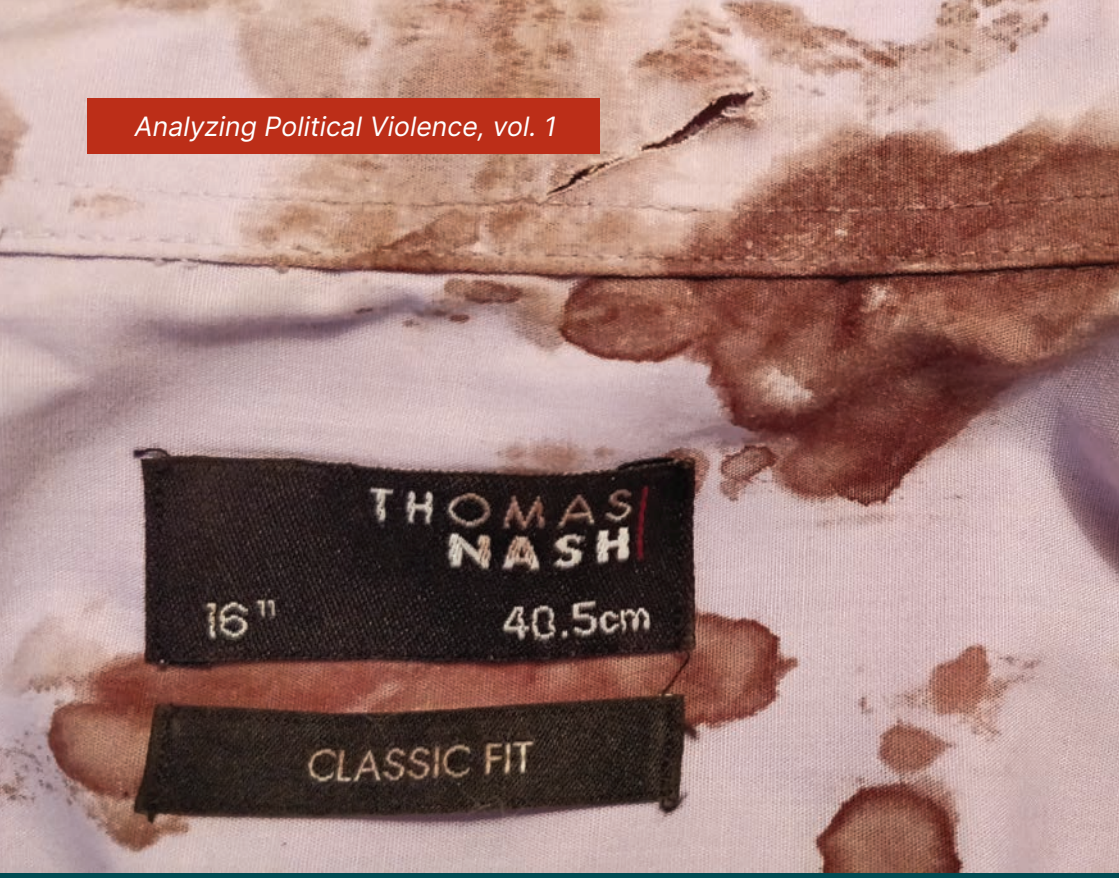
Analyzing Political Violence, vol. 1



Nasser Kurdy & David Tucker

A Reply to Hate: Forgiving My Attacker

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ANALYZING POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Edited by Bethan Johnson and John Richardson

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A Reply to Hate: Forgiving My Attacker
ISBN 978-3-8382-1558-7

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ibidem Verlag

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-7558-1

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Foreword

David Tucker

I first met Dr Nasser Kurdy in February 2019, where myself, Matthew Feldman and Amjid Khazir, the three of us representing Academic Consulting Services Ltd. (www.academicconsulting.co.uk), The Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (www.radicalrightanalysis.com) and Media Cultured (www.mediacultured.org), had collaborated with Shazia Awan of Manchester City Council on a counter-extremism event for school pupils which was hosted by Manchester Metropolitan University. At the event, experts spoke on prejudice, extremism and violence, and there were two survivors of extremist violence discussing their experiences. One was Ahmad Nawaz, who on 16 December 2014 in Peshawar, Pakistan, was shot by the Taliban in an attack on his school; 150 students were brutally massacred that day along with teachers and educationalists. Amongst those murdered was Ahmad's brother, Harris. Ahmad survived the attack and has since become an ambassador for education and peace working across the world. The other invited speaker was Dr Nasser Kurdy. On Sunday 24 September 2017 Dr Kurdy was stabbed in his neck as he was entering his local Islamic Centre in Altrincham, Greater Manchester. Dr Kurdy did not see the attacker coming, and he has only been able to speculate as to why he was the victim of this sudden, awful, and life-altering split-second attack. Nevertheless, through all the physical pain, the confusion and at times fear engendered by this attack, Dr Kurdy managed to come through it in just a matter of hours and profess his forgiveness of his attacker. Further on in the book Dr Kurdy discusses how he has thought about distinguishing

between the forgiveness of an attacker and the forgiveness of an attack itself. For now, it suffices to say that it is very much this reflectiveness that comes through when meeting Dr Kurdy, a thoughtfulness always combined with good humour and kindness, a personality that has been brought to bear on the more impersonal abstracts of crude violence. It is of relevance throughout that, in telling contrast to his kitchen-knife-wielding attacker, Dr Kurdy is a surgeon. He brings his medical expertise to bear in fascinating ways on his own injury and in thinking about the implications his analysis has, or could have, for a criminal investigation and trial. In a sense, this book is a story of two users of knives, and the contrast between how the two deploy their respective tools tells us something about extremist violence and possible responses to it.

Dr Kurdy has been telling the story of his attack and forgiveness to many different audiences since, and by 2019 had started to think about setting it down on the page, so we discussed what such a project might look like. For one thing, Dr Kurdy is very busy as an orthopaedic surgeon, and he did not feel he could simply write the book himself. We decided, therefore, to conduct interviews, with the intention being that much of the book would be told in the first person, in Dr Kurdy's voice, as well as I could capture and edit it for the page. Chapters 1 to 10 are derived from this methodology; they are Dr Kurdy's voice, as spoken in interview, then transcribed and edited, with the interviewer's voice removed along the way. However, we also wanted to include some more discursive work, some evidence of the conversational way in which much of the book had come about. To that end, Chapter 11 retains its interview format in order that the wider-ranging and reflective discussion therein, which looks back on the events of the preceding chapters, explores current

projects Dr Kurdy is engaged in and looks forward, could be presented in a way closer to how it came about.

Towards the end of the book are shorter contributing texts by other people also affected by the attack. Family, friends and colleagues lay out how events had both short-term and longer-term effects on themselves as well as on the protagonist. These contributions set out multifarious manifestations of what Dr Kurdy has come to call in recent work with prison inmates a "ripple" effect, referring to the ramifications across a range of people that a single traumatic event will inevitably have. It is often a cliché to say that an attack is an attack on a particular "community", especially if such an act might very well be intended as precisely just such a synecdoche. But it is not only a British Muslim community in general that these interspersed voices speak for, but also for the personal, familial and multi-faith community close to the person at the centre of these events.

Dr Kurdy always wanted the concept of forgiveness to be at the centre, the heart, of this book. In this very intention he even perhaps unknowingly spoke about his thinking of, his hopes for, other people. The book is less a record of events for Dr Kurdy to retain as memory might fade, times change, as priorities and focuses shift. I believe, though it has never been articulated as such throughout the process of producing this book, that the hope can be that the events surrounding this particular act of extreme violence might bring about some good, whether that is in speaking to others in comparable circumstances, or in filling out the academic records, for those producing policy as much as for those producing research, of what can happen following such an act. Personally speaking, it has been inspiring to see how an act of hate has been turned to good in such a way as described in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 1

About Me

I would like to begin this book at my own beginnings. I was born in 1959 in Aleppo, Syria, which is also where my mother came from. Given my name and my Middle Eastern looks, it can surprise people to learn that my mother's maiden name is Gilbert Manjaka. It is a Christian name, and her surname is not Arabic. My uncles' first names are Tony and George, and my grandmother's name is Margaret, all from my mother's side of the family, the Christians of Aleppo. They have lived in Aleppo for generations. I remember when my uncle George was married in a church service in Aleppo and I was probably just seven or eight years old, walking alongside my brother as we carried candles down the aisle.

My father's side of the family is Muslim, and then on that side my grandfather is of Kurdish origin, hence the name Kurdy, and my grandmother is Circassian. Her origin is the Caucasus, a region between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea north of Turkey. Sadly, the late nineteenth century witnessed a Circassian genocide with many forced to migrate south, some as far as Syria where my grandmother's family eventually settled. I know very little about my father's family other than they lived in Damascus in the well-known Kurdish district of Rukn al-Din where he was born. I have only little recollection of my early childhood and I don't recall my father mentioning much about his life when we lived in Damascus. I later found out that he had worked in the security services in Damascus and all over Syria. In 1966, when I was just seven years old, he had to flee Damascus after a coup, led by Nour el Din Atassi. There were personal

conflicts between Atassi and our father and when Atassi became president our father had to make a swift exit to Jordan. He was helped greatly by his friends in Jordan and eventually he managed to gain Jordanian citizenship. This is why I tell my friends I am half Syrian, half Jordanian.

Looking at my father's photos from the 1950s, I am not surprised why my mother fell head over heels for him. He was tall and handsome, he was a good swimmer, and he had a presence. As might be imagined, my parents marrying was part of a somewhat difficult story because they went against usual traditions at the time of Muslims marrying Muslims and Christians marrying Christians. I met one of my Christian cousins a few years ago and they told me about the impact the marriage had on the community at the time, but my mother was going to have it her way and that was that. She did finish high school, which was exceptional in the 1950s, but beyond that she was self-taught; she spoke, typed and used shorthand in three different languages. In her younger days she managed to work as a personal assistant to a number of high-ranking politicians in Damascus, which was where I spent the first ten years of my life. I recall starting my primary education at a French school, L'école Laïque, which was walking distance from where we lived, but the school was unfortunately closed after the six-day Arab-Israeli War that took place in June 1967. I still recall the tanks stationed outside our apartment building during that time. So many things changed for my family after this conflict and eventually, for a number of reasons, we all moved to Kuwait for a new start. First my father, then mother, a year later myself and then another year later my brother joined us.

At the time, Kuwait was one of the wealthiest oil countries in the Middle East, and it was there that my education changed from French to English, in a school which

is still going strong today. The New English School was founded in 1969 by a visionary couple, a Kuwaiti man and his British wife. The curriculum was taught primarily by British teachers and over a relatively short period the school began preparing its students for O-level and A-level exams. My mother was a strong believer in education and we always had the best schools chosen for us, despite the fact that our means were, at best, moderate. Consequently, a good portion of who we are, of how we live and what we believe—my brother, sister and I—is owed to her. I still remember the first time we joined that school one summer. It was on the grounds of a large villa, possibly an embassy, where they had an outdoor swimming pool that I still remember swimming in. We would get changed inside the building and walk as a class to the outdoor pool which was built up off the ground like a large concrete tank, and we would dive into it. The joy of swimming at this school is something I still recall to this day.

At some point my mother realised that people who were aiming for a high-quality education were sending their children to Lebanon, so in 1973 my brother and I were sent to a boarding school there. This must have been a very big and brave decision for our parents. Fortunately, my older brother was much more streetwise than me and he was entrusted to look after us both! First, we went to a nunnery for the summer, a boarding school run by nuns. Here we were taught mainly French, but this also gave us an introduction to beautiful Lebanon. We had many school trips and I even remember watching my first Bruce Lee film, *Fist of Fury*, that summer, and for whatever reason the image of a gold Lamborghini is firmly etched in my mind. Lebanon was after all the French Riviera of the Middle East. When term started, we joined Brummana High School. This was a beautiful (and

expensive) school situated on the mountain overlooking Beirut. The school had been founded by the Quakers and also had an English-based curriculum. We were there for two years and it was at this school I sat my O-level exams. Unfortunately, in October 1973, and while we were just settling at Brummana High, another Arab-Israeli war broke out. I still recall peering up at the sky from the school grounds with fascination, watching fighter jets chase each other, though I had no clue what was going on. The war did not last long and fortunately it did not have any immediate impact on our education or our safety.

By 1975 I was getting ready for those O-levels, when everyone at school started noticing heavy guns and various bits of military equipment settling on the mountainsides near the school. Then just a few weeks before our exams, in April, the civil war in Lebanon broke out. We were mostly locked in at school, but, despite the mayhem, the uncertainty and danger, we were still able to sit our exams. However, by the end of the exam period the situation in Lebanon had become extremely dangerous and we were trapped at school even though term had finished. I don't recall all the details, but we were not able leave the grounds of the school because of all the warring factions. The Palestinian forces, the various Lebanese forces and the Syrian forces all had roadblocks. At these roadblocks one of the most sinister and depressing aspects of the war would take place: innocent people were being summarily executed based on their identity. It was rumoured that if someone were stopped at a roadblock without an ID card, the militia men would ask the person to pronounce the word "tomato"; because of the various dialects, each faction pronounced the word differently. How you pronounced the word tomato literally meant life or death. My parents were extremely worried, as we ticked the

wrong boxes for most of these roadblocks. We were Muslim, carried Jordanian passports and were born in Syria! That civil war proved to be very violent, but we were extremely fortunate when for a couple of weeks, a truce allowed my brother and I to travel to Syria, all the way by taxi, to join our parents. It was just over a hundred-kilometre journey and we had to borrow the taxi fare from our maths teacher. We left in a hurry and we escaped with only our passports. We did return to Lebanon a few years later to collect our belongings from the school. I recall sitting in the back of the car looking at all the destroyed buildings riddled with bullet holes. The image of Beirut at the time can perhaps best be likened to that of bombed-out Sarajevo. That Riviera version of the place had disappeared. After escaping from Lebanon, we returned to Kuwait where two years later I completed my A-levels at my old school. I was doing relatively well in my studies and so I applied and was accepted to study medicine in the UK, at Dundee.

August 1977 was the first time I ever left home on my own. I remember landing at Heathrow and staying the night at one of the airport hotels as we had missed the connecting flight. I arrived at the hotel very late, I had no clue how to order room service and I ended up going to sleep feeling hungry and lonely. That was my first night away from home! Early next morning I took my flight to Edinburgh. It is difficult to put the experience of my first day in the UK into words. Everything I was seeing was new to me, there was a great deal to take in and I felt overwhelmed. At Edinburgh airport, I asked the taxi driver to take me to the train station as I knew I had to take a train to Dundee. I had never been to such a massive railway station before. As I arrived at Waverley train station, I recall seeing so many trains for the first time in my life. The thought of ending up lost on a train

somewhere in Scotland was very daunting and I just sat in the taxi. Eventually I asked the driver if he could take me all the way to Dundee and I gave him the address, Belmont Hall of Residence. He was very happy to oblige! Two hours later we arrived at Dundee, but to my surprise, the driver did not know where Belmont Hall was and he needed to ask for directions! Finally, I was safely dropped off at my halls of residence to start what would be six years of medical studies in Dundee. As soon as I entered my room, I just fell onto my bed and started crying. It wasn't the journey that had been the most distressing, it was the fact that when I arrived in Dundee, I could not understand anyone I spoke to. Yes, it sounded as if they were speaking English, but not the English I learned at school; Scottish English was something else entirely. In case you are wondering, the taxi fare cost me twenty pounds that day!

Neither of my parents were university educated, so when I left home to study medicine, my mother had little idea what it meant in practical terms. I was her pride and joy, and she thought that once I graduated that I would therefore be qualified, and I could go back home and start working as a doctor straightaway. Just six years at the most, and I would be home. Unbeknownst to any of us at the time was that, having graduated, I needed to go through a further training programme; a degree in medicine is no more than a starting point. I graduated in 1983 and started my training in Dundee. By 1988, eleven years after leaving home, I completed my basic surgical training and I managed to obtain my surgical diploma.

Unfortunately, during my time at university, my mother was diagnosed with leukaemia. Initially this was under control and I recall her optimism as she travelled to various centres in Lebanon, the US and the UK for treatment. Sadly,

as predicted, and after seven years of battling, her condition started to get out of control. I remember in March of that year, my father called me to say that mum was in hospital and that she was quite ill. This was not unusual, but this was the first time that he said we should travel over to see her. Doing so, however, was far from straightforward. It posed some administrative obstacles in view of the fact that I was still a foreign national, so I could not just get on a plane and leave and expect to easily return. I had to send my passport away for a re-entry visa, and the process took a few weeks. Eventually I arrived with my brother back in Kuwait on 08 April 1988 and our uncle picked us up from the airport. Not much was said in the car, but as we were getting close to home, my uncle told us that our mother had passed away earlier that same day. I never managed to see her alive again. It was my birthday the following day and I went to see my mother in the mortuary, for the last time, before burying her in the afternoon. I remember meeting my Uncle George at the mortuary where we bid farewell to her. He was inconsolable; I still remember his crying. At home, my father just kept quiet. In a sense, even though my mother was the architect of everything that she wished for me to be, sadly she passed away before she could see it all come good.

Shortly after that, my career almost came to a halt as I struggled to obtain a higher surgical-training post. If you cannot get such a training post, then you are no longer on the ladder to becoming a consultant. It took me another three years, but in 1991 I had my lucky break; I managed to get a temporary training post. However, those intervening three years of 1988 to 1991 had been by far the most difficult of my life, emotionally, professionally and financially. Unfortunately, the recession that kicked off in the second half of 1990 caused me to lose my house, but at least I was able to

move into hospital accommodation. My self-esteem and self-belief were at an all-time low and I believe that a lot of how I approach adversity now, the resilience that I have, comes from me coping on my own through those years. I had graduated in 1983, but by 1991, after eight years of employment, all I had to show for it was a car, a stereo system, and a debt of £8000. But at least I was now back, even if only temporarily, on the training ladder.

What probably altered my fortunes for the better was getting British citizenship in 1991. Up until then, each time I applied for a job I presented myself as Jordanian, and I got nowhere. The very first time I presented myself as British I was offered an interview. Maybe that was just a coincidence, but anyhow I got a short-term job as a locum tutor in orthopaedics at the University of Manchester. For the first time since 1988 I was employed in an academic post. Getting this job gave me an immense feeling of satisfaction and a belief that I still had a chance at career success. I first started working in Manchester at Ancoats Hospital, which sadly no longer exists, and it was during that year that I bought my first computer and I started producing academic work. 1991 was a fantastic year for me. I worked my way up financially, getting back on my feet again and, on a personal level, that year gave me the belief that no matter how low things can get, given time, patience and perseverance, there is always a chance. My chance came after nearly 300 applications and I was determined to make the most out of this break.

I had my second lucky break when the one-year locum tutor post was extended to 18 months. I then got a third break when I worked for a year in research alongside an incredible Senior Lecturer who was very supportive. But then came the most incredible break in my career, which was Calmanisation. The postgraduate training structure in the

NHS was being overhauled and, in simple terms, in order to streamline the training journey of medical graduates at registrar level, two major changes took place. Firstly, training centres needed to restructure themselves to provide a comprehensive five-year training programme. Secondly, and most important to me, once you had a Calman number, you were in line to compete for a consultant post. In 1994, and with the support of my Senior Lecturer, I was offered one of these Calman numbers.

When I started working in Manchester, I was living in hospital accommodation. I first lived in a bedroom, then I had my own ensuite, and by 1993 I managed to move into a rented flat. By then I had paid off my debt and was gradually getting back on my feet financially. But still, I was single, living by myself, and I felt I needed to settle down. As with most Eastern cultures, it is the mother who usually takes on the matchmaker role. With my mother having passed away, I needed the help of my aunt in Syria. Eventually I contacted her and said something along the lines of "I want to settle down and to get married, and I need you to find someone suitable for me". This probably came as a bit of a shock to her, but she was happy with the idea and understandably she asked what I was looking for; a strange conversation to be reading about in the West in the 21st century, I know. My instinctive reply anyway was "As long as she's pretty". I guess anybody would say that. But I also said, "I need her to be a good practicing Muslim". For a few years I felt that I had been drifting away from Islam, that I had become a little wayward, and I was not comfortable with that. To my surprise, before long I received a call from my aunt telling me that she had found someone she wanted to introduce me to, so off I went on a flight to Damascus. At 33 years of age, it was a very odd experience for me to be going with my father