

DEMOCRACY IN ARABIA

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Note: In 1987, Charles Glass's journey through Greater Syria from Alexandretta in southern Turkey to Aqaba on the Red Sea for his book *Tribes with Flags* ended halfway when kidnappers abducted him in Beirut. A few days after the September 11 2001 attacks, he went back to finish the trip—in reverse, from Aqaba to the spot on Beirut's coastal highway where Hezbollah took him.

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After a long walk and many stories of Moses, Moabites, Edomites, and Nabataeans, my guide, Ahmed Amrin, took me for coffee in a small park. Tall, thorny and mangled trees, called *sidr* in Arabic, shaded the garden. Mr. Amrin and the café's owner, Bassam Abu Samhadana, both came from Kerak. In the center of Jordan, Kerak was known for a magnificent crusader fortress that the Muslims had conquered centuries ago. Mr. Amrin had served in the Jordanian army, which included military studies in Britain, before moving to Aqaba to become a tour guide in a country without tourists. His colleague, Mr. Abu Samhadana, opened a café near Aqaba's seafont.

The café, a hut with a Pepsi logo canopy and white plastic tables that dappled the park, sat in a triangle of open land surrounded by city streets, restaurants, and commercial buildings. Most of the tables hosted large families. Mothers, fathers, grandparents, and uncles talked. Children ran amok among the *sidr* trees. In a corner of the garden, three women smoked narghiles, sucking hard on the long tubes to make the water bubble and the smoke fly. “*Sharameet*,” Mr. Amrin explained. Prostitutes. Mr. Amrin admitted they were Jordanian, but they were not from Aqaba. They were most assuredly not, he said when I asked, from Kerak.

Bassam Abu Samhadana poked in and out of our conversation, administered affairs in the café and gave us lunch he’d made himself at home. We feasted on a large pan of *kafta*, minced and spiced lamb in yogurt, that we ate communally. Each of us grabbed bites from the flattened circle of meat with our silver spoons or pieces of Arabic bread and took billows of white rice from a bowl. While we ate and drank tea, Bassam Abu Samhadana told us Aqaba’s gossip in as relaxed a manner as if he’d been seated on a divan smoking a narghile and musing on the visions in its rising smoke.

In the evening, I walked alone along the beach, read the newspapers, ate a Lebanese dinner at the Ali Baba and returned to Bassam’s outdoor café. The day’s heat had settled, leaving Bassam’s garden cool and silent. Long necklaces of fairy lights, every other one off like a closed eye, dangled among the branches. A few hours earlier, I had watched children swim at Aqaba’s last free beach—a dirt shore where women coddled babies and let the sea brush the hems of their long dresses. Boys, no more than eight or nine years old, charged by on lithe and small Arab mares, plumes and spangled bridles ablaze in the sunset. Blankets and rugs draped every inch of dry earth nearest the water, where men and women, not one immodest enough to wear a swimming costume, wrapped the remains of their picnics and called their young to come in from the waves. Away from the shore, boys in jeans or

shorts kicked a football, others bought ice cream and popcorn from a two-wheeled stall. Wet children wrapped themselves in large towels, crouched with their backs to the wind and shivered. The wind rose, from the northwest, like T. E. Lawrence's Arabs when they conquered the Turkish garrison here in 1917, hurling desert sand and pebbles at the dying day.

Out of the darkness, between my chair and the kiosk where the staff prepared coffee and food, Bassam approached wearing a red-check kaffiyeh around his neck. He unwound the fluffy headscarf and handed it to me. "My mother made this," he said. "It's wool." Stretched out, it was a yard of white cotton into which his mother had sewn dyed wool in elaborate patterns. People used to tell me that red-check kaffiyehs like that were for the bedouin. Peasants, the fellahin, wore black and white. Bassam told a waiter to bring me tea and a narghile.

The waiter dropped the water pipe and a box of hot coals to keep us warm beside the table. "You want more coal?" Bassam asked. I was warm enough. The waiter ran back to the hut for a smaller coal carrier with chips of charred wood, *fahm* in Arabic, for the pipe. He placed the embers on a mound of wet tobacco at the summit of the silver stem above a glass vase of water. The ceremony proceeded: He tested the tobacco, blew on the coals and inserted a plastic mouthpiece into the wood tip of an accordion cord. The sweet smoke, filtered through clear water, let me dream like a Turkish pasha.

Bassam, rubbing his hands close to the fire, asked if I liked the tobacco. Pleased, he said, "It's apple." He flavored his tobacco with other fruits, but apple was his favorite. He told me the story of his business. He had come to Aqaba as an inland tourist a year after Jordan ended its official state of war with Israel. He saw a disused plot of trees and shrubs and weeds between a traffic roundabout and some restaurants and asked the town's government for a permit to sell coffee on it. It was agreed that, if he cleaned the site and the public liked his coffee, he could stay. "I opened with a half kilo of coffee, two kilos of sugar, two kilos of

bananas, and two kilos of oranges.” He spent what little money he had in the bank on clearing the weeds and rubbish and building the kiosk. With his profits from sales of tea, coffee, and fresh juice, he bought more coffee, more sugar, more fruit. “I cannot drink juice here anymore,” he said. “I see it too much. But if I go to Syria, I drink orange juice every day.” The business prospered. Pepsi put a canopy on his kiosk and provided a cooler for its bottles. Bassam was joining the world economy.

Israelis came to his café, usually on day trips from Elat, and Bassam welcomed them. An Israeli guide named Menachem brought group tours to rest and drink tea under the *sidr* trees. I assumed Bassam had to pay him something in return. There were problems with the Israelis. What? Stealing, he said. What did they steal? Glasses. Glasses? “We cleared the tables,” Bassam recalled. “Twenty glasses were missing. I asked Menachem to get them back. Menachem said they were taking them to drink later. I told him we had plastic cups for that.”

Despite the thefts, Bassam served the Israeli day-trippers and counted glasses before they left. When the Palestinian uprising against military occupation began at the end of September 2000, the Israelis stayed in Elat. Western tourists, apart from a few hearty pilgrims, avoided the whole region. The source of Bassam’s suffering was neither the Israelis who stole glasses nor the foreigners who feared visiting Jordan, but the Jordanian bureaucracy. One conscientious bureaucrat almost cost him his business, his investment, and his livelihood. This officer of local government took it upon himself to enforce the law with an efficiency that many Western financial consultants believe the Arab world needs if it is to assume its place in the scheme of transnational, universal, utopian capitalism. This functionary was new to Aqaba, a man who knew the regulations, a man to help forge a land of laws and not of men, an arbiter of right and wrong, the kind of man whose rightful home might have been in the FBI, an “I’m all right, Jack” British trade union of the 1950s, or middle management at an American corporation. He did not belong in Aqaba.

Having been posted to the town from Jordan's more austere north, the official visited Bassam's café. He tasted the coffee and must have observed that Bassam's clean kitchen conformed to the rules of health and safety. He noted that previous local officials had issued Bassam the papers necessary to maintain the green kiosk, its cooker, its juice squeezers and its refrigerators. The kiosk-café had a valid permit. The plastic tables and chairs, scattered among trees for the relaxation of families and occasional tourists, did not. And the observant bureaucrat saw tables where the law did not allow tables. He saw people sitting in chairs that the law did not sanction. He must have seen glasses of tea and cups of coffee on those permit-less tables. Perhaps he heard a bit of laughter in the shade and observed children running round the prohibited tables on the earthen paths that Bassam had cleaned and swept amid grass that he had cut. The bureaucrat, this northerner, did his job. He had come to Aqaba to enforce the law, and he enforced it by sending men to seize every table and every chair and lock them in a government warehouse.

Patrons who had come to enjoy Bassam's garden and to muse over Persian tobacco smoke and Turkish coffee went elsewhere. Aqaba's citizens were not Italians to stand at a counter for a quick espresso before rushing to an office or shop. They had time for the rituals of the day, to wait for coffee to brew with cardamom seeds in a brass pot, to watch a young man light the coals and pack the tobacco into a hookah, to observe from a chair the universe revolving around them. Bassam lost them to other cafés, none so congenial as his had been, but where they might feel a chair beneath them and bang a table when the argument suited. His business declined, and the little garden resumed its empty, forlorn state. Bassam stopped sending money to his two sisters at university. Helping his father in Kerak, a filial duty, became difficult.

Bassam Abu Samhadana did what any good Jordanian whose prosperity was threatened by bureaucracy would have done: He wrote to the king. A new monarch had ascended the throne, a young man who had not been tested. The old king, as Bassam and

many others among his subjects abjured, would have dealt with the legal threat to Bassam's survival swiftly and justly. Young Abdallah, however, was a modern man. His mother was English, and his education came from the Western world where law and bylaws and regulations and rules were said to prevail. Such a modern king might leave the enforcers of law to do their work without royal interference. Abdallah's training—his English was more fluent than his Arabic—should have inclined him to let Bassam's remaining clients drink on their feet or drink elsewhere. Writing to such a king—unlike to his father, who had behaved like the true father of all his subjects—held perils. What if King Abdallah read the letter and rebuked Bassam for going over the head of a government official, accused him of demanding favors, prosecuted him for asking the king himself to violate the law? Bassam was a man of Kerak, and the men of Kerak were not afraid. He sent the letter, and he waited. A week is a long wait, when your business is dying and your sisters and father depend on you. Bassam waited many weeks, then many months. He survived in part because of the courtesy of loyal customers like Ahmed Amrin, who were willing to stand rather than seek another café.

King Abdallah's letter arrived, and Bassam rejoiced. The king had read the petition, weighed the facts of the case and concluded that the Governorate of Aqaba must restore to Bassam's café all its chairs and tables. Bassam took the letter to the government office building and showed it to the bureaucrat who had seized his property. Despite what amounted to a royal proclamation, the bureaucrat did not relent. While conceding that the king had written the letter, the man said it had no legal force. Instructions to release confiscated property had to be processed through channels. There were not only regulations—and the official had demonstrated his devotion to those—there were also procedures. And to the procedures, he was just as loyal. To enforce his decision in the case, the king would have to instruct a minister, who would pass the order down to the regional governor, who would send it from one office to another, where it would be signed and stamped by the appropri-

ate officials, until it reached the desk of the bureaucrat in Aqaba. The chairs and the tables remained locked in the warehouse.

Bassam had an acquaintance, also from Kerak, who knew the king. The Kerak man was a soldier, who had trained the then-Prince Abdallah years before in some aspect or another of military practice. Bassam contacted the soldier—by telephone or letter, I was not sure which—and asked him to tell the king what happened to royal decisions in Aqaba. The king had to be informed that, despite his ruling to the contrary, the tables and chairs remained locked away and Aqaba's finest garden café was empty. The soldier promised to bring the matter to King Abdallah's attention. Days, then weeks, passed without action from the palace or a call from the soldier. With business suffering, Bassam called Amman, the capital and home of the officer who had been a mentor to the young prince before he became the king, to impress upon his Kerak compatriot the urgency of the case. If his tables and chairs were not restored soon, the café would close and Bassam would return to Kerak a failed man. His disgrace would not fail to dishonor King Abdallah, whose writ would be seen not to run as far as Aqaba, as well as the officer from Kerak.

While I listened to Bassam's tale, told in a tranquil voice without rancor, and puffed my narghile, I imagined the dilemma of the officer in Amman. As at all royal courts, the man would have to await the right moment—perhaps when the monarch and his courtiers were talking about Aqaba or the people of Kerak or coffee or even tables and chairs. Such moments do not present themselves every day, yet his fellow son of Kerak was calling every day from Aqaba to demand justice. A man had to be careful when making requests of a king, but the same man had to protect his reputation among the people of Kerak. Months later, when Bassam had to consider bankruptcy and admitting to all in Kerak that his king and his Kerak intercessor had both failed him, King Abdallah was made aware of the insubordination of the assiduous bureaucrat in Aqaba. The fresh decision and its implementation were immediate, and, in Bassam's view, just: The bureaucrat was trans-

ferred to a desolate corner of the northern desert and eight tables and thirty-two chairs were delivered from the state warehouse to Bassam's garden. He was back in business.

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The tobacco was burning down, and the coals were ash. Several empty coffee cups and tea glasses had collected on the table. Bassam told the waiter to bring a last tea before he went home. I tried to pay him for the coffee, the tea, and the narghile, but he would not accept anything. All he allowed me to do, when the table was cleared and the kiosk locked, was tip the waiter.

It was after midnight when I walked along the shore to the hotel. The Red Sea, as still as the open eye of a corpse, caught the lights of four countries within a compass of forty miles. The map lines made no impression on the night. Aqaba was the reason for the lines, the frontiers, the divisions. Aqaba had been the goal of a revolt against an empire on behalf, not of the rebels themselves, but of more distant empires. The fall of Aqaba was a romantic, cynical saga, that had bequeathed a century of separation, of exodus, of bloodshed. The Turks could not hold Aqaba and, with it, the rest of what had been Greater Syria. Those who conquered it, occupied and divided it, had yet to destroy and remake it wholly in their image. Bassam did not take money for coffee and tobacco, and he sent what he had to his father in Kerak. This was no way to run a Starbuck's.

When the Arabs realized that France, Britain, and Zionism were claiming sovereignty over them after 1918, they resisted, longer perhaps than any other colonized population. And they were still holding out. In small ways, their lives could not conform to the standards set for them by the empires—first Britain's and France's, then America's—because they ate with their hands from a shared bowl, because they took time to brew coffee and prepare their tobacco, because desert traditions of hospitality and vengeance survived in their city houses, because they believed in

angels. The Western world had destroyed the mass forms of their protest—their nationalism, their socialism—and was even then bombing its latest manifestation: fundamentalist, violent Islam. Standing on ruins that Greeks had left more than two millennia ago, I looked at the shores of Egypt and what are now called Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. This land was indigestible. Its history was too long, its cultures too strong, its faiths too pervasive. The cost of their stubbornness has been high, but they go on paying. They have absorbed the good and the bad of civilizations that have passed here, but they have not been absorbed. They are the world's spoilers. Imperial histories chronicle expedition after expedition—by Pharaoh, by Titus, by the Shahs of Persia, by the legions of Byzantium, by Sultans in Cairo and Istanbul, by the British Army and the American armed forces—to suppress their rebellions, contain their passions and possess their wealth. Perhaps that was why I had returned, not out of pity, but in admiration.