region and in Muslim education frameworks throughout the West. Hamid is deep into the compilation of such an alternate reading of key sections of the Koran, he said, to be published in book form in both Arabic and English.

"Practically speaking," he said, if young Muslims "don't have an alternative interpretation of the Koran, it's going to be impossible" to foster a more moderate approach. And without it, "we're essentially asking them to leave their religion. That won't happen."

Hamid, who holds degrees in medicine and cognitive psychology, is visiting Israel with a group of moderate Muslim leaders from the US on a trip sponsored by the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and the Project Interchange institute of the American Jewish Committee, in cooperation with the Foreign Ministry.

Asked whether his claim is that Islam is an essentially peaceful religion whose teachings have been skewed by the fundamentalists, Hamid responded carefully: "Islam could be followed and interpreted in a peaceful way," he said, "but the current dominant way of interpretation has many violent areas that need addressing. To say Islam today is peaceful? It is not. But it can be taught peacefully. The texts can allow you to do this."

For instance, he said, Muslims ought to be "incredibly respectful of Jews - on the basis of the Koran." He cited quotations where the Old Testament is described as "a light," said that there is repeated support in the Koran for the Children of Israel as the "preferred" and "chosen" people, and stated that even Zionism finds resonance in the Koran. There are several references, he said, to "the land God promised" to the Jews, the land as a "permanent inheritance," and the return "when the end days are near" of the Children of Israel "to your homeland."

As for the fundamentalist Islamic insult of all Jews as "pigs and monkeys," Hamid argued that is a willful misinterpretation of Koranic text, noting that to follow that thinking is to "insult most of the prophets of Islam - including Moses, Aharon, David and Solomon. You are insulting the brothers of Muhammad."

Where Jews are clearly branded as "monkeys" in the Koran, he said, the description applies to a specific group of Jews who are criticized for resisting Moses's Jewish

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teachings and for mimicking unholy cultures. He quoted as follows: "Ask them about the group of the Jews who were disobeying God on the Sabbath." This is the group," said Hamid, "who are described as monkeys - the Jews who were resisting Judaism!"

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