

## Night Hunters: A Journey with Murad

Suad Amiry

### **Introduction: An Interview with Suad Amiry**

Suad Amiry's new book, *Murad, Murad*, scheduled for publication in Italian in the summer of 2009, is the story of her eighteen-hour journey in 2007 with Murad, an "illegal" Palestinian worker and his friends, as they attempt to cross the "border" into Israel and find work. Starting off at midnight from the village of Mazra el Noubani, in the Ramallah-area, a group of workers, accompanied by Suad in male disguise and Mohammed, Murad's brother who is a colleague of Suad, set off in a rickety bus on a journey that resembled a maze, as they struggle to avoid army patrols, skirt the Wall, walk through ditches, orchards and tunnels to reach the "other side" and work in Israel. In the excerpt

Cover of *Murad, Murad* by Suad Amiry.

below, the group has finally reached the Nablus-area village of az-Zawiya, which is still on the wrong side of the Wall.

The hero of the book is 21 year old Murad, who has worked in Israel since he was thirteen and is utterly determined to continue to work there, despite the enormous odds against him. Murad is an unusual hero and *JQ* asked Amiry how she conceived of him as a hero.

He is a hero because of his resilience. Nothing can stop Murad. In a strange way, he reminds me of the butler in *Remains of the Day*: he is completely obsessed with doing his job. Like him, he is in a hopeless situation, but doesn't think he is hopeless – that's very Palestinian. He is also a hero because he is not sweet, in many ways he puts on, by necessity, a thuggish air, he is a survivalist."

Suad begins her book with a quote from the Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski who writes:

"As I see it, it is wrong to write about people without living through at least a little of what they are living through."

Thus, Suad does her best to enter the world of illegal workers, highlighting her own ignorance of this world which tens of thousands of young and old Palestinian men inhabit day after day and night after night. She gently mocks her fear as the night grows long and dangerous. When asked what she learned from "living through" the experience, even if briefly, she says she "changed her attitude" to the young, often shabbily dressed, men that are encountered daily on city streets. "Like many women, I used to look away and be apprehensive, now I have a connection, a way, at least sometimes, to build a relation." She also comments:

We who are professionals in Ramallah are able to make a living away from Israel. It's difficult to understanding the complexity of Murad and other workers' relation to Israel. Murad went to Israel when he was 13. All his growing up happened there. He is oppressed, beaten, and lately has been put in prison – but in a strange way, Israel is also his home. In this contradictory relation, he is more like the Palestinians inside Israel.

Suad tells a story of lives that are largely invisible – invisible to her before her journey, and invisible to much of the Palestinian public, as well as to the world. She notes that when the Palestinian Authority didn't pay salaries for several months, it was the talk of the town. But Murad told her: "Why the big fuss? When we are thrown into prison, no one helps us." In the year 2000, there were about 100,000 West Bankers workers in Israel, with many more family members dependent on their work. While numbers

fluctuate today, it is no exaggeration to say that the lives and rights of a substantial proportion of the population are rarely acknowledged.

Like Amiry's previous book *Sharon and My Mother in Law*, *Murad, Murad* is full of humor and ironic reversals. Suad says:

“You cannot describe a tragedy with another tragedy. People stop listening. But humor humanizes. In *Murad, Murad*, the humor comes from Murad and his friends as they joke through the night in order to cope with their situation. In fact, I couldn't joke as much as I did in *Sharon and My Mother in Law*, as times are even darker.

These times are reflected in Amiry's use of dreams and nightmares throughout *Murad, Murad*, included in the text below. When asked why she turned to fantasy and dream-like sequences in her new book, she explains:

The times are insane – to describe them needs, in a way, a level of insanity. The Wall had a traumatic effect on me and it cannot be described by giving details of its height and length in an objective tone. In fact, I need to think of it as a dream. Straightforward sentences don't work.

An alternative title Amiry considered for the book sums this up; “Nothing Makes Sense, Why Should I?”

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## **Night Hunters**

Sunday May 14<sup>th</sup> [3:15 AM]

From Az Zawiya to Az Zawiya:<sup>1</sup> (From one Angle to Another)

My late mother's husky voice was echoing in my ears as I watched the workers being swiftly swallowed into the darkness of the olive groves; one... by... one:

“*Susu, sweetie, there is nothing to be afraid of; darkness has no ghosts, and eats no one.*” At that point I buttoned up my jacket, tucked my hair under my cap, and briskly followed.

It took a while before I felt confident walking on the narrow and rocky path winding down the hill between the huge olive trees which, unlike what mum claimed; the darkness *had* ghosts. Making sure not to fall down or twist my ankle (and become an even heavier burden on Mohammad and Murad), I would carefully place my feet in semi-dark spots, and would every so often, stop, take a deep breath, and watch the captivating shapes and sizes of the centuries' old ghosts; a few were Romans.

Walk ... Walk ... Walk ... Stride ... Stride ... Stride...

The call for prayers by the *muazen* from the nearby village of az-Zawiya as well as the thumping of the workers' boots, made it difficult for me to follow what was being said or argued. I could no longer be part of or engage in any of the conversations around me. The amplified noises echoed in the surrounding deep valleys. The collective warmth of the bus was slowly being replaced by linearity; a strong sense of discomfort; loneliness; and estrangement. The more I stared at the mysterious landscape around me, the more I seemed to awaken the ghouls inside me; and this I for sure wanted to bring to a halt instantly: I deliberately initiated a dialogue with Mohammad:

“Now I understand why Abu Yousef had been worried about walking in the darkness of the olive groves since Friday... ‘And it only gets worse,’ he said earlier...it only gets worse...and it only gets worse,” I catch myself mumbling as I dribble down the rocky path. But soon I discovered that my repetitive mumbblings – “it only gets worse” – were not echoed by the ghosts around me, but by Abu Yousef himself who, I discovered, was walking right in front of Mohammad and me.

“No doctora, it is not *this* darkness that worried me, it is the darkness in their hearts.”

“For God’s sake keep quiet, don’t make so much noises, otherwise the soldiers will spot us, soon you’ll have to turn your mobiles off” I heard someone say.

“How can Maher reach us or know where we are if I switch off my mobile phone,” objected Mohammad, one of many protests.

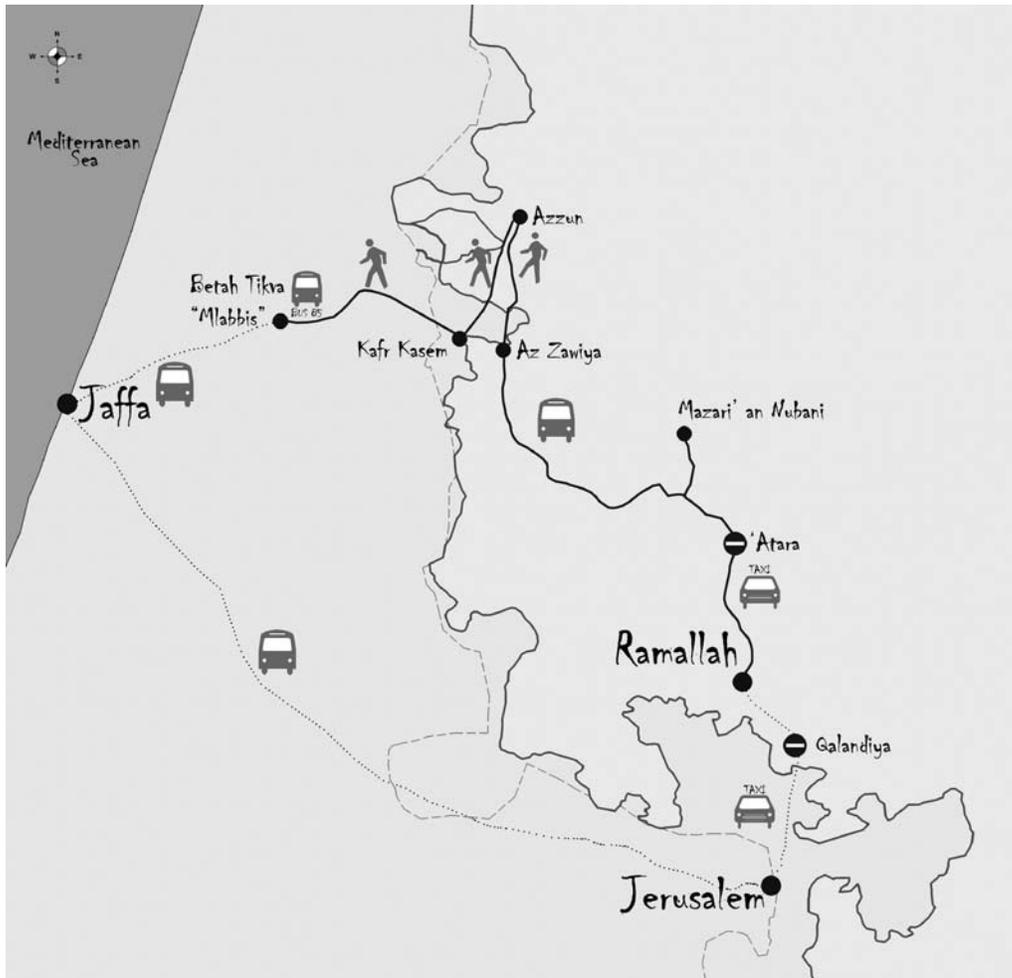
“Walk faster, I tell you, if we don’t manage to cross the barbed fence before sunrise, the soldiers will spot us, no one will make it, and the day will be totally wasted.” The soldiers must be deaf not to hear us. I kept the thought to myself.

Abu Yousef’s words helped me grow out of my childish fears of walking in a moonless night. I soon resumed my conversation with him:

“*Twenty eight* years of work in Israel, and they refuse to even give you a work permit! Wow! By now you deserve a passport not a work permit.”

“A passport! You must be kidding. They have no mercy and they know no God, what else can I say?” Abu Yousef paused for a while, sighed, and continued: “I spent my whole life working for them, and now look at me like a thief, I steal my livelihood in the dark (*basruq* ‘*ishti sirka*); it used to take us half an hour to drive there and now, as you see, it takes us a whole night in the hills... that’s if *you* don’t get arrested or beaten up.”

Arrested or beaten up! His words reminded me of the different possibilities still awaiting us.



Map of Suad's journey with workers. *Source: Suad Amiry.*

Walk ... Walk ... Walk ... Stride ... Stride ... Stride ... Hardly any breath.

The more we walked, the more I could see or imagine my surroundings: the two low rubble stone walls which marked the two sides of our crooked path, the terraced olive groves, the high rubble stone walls, which we had to jump every now and then. I could hear the trembling stones behind the not so elegant walkers like myself, the fluffy tilled dark red earth whose brown-red color looked black now, the many small wild flowers: poppies, tiny wild orchids, anemones, blue and white crocuses on which we were probably stepping, the scared gazelles and hyenas running away from the night hunters, the small stones on the ground, and finally, Mohammad's shoulders which acted as my walking stick. It was on this trip that I realized, more than ever, that losing ten kilos was no more a personal choice but a national duty; if not for my sake, at least for the workers' sake.

With the mysteriousness of the darkness and the augmented level of noise, I was becoming increasingly apprehensive that some cat-eyed soldier may spot us; shoot at us (meaning shoot at *me*), beat us up (meaning beat *me* up) or arrest us (meaning arrest *me*). While I was contemplating which one I would get tonight, my three-option-hallucinations: being shoot, being beaten, being arrested came to an end as I heard someone swear out loud:

“Oh no... Oh *Fuck*... You son of a bitch.”  
I suspected it was Murad.

I froze, listening in, and tensely watched *all* that surrounded me: suddenly there were hundreds and hundreds of dark silhouettes; there were ghosts here; there were ghosts there; and there were ghosts *everywhere*:

*Some appeared from behind ghostly olive trees:  
Some were still winding along narrow paths  
Some sat under trees, some rested on black rocks, some leaned against rubble walls,  
and some dotted both sides of our path*

*Some were in fast motion, some in slow  
Some animated others suspended  
Some were small some were gigantic  
Some with hoods most without  
Some with masks a few without  
Some hovered in large groups, some in small, some in pairs, a few alone*

*Some seemed motivated others seemed aimless  
Some were full of life others seemed departed  
Some looked purposeful and others seemed purposeless  
Some were talking others were silent*

*My head was spinning, my body turning, and my fear mounting.  
I was frightened and for a fraction of a second, I sensed the darkness seeping into my heart.*

*I got hold of my senses, closed my eyes, and listened:  
Some spoke Palestinian Arabic with a few Hebrew words; others spoke Moroccan Arabic or Berber with French words; some spoke Turkish with German expressions; and some spoke Mexican Spanish with much American slang  
And some like me felt no need for words,*

*Once I got rid of my fears and the black spot in my heart  
I figured out what it was:  
An innocent Saturday evening chase for a living  
A Night Hunters outing*

*I stood there and wondered:  
Were they the hunters? Or were they being hunted?  
Were they haunting or being haunted?  
Were they the seekers or the sought after?  
Was it real or was it a vision?*

“What’s going on Mohammad?” I inquisitively inquired,  
“Don’t know,”  
“It is the Army, *il jaysh*” I hear someone say,  
“The bloody Army.”

My heart skipped once...skipped twice...skipped a third time then stopped.

“Oh... no, here is an Israeli jeep waiting for us,” said Abu Yousef in a desperate low tone.

“Where? Where?” Mohammad and I anxiously inquired at exactly the same moment.

“Are they close? I can’t see them.” I asked terrified.

“No... they are on the opposite hill.” Assured me Abu Yousef.

“Thank God.” I had realized that the soldiers weren’t close enough to arrest us or beat us up. I was so relieved to know that the only option left for them was to shoot at us.

Once I was re-assured that my book was not about to end on chapter five, I was happy to finally get some *real* action in this book.

“Do you see the blue neon light over there?” asked Muneer.

“No where?” I replied as I concentrated on the different colored lights resembling stars in the semi-darkness. Across the highway, on the opposite side, I could see a line of white lights, spotting the silhouettes of an Israeli settlement. The three or four huge orange flood lights were obviously for the protection against, “the coming of the barbarians.”

Meanwhile Abu Yousef continued:

“Ok Suad do you see the highway?”

“Yes.”

“A hundred meters or so across the highway to the left.”

“Yes, yes I see the glittering navy blue neon light there, what is it?”

“It is the computer inside the Israeli military jeep.”

“Oh I see.”

“The bastards (*il ‘arsat*) have been here since 2:30, so no one could pass.” I hear someone complain.

“We’ve been here since 1:30, so far no one managed to pass,” said another worker from another group.

“Fuck them; fuck their mothers,” another angry contribution.

“*Kuss em abukum, ‘ars*” I said the same curse but in a more gender sensitive form targeting their fathers. I said it in a *very very* low voice. Mohammad laughed. “We could’ve slept a bit more,” I joked with Mohammad who giggled once more and then inquired: “What now?”

“We’ve got to wait until the bloody jeep goes away,” said Saed as he looked at Murad and asked:

“Murad what do you say? Shall we go like last time on the side of the road then in the tunnel ‘*abbarah*’ under the highway?”

Ho, no, we are *not* doing Victor Hugo’s “*Les Miserables*.” I kept the thought to myself, but I also realized it was no more a picnic in the olive groves.

“Let’s just wait a bit they’ll probably leave soon,” I hear some suggest.

“No they’re here to stay what do you say Murad?”

Before I knew it, Murad was on the run; like a fox he descended the rocky path, hopping from one rock to another. Realizing that Murad knew best, all followed. I rested my hand on Mohammad’s left shoulder and tumbled down as fast as I could: down the hill, along the concrete side of the ditch, in the ditch, and up the slanted side of the ditch and soon, we were standing against the metal barrier on our side of the highway. At that point I looked back and realized that we were followed by hundreds of other workers from other villages. They looked like monkeys hopping in all directions.

“Lets all cross the highway and go in different directions they can’t possibly run after us all.”

For the first time ever I felt actions could be faster than words.

Everyone was running across the highway at different angles, over the concrete strip dividing the highway, and across the highway to the other side. Yes, the same side where the blue light of the jeep beckoned. There was chaos; there was noise; there were screams; there was laughter, but there were also *shots in the dark*. In a split second we were running back exactly the same way, once again we came back to where we were only few minutes ago.

I was taking a deep and long breath when I heard Murad say:

“Let’s give it another try don’t be scared they are firing in the air.”

“They say six or seven workers from Bidya made it to the opposite hill, they either got away: *nafadu* or got arrested: *enmasaku*.”

Got arrested! It sounded so matter of fact. No one seemed to want to know what exactly had happened to these workers except me.

“Ok let’s give it another try, let’s go,” said Saed who almost always stood next to

Murad. They seemed to be inseparable twins; they gallop next to one another like two good Arabian horses.

We ran west one more time, a few shouts in distorted Arabic this time: “*Ighja*” go back. This time we took orders from the “real authority”; we ran back as instructed in a language that all the workers, except for me, understood well. We ran a third time, and with every round we seem to come back missing or losing a few workers. No one knew or bothered to find out whether they had *nafadu* or *inmasaku* (whether they got away or got caught). It was not until the fourth hopeless round that an alternative strategy was finally adopted.

The more we ran the more energetic I became. And the higher my adrenaline level was: the more courageous I became. All I knew was that, in the new strategy, and in the new narrow path along the ditch, I was fourth in line; yes no more the last one dragging behind.

The high edge of the ditch, running along the highway, gave me the confidence and the needed courage to be fourth in line: there was Majed, there was Saed, there was Murad and believe it or not there was I. Yes, I was forth in line, and my security blanket Mohammad was not behind me. Mohammad had discovered a new talent on this trip: he was being the “photographer.” As we stood in the darkness of the highway, he remembered that he could document this trip on his mobile phone, and thanks to him there is a shaky video of our journey.

All was quiet except for the workers’ steps trailing right behind me, and the *whiz* noises of the passing cars which were increasing in numbers as morning came closer. The level of the highway, to our right, reached the heads of the short ones and the shoulders of the tall ones. This meant that Murad could walk with his body erect; both Majed and Saed had to slightly bend their heads, while I had to walk half bent over: not because I was the tallest, but because I was much more afraid to be spotted by the soldiers standing next to the military jeep on the other side of the highway.

The new strategy was to walk a kilometer or two, along this ditch, until we reached the ‘*abbarah*, (the water tunnel under the highway). If we managed to cross the ‘*abbarah*, it would’ve meant that we would have ended up on the soldiers’ side of the tunnel but much further south. If we were not spotted or caught, then the probability of getting to work on time would be quite good. Even if Murad hadn’t explained his scheme, having a strategic mind, I had already figured it out all by myself.

I was closely and carefully watching the manner in which Murad was walking in the half meter wide water drainage ditch: he was as quick as a gazelle, as alert as a fox, and as patient as a camel. Being right behind him once more I noticed how tiny and skinny this Murad was. I kept myself entertained watching his Charlie Chaplin’s body

movements: his two feet at a wide angle, his stiff body, his jerky movements, his below the knee pants, and even his leather shoes. Every thing about Murad somehow reminded me of my adored Charlie Chaplin. Only his spiky hair looked more like Bart, son of Homer Simpson.

While busy combining Charlie Chaplin with Bart, I heard Majed whisper to Murad: “Look, look, look there are two soldiers on the opposite hill, over there... over there.” Majed bent his head down, so did Murad, but I was as the Italians say “*a terra*.” When I looked up, Majed was still stretching his arm and pointing towards the suspected images of soldiers: “I can’t figure out whether they were bushes or soldiers,” said Majed but Murad didn’t seem to worry; he gave a hand gesture meaning just carry on. Majed continued walking, so did Saed, and I and all behind me followed suit.

By now there was early morning breaking light: I could see shades and shadows. I not only spotted the two soldiers and *filled* in a third, a fourth...but in no time at all I saw a whole regiment: some hid behind bushes and boulders while pointing their rifles in our direction, others at a standstill pointed their Uzi in the opposite direction, some laid flat on their tummies, but most were frantically spinning while *mutely* shooting in every direction.

Recalling how the Israelis, and the Americans, have their own interpretation of Newton’s Theory: “For every action there is a re-action; in all directions; and a hundred times as strong,” which they’ve applied in *all* their wars against us (in the 1948 ethnic cleansing, in the 1967 on-going-occupation, and in the present battle of impoverishment), having a job myself, for Murad’s friends’ sake, I decided to keep a low profile.

Walk ... Walk ... Walk ... Stride ... Stride ... Stride ... A long and deep breath.

But that on-going rhythm was soon broken by a scream from Majed, and a swift turning around by Murad. I could hear Majed beg: “For God’s sake don’t shoot” (*mishan Allah, ma tukh*) as he put his two arms up in surrender. Having used his mother tongue Arabic, and not Hebrew, I realized the seriousness of the situation; my heart skipped a few beats before I turned and followed Murad who was running away as fast as a bullet. I, like the others understood that the minute Murad ran that fast, there was real danger. Like a cannon ball, I ran along the ditch in a zigzag way: like a ball I was bouncing between the slanted left side of the ditch and the rocky right side of the ditch. It was not easy to keep balance on a fifty or sixty centimeters ditch filled with water ponds here and there. When we got to safe ground I looked behind, there was no one. Once more I was in the exact same spot where we were only some thirty minutes or so ago.

The same feelings of frustration and anger got hold of me as when I was a little girl playing “Snakes and Ladders” with my brother and friends. Every time I thought I got to the end of the check-board, a venomous monstrous snake sprung at me forcing me to slip down a ladder which took me back, again and again, to the exact same spot where I first began.

Not taking my heavy breathing into account, I must have broken a world record (for my age and heavy weight bracket), but like so often in Palestine, there were no international referees to witness all that was happening.

*Suad Amiry is the author of Sharon and My Mother-in-Law and the co-founder of Riwaq, the Center for Architectural Conservation, Ramallah. Her new book, Murad, Murad was published in Italian in July 2009. JQ thanks the author and her publisher, Feltrinelli, for permission to publish this excerpt.*

#### **Endnotes**

- 1 Az-Zawiya is the name of a village but in Arabic it literally means an angle.