

From bikinis to burkas by Kamal Al-Solaylee

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Shopping for bikinis with my four sisters in the summer of 1975 brought out the fashion beast in me, an 11-year-old living in exile with his family in Egypt.

"The colour on this brown two-piece makes you look darker," I tell my sister Raja. She picks a lime-green bikini instead. "I love this one so much, I want to wear it myself," I blurt out to Ferial, clinching her choice of a black-and-white striped swimsuit.

The fruit of that shopping trip hangs on the office wall of my Toronto apartment - a photograph taken a few days later of myself, my four sisters and three brothers on a beach in Alexandria.

The photo captures a moment of bourgeois life in the Middle East, before the region became associated in the Western collective psyche with exporting terror or the subjugation of women. It's an image of a large and admittedly privileged family, led by enlightened, secular parents from southern Yemen.

Yes, the same Yemen that, since Christmas Day, has been reintroduced to the world as a second Afghanistan or the third front in the war on terror - where my family still lives, in the capital, Sanaa. But the Yemen of today is nothing like the one where my older siblings came of age in the 1950s and 1960s. And when I speak to my family now, they have changed so much that it's hard to believe we are even related.

Yemen's new notoriety doesn't surprise me; what does is how all the warning signs went unnoticed for so long. I saw it in my own flesh and blood: An open-minded family defined by its love of arts and culture embraced hard-line interpretations of Islam and turned its back on social progress and intellectual freedom.

Whatever happens next in Yemen, my family there, and no doubt millions of other middle-class Middle Eastern families, has been losing the war against extremism.

Goodbye, Ringo Starr. Hello, street curfew

Our Camelot was the ancient port city of Aden. There in 1945 my father, Mohamed, then 19, wed the 14-year-old Safia, a shepherdess from Hadramut, a part of Yemen now known as the birthplace of the bin Laden family. With his high-school education and some support from my grandparents, my father started a small real-estate business in what we would call flipping today: He would buy old buildings, renovate and sell them at a profit, as well as renting some units to the British expatriates who "managed" Aden as a colony.

His properties multiplied in number almost as fast as his progeny, 11 in all, born from 1946 to 1964 - the Yemeni version of the boomer generation. The youngest is me.



Today, Aden is home to a growing, violent southern secession movement, and the place where al-Qaeda hit the USS Cole with explosives in 2000 while it was in the harbour. But, according to my family, it was once a model of peace and harmony.

"The Brits brought order," my father used to tell us. My sister Faiza talks of a cosmopolitan port where European ships would stop on the way from Europe to the Indian subcontinent, often bringing with them such coveted merchandise as the latest fashions or, more thrillingly for my then-teenage sisters and brother, early Beatles albums. For some reason, Yemenis especially liked Ringo Starr.

But that security was rocked by guerrilla uprisings in the mid-1960s, and came to an end in the fall of 1967 when the nascent nationalist movement declared independence from the British.

That November, rebels kidnapped my father for two days and released him for a large sum of money, under one condition: We were to pack and leave Aden in 24 hours. Imagine having to find a new home for a family of 11 children in less than a day. Decades later, my sisters would still ask an aunt if she ever found the Beatles records my mother made them leave behind.

What followed were 15 years of exile between Beirut and Cairo. By the late 1970s, though, neither of those tension-filled cities felt safe or welcoming any more, and my father decided there was no choice but to return to Yemen - not to socialist Aden, but to pro-business Sanaa in the north, which was slowly making contact with the outside world after decades of insular, caste-based pseudo-monarchy.

Sanaa? That medieval-looking city? As a young gay man still exploring his sexuality, I knew I couldn't spend the rest of my life in a place where hangings were still held in broad daylight as part of *sharia* law. But I had to go along, and lived there from 1983 to 1985.

It was a jolt to the system: The streets came to a standstill at 9 p.m. - no one went out, and vans carrying uniformed security guards roamed the city as added security. It was too much silence for a teenager used to the bustle of Cairo.

My sisters' adjustment was more complex. Women were now expected to cover their heads and wear the *burka* in public, and walk a few steps behind their husbands, fathers or brothers. When I was reunited with my cousin Yousra, who had been living in Sanaa for more than a decade, I reached out to give her a hug, but she pushed me away and shook my hand instead, within the bounds of propriety.

In 1985, I left to study in England, and later migrated to Canada, returning periodically to Sanaa for visits that became more distressing as the years passed, as the gap narrowed between my family and Yemen but widened between them and me.

Of migrants and militants: The Saddam Hussein factor

Local events didn't help. One of the turning points in Yemen's recent history came in 1990, shortly after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August. Yemen stood out for its support of Saddam Hussein's invasion, and paid a dear price.

As hundreds of thousands of migrant Yemeni workers in Saudi Arabia and neighbouring Gulf countries were expelled in retaliation, many of them settled in Sanaa. A small capital city in an impoverished country, already ill equipped to serve its citizens, it cracked under the pressure.

Streets teemed with the unemployed, particularly young men, many of whom succumbed to the Wahabi brand of Islam that the exiled workers had picked up in Saudi Arabia and brought back.

At the co-ed Sanaa University, female students began to complain about harassment from repatriated Yemenis who blamed women's education for the fast-rising unemployment. I don't recall seeing a single beggar in Sanaa during the early 1980s. Now, they stood at virtually every street corner. That medieval but safe city was now gritty - and still medieval.

I paid a visit to my family in the spring of 1992, my first in almost six years, and was shocked to see how just a few years changed us both so dramatically. There was a defeatist quality to their lives, while mine had hopes of a better future. My sisters seemed especially dispirited. Four of them worked for a living, but although their jobs gave them some economic independence, their lives remained limited. Beyond their commute to work, they rarely ventured anywhere other than grocery or clothing stores.

Returning again in the summer of 2001 - my first visit since I had moved to Canada in 1996 - I encountered a family that was a lot closer to the stereotype of regressive Muslim culture than I had ever known.

The veils were in full view. Everybody prayed five times a day. My brothers were unapologetically sexist in their dealings with their wives. Was this the same family that once took turns reading the great works of literature and subscribed to four newspapers daily, three in Arabic and one in English?

One of my brothers was actually suggesting that his eldest daughter need not go to university because education wouldn't help her much as a housewife. One of my sisters, who is in the 1975 beach photo, now works as a librarian at Sanaa University and wears the full *niqab*, covering her whole face except, just about, the eyes. One day, she followed me around town for half an hour, just for fun, to see if I would recognize her. I never did.

Collectively they have become television addicts. Satellite TV, featuring hundreds of channels from the Arab world and beyond, has taken over from reading and socializing as the main form of entertainment. Why? Because among the many channels you can watch are the more Islamist ones (Hezbollah's Manar TV, for example) that promote a rigid version of the faith.

By the time I visited Sanaa again in 2006, anti-Western and pro-Islamist sympathies intruded on virtually every conversation with friends, neighbours and family. The presence of al-Qaeda is never spoken of as positive, but it's not challenged or condemned either.

The real danger is the tacit acceptance - an acceptance that has been building slowly for more than two decades and has claimed even progressive families like mine.

The government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, in power for more than 30 years now, is too busy protecting its own interests from Yemen's relatively small oil wealth - businesses contributing to it include some Alberta oil companies - to show any real interest in the well-being of its middle-class citizens.

Under his watch, Yemen has gone from a poor country to the most destitute in the Arab world. He fortified his stronghold on the country's larger cities in the north (Sanaa, Taiz, Houdeida), but lost control of the vast tribal terrains outside them. The result is a political culture where the cities are riddled with government red tape, while everywhere else is virtually lawless.

Comparisons to Afghanistan are not entirely warmongering on the part of the U.S. media. My family is reasonably well connected, so it keeps surviving one crisis - food and water shortages, health scares - after another. But for how much longer?

Coming down to a photo finish

In a black photo album tucked inside an old filing cabinet, I keep more recent family photographs, from my visits to Sanaa, or ones they send in the mail. I don't believe that even my closest friends have seen them. The rare times I look at them, I see only a family that has betrayed its secular, intellectual history and has either chosen or been forced to accept intolerance instead.

One photograph from April, 2006, particularly infuriates me. My family's penchant for group photos never wavers, but this time my eldest brother voices his concern about my sisters being photographed in their "indoor" clothes.

"What if the men who work at the photo-developing shop get to see your sisters in short sleeves or without a head scarf?" he asks, as if it's something I should have thought about myself. This is the same brother who is standing behind me in that 1975 picture I love so much.

My sisters immediately see his point. I'm stunned. We reach a compromise. I can pose with my sisters and mother if they wear the *hijab*, or at least long sleeves and skirts. I fake a smile as my heart breaks. The last thing I want is an argument on my last night in Sanaa.

I haven't seen my family since.

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