

Persmap



LES CHEVAUX DE DIEU

Een Film van Nabil Ayouch

Gebaseerd op de roman *The Stars of Sidi Moumen* van Mahi Binebine

Geselecteerd voor Film Festival Cannes 2012

Winnaar van de Moviezone Award op het Internationaal Filmfestival Rotterdam 2013

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Meer informatie:

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Janneke De Jong

Herengracht 328 III

1016 CE Amsterdam

Tel: +31 (0)20 5308848

Email: janneke@cinéart.nl

Persmap en foto's staan op: www.cinéart.nl

Synopsis

Nederlands

De 10 jarige Yachine woont met zijn familie in de sloppenwijk van Sidi Moumen in Casablanca. Zijn moeder Yemma probeert met al haar kracht het gezin te verzorgen. Zijn vader lijdt aan een depressie, één van zijn broers zit in het leger, een andere broer is bijna autistisch en de derde, de dertienjarige Hamid, is een kleine straatrebel en beschermer van Yachine. Wanneer Hamid in de gevangenis terecht komt, grijpt Yachine zijn kans om via kleine baantjes zijn gewelddadige en ellendige omgeving te ontvluchten. Na zijn vrijlating uit de gevangenis is Hamid veranderd in een radicale Islamiet en overtuigt Yachine zich ook bij de groep 'broeders' te voegen. Hun spirituele leider, Imam Abou Zoubeir, stoomt de mannen klaar met een lange fysieke en mentale voorbereiding. Op een dag vertelt hij hen dat ze uitgekozen zijn om martelaars te worden.

English

Yachine is 10 years old, he lives with his family in the slum of Sidi Moumen in Casablanca. His mother, Yemma, leads the family as best as she can. His father suffers from depression, one of his brothers is in the army, another is almost autistic and the third, Hamid, 13, is the boss of the local neighbourhood and Yachine's protector. When Hamid is sent to jail, Yachine takes up jobs after jobs, though empty, to get free from the doldrums of violence, misery and drugs. Released from prison, Hamid, now an Islamic fundamentalist, persuades Yachine and his pals to join their "brothers". The Imam, Abou Zoubeir, their spiritual leader, starts to direct their long-standing physical and mental preparation. One day, he tells them they have been chosen to become martyrs.



CAST

YACHINE ABDELHAKIM RACHID
HAMID ABDELILAH RACHID
NABIL HAMZA SOUIDEK
FOUAD AHMED EL IDRISSE AMRANI

CREW

DIRECTOR NABIL AYOUCHE
SCREENPLAY JAMAL BELMAHI
BASED ON THE NOVEL "LES ÉTOILES DE SIDI MOUMEN" BY MAHI BINEBINE
PRODUCERS NABIL AYOUCHE
PIERRE-ANGE LE POGAM
ERIC VAN BEUREN
PATRICK QUINET
EXECUTIVE PRODUCTION LES FILMS DU NOUVEAU MONDE
CO-PRODUCTION ALI N' PRODUCTIONS
STONE ANGELS
YC ALIGATOR FILM
ARTEMIS PRODUCTIONS
DP HICHAME ALAOUIE
SOUND ZACHARIE NACIRI
ERIC LESACHET
EDITOR DAMIEN KEYEUX
ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK MALVINA MEINIER
SET DESIGN HAFID AMLY
HIND GHAZALI
COSTUMES NEZHA DAKIL
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS FRANTZ RICHARD
MARIE KERVYN
STÉPHANE QUINET

The Origin of HORSES OF GOD

According to an authentic hadith ascribed by the imam Ibn Jarir At-Tabari, people flocked to the Prophet Mohammed, Peace Be Upon Him, and said to him "We bear you allegiance." But they were not sincere and Islam did not interest them. They said to the Prophet "We no longer feel at ease in Medina." The Prophet commanded "Drink the urine and milk of the she-camels that surround you." At the same moment, a voice called "FLY, HORSES OF GOD." The people who had come to see the prophet, surprised by the voice, immediately fled. The Prophet and his companions pursued them until they managed to catch up with some of them and capture them.

The expression "FLY, HORSES OF GOD" is frequent among the first Muslims as a call to jihad. This expression has been used again at times throughout the centuries, either in speeches, songs or poems as an invitation to holy war. It can be found in Al Qaeda's present-day propaganda, notably in the famous declaration made by the organization following September 11th, broadcast by the news station Al Jazeera and read at the time by the Kuwaiti Suleiman Abu El Ghait.

The paragraph in which the expression was used is as follows:

"This is my last call that I address to the nation of the billion, to the nation of Islam, to the nation of the jihad, the nation of Mohammed and of the descendants of Abou Bakr and Khalid ibn al-Walid. I say *"Fly horses of God, fly horses of God, fly horses of God."* Today war is declared and it's a decisive battle that today has begun between faith and infidelity. So choose your camp. There are only two. There is no third. Either we are in the camp of the faithful or in the camp of the infidels..."

In a text read over Internet by a certain Abu Dujana Al Qurashi Al Hashimi Al Maqdisi, the latter asserts that Osama Ben Laden read this phrase during a speech: "**When they** [the first Muslims] **heard "FLY HORSES OF GOD" they left all and rushed to the jihad with or without gear, for the blessing of Allah to be upon them..."**



An interview with Nabil Ayouch

How did your film HORSES OF GOD, based on the story of the young Moroccans who committed kamikaze bombings in 2003, come about?

First off, it comes from my own personal experience with the shanty town of Sidi Moumen, the neighborhood of the young kamikazes who committed the Casablanca bombings in 2003. I had already shot a few scenes in the area for my 1999 film ALI ZAOUA. So it was someplace I'd had ample opportunity to explore and I felt perfectly comfortable there. It also boasts the surprising distinction of being Casablanca's highest suburb. I remembered the people from the quarter being really pacifist and really open. So when the events of 2003 took place, I just didn't get it. Fourteen kids from Sidi Moumen blowing themselves up. You say "No, it can't be!" It was hugely traumatic for Morocco, because people expect this kind of act to be the work of trained terrorists hailing from Afghanistan or Iraq, but not for the perpetrators to be kids who until then had never left their slum. Most of them were twenty. It was so shocking that immediately I felt the need to react, to do something about it. Except that I didn't do what I should have!

Which was...?

I took a camera and a team and went to meet the victims. I listened to the survivors, to their families. I did a short 16-minute film. But that was all. It took me a while to realize my vision was incomplete. It was about three or four years before I really came back to it. First because I realized that as film directors, we are not really witnesses with a duty to respond immediately like journalists. Our duty is first and foremost to stand back from events in order to construct a particular way of looking at things, our own way. It's also the time I needed to understand my feeling of frustration, to understand that the victims were on both sides.

So then what did you do?

I went back to Sidi Moumen. The work I did was almost anthropological. I talked to people. I met with associations, because in the meantime, obviously, a large number of associations had sprung up in the quarter in response to the bombings. Then I bought the rights for an adaptation of Mahi Binedine's book entitled "Les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen" ("The Stars of Sidi Moumen"), whose approach was exactly that of the story I wanted to tell.

Did you then go shoot your film in Sidi Moumen?

No, although for a long time I had planned to shoot right in the middle of Sidi Moumen. But the area has changed a lot, like with the construction of a huge block of apartment buildings. The pocket of slum where the kamikazes were from was shrinking. In terms of the camera's point of view, it was becoming impossible to film. It no longer made sense to shoot there, everything had changed so much.

Why?

I needed to capture the Sidi Moumen that gave rise to this generation of kamikazes in terms of their relationship to their neighborhood; a Sidi Moumen removed from the modern world, a rural shanty town, removed from any notion of urbanism. So I decided to shoot in another shanty town a few kilometers away. I worked, however, with a lot of inhabitants of Sidi Moumen.

Was it difficult to get a film on such a touchy subject off the ground? For instance, did you meet with defiance on the part of Moroccan authorities?

I met with a lot of defiance regarding the subject, at different levels, but never from the Moroccan government. I even received a grant for the project. Similarly, we immediately got authorization to shoot. On the other hand, each time we had to explain in great detail how we planned to approach the subject which, again, was hugely traumatic for Moroccans. Some people questioned whether the wound should really be reopened at all. So there was understandable reluctance, but never any blockage or censorship.

Has the Arab Spring, which occurred while you were in the middle of your film, had any influence on it?

The first effect of the Arab Spring was that the authorities no doubt weren't too preoccupied with us, we were pretty much left on our own. That was the first real effect. The second, however, was that there was a certain tangible tension in the streets, especially in the working class neighborhoods where we were shooting. We had to keep our heads down if we didn't want to give the impression of some kind of provocation. Everybody was on edge. There were demonstrations daily. Islamist currents, encouraged by what was happening in Egypt and Tunisia, were coming out in the open. With elections coming up, several people involved in Islamist movements in the quarter tried to stop the shoot.

You were immersed in Morocco's political climate and yet you chose an intimate approach to this true story. Why?

For multiple reasons including the desire to get viewers immediately involved with the film's characters. The main characters, the kamikazes, are kids who are not the only ones responsible for their acts, they are victims of them. I wanted to get that across. I needed to start the film like a chronicle and not jump immediately in with a distant historical panorama. What I wanted above all to convey was the everyday life of these kids, their environment, their parents, the lack of paternity, the strong bond between them and all of the micro traumas of life that make that at some point or another, it all transforms, as they grow up, into desperate, unbearable resentment. Their small stories forge their destiny and turn them into part of history, that of national and global geopolitics.

What are the key points you relied on to develop your story?

The lack of access to education for these kids, the breakdown of family structures that brings with it a loss of bearings. There is also the unity of the place, which is very specific to this story, since these kids had never left their slum. There was a closing in, even if that isn't all bad. Indeed, shanty towns are horizontal structures where people communicate with greater flow than in the vertical structures of block housing complexes. But the limit to living in a vacuum of this kind is that people turn rigid. Moreover, in these slum niches, micro systems sometimes arise, like the Wahhabi fundamentalism that reached Morocco in the 1980s and 90s from Saudi Arabia. It's difficult for a kid who has never known anything outside neighborhood life not be permeated and sometimes thoroughly convinced by the idea that these new micro systems, in this instance radical Islamism, are their only future.

Yet we do see in the film that soccer also enables these kids to escape their condition.

Yes, soccer really is a form of social elevator for these kids. It's also what creates ties between them in the film since soccer possesses a unifying power that few things equal, except perhaps for art and culture, but these kids don't have access to that.

Did you decide to romanticize, to extrapolate on the backgrounds of the kamikazes or did you remain faithful to what you knew of their real lives within this geographical and social context?

Jamal Belmahi, the screenwriter, Alain Rozanès, who accompanied us throughout the writing phase and then Pierre-Ange Le Pogam, the film's producer, and I discussed this a lot. We were all in agreement. Reality has an exceptional virtue, that of being able to present the facts, while fiction allows us to recount them. I therefore chose to stray from the reality of the lives of these young kamikazes, to not do their biographies, in order to capture my subject and extrapolate, all the while basing it on discussions with researchers and sociologists and a reading of the research and studies on the subject.

What did you get from your reading?

The way the fundamentalists have appropriated the notion of solidarity. How they operate to recruit these youths who want for a father figure.

This lack of a father figure, of authority, does it have anything to do with that which is felt by a whole generation of children of Arab immigrants living in Europe, who feel their fathers are not respected in the social order and have let themselves be too far pushed around?

Yes, there's a spirit of revolt, of rebellion, in common between these young generations, whether they have emigrated or remained in their country of origin. Clearly so. They criticize their parents for being too docile. These generations want it all and they want it now. The fact is, these kids live in patriarchal societies. Their mothers make the decisions but their fathers symbolize the power. So obviously, when their father's authority is lacking, there are no longer the safeguards needed to keep these youths within certain boundaries and it all explodes. That was the case for almost all of the young kamikazes that blew themselves up in Casablanca in 2003.

Were the young actors in your film also very concerned by this issue?

No, it's not part of their major preoccupations. They are non-professional actors we could describe as reliable albeit unwitting witnesses to a reality they carry and experience to some extent despite themselves. They are kids from working class neighborhoods. Some, like the two main roles, even live in Sidi Moumen which is where I met them. I chose them after roaming the neighborhoods for two years, because the difficulty, of course, was to find personalities capable of incarnating the characters.

How did you decide on the title of your film?

At first the film bore the title of the novel from which it's adapted: "The Stars of Sidi Moumen". But we realized that it could be perceived in a positive light, that some would see a form of glorification in what the kamikazes had committed. Whereas, while I wanted to give a human face to these young

men, in no way did I wish to celebrate their deeds. We looked around and found an excerpt from a text on the jihad at the time of the Prophet: “Fly horses of God and to you the doors of heaven will open” This phrase was used several times in modern jihad terminology by Ben Laden and in televised sermons. The phrase was also pronounced in the film by the “great emir” who comes to tell them they have been chosen.

What was your directorial angle with regard to incarnating all of this? How do you conciliate sunshine and youth with despair and death?

By going from one to the other. Without going to extremes, I discussed it in terms of definite colors with my DP, Hichame Alaouie, the property master and the costume designer. I wanted us to start with everyday life full of warm, highly saturated colors, and then, as we got further into the film, toward death, for the colors to fade. The closer we got to the present, the duller the colors. Then there’s the question of framing. I wanted to stick with something sober, elegant and non demonstrative. At the same time, I wanted to keep the camera on the cameraman’s shoulder for the two-thirds of the film up to the point where they’re recruited. For that, I had the key grip make systems to “carry” the camera during moving scenes while keeping the framing dynamic, since none of the existing systems suited me. We did several days of testing to find the right system. In the last part of the film, the more the film advanced the more I wanted the image to settle down, and the rhythm to be calmer, more serious, less twisting and turning.

A last angle in terms of directing is the music. I wanted anything but ethnic or folk music, “local” color. I wanted music that wasn’t overly orchestrated (with the exception of the last piece), that was almost inaudible, unidentifiable. There are so many sounds of all sorts—music escaping from transistor radios—that comes up everywhere in the film that I wanted this music to be different, for it to provide a certain detachment that can invoke another form of emotion.

What did you personally get out of the film?

It’s a film on the human condition. I think it taught me to leave behind a form of natural reserve or distance, and to reach out to others. To better understand, for sure. But to better understand myself as well, and to accept certain choices. Some choices no doubt more radical than others, made earlier. With this film, I feel less of a need to be loved and more the need to be understood.



Excerpts from Nabil Ayouch's filming notes

"A few nights before principal photography began, one of the main sets for the film (the Madani Café) burned down. We never knew who set fire to it. The police were called to the scene but nobody saw anything, nobody heard anything.

Despite the setback, the presence of the team was overall well received in the shanty town. We were aware that we provided an additional source of income for about half the population. Some people worked on the construction crews, others as guards or extras. A few of the roles, like that of Yemma, Yachine and Hamid's mother, were cast among shanty town residents..."

"...Yet, there was violence daily. Fights, arguments, knives, stone throwing. To the point that we eventually got used to it and found it almost normal..."

"...One night we were shooting a key scene between Hamid and Yachine in front of Tamou's house. We were bombarded with stones. Zacharie Naciri, the sound engineer, was hit in the head and knocked out for a few moments. We started to shoot again with sheets of foam over our heads for protection and neighborhood kids posted on roofs as sentinels..."

"...The shoot was interrupted a first time due to a religious holiday (Eid al-Adha). I also wanted to leave time for the main actors to grow real beards; I didn't want to use fakes. As a result, we prolonged the interruption, which ended up lasting in all 2 and a half weeks. It was tough to get going again. The conditions for shooting in the mountains were harsh. It started to rain and the river overflowed. Over the next few days there was a deluge. We had to cross the river—normally we could just step across, but it had become a veritable torrent—by canoe to get to the shoot..."

"Everything was flooded, the sets, the equipment, the canteen... It was incredibly violent. We were all wiped out, powerless. I remember one day when the whole crew gathered under a stretch of tarp, the only shelter that remained. We all stared at each other, no one knowing what to say to boost morale. I thought about Terry Gilliam and LOST IN LA MANCHA. In cases like these, you try to reassure yourself by telling yourself others have had it worse, that you have to hang on, that everybody has to hang on..."

"The day the rain stopped and we could pick up the shoot again, we started with the scene at the foot of the mountain. By the end of the day, Abdelhakim (Yachine) was dragging his foot but, according to him, it was nothing serious. The next day, he couldn't walk. Frantz Richard (the line producer) took him for x-rays and called me afterward. Verdict: two weeks of total immobility. There were no scenes left to shoot without Yachine. The shoot was to be interrupted again just as the rain had finally stopped..."

"... Shooting this film made me very happy. The crew stuck together seamlessly. They supported me, they rallied, they believed whole-heartedly in it, and that boosted my strength tenfold. Gradually we felt a part of the shanty town. People recognized us, waved hello, had us over, came for lunch. I felt incredibly privileged to experience these moments, to be able to observe this micro system with all its own rules, codes and solidarity."

Biography Nabil Ayouch

Nabil Ayouch was born April 1st 1969 in Paris.
He works in Casablanca and Paris.

In 1997, Nabil Ayouch directed his first feature film, MEKTOUB which, like ALI ZAOUA (2000) represented Morocco at the Oscars. Next came UNE MINUTE DE SOLEIL EN MOINS (2003) and WHATEVER LOLA WANTS (2008), produced by Pathé. His first short film, in 1992, THE BLUE ROCKS OF THE DESERT marked the discovery of Jamel Debozze.

In 2009, he created and directed the closing show of the World Economic Forum of Davos, after having directed several live shows such as the opening of “Temps du Maroc” in France at the Palace of Versailles in 1999.

In 1999, Nabil Ayouch founded Ali n’Productions, a company through which he helps young directors to launch their careers thanks to initiatives such as the Mohamed Reggab Award, a script and production competition for short films in 35 mm. Between 2005 and 2010, he produced 40 genre films in the framework of the Film Industry. In 2006, he launched the Meda Films Development programme – with the support of the European Union and the International Film Festival Foundation of Marrakech, a structure to accompany producers and scriptwriters from the ten countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean in the development phase of their films.

Nabil Ayouch founded the G.A.R.P. (Group of Authors, Directors, Producers) in 2002 and the Moroccan Coalition for Cultural Diversity in 2003. In 2008, he participated in the creation of the Moroccan Antipiracy Association, of which he is president.

In 2011, he released his first documentary feature film, MY LAND, which was filmed in the Middle East.

In 2012, Nabil Ayouch finished HORSES OF GOD, inspired by the Casablanca suicide bombings of May 16th 2003.

Filmography de Nabil Ayouch

2012

HORSES OF GOD

Fiction feature film, 110 min.

Production: Les Films du Nouveau Monde (France), Ali n'Productions (Morocco), YC Aligator Film (Belgium), Artemis Productions (Belgium)

Distribution: Stone Angels

2010 / 2011

MY LAND

Documentary feature film, 81 min.

Production: Les Films du Nouveau Monde (France), Yade French Connection (France) and Ali n'Productions (Morocco)

Distribution: Les Films de l'Atalante

Best Music and Best Editing Awards at the Tangiers Festival in 2011

Best Documentary Award at the Tetouan Mediterranean Festival in 2012

Audience's Choice Award at the Cinéalma Festival (Nice)

Press Award at the Fameck Festival

Selections in many festivals in France, USA, Palestine, Morocco, etc.

2007 / 2008

WATHEVER LOLA WANTS

Fiction feature film, 115 min.

Production: Pathé Productions

Distribution: Pathé Distribution

Sold in 33 countries

Best Film Award at the National Moroccan Festival (2008)

Selections in Tribeca, Dubaï, Marrakech, New Delhi, FESPACO, etc.

2003

UNE MINUTE DE SOLEIL EN MOINS

Feature film for the "Masculin/feminine" collection for the TV channel Arte.

Technical Achievement Award at the Montpellier Mediterranean Festival

2000

ALI ZAOUA

Fiction feature film, 100 min.

Production: Playtime (France), Ali n'Productions (Morocco)

Distribution: Océans Films

Official Moroccan selection at the Oscars in 2001

Sold in 28 countries

Appears in "1001 Films You Must See Before You Die", selected and written by leading international critics. General editor: Steven Jay Schneider

44 awards won in various international festivals: Montreal (Canada), Namur, Brussels

(Belgium), Khouribga, Marrakech (Morocco), Stockholm (Sweden), Amiens (France),

Manheim (Germany), Ouagadougou (Burkina-Faso), Kerala (India), Milan (Italy), Zlin (Czech

Republic), Cologne (Germany), etc.

1997 / 1998

MEKTOUB

First fiction feature film, 90 min.

Official Moroccan selection at the Oscars in 1998

Best Arab Film Award and Best First Film Award at the Cairo International Film Festival

Special Jury Award in Oslo

Selected in 30-odd international film festivals (Berlin, Rotterdam, Gant, etc.)

1994

THE SILENT SELLER

26 min.

Best Production Award at the Tangier National Film Festival National

Selections in numerous international festivals

1993

FREQUENCY CONNECTION

4 min.

Montreal World Film Festival. Broadcast on Arte and ZDF

1992

THE BLUE ROCKS OF THE DESERT

21 min.

Presented at 20-odd festivals around the world

Canal + Award at the Bastia Mediterranean Film Festival Bastia (France)

Broadcast on Canal +, RTM, Canal Horizon, 2M, France 2 and ParisPremière



Interview with Mahi Binebine

Mahi Binebine, author of “Les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen” (“The Stars of Sidi Moumen”) which served as inspiration for Nabil Ayouch’s film HORSES OF GOD

Where did you get the idea for your book “Les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen”?

On May 16th, 2003, bloody bombings took place in Casablanca. When I learned that the 14 Kamikazes all came from the slum of Sidi Moumen, I decided to go there to try to understand what had just hit us. Moroccans are not violent by nature. The first image in this cesspit? Children playing soccer on a heap of garbage. I told myself then and there, these are the heroes of my next novel.

Why this title?

It’s the name of the football team that will be enlisted by the Salafis.

What did you mean to get across through this story?

Simply that if the utter destitution is not the only factor in the manufacture of human bombs, it is essential fertilizer. When you’re born into scum, without any prospects, no hope of escape, you become easy prey for the first dream merchants to come along. The challenge, which isn’t easy, is to portray these kids as victims. First of the State which allows slums like Sidi Moumen to exist, then of the religious mafia that conditions these kids, and lastly of the bourgeoisie that continues to suck the lifeblood from anemics.

Did you meet the attack’s few surviving kamikazes in prison?

No, I went to Sidi Moumen on several occasions and entered homes thanks to a journalist friend who’s from the area. I met with the parents of kamikazes. I mainly absorbed the overall atmosphere. The rest is the work of the writer: The dump becomes a cemetery for ogres, a field for a treasure hunt, a crime scene and a realm of friendship. Violence becomes banal, it’s part of their daily bread. The line between life and death is a thin one. In this closed world, there is no awareness possible, nor room for it to grow.

How did you meet Nabil Ayouch?

Nabil read in the press that the book was coming out and contacted me for a copy. He’d been toying with the idea of a film on the 2003 bombings for some time already. He liked the manuscript and the project was on its way.

What made you decide to sell the rights to your book to Nabil Ayouch?

I was a jury member at the Marrakech Film Festival about ten years ago. There I discovered a cinematic gem called ALI ZAOUA, which totally won me over, totally moved me. It was shot in... Sidi Moumen! Incidentally, the film took home all the awards. It’s on the scale of Buñuel’s LOS OLVIDADOS.

How did you work together?

In harmony. I didn't want to write the screenplay because it's not my profession. But I read it and shared my impressions. I also spent a day on the shoot. I was extremely surprised to meet the children I'd thought up...

How was adapting your novel important to you? Does it reflect what you meant to express in the book?

All writers dream of seeing their characters come almost to life on the big screen. We are fundamentally in agreement: to understand is not to justify. In no case do we condone terrorism, even if we love these kids, the victims of obscurantism.



Interview with Rachid Jalil

Rachid Jalil, surviving kamikaze from the May 16th, 2003 bombings in Casablanca, currently at the Kenitra central prison in Morocco

You were born and raised in the slum of Karian Toma. Tell me about your childhood.

I have seven brothers and sisters. We lived in the same house with my parents. At first, my father worked in a crushing quarry. He had a stable job thanks to which he fed the family. Then he got sick and worked as a peddler. But he didn't earn enough money. My brothers and me, we had to quit school and go to work.

You dropped out at the age of 16. Was it only because you needed to work?

(Laugh) Frankly, I wasn't very good in school, I didn't have the head for it. But it's true that the need for money was pressing and not just to feed the family. When you're young, you want to go out, to dress nice, take advantage of life. Without a dirham to your name, it's tough.

What did you do after leaving school?

I worked in a garage as a welding apprentice, and then in a company that did bodywork for buses. Then I bought my own equipment and worked at home for myself. Since I'd also apprenticed as a carpenter, I put together doors and windows. It was going pretty well.

In 2000, you served a month in jail for theft...

It wasn't theft. There was no more electricity in the neighborhood and it was impossible to live with no light, with no oven to cook with. So with friends from the neighborhood, we erected some poles, bought some electrical wire and hooked it up to the nearby public works. It worked for a few days and then it blacked out. A wire had been cut. When I climbed up to fix it, the police came. [...]

When did you become an Islamist?

About 2002. I prayed before that, even if I didn't do it all the time... you know, like everybody. But after talking with some guys [writer's note: notably Adil Taïa and Khalid Benmoussa, two of the future May 16th kamikazes], I started not to miss a single prayer, and to do them all at the mosque. But one event in particular convinced me to become moultaqim: September 11, 2001 and the invasion of Afghanistan that followed it. It made me think about all of the oppressed Muslims across the world. It made me realize I should take religion more seriously.

Did you realize that all on your own?

The chouyoukh (preachers), especially Abderrazak Rtioui [writer's note: currently in prison] played a major role. But hey, nobody made me do anything. [...]

But you still joined the “Ahl sounna wal jamaâ” group, which eventually carried out the May 16th bombings...

Yes, but I didn't know it was a group with a name. I only found out later. I knew some of the members well and saw them often, but for me, they were just moultaazim friends, that's all. We went to hear the chouyoukh together, we all wore beards, we read books about the life of the prophet—peace be upon him—we talked about the Muslim jihad around the world, we watched video cassettes... But I saw no wrong in any of it. As a matter of fact, I still don't.

And yet your friends were planning bombings. They began talking about it as early as 2000.

I only met the brother members of this group in 2002. Even then, I missed most meetings because I worked in the center of town. I just didn't have the time. It's true there were debates about the usefulness of the jihad, how to oblige people to respect Islam... But I never agreed with that. Moroccans are Muslims and we should not harm Muslims. I approved and I still approve of the jihad when it's a question of defense against the enemies of Islam. But to kill other Muslims, never.

But isn't that what was on the video cassettes you watched with your friends? They were about the armed jihad in Chechnya, in Bosnia... You never wondered “what's that got to do with Morocco?”

(Hesitation) No. I never did.

You declared that you weren't informed of the bombings until the day before May 16. But other members of the group had been preparing for it for two or three months, even years for some of them. You never overheard any conversation, no one ever mentioned it to you or even made an allusion?

First of all, they considered me a beginner. Second of all, they were held to secrecy. So no, nobody ever spoke to me of it before.

How did they announce to you, on May 15, 2003, that you were going to participate in a kamikaze bombing?

They didn't tell me right away about the bombings. They just said we were to meet that night at the home of our brother Omari, and that it was important. I got there about midnight. There was a weird mood. People were tense. I didn't understand why. Still nobody told me anything. But then I went into a room and I saw things that I immediately gathered to be explosives.

And then?

Then I asked myself a lot of questions. I asked myself who had made the explosives, who had brought them here... The brothers didn't have the level necessary to make stuff like that.

Getting back to the night of May 15-16...

I didn't dare ask what was to be done with the explosives, even if I got the picture. I asked myself a lot of questions, I didn't want to... But I didn't say anything until the next day.

But in the morning, you finally asked the question?

I don't remember who first spoke of the targets and the sequence of bombings. But at some point, everything became very clear for everyone. Around noon, I spoke to brother Abdelfettah [...] I told him I wasn't at ease, that there were Moroccans in the places we were supposed to go... I said to him "Even if they drink and fornicate, they might still pray. It's possible."

What did he reply?

He snapped back "Deal with it, do as you like. If you don't want to go, too bad." He turned to brother Mhanni and told him I refused to go. Mhanni said "In that case, keep him here until we go. After that, he can go where he will." When I saw the way Abdelfettah glared at me when he said that, I got scared. (...)

Finally, at about 9:30 pm, you went with them, even though Abdelfettah authorized you not to.

For me, it was obvious they wouldn't let me go free. I could have told the police. They were all carrying big knives and it was clear to me that before leaving, one of them would slit my throat and leave me there. In any case, we were all going to die...

I thought about it all afternoon without saying anything to anyone and I decided to leave with them and then escape at the first opportunity. (...)

And after that?

We left by taxi for Maréchal Square and then we walked. When we arrived before the Jewish Alliance, we heard the explosion at the restaurant [writer's note: the Positano, three dead, all kamikazes] just a few streets back.

Did you see their bodies blow up?

I saw a ball of fire and smoke. That's all I remember.

What did you do?

Abderrahim told me "Come on, let's go." That's when I told him I wouldn't go and, without waiting for a reply, I dropped my bag with the bomb on the ground and ran back up the street in the opposite direction.

What about Abderrahim?

When I said I wasn't going, he looked totally lost, but he didn't drop his bag like I did. Then I scrambled and never saw him again. The police told me later he wandered aimlessly and finally blew himself up in the medina, a few streets away, when two men tried to take his bag.

What happened after you ran off?

I took a taxi to the Bernoussi quarter. I went to see Sheik Abderrazak Rtioui. He always told me he was against the idea of Muslims killing Muslims. I knew he'd back me up for not wanting to participate. I found him and told him everything. I was in a dazed. [...] The next day, Mohammed Mhanni's father came. He was looking for his son and thought he'd taken refuge with us. I told him that I didn't know where he was. I couldn't tell him he was dead.

Weren't you afraid you were jumping into the lion's den? Almost all of the kamikazes came from there and the police were surely already on the spot...

Like I said, I was dazed. All I could think of was reassuring my parents. I didn't want to them to get into trouble because of me. I told them everything and the police arrived in Karian Toma shortly after. They picked me up at a neighbor's.

What did you think about as they handcuffed you?

The end. I immediately saw prison, torture, a death sentence... I knew what had happened to many brothers, I knew what to expect.

And what did happen?

They took me to the Maârif central police station Right away they started torturing me. (...) For hours, straight off the bat. They didn't start to interrogate me until after several hours of torture. I immediately told them all I knew, without forgetting a thing. But they continued to question me and torture me from time to time, for three days straight. (...) It stopped when one of the agents who interrogated me said my declarations were consistent with those I'd made three days earlier in Casa. (...)

Would this happen similarly with the other inmates? As soon as the agents no longer found contradictions they would stop the torture?

No not always. In fact, many had nothing to say as they hadn't done anything wrong. They grew beards and attended mosque, nothing more. I had things to tell. Not the others. For them, the torture wouldn't stop... The agents were sure that they were reservists for other attacks. But they were not aware of anything, no one had told them anything. Like me, just before May 16th. I knew these brothers; three years ago now, I was living with them. I can tell you they are all against the idea of killing Muslims, as I am against the idea of killing Muslims.

And Jews?

(Hesitant, an embarrassed smile) It is our duty to combat those that combat Islam. Look at what they do to the women and children in Palestine...

You think that every Jew is responsible for what happens in Palestine? Even if they live elsewhere?

(Hesitantly) No, I don't think so (hesitantly again) I do not have enough religious knowledge to answer this question.

What if someone who has that kind of knowledge tells you that you must kill Jews?

I will respect his point of view, but if I am not convinced I won't do it.

And aren't you convinced?

If I had been I would not have pulled back in front of the Jewish Alliance, where there were only Jews. (Ed. note: May 16th 2003 was a Friday, a Shabbat eve. The premises of the Jewish Alliance were closed, but the suicide bombers were not aware of this).

How did you feel when you learned you'd received a death sentence?

My first reflex was to invoke God. I said aloud "La ḥawla wa la quwwata illa billah" ("There is no initiative or capability save from God"). Just after that, they took us down to the underground cell from the courtroom. And there, I felt like a cool wave washed over me, I felt delivered. I knew I had done nothing. My conscience was clean. The rest was in the hand of God Almighty.

Have you any regrets?

I haven't done anything I need to regret.

You don't regret having joined this group that killed people?

I didn't know about it. I have nothing to regret or reproach myself for. (...)

What would you say to the families of the victims today?

I would present my condolences, in the name of all my prison mates. I would tell them we never wanted that. (...)

Rachid Jalil, kamikaze survivor of the May 16, 2003 bombings: 10 important dates

1975	<i>Born in the shanty town of Karian Toma, in Sidi Moumen (Casablanca) to a peddler and a housewife</i>
1991	<i>Drops out of school at age 16</i>
1992 to 2001	<i>Apprentices first as a welder, coachbuilder, then as a carpenter</i>
2000	<i>Serves one month in jail for theft</i>
2002	<i>Becomes a devoted practitioner, grows a beard, builds ties with future kamikazes</i>
2003, May 15th	<i>Learns he is expected to participate in bombings the next day</i>
2003, May 16th	<i>Abandons at the last minute after watching two of his comrades blow themselves up</i>
2003, May 18th	<i>Captured in Karian Toma after two days of pursuit</i>
2003, August	<i>Sentenced to death Incarcerated since then at the Kenitra Central Prison's high security facility</i>

