



AN ARAB IN THE ISRAELI ARMY

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I am an Arab. I am a Muslim. And I love my country. In fact, I'm prepared to die for it. Which is why I serve in its army.

I don't have to do this. I want to do this. Because my country is a special place, unlike any other.

Free. Diverse. Vibrant.

Yet, other countries—countries not so free, not so diverse—call for my country's complete destruction. The moment my country lets its guard down, it will be destroyed.

My country is Israel.

I grew up and still live in a small village named after my family's Bedouin Arab tribe. Our roots in this land run deep.

In 1948, when Arab armies invaded the new state of Israel, my family thought of leaving our village. Some of them did. But when the Jews' leaders heard that, they implored us to remain. "This is our country, for both Arabs and Jews," they said. "Stay, and we will work together to build it."

My family stayed. My parents were born here, made their lives here, started their own family here—in Israel.

In 2002, I was a teenager. It was a violent time. Palestinian suicide bombers were blowing up Israeli civilians—a danger to Arabs and Jews alike. Israeli troops entered to the West Bank to stop them at their source. As a result, many Palestinians were killed.

I was torn. Whose side was I on, I thought: Israel's or the Palestinians'? Is it possible to be an Arab and an Israeli? The question became even more difficult when I saw men from my own village wearing the uniform of the Israeli army. Only Jews are required to serve in the military. No one forced these Arab men to join; they chose to. "Why?" I asked them.

"Our home is here, in Israel," they said. "Our home is under attack. Our neighbors in this home are Jews. They are being attacked. We fight together."

Still, I struggled.

I went to high school in Nazareth. There, unlike the village where I grew up, most of the Arab students identified as Palestinians even though they are citizens of Israel.

Some of the students—my friends—hated Israel. They couldn't understand me. "You're a Palestinian", they said, "so you must hate Israel." When I said that I didn't, that we had far more freedom and opportunity than Arabs anywhere in the Middle East, they called me a traitor.

After high school, I went on to study electrical engineering at Technion, a leading Israeli university. During my first semester, heavy rocket fire from Gaza forced Israel to launch a counterattack.

Not long after the war began, I witnessed a group of Arab-Israeli students expressing their solidarity with Hamas, the Palestinian terror organization that controls Gaza and is committed to Israel's violent destruction.

Did these students not understand that those rockets could just as easily be aimed at them? Hamas didn't care who they killed as long as they landed inside the borders of Israel. Had my fellow Arab students forgotten that Israel had left Gaza a few years before? That there wasn't a single Israeli living there?

That day, I dropped out of school to join the Israeli army, the IDF. A few months later, I was a soldier in the Israeli Air Force. After months of training, I was assigned to the Search & Rescue Helicopter Unit.

Our job was to save lives. We never concerned ourselves with the identity of the people who needed our help. We rescued Syrian civilians wounded in their country's civil war, Palestinian children from Gaza requiring urgent medical care, and countless Israelis of every religious and ethnic background. A life—whether it is Muslim or Jewish, Palestinian or Israeli—is a life.

On a base of 6,000 soldiers, I was the only Bedouin. But it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was keeping Israel—our home—safe. We came from all parts of the country and from many parts of the world. We were every shade of skin color. Our shared goal created a deep bond.

Today, I am a student at Haifa University. Half of the students are Arab. More than once, I have seen the Palestinian flag being waved at a rally or protest on campus. In Israel, you can do this because, whether you are a Jew or an Arab, you are free.

What more do you need to know?

I am Mohammad Kabiya for Prager University.