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ISLAMIC STATES OF
AMERICA
A NOVEL

HASSAN RIAZ

HILLTAPER

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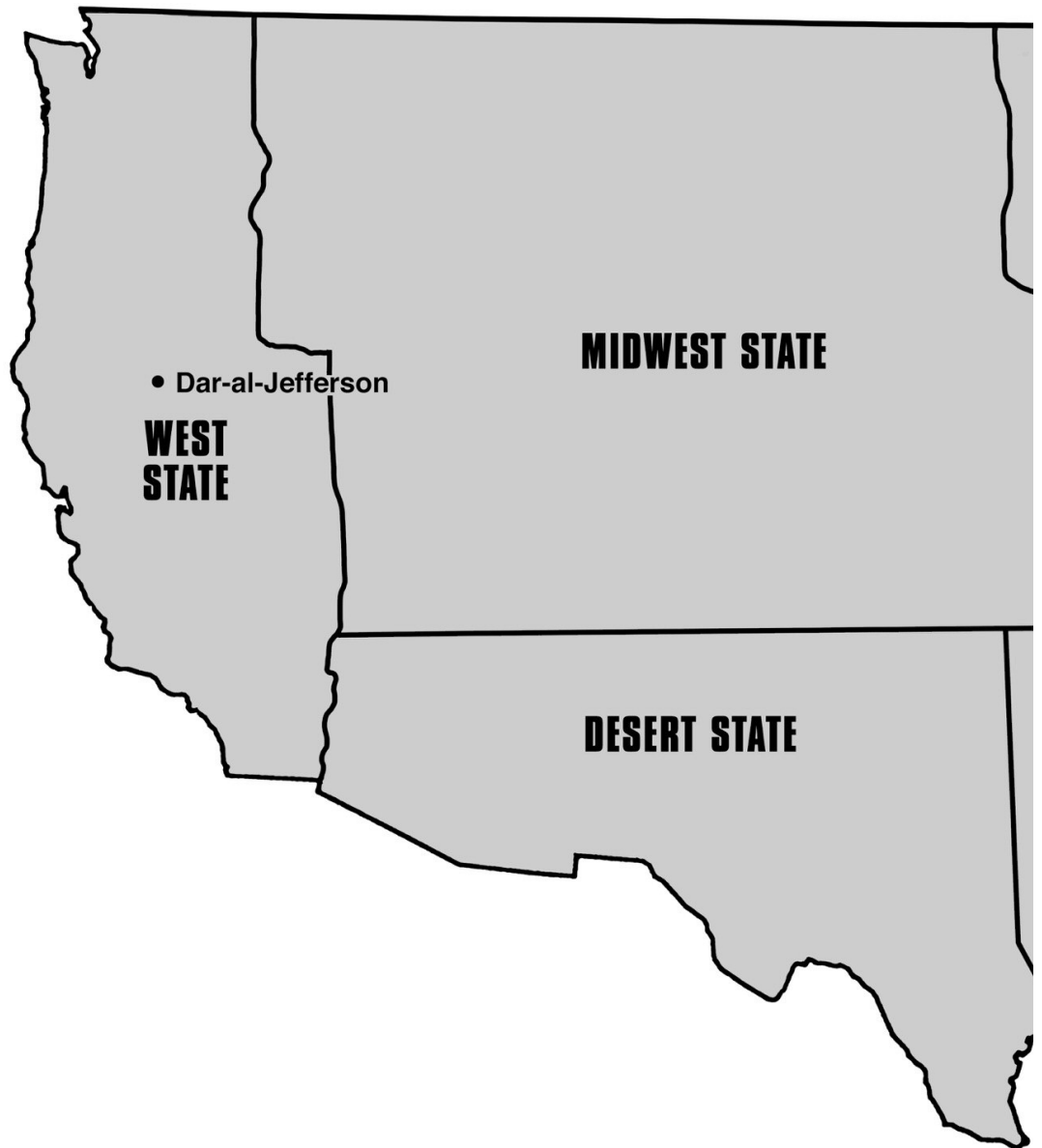
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For Athan. For Mariam.

ISLAMIC STATES OF AMERICA





ISLAMIC STATES OF
AMERICA

WEST STATE

1.

THE NOVEMBER MORNING was gray and cloudy and the streets held on to their usual smell of ash and charred plastic. It was warm here in the West State, cold everywhere else in the Caliphate. I was entering another bomb site in Dar-al-Jefferson when Khalil came back into my life. He'd been missing for seven years and now he'd returned in the form of a video sent anonymously to my phone. The video was recent, which meant the Khalil in the video was ten years old. In the video, Khalil sat on a crumbling, concrete bench, his back turned towards the camera. He was fidgeting, kicking out with skinny, ashen legs. He was wearing a Patriot combat jacket that was too big for him. An older, white kid with a rifle stood to his side, wearing the same oversized camouflage. An F-37 Joint Strike fighter jet edged into the frame above. And the video ended.

The video was short, no more than a few seconds, and Khalil looked skinnier than I imagined he ever would at this age, but the boy in the video was Khalil. I had no doubt. Even though I hadn't seen him in seven years, he was my son. I was supposed to be his father.

Ward had been a couple of paces ahead of me when I'd

received the video. By the time I'd finished viewing it, he was half a block away. He turned around to see what was keeping me. The Caliphate Guard was supposed to clear bomb sites of all occupants at least four hundred yards in each direction, but we'd been at this gig long enough to know this was rarely the case. We'd taken fire from these low-rises before. He eyed the buildings, lifted the barrel of his compact rifle, and walked towards me.

“What’s wrong?”

“I have something to show you.”

“Am I going to want to see it?”

“I want you to see it.”

I showed him my phone and he watched the video in silence.

“Who is he?”

“My son.”

“Your son?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t know you were a father, Stone.”

“Different life.”

“What happened to him?”

“He went missing a long time ago.”

“Who sent the video?”

“Unknown sender.”

“You have an idea.”

“Maybe.”

He didn’t press me for more. He knew not to press. “What now?”

“Where do you think he is?”

He watched the video again. “Is that an F-37?”

“Yes.”

“The plane that was supposed to have ended the Fight for Democracy. East State. He’s in the East State.”

“I was thinking the same. The District.”

“Why ask?”

“I wanted to be wrong.”

By now, a decade had passed since the U.S. had lost the Fight for Democracy. The Caliphate ruled America and U.S. insurgents were the terrorists. Drones buzzed the night skies, insurgents made improvised explosive devices, and neighborhood warlords demanded tribute taxes. Ward and I were interrogation operatives in the West State for the Ministry of Caliphate Intelligence. Ward had been born here when Dar-al-Jefferson had still been Sacramento. I'd joined him from the East State two years ago, having transferred from Fatiha Security Group at the frontline. Most believers fighting the jihad would consider the change from FSG in the East State to MCI in the West State to be a downward move, but I'd considered it the right move at the right time.

I'd served the Caliphate in the First and Second Battles of the District and now I was in the Caliphate's version of California. The District—Washington, D.C.—was over two thousand miles and two histories away. Out here in the West State, the Caliphate had squashed the bulk of the U.S. insurgency, but the same was not true for the East State, particularly the District, which the Caliphate had annexed time and again to no avail. Out here, the Caliphate had won, and only needed to stay ahead, squash out the stragglers, disgruntled, and crazies. Out there, U.S. Patriots were winning. Or rather, they'd never lost. The strongest bastion of U.S. insurgency remained in D.C. In between Dar-al-Jefferson and the District, all permutations of the Caliphate's successes, failures, and works in progress existed.

America had changed.

Ward glanced at the buildings. I knew what he was thinking. Getting sniped while standing around and doing nothing was not the best martyrdom. I wasn't worried about getting sniped. I'd made it to thirty-nine, an old head these days. He

though was several years younger. “You’re not wrong,” Ward said. “Let’s go.”

I pocketed the phone, patted the pistol at my thigh, and stepped beside him. We walked along the empty street in silence, listening to the hum of machinery coming from several blocks away. The Caliphate Guard was closing off this portion of Q Street after a woman had blown herself up early in the morning during *fajr* prayer. When the streets closed, the Caliphate Guard got antsy. Traffic backed up, crowds collected, and the *dhimmi* became encouraged. As was always the case, the Caliphate Guard wanted to haul away the body and debris and open the street two minutes ago, but the Caliphate required that all bombings throughout the Islamic States of America be investigated, and since Ward and I were MCI field operatives for this part of the West State, we were supposed to review the Caliphate Guard’s findings.

The Guard hadn’t yet detained or arrested anybody, but no bombings in the Caliphate went unheeded. If the bombing were an act of insurgency, the Guard would order the detention or arrest of an insurgent or a *dhimmi* or even an estranged believer. If an arrest or detainment were made, Ward and I would have someone to interrogate.

The Guard’s bomb team was waiting for us. Hoag was the lead investigator and a forensics specialist. He was recognizable, even from a distance, because of the shock of white hair that fell to his shoulders. He was wearing the Guard’s urban fatigues. He was competent and earnest but hadn’t advanced up the hierarchy even when other men less capable than he had. He’d been a *dhimmi* in the early days of the Caliphate. Maybe having been a *dhimmi* had something to do with the stasis.

“What do you have for us?” Ward said.

“A woman blew herself up,” Hoag said. “She was in her twenties. No chatter. None before, none after.”

“Lone wolf?” Ward said.

“We’re still processing the scene, but probably not a lone wolf either.”

“Then what?” Ward said.

“Just a crazy white woman. Maybe she was angry at someone. Maybe her husband.”

“She was married?” Ward said.

“Might’ve been. No ID yet. But we’re pulling her profile from Census.”

“She just blew herself up?” Ward said.

“Happens all the time. Whatever the reason is, it’s probably not going to be relevant to you guys.”

“We’ll take a look anyway,” Ward said.

Hoag whistled at one of the jondis holding the line along the perimeter of the bombsite. The foot soldier lifted the tape and we entered the site. Another jondi handed us disposable gloves. We knelt over the woman’s incinerated body. Not much remained of her, and whatever did was charred. Maybe she’d had blonde hair, but I couldn’t tell for sure. Ward ran his fingers along her upper chest and held them up to show me a pasty film of soot. We didn’t need the investigative team to tell us that the explosive was homemade, nothing special, nothing from old U.S. stockpiles, nothing diverted from China. If the woman wasn’t an insurgent, she’d had no ideological bent. She’d only been disturbed.

We ungloved, tossed them into a bag held open by a jondi, and left the bombsite. We waited under one of the few trees still standing on the street. Another jondi approached to inform us that the Caliphate Guard had set up an area with sniper coverage for prayer. If we wanted additional protection while we prayed *asr*, he and a fellow jondi would provide it. As the jondi explained the setup, Ward received a call. I knew from the way Ward retreated down the street that his wife was the caller. The jondi watched me, waiting for a response. I dismissed him. These days, prayer wasn’t for me.

As I stood by myself and watched the investigative team turn over the bomb site, I again replayed the last words Khalil ever had spoken to me. I'd been replaying them for years.

Home, he'd said, clutching at me. *Take me home*.

I hadn't, and I'd spent the next five years of my life trying to find him, interrogating every Patriot I could to find out if he was living a normal life somewhere in the Caliphate, if he was dead like all the other kids, or if he was fighting for the other side. Now I knew he was fighting for the other side. They had him fighting for the other side.

Hoag whistled to catch my attention. I held up my hand to acknowledge him. I waited to see if he was going to wave us over. He didn't, and instead shook his head. I understood—there was nothing here for MCI. Whatever happened with the woman had not been a security issue for the Caliphate. She'd blown herself up because of desperation, anger, or disenchantment, but these were not issues that concerned MCI. We only concerned ourselves with issues that affected the sovereignty of the Caliphate of the Islamic States of America. She was a non-ideological concern. Shariah Courts would handle the bombing.

I whistled at Ward and waited for him to finish his call. He did, and we walked back to the truck. We climbed into the Toytoa, I turned it around, and we drove south along Q.

Caliphate Guard finally had established the four hundred-yard perimeter. At the first set of blast barriers, Yusuf, a sergeant in the Guard, stopped us. "What is the news, *shaiykh*?" he said, enunciating every syllable. He'd snuck into the U.S. from overseas when the jihad had started. Unlike Ward, he'd been born a Muslim. He'd fought for God and still was.

"All yours," I said.

"What was the bombs? Was the bombs homemade? Or Chinese?"

“Hoag will update you,” I said.

“All of the bombs are homemade these days. At least, in Dar-al-Jefferson.”

“Why ask?”

“I do not get enough informations. I need the informations for my men. We are on the frontline. We get killed when something happens. We take the gunfires. They drive the cars bombs into our barriers. Nobody cares about the regulars guards, shaiykh.”

“The West State isn’t the frontline, Yusuf,” I said. “This is Paradise. We’ve been here for twenty minutes and I didn’t ask you to close down the street for the rest of the day. The time alone should give you all the information that you need.”

“The Caliphate needs to track fertilizers sales.”

I didn’t want to argue specifics with Yusuf. “We have to pray. It’s asr. We’re going.”

Yusuf nodded and let us through without another word of debate or inquiry. Prayer shut everyone up. Back in my U.S. days, when I’d been Title 50 with the Company, a senior operations officer in a different division used to say that he needed to see a man about a horse whenever he’d needed to meet with an asset. The expression was outdated even then, but we’d always known that when he’d said it, he’d needed to go.

Nowadays, prayer was always the right excuse, no horse needed. Prayer was five times a day—*fajr* at dawn, *zuhr* at midday, asr in the afternoon, *maghrib* at sunset, *isha* at night. There was even *tabujjud*, the voluntary prayer in the middle of the night, if a believer wanted the extra credit. Nowadays, prayer was always the right excuse.

After we passed the checkpoint, my cell phone buzzed with a message. I checked to see if I’d received another video of Khalil. I hadn’t. Rather, 5-3 dispatch from campus had texted me. There’d been another bombing, this time in Rasdaf, two hundred miles north of here. An investigative team from the

Caliphate Guard was already there and had determined that the bombing had been an act of local insurgency. They would brief us on the bombing when we arrived on site. This time, there would be no disgruntled white woman.

I showed the text to Ward. "Drive?"

"Air. I need to be home tonight. The neighbor took a second wife. Stephanie is convinced I'm going to do the same. She has no reason to think I'm going to take a second wife, but she does."

Despite the explanation, I knew he was choosing air because of me. He hated the choppers. They were always going down, and he feared he would be on the next one that did. "You need to reassure her."

"I do. It doesn't help. She never used to be this way. It has to be the pregnancy. The sooner I get home, the better."

"It's not the pregnancy."

"What is it?"

"She knows the ways of the Caliphate are becoming more entrenched. She knows what's coming."

"Let's get home for isha."

"I don't think we're getting home for isha."

"Does the Guard have someone already?"

"Not yet."

"No interrogations for us tonight. Home by isha. If not isha, midnight. Even tahajjud will be okay. Just not fajr. Let's get home before the sun comes out."

I texted campus and told them to get us chopper transport and provide us with a couple of jondis for security support for when we landed. Rasdaf was a hellhole compared to this part of old Sacramento. I wasn't ready to be killed tonight, especially with Khalil back in my life.