

XXIII

Struggle

Sometimes the people around you won't understand your journey. They don't need to—it's not for them.

—Joubert Botha

I felt more foreign in North Yemen when I returned in 1992 than I had the first time I moved there in 1978. Prior to departing Sana'a for the US, the city had been cleaner and less crowded. Now, after an extended hiatus, I was surprised to see the number of women wearing head-to-toe coverings. I saw more people wearing Saudi clothing than the typical Yemeni outfits I was used to seeing. And many men were carrying guns. The differences were beyond my imagination;

it didn't feel like the same country I had left less than a decade earlier.

When I asked friends and family about the changes the country had experienced in the previous eight years, they told me how and why life changed after the Gulf War. The invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein and the Yemen leadership's public support for Saddam and criticism of Saudi Arabia for inviting American-led forces into the Kingdom provoked the Saudis' swift and punitive deportation of millions of Yemeni workers.

Nearly two million Yemeni immigrant workers were forced out of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, and many of them returned to Yemen. The returning workers brought with them the *Wahhabi* version of Islam to Yemen. Wahhabism is the strict orthodox version of Islam practiced mainly in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. It originated from within Sunni Islam and promotes a stricter, more "pure" form of Islam than what most Muslims had been practicing in that region. The Saudi Royal Family has exerted its power for the past four hundred years to maintain adherence to the Wahhabi sect. The two million Yemeni who spent a good portion of their lives working in Saudi Arabia brought their beliefs with them when they were kicked out of Saudi.

The people I knew prior to going to the US had completely changed. Nearly all of the Muwalladin had changed their Yemeni ID cards to indicate that they were born in Yemen even though they hadn't been. They didn't want to speak Amharic as they didn't want people to know they had any connection to Ethiopia. A good portion of the youth that I knew had returned to Yemen after serving in the Afghanistan war against the former Soviet Union. They had been recruited, gone to Afghanistan to fight, and returned

changed. Most of them wore beards. We had been friends as children, but now we were almost enemies. We no longer had anything in common, so conversations were limited. As an Americanized man wearing jeans, I was an infidel in their eyes, and when I saw their clothing, their beards, and their attitudes, I saw the Taliban.

All conversations were around religion. Everyone talked about this extreme version of Islam—Wahhabism. As a young child, I had been taught Islam, and I'd had a great deal of exposure to it when I migrated to North Yemen in the late 1970s, but the tone now was totally different. Everyone was focused on killing the Jews and every American. To them, "American" included the entire Western population, all of whom were seen to be supporting Israel.

When I was a child and a young adult, we had all thought that when someone kills an innocent life, it is as if he has killed all of humanity. However, what I found upon my return to North Yemen was totally contrary to the Islamic teachings I had received. Every person who had returned from the Afghanistan war was capable of killing, without any reason, any ordinary American or Jewish civilian he could find. The religion had turned into an ideology. Why?

As per my earlier teachings of Islam, I understood that the religion does not condone, and it in fact condemns, practices such as "honor killings," racism or tribalism, oppression of women, banning women from obtaining an education, and many other un-Islamic practices that make their way into the sensationalized news.

Of course, having lived in the US for the previous eight years, I had a completely different image of the US and Westerners than people in Yemen possessed, but I was unable

to reason with anyone. They kept dismissing me as having been brainwashed by the US or simply being ill-prepared with zero or a low level of Islamic knowledge.

In the 1970s, every family and almost all shops and restaurants in Yemen had a picture of Jamal Abdul Nasser, the Egyptian leader, on the wall. Those pictures were gone; now most houses, shops, and restaurants had either verses of the Qur'an or a picture of Saddam Hussein on the walls. I was told girls should not be sent to purchase cucumbers, eggplants, or carrots, and they weren't allowed to milk cows. The response I got to my inquiries was that these vegetables and the cows' udders would remind girls of male genitalia or bring sexual desires. This concept was never thought of when I was a child.

I also observed that the way the Somalian and Ethiopian refugees were treated in Yemen was beyond any acceptable pattern to humanity; they happened to be dark-skinned humans from the continent of Africa, yet they were treated as sub-human. Most Ethiopian and Somali females who were hired to work as domestic servants were often underpaid and overworked. I came to know that several of these employers never fully paid the women their deserved wages. I also learned that most of these women were subject to sexual assaults and other types of abuse.

All forms of media including books, newspapers, magazines, films, and television were censored. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, when I was a teenager in Yemen, I was able to hear and enjoy songs from Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria at groceries stores, shops, and cafeterias. In the 1990s, though, I didn't hear any music played in malls, department stores, or grocery stores. Also, music classes were no longer allowed in

public schools because music was forbidden since school curricula had to follow the rules of this new form of Islam.

As a teenager, I had been able to attend movie theaters in Sana'a, Ta'izz, or Hodeidah. Upon my return, I noticed that movie theaters were nearly nonexistent in Yemen; people only watched movies in private, residential houses. Movie theaters were a no-no for those devoted to Islam, as they enabled the unsupervised mingling of men and women, which Muslims believe may lead to immoral actions outside of marriage.

Even more disappointing for me was to see the state of South Yemen after the unification of North and South Yemen. Apparently, it is much easier to dilute clean water with dirty water than the other way around. Back in the early 1980s, when I used to travel to Aden, women had almost an equal footing or status in society, as they were working as judges, police officers, etc. Nearly all of them dressed without covering their faces. The situation was totally different in 1994, and I found it hard to believe how easy it was to relegate half of the members of society into suppression.

I was disheartened to find that Yemen seemed to have gone backward a thousand years in less than a decade. I was confused as to whether my observations were the result of my exposure to a different lifestyle in the US, so I had a different outlook, or whether the country had turned the clock backward in only eight years due to the increasing Saudi Arabian influence on Yemen. It was likely both.

I was sophisticated, and I began to wish I hadn't gone to the West to learn how to live life differently. I didn't chew qat, and I wasn't invited to any social gatherings. I became lonely and depressed. I continued writing to my friends in the US as an outlet to express my frustrations.

November 1992

Dear Sharese,

You've asked about my family. Let me tell you how I'm getting along with them.

I used to tell my relatives how free I was in the US, and I was boasting about all of the opportunities I had in the US. Of course, they don't see anything other than me returning to Yemen like an undesirable dog because my return was not my choice.

My sisters have already started to speak to me about marriage. In the US, I was always able to avoid this issue using school as an excuse. When I tell them I have plans to return to the US, they almost go crazy. I will find a way to delay the issue until I leave Yemen again.

I've already stopped sharing my problems and intentions with my sisters because they don't understand my perspectives. In one way, they are happy that I have returned to Yemen, but they also know how much I hated Yemen and loved the US, and they also knew I had no intentions to return to Yemen.

I am having communication problems with friends and relatives because we don't seem to have common ground for anything. The years I spent in the US have completely molded my values, attitudes, presentation, and in many ways, I'm facing difficulties in adjusting. I feel I am a total stranger in my own native country.

The country is experimenting with democracy for the first time in its history by bringing together the two states that differ greatly in terms of their official attitudes toward women, law, religion, and human rights.

The difference between the two states is causing all the laws passed by parliament to either have been contained or frozen. There is a large gap in their respective visions. They have different points of view about the implementation of the laws, the role of the presidential council, the

judiciary, and the parliament. The ruling government interferes in judicial independence despite constitutional guarantees.

There are major problems facing Yemen at present. The country and its people inherited a very troubling attitude of lawlessness. The basic problem today is that certain elements in this society are either ignorant of the laws or unwilling to abide by them. The worst part of it is that some of those law makers are often the first ones to break them. As a result, the whole system suffers from a state of helplessness. In fact, social habits enjoy more respect and adherence in Yemen than the laws.

The question of the democratization of Yemen is a critical and vital part of its political evolution. The two Yemen countries were subjected to one of the most ruthless dictatorships in the world. Marxist communism in the former South Yemen and feudal-military rule in North Yemen.

Since unification, despite Yemen's stated support for human rights, there have been lapses. The government continues to selectively monitor citizens, search homes, open mail, and listen in on telephone conversations.

Women in the former South Yemen, where my origins are, had enjoyed extensive legal rights based on a progressive family code and greater access to work and education. Although women in North Yemen held full electoral rights, they had fewer educational and vocational chances. A basic tension thus exists between the legacies of the two states, as progressive and Islamic groups differ in philosophy regarding the role of women in such matters as divorce, child custody, and polygamy.

Well, that gets you up to speed on some of the difficulties I am seeing and experiencing.

*Until next time,
Adel*

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November 1992

Dear Norma and Rich,

How are you, my friends and families? I received your fax yesterday. I was happy to know that I can still communicate with you.

I am staying with relatives. The language, culture, food, and just about everything else is new to me. I cannot remember being here in this country before.

My relatives are doing everything to make me feel better. They make sure I eat and get rest. They provide everything, and I have no idea how I can return the favor. They do understand my emotional distraction and disappointments. As a matter of fact, they are amazed that I am still together. It's a large family that I'm staying with. There is a grandmother and grandchildren, as well as other adults. All of the attention and love is able to take me away from my immediate problems. But between you and me, I feel as though I am a foreigner in my own homeland.

I have no reading materials. There is nothing here in English. I have no decent clothing. I have already lost one bag and arrived here with only underwear and socks. I forgot everything and I have to be escorted everywhere I go. I am very disoriented. I hope you have contacted the US immigration officer to find out the whereabouts of my ID card, and military exception papers. I need these documents. Because I am here with no ID card, or any other kind of identification, I am worried about my status here, more than ever before. The Yemen government is conducting massive arrests of whom they think to be Somalis. Millions of Somalis have fled to Yemen, and none of them are in the refugee detention center. The UN is requiring the refugees to be at the detention center in order to provide them supplies to meet their needs. Since I am dark-skinned, I am often mistaken for being Somali and am in danger of arrest. Not only that, with no ID, I cannot obtain a job, travel, or do anything.

Please say hello to all of my coworkers and friends!!

Sincerely,
Adel