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## Meeting the Man Who Helped Trigger the Arab Spring

'I Wish I Could Die'

By Clemens Höges

1/21/2016



The Arab Spring began five years ago when two men set themselves on fire in Tunisia. One of them survived his self-immolation -- and now wishes he hadn't. This is his story.

**The Arab Spring began five years ago when two men set themselves on fire in Tunisia. One of them survived his self-immolation -- and now wishes he hadn't. This is his story.**

Hosni Kaliya pulls a cigarette out of his pack with his mouth. When he poured gasoline on his body and set himself on fire, most of his right hand was consumed by the flames and all that remains is a stump without fingers. He still has four fingers on his left hand, but they jut out like claws, burned, stiff and contorted. His fingernails are curled. He wears black wool gloves with the fingertips cut off, so that they won't dangle empty. A knit cap protects Kaliya's head, where his hair was burned off, and his unusually small ears. But the disfigured face, the work of doctors using old and new skin, how could he hide that?

Kaliya needs medication to sleep. Should his head fall backwards, he could be strangled by the skin on his neck, because it's stretched too tightly across his larynx. He shouldn't smoke, because the flames and soot severely damaged his lungs and trachea. But he does so nonetheless, as if he were trying to destroy what he has turned into: this figure that instills fear in children, a prisoner in his own body. "I wish I could die," says Kaliya.

Everything burns, inside and out. Everything hurts, his body and his soul, because he blames himself: for the destruction of his family, for the death of his brother and several friends, and yes, he even blames himself a little for the Arab Spring, the uprising that began in Tunisia five years ago and has since turned into a tragedy. Two men triggered the Arab Spring. The world remembers one of them, the fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi. The other was Hosni Kaliya.

The acts of desperation quickly transformed into a political hurricane. It swept along Africa's Mediterranean coast and up to the Turkish border. Dictators were overthrown, new rulers came to power and Islamists and terrorists spread across the region. Countries collapsed and hundreds of thousands died, and are still dying, in civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen. The offshoots of this storm have also reached Europe, in the form of mass immigration and terrorist attacks in Paris and Istanbul.

And what for? "It was all a mistake," says Kaliya. "I didn't know what would happen. I no longer believe in the revolution."

To understand how it all began and why it's a long way from being over, it helps to return to one of the starting points of this hurricane: Kaliya's home town of Kasserine, more than three-hours by car southwest of Tunis. It is a town in the barren highlands of Tunisia and it feels much farther away than it already is -- almost as if it were on another planet. Kasserine is at the foot of Jebel Chaambi, the highest mountain in Tunisia. Terrorists are now hiding in the surrounding canyons, and every few weeks the army attacks them with artillery and helicopters. The coast has always been where the money is made and where investment goes. Former dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali allowed the hinterlands around Kasserine to become impoverished.

### **A Modicum of Dignity**

Kaliya normally lives in a home in Tunis, but I met with him and his mother Zhina at her home on a grimy street in Kasserine. His mother is a tiny woman and far too weak to care for a heavy,

42-year-old man who is unable to dress himself. Zhina tries to turn on an old space heater for Kaliya, whose joints stiffen and hands hurt when it gets cold. But his head is clear as he talks about how it all began, five years ago.

There was unrest in the region surrounding Kasserine in the last few days of 2010. On Dec. 17, fruit vendor Bouazizi had set himself on fire in nearby Sidi Bouzid after being harassed by the authorities. People immediately took to the streets, initially to protest against government tyranny and then against the Tunisian dictator and the extravagant lifestyle of his extended family -- and against high youth unemployment and rising bread and vegetable prices. The protesters wanted freedom and a modicum of dignity.

Kaliya, who was working as a hotel doorman in the beach resort town of Sousse at the time, took a few days off and drove home to Kasserine to see his family and friends. He earned good money at the beach resort, and he liked to show off. He told his friends that they should make something of themselves, and that they should leave Kasserine, where life had come to a standstill and seemed directionless.

Like many others, Kaliya also talked about the need to sweep away the regime. But he was no revolutionary, and he had no thoughts or ideas about overthrowing the government, and certainly no plan. All he had was a hatred of the regime.

On Jan. 3, he was stopped by the police, who asked to see his identification papers. "I had money in my pockets and I was good looking," says Kaliya. Perhaps it was his expensive boots, or perhaps the way he walked, the swagger of a doorman, a kick-boxer, that the policemen didn't like. It was certainly the big ring a Frenchman had given him in Sousse, the ring with the big cross on it. When he saw the ring, says Kaliya, one of the policemen said to him: "Do you know why we're here? To fuck guys like you."

### **A Mistake in a Dictatorship**

And then, according to Kaliya, the policeman slammed his fist into Kaliya's stomach. He vomited and fell to the ground, where he lay in his vomit as the policemen laughed. He filed a complaint at the police station the next day -- a mistake in a dictatorship. Or an act of rebellion.

Three days later, Kaliya saw the same police officer as he was walking past the bus station. The cop mentioned Kaliya's complaint, and then started beating him with his baton, hitting his face and hands, Kaliya recalls.

This time Kaliya fought back. It was his second mistake. Other officers appeared immediately and seriously roughed him up. In the end, they also emptied a canister of tear gas into his face. "When they left me lying there, I felt like an insect that they had stepped on."

He pulled himself together and staggered to one of the many illegal gas stations that are equipped with just a barrel and a hand pump. Smugglers use them to sell cheap gasoline from Algeria. Kaliya took a bottle of gasoline and went back to the bus station. "I wasn't myself anymore, and I

didn't know what I was doing." He didn't want to be a hero and he wasn't sending a political message. He simply could no longer bear the humiliation.

For a moment, says Kaliya, he thought he could light the bottle on fire and throw it at the police officers. "But I didn't have a chance. There were too many of them, and they were armed." Instead, he lifted the bottle over his head, turned it upside-down and allowed the gasoline to run over his body. Then he pulled out his lighter.

He remembers hearing the sound of burning fat, a hissing sound, like drops of grease falling from a barbecue grill into the hot coals. He staggered toward the policemen, but everything went black after that. The news of what he had done spread quickly in Kasserine.

### **'Nothing But Criminals'**

"We all thought that Hosni Kaliya was dead," says Ali Rebah, one of the young intellectuals of Kasserine. He went to the family's home, where others had already gathered. That night, car tires were set on fire in the streets of Kasserine.

Rebah, a sound engineer, also wanted to do something, as best he could. "The government media characterized all the demonstrators as nothing but criminals. So we needed something of our own: independent information. No one was being told what was happening here." On the same day, he used an Internet streaming service and Facebook to spread the news of Kaliya's self-immolation.

The violence escalated over the next three days. Protestors threw rocks and Molotov cocktails. The special government units that were brought in aimed at the head and the heart, killing more than 20 demonstrators and injuring dozens. It was the first massacre of the Arab spring. And Rebah was one of those who ensured that the world learned about what had happened.

Kaliya wasn't aware of any of this: He was in a coma in the burn unit of a Tunis hospital. Mohamed Bouazizi had died in the same hospital three days before Kaliya's self-immolation, and others apparently tried to set themselves on fire during the same period. Dictator Zine El Abidin Ben Ali visited Bouazizi at his hospital bed. He had tried to soften his tone, spoke of an end to the violence and promised hundreds of thousands of jobs for young people. But it was too late. A week after Kaliya set himself on fire, the dictator fled the country.

The spark of revolution immediately jumped to other countries in the region. The uprising against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak began on Jan. 25, 2011, Yemenis rebelled against President Ali Abdullah Saleh a few days later, in mid-February the Libyans revolted against Moammar Gadhafi, and in March the Syrians began their revolution against President Bashar Assad.

During this period, Kaliya was operated on multiple times. Skin was transplanted from one part of his body to another, and his throat was reconstructed. A few times, doctors had to resuscitate him. Kaliya recounts a nightmare he believes he had at the time. In the dream, he was walking along a street when the buildings suddenly flew toward him and crushed his body.

## **A Stalemate**

He only regained consciousness after eight months. At first he could only hear muffled sounds, because he was wrapped in bandages, like a mummy. His eyes were also bandaged. He didn't know where he was, and he had forgotten who he was. Then the doctors removed the bandages from his eyes.

A short time later, Tunisia held its first free and democratic election. When the Islamist Ennahda Movement won the vote, many liberal Tunisians felt it was a disaster. Still, the Islamists were unable to govern alone but were instead forced to share power with two other parties. An Islamist served as prime minister, but human rights activist Moncef Marzouki became the country's president.

It was a stalemate, and the country was soon on the brink of emergency rule. The Islamists wanted to enshrine Sharia law in the constitution and limit the rights of women. They did not prevail, but then Salafists engaged in street battles with the police and tens of thousands demonstrated against the Islamists, in part due to rising unemployment. Protestors also accused Ennahda of supporting Ansar al-Sharia, a Salafist terrorist organization.

For Kaliya, these events were far away. His mother Zhina, who had only been allowed to look at her son through a window for many months due to the risk of infection, told him about everything that was happening in the world. She also told him about friends and relatives. Eleven had died in the uprising. A psychologist also went to see him every day. She told him his name, and she spoke with him about Kasserine, the policemen and the gasoline.

As Kaliya slowly regained his memory, he began to understand the enormity of the storm he and the fruit vendor had triggered.

Still, President Marzouki ensured that those who were wounded in the revolution were properly looked after. Kaliya's mother was given an apartment in the capital, so that she could care for her son.

## **'Not Accustomed to Freedom'**

In the summer of 2013, Tunisia was on the brink of civil war. Two opposition politicians had been murdered, probably by Islamists, and Ennahda feared a military coup like the one that had occurred in Egypt. At that moment, an unusual quartet of four organizations, led by a federation of trade unions, intervened to mediate between the opposing groups. Ennahda agreed to a transitional government and new elections, and the quartet was last year awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts.

But the party that won the new election, in October 2014, was Nidaa Tounes, which included many of Ben Ali's former cohorts. Béji Caïd Essebsi, 89, a former interior minister in the Ben Ali dictatorship, became president and made his son the party's deputy leader. For many Tunisians, this marked the beginning of a new political dynasty. Is the country back where it was when he, Hosni Kaliya, set himself on fire?

"We were hopeful, but we Tunisians are not accustomed to freedom," says Kaliya.

Surviving heroes can become a burden when they criticize the heirs of a revolution. Under the new regime, Kaliya was shunted off to a home for unwed mothers and he has been waiting for several urgent operations for months. The surgeries must be approved by a committee, but the committee is dragging its feet. "They are letting me rot in this home," says Kaliya. He feels like a phantom, someone the government doesn't want anyone to see or hear.

He cannot return to Kasserine, because the only doctors that can help him in an emergency are in Tunis. He occasionally visits his friends and his mother in Kasserine. When he looks around today, he says, he sees nothing to suggest that it was all worthwhile.

"There was no Arab spring," says Kaliya. Various factions are fighting each other in Libya, while the self-proclaimed Islamic State captures town after town. In Egypt, former General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi rules in much the same way as Mubarak did. Saudi Arabia is bombarding Yemen, where Shiite and Sunni militias are at war. And then there is Syria, where more than 250,000 have died. Is it presumptuous to accept the blame?

### **A Hotbed of Jihad**

Tunisia, of course, is in better shape and is still viewed as a shimmer of hope in the Arab disaster. At least Tunisians cast their ballots instead of shooting at each other. But the peace is fragile. There is high unemployment, especially among young people, and several thousand Tunisians are fighting for Islamic State in Syria, Iraq and Libya.

Or they are carrying out attacks at home. Last March, Islamist militants murdered 20 tourists at the national museum in Tunis. In June, a gunman killed 38 tourists at a beach resort hotel in Sousse. Terror groups aligned with Islamic State claimed responsibility for both attacks. Finally, two months ago, a suicide bomber blew up a bus carrying presidential guards in Tunis, killing 13 soldiers. The series of attacks has all but destroyed the tourist industry, a significant source of revenue for Tunisia.

Kasserine and the canyons of Jebel Chaambi are now considered a hotbed of jihad, an unsafe area that is said to be prime recruitment territory for terrorists. "Terror emerges in places where people are marginalized," says economist Hizi Med Raouf. He returned to his hometown of Kasserine from Tunis a few months after the uprising began.

Raouf believed that everything would change, and that entrepreneurs would create new businesses now that the dictatorship was gone and he rented a small office on the main street of Kasserine. In Los Angeles or Berlin, his company would be referred to as a start-up incubator. He advises prospective entrepreneurs, prepares feasibility studies and facilitates business relationships. But he constantly encounters the old networks from the Ben Ali-era in banks and government agencies, men with little interest in change.

Raouf has studied the numbers. Half of the educated young people in Kasserine are unemployed, he says, while smuggling is -- just as it has always been -- the most important business in the

region due to the proximity of the border with Algeria. "I'm an optimist, or else I couldn't do what I do. Even if nothing is working, I want to keep believing that everything will improve."

### **Nothing Better to Do**

A few buildings down the street from Raouf's office, Ali Rebah runs the radio station that he started on the Internet on the day Kaliya set himself on fire. The station, KFM, has grown and now has 70 employees and transmits its programs to a region with a population of 400,000 people. But none of the people who work for KFM is paid a single dinar, including Rebah, because the small amount of advertising revenue only covers operating costs. Besides, says Rebah, most of his people are unemployed anyway and have nothing better to do.

"Anyone can speak his mind in Tunisia now. Aside from that, not much has changed," says Rebah. "We need more time. Much more time." That's why KFM works together with schools. Children help produce radio programs and, in the process, learn how elections work, that different opinions count and, most of all, that it is possible to bring about change. Rebah is pinning his hopes on the next generation. He no longer believes that change will happen quickly, and probably not for his generation, the one that triggered the Arab spring in the first place.

But not everyone is as patient. Hosni Kaliya had a younger brother, Saber. He was 35 and worked as a custodian. He made a decent living and even managed to support his mother. But Saber lost his job last summer. Many in Kasserine are losing their jobs, because businesses are going under or shifting production to the coast, and because new projects have become bogged down, and because the revolution, which Hosni Kaliya helped trigger, brought democracy but no jobs.

Saber fought for his job, spending three months begging his employer not to let him go. He had no other job prospects. When he felt that there was no longer any hope, he bought himself a bottle of gasoline, just as his brother had done, and set himself on fire, not far from his home. When his mother heard the screams, she ran out of the house and saw Saber lying on the ground, engulfed in flames. He died on Oct. 14.

"I curse this revolution. I want my sons back," says the mother, weeping into a piece of cloth, already wet and dark from her tears. "More will die, more will fight and more will set themselves on fire. They have no future."

Hosni Kaliya sits quietly next to her. He wasn't even able to weep properly at his brother's funeral, because the flames destroyed his right tear duct.