Confronting the real face of Islam

*BY DAPHNE NETANYAHU AND LELA GILBERT*

As we entered Umar Mulínde’s hospital room in Ramat Gan, we were immediately grateful that a friend had sent us his photograph. This at least partially prepared us for the sight of the disfiguring burns on his beautiful face. Still, we quickly learned that the blinded right eye, the scorched skin, the missing nostril and the swollen lips have not lessened Umar’s passion for his mission in life: to proclaim his love for God and for Israel to fellow Ugandans.

Mulínde was born in Uganda in 1973 to a devout Muslim family comprising several wives and 52 children. His maternal grandfather is an imam, his father a well-known Islamic leader. Today, however, Mulínde is an Evangelical Christian pastor who leads a Kampala church of more than 1,000 believers, many former Muslims like him.

Last Christmas Eve, a figure approached Mulínde shouting “Allahu Akbar” and threw acid on him. The right side of his face bore the brunt of the injury. He was rushed to the hospital, but it was soon evident that the medical facilities in Uganda for such severe burns were inadequate. Mulínde called friends in Israel, who quickly arranged for his admittance to Sheba Medical Center at Tel Hashomer, where we met him.

We wondered if the attack on Mulínde was because of his conversion from Islam to Christianity – a capital crime under Islamic Shari’a law.

“As a Muslim, I had a very legalistic approach to life. I did things not out of love, but out of fear of Allah. I did not have inner peace but was a prisoner on a mission. I did things not because I wanted to do them but because I was told to do them, and I did them in the exact way I was taught to. As a Muslim I thought I had to kill infidels, but now that I am a Christian my heart is filled with love. The power that motivates me is God’s love and love for Israel. I feel that the spirit that previously dwelt in me has disappeared and now I’m a real person.”

“When I was a Muslim I hated Israel. Don’t know why. Everybody was like that. I knew nothing about Israel – not even where it was on the map. But after I became a Christian, I loved reading the Bible, both the Old and the New Testaments, and I saw phrases like ‘the God of Israel’ and ‘the people of Israel’ repeated continually in the Scriptures. What did that mean?”

In Kampala, Mulínde met a group of devout Christian women who prayed for Israel everyday. So in 2008, Mulínde made his first visit to Israel, arriving via the Taba crossing from Egypt. In the car that met him was an Israeli guide and an Arab driver. He was shocked.

“I didn’t know that Jews allowed Arabs to live in Israel and to work. I believed that Jews were persecuting and hunting Arabs.”

During his visit he saw that hotel workers were Arabs, living in safety and going about their business.

“My eyes were opened that Israel is a democracy... and a country of peace. I loved the nation and the people.”

In the meantime, Mulínde took an online course about Israel, which further changed his thinking and, before long, transformed his life. Before the recent attack, Umar organized two more tours of Israel for fellow Ugandan pastors.