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Biography

I, Nadia, Wife of a Terrorist
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It is a common complaint that marriage changes people. For Nadia Chaabani, that fear was real: "A knot tightened around my heart. It was so strong that as soon as Ahmed was out of the room I started screaming to keep from suffocating."

Stark, visceral, and disturbing, this biography tells the true story of the transformation of a naïve teenager into the wife of a brutal religious fanatic. The book is set amid the political turmoil of rural Algeria in the early 1990s, when sixteen-year-old Nadia falls in love with a petty thief named Ahmed. Poor and uneducated, this rebellious youth is an ideal recruit for the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), one of several fundamentalist movements sweeping the nation. The religious fervor that overtakes their household and the wave of violence that ensues offer a chilling glimpse into the heart and mind of a ruthless killer and his silent witness.

Originally published in France in 1998, the book is based on an interview between Nadia and the author, a veteran journalist. Gacemi is the founder of the Algerian newspaper *Le Tribune* and has reported internationally about the subjugation of women in her country. A mother and widow at twenty-two, Nadia met her interviewer through a support group for women victimized by terror. She lives with a host family to this day; for her protection, all names in the story have been changed.

Many books have been written about the terrorist mind, but few explore the psychology of the civilians who make the terrorist way of life possible. The ease with which terrorism engulfed the town of Hai Bounab shows that while fear and poverty play important roles, the power of belief is equally strong. As Ahmed rises through the ranks of the GIA to become the local emir, Nadia's hesitation turns to pride and she relishes her status as "mother of the faithful." Soon the entire village joins the cause. Men build hideouts. Women lie to the police. It

isn't until the violence spirals out of control—until the GIA starts burning down schools and torturing teenagers—that the villagers realize that anyone could be next.

The reader never quite learns how Nadia perceives her own moral responsibility, and it is very likely that she remains conflicted. Her rationalizations range from the defensive ("I had no choice") to the passionate ("I loved my husband"). Even now, her guilt seems limited, her sadness somewhat self-absorbed. She spends much more energy lamenting the slave labor she performed as cook and laundress to the GIA than to her passive collaboration in the beheading of her five girlfriends. After describing Ahmed's habit of looting his victims' homes for gifts, she coolly complains, "But Ahmed had no taste. I never liked the clothes he brought me."

However unsettling, Nadia's numbness testifies to the state of perpetual violence in which she lived. Understanding both her role as an obedient Muslim wife and her need for self-preservation is essential to comprehending her ambiguous state of mind. One can't help but pity her misfortune when the police close in on Ahmed's trail and she is forced into hiding. Pregnant and frightened, Nadia wanders through the streets of Hai Bounab in winter looking for shelter, only to be rejected by all her former friends—even at first by her own parents. Eventually her son, too, suffers the consequences of this violent legacy. In addition to beating Nadia viciously, her father refuses to let anyone feed the boy, citing the belief that he will grow up to be a terrorist just like Ahmed.

Upon hearing of her husband's death, Nadia joyfully admits that she is "coming back to life." She seems to genuinely regret the pain she has caused her family and shares the hope that other young women will learn from her mistakes. Most significant perhaps is her declaration that she no longer wears a headscarf. "The hardships I've endured have caused me to doubt everything, even religion," she says. "I have to ask myself, does God favor people like Ahmed who never miss saying their prayers but who kill innocent victims?"

Both Gacemi and her subject have taken a brave step in telling this story. They not only face retribution from the Islamic fundamentalists who still ravage much of Algeria, but also the condemnation of those who believe that putting a human face on terrorism is tantamount to condoning it. After reading *I, Nadia* one has no doubt that the faces behind these acts of violence are very human—and they are all the more frightening because of it.

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