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A job at a Saudi newspaper offers a rare look inside a closed society.

**BYLINE:** LAWRENCE WRIGHT

**BODY:**

"This is a newspaper?" I asked the cabdriver in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, as he pulled up in front of the lavish new headquarters of Okaz, the most popular paper in the kingdom. I had expected the usual dingy firetrap that characterizes newspaper offices all over the world, but this building loomed over the humble neighborhood like a royal palace. Workmen were still laying marble tiles on the steps as I entered a towering atrium. Envious reporters for other newspapers call Okaz's new headquarters the Taj Mahal. Saudi men whom I took to be reporters solemnly passed by, wearing crisp white robes and red checked head scarves. I felt out of place and underdressed.

Newspapers are a surprisingly good business in a country where the truth is so carefully guarded. Members of the royal family, Al Saud, are obsessively concerned about their image; they own or control most of the Saudi press, which dominates the Arab world. Within the kingdom, there are more than a dozen papers on the newsstands every morning. The most authoritative of them, and the most progressive, Al-Hayat and Asharq Al Awsat, are owned by Saudi princes but published in London. They are constrained by the same taboos that cripple all Saudi publications, however: nothing provocative can be said about Islam, the kingdom's official religion; the government, which is effectively led by Crown Prince Abdullah; or the royal family, which is headed by King Fahd. Another paper, Al Watan, partly owned by Prince Bandar bin Khalid, models itself on USA Today. But Okaz remains the national favorite. On the coffee table in the lobby was a copy of that morning's edition, January 28, 2003. It was like an Arabic version of the New York Post, filled with Hollywood gossip, and stories of djinns who haunt the sand dunes. Although ostensibly independent, Okaz is closely identified with Prince Naif bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, the Minister of Interior, who also controls the secret police and the media.

Up a flight of stairs, in a modest wing by itself, is the Saudi Gazette, an English-language daily published by Okaz, which had hired me for three months to help train young Saudi reporters. The job offered me a way of getting into the kingdom after more than a year of fruitless attempts to get a visa as a journalist. Working at the Gazette would also give me a vantage on the Saudi press, which had struggled for a decade to liberate itself from the bonds of government control. In 1990, just before the Gulf War, the government forced the media to wait a week before reporting on Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Satellite news coverage, which emerged as a force during that conflict, leaped borders, as did the Internet. The press gained a measure of freedom. Suddenly, there were stories

about crime, drug use, divorce, even the presence of aids in the kingdom. For the first time, Saudis were taking a critical look at their country and its problems. But after September 11th the media retreated; as a result, it largely missed the biggest story in the kingdom's modern history, blinding itself to the danger within its own society.

Walking around the Gazette, I soon found Dr. Muhammad Shoukany, the deputy editor-in-chief, sitting in a dim office overlooking the newsroom. There was a television in one corner, and a Mexican soap opera was playing on mute. Like most Saudi men, he wore a white thobe, a shirtlike gown that reached his ankles. His head scarf, called a gutra, was folded on the couch, but he wore the white skullcap that goes under it, which gave him a pastoral air. He is a stocky man, with a round face and a narrow salt-and-pepper mustache. At heart, he is an academic, not a newsman, and he teaches courses in English literature at King Abdul Aziz University, in Jeddah. As we talked, it seemed to me that his eyes were almost retractable, receding into slitted boredom when the subject was not of interest to him, then bulging with excitement when he was fully engaged-as when he told me about his great passion, Joseph Conrad. "Some of the characters in his early stories come from the Hadhramaut, which is where the bin Ladens come from," Shoukany said. "Also, in 'Lord Jim' there is one of the earliest mentions in literature of a Wahhabi preacher. Conrad is definitely a man of our time!"

Shoukany assumed that I had come to the country with a set of stereotypes about Saudis. I had spent some time in the Arab world-my wife and I taught for two years at the American University in Cairo long ago, and I had travelled in and reported from the Middle East-but I had never been in the kingdom before. Most of my encounters with Saudis had been in Cairo or London, and these Saudis were either political dissidents or disaffected scholars. "All we ask is that you judge us on our own terms," Shoukany said.

He led me through the newsroom, where two dozen editors and typesetters, most of them Indian expatriates, were working on Apple G4s. I could see layouts for the next morning's paper on the screens. The readership of the Gazette is drawn largely from the millions of foreign workers, like these editors, who do much of the essential labor in the kingdom, from driving cabs to manning the oil fields. World and national news is at the front of the paper, with separate pages for the Indian subcontinent and the Philippines, where most of the expats come from. There is also a culture section, a sports page (primarily soccer and cricket), business news, and editorials. Most of the international news comes from wire services. On Friday, Islam's holy day, there is a page on Islamic teachings.

In a side room, at a long library table, four translators from Sudan were scanning the daily Arabic press for usable stories. One of them wore a white turban and another had tribal scars on his cheeks. A Yemeni and a couple of Bangladeshi teaboys in brown uniforms patrolled the floor. Beyond the main newsroom, behind a long wall of glass, the local reporters were waiting to meet me.

I sensed the lethargy as soon as I entered the room. Cigarette smoke combined with a fluorescent pall to create a dense, subterranean atmosphere. Three young Saudi reporters greeted me with expressions that appeared welcoming but puzzled. I was also supposed to be training female reporters, but I hadn't seen a woman since I entered the building.

We sat down, and I asked them to tell me about themselves. There were two reporters named Hasan-Hasan Baswaid and Hasan Hatrash-but they were strikingly different. Baswaid, thirty-four, was tall and broad-shouldered, with sideburns and curly black hair, and omnipresent earphones for his mobile phone, which rang every few minutes, playing the theme from "Mission: Impossible." He wore jeans and a partly buttoned, untucked white shirt. His handsome face belonged on the cover of a romance novel. Hatrash, twenty-eight, was slight and short; he wore traditional Saudi clothes, a trim black goatee, and black glasses that tended to be at half-mast on his nose. Under his head scarf, however, there was a snaky mass of dreadlocks. At heart, Hatrash said, he was a musician, but that was a hopeless career choice in such a puritanical society. Both men had been working at the Gazette for several years; the third reporter, Mamdouh al-Harthy, had joined the staff only about an hour before I arrived.

"How do you like working here?" I asked them.

The two Hasans shrugged and looked away. "Maybe we can talk about this later, mon," Hatrash said. It was several weeks before I learned why he had a West Indian accent: he had honed his English by listening to Bob

Marley songs.

The serendipitous assignment of training young reporters, I may as well confess, thrilled me. I suspected that behind the closed gates of Saudi society there was a social revolution in the making. With some guidance, I thought, these journalists could help inspire change. Confronted with the demoralized reporters in my charge, however, I didn't know where to begin. My duties were vague. I was to "mentor" the reporters by hanging around the office for part of each day, and teaching them some elementary techniques of investigative journalism.

"Don't expect too much," Shoukany had warned me. "You can assign them stories, do whatever you want. You have complete freedom." I wondered what he meant by that.

My first big task was to help the local reporters cover the 2003 hajj, which began in February. Each year, at the end of the Islamic calendar, more than two million pilgrims arrive in Jeddah on their way to Mecca, forty miles to the east. It is the largest annual human gathering in the world. It is also the biggest event for the local press to cover, and competition for stories is fierce. The Gazette was sending four reporters-most of the male staff-to cover it; Hasan Hatrash would lead the team.

In the past, the hajj has been the scene of numerous tragedies: stampedes, fires, air crashes, bombings, bloody riots, and epidemics. The pilgrims, coming from all over the world, invariably bring with them assorted viruses and bacteria, and by the time this hajj started, on February 9th, there had already been outbreaks of influenza and meningitis in the kingdom. Hatrash wasn't worried, though. He told me that he insured his immunity by eating small green native lemons. "They protect me against everything," he said.

The expectation of war in Iraq made this hajj especially tense. If the war began before the pilgrims got home, they could be stranded for months. The Saudi government's ambiguous attitude toward the Iraq crisis-officially condemning it, but allowing American forces to use Saudi bases as a staging area for search-and-rescue missions-left the kingdom open to political demonstrations by Muslims who opposed the war. The government, remembering disasters of the past, was determined to squelch any such dissent. One of the most significant moments in modern Saudi history came at the end of the 1979 hajj. Several hundred Islamist radicals, many of them students, took over the Grand Mosque in Mecca, using the holiest spot in Islam as a forum for challenging the authority of the royal family. King Khalid obtained a fatwa from the clergy that allowed government troops to retake the mosque. Two weeks of savage, hand-to-hand combat in the underground chambers of the holy site left a hundred and twenty-seven Saudi soldiers dead and more than four hundred and fifty injured. French commandos provided the Saudis with an unspecified "non-lethal" gas. When that failed to flush out the terrorists, according to the head of Saudi intelligence at the time, Saudi forces dropped hand grenades through holes drilled into the chambers. Amazingly, a hundred and seventy rebels survived; sixty-three of them were beheaded, in the largest mass execution in Saudi history.

This year, as many as half the pilgrims would be women-the highest percentage ever-but, curiously, the Gazette was not sending any female reporters to cover the event. According to Shoukany, I was supposed to have three women under my supervision, but after a week at the paper I still had not met them. By then, I had spotted a sign on the first floor marked "Ladies Section," but I had no idea who, if anyone, was behind the door. Shoukany assured me that female reporters were permitted to attend meetings in the conference room, but they missed the first session I called, at four o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon. "I learned they go home early," Shoukany said apologetically.

The following day, with the meeting set for an hour earlier, three black-shrouded figures slipped into the Gazette conference room. Once they were seated, the male reporters followed, arraying themselves on the opposite side of the table. I sat awkwardly at the head. The women were all in black abayas and hijabs-the obligatory robes and head scarves-and one of them veiled her face as well. Only a pair of gold-rimmed glasses peeked out from the mask of cloth surrounding her eyes. Hanging from her chair was an alligator purse with a long gold chain.

The self-effacement of an entire sex, and, in consequence, of sexuality itself, was the most unnerving feature of Saudi life. I could go through an entire day without seeing any women, except perhaps some beggars sitting on

the curb outside a prince's house. Almost all public space, from the outdoor terrace at the Italian restaurant to the sidewalk tables at Starbucks, belonged to men. The restaurants had separate entrances for "families" and "bachelors," and I could hear women scurrying past, hidden by screens, as they went upstairs or to a rear room. The only places I was sure to see women were at the mall and the grocery store, and even there they seemed spookily out of place. Many of them wore black gloves, and their faces were covered entirely-not even a pair of plummy, heavy-lidded Arabian eyes apparent. Sometimes I couldn't tell what direction they were facing. It felt to me as if the women had died, and only their shades remained.

The reporter with the alligator purse was named Najla Fathi. It was a surprise to learn that Najla and her female colleagues were far better educated than the men on the staff, most of whom had not finished college. Najla, for instance, had obtained a master's degree in political science from the University of Louisville, in 1995. "And I haven't been outside the Arab world since!" she said. Her tone suggested anger or defiance, or even an attempt at humor, but it was maddeningly difficult to read her intentions without access to her facial expressions.

I wanted to get the Gazette reporters like Najla started on investigative stories while Hatrash and his team were covering the hajj. There was one piece I was particularly keen on. In March, 2002, a fire had broken out in the Thirty-first Girls' Middle School, in Mecca, a dilapidated four-story building that held eight hundred and thirty-five students and fifty-five teachers. According to initial reports, the fire had begun in the kitchen at about eight in the morning, creating panic. The only exit was locked; an elderly guard had wandered away with the key. Fifteen girls were trampled to death; more than fifty others were injured, some having jumped from the windows. According to eyewitnesses, a number of people had rushed to put out the blaze, but they were turned away by a representative of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice-the country's religious police-because the girls were not wearing their abayas. (The director of the commission denied these accounts.)

Female education, which was introduced in 1960, was born in controversy. Although females now outnumber males at the university level, only six per cent of women in the over-all population are employed, a statistic that has led religious conservatives to argue that education is "wasted on girls." After the fire, the head of the Presidency of Girls' Education announced that it had been "God's will." He said this at a press conference at which he awarded each reporter an expensive lambskin briefcase. I was told that he was later photographed surveying the ruins of the school in his ministerial robes; the pictures captured him stepping absent-mindedly on the abayas that had been left behind.

But it was the detail about the religious police blocking the rescue of the girls that sent the country into a paroxysm of introspection. Ever since the 1979 attack on the Grand Mosque, the muttawa'a, as these government-subsidized vigilantes are informally called, have become a far more invasive presence in the country. The lesson the royal family had drawn from that attack was that it could protect itself from religious extremists only by empowering them. The muttawa'a prowl restaurants and shopping malls and amusement parks, making sure that businesses have closed for prayer time and chastising women whose attire fails to meet their standards of modesty. They have been known to shoot up satellite dishes and break into private homes. The muttawa'a are usually trailed by official policemen, who are at their command.

The Saudi press made history by writing about the fire without first asking the Ministry of Information for permission. For several weeks, the government stood aside and simply let the press be free. "When will we ever be ashamed of our attitude towards women?" the editor of Al Riyadh asked his readers. "We ascribe all of society's ills to them. . . . Does the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice care about our wives, sisters, mothers and daughters more than we do?" The Gazette, which rarely criticized the government, demanded an investigation of the religious police and prosecution of those responsible for the deaths of the girls. By Saudi standards, the coverage was so relentless that even reformists were troubled. Eventually, the Interior Minister summoned the editors-in-chief of all the newspapers in the country and told them that the stories must stop. They immediately did.

For Saudi journalists, the drama over the girls' school was both liberating and disconcerting. It confirmed that the Saudi press could play a dissenting role. But some said that, ultimately, the story had proved to be a setback; the

government sharply reduced the zone of freedom because it had been so alarmed by the popular fury the story had unleashed.

Near the end of the Thursday meeting, I suggested assigning a one-year-anniversary story about the event. I wanted a woman reporter to write it. "The question is, after a year, have things really changed?" I asked.

"Of course they have," Najla said impatiently, leaning on the table with what must have been her chin resting on her fist. "Everybody knows this. The head of the Presidency of Girls' Education was fired. They merged that department into the Ministry of Education. These are huge changes."

"To me, they seem like symbolic changes," I said. "The girls died because they were locked inside a ramshackle, overcrowded building with no fire escapes. Is the government actually building safe schools for girls? Are the teachers conducting fire drills? Are girls still locked inside?"

One of the women, Sabahat Siddiqi, shyly spoke up. "I will do this story, if you will tell me how," she said. I suggested that Sabahat talk to civil-defense authorities to see if they have improved fire safety, and to the Minister of Education to determine if the government had followed through on its pledge to build safe schools. I advised her to go to Mecca and talk to the families of the girls who died. She should visit girls' schools in Jeddah, and talk to women educators to see whether they were satisfied with the government's response. Sabahat nodded and earnestly took notes, but Najla laughed. "That's not the way things work here," she warned me.

While Hatrash and his hajj team were in Mecca, I took time to drive around Jeddah. I rented a Hyundai, with fifty-seven thousand kilometres on it, that had already been dented on every panel, including the roof. The traffic was frightening. "We have the highest number of accidents in the world, and we don't even have alcohol!" Hatrash had told me. He attributed the accident rate to the high level of stress in Saudi society, which also contributes to extraordinary rates of diabetes and high blood pressure in the kingdom. Every time a signal turned green, drivers in the far-right lane turned left across six lanes, drivers in the left-hand lane went straight, then we all sped like dragsters to the next light.

Jeddah is an ancient city that displays almost no evidence of the past. In the Old Quarter, houses made of coral brick with latticed balconies are crumbling from neglect. Buildings that fell decades ago are still rubble. Outside this small historical district, one enters what could be a seedy suburb of Houston, with familiar American franchises lining potholed boulevards. Despite the wealth of the bin Laden clan, Osama bin Laden grew up here, in a working-class neighborhood called Al Amariyya, where laundry dries on the balconies and shopkeepers chat on the stoops. Later, he moved with his mother and his stepfather to a new neighborhood; they lived in a modest white villa on Jabal al-Arab Street, with a filigree iron gate and a small courtyard. In 1984, when Osama took a second wife, he bought a run-down apartment house off Macaroni Street-so named because of an old pasta factory nearby.

At night, teen-agers cruise Palestine Street, one of Jeddah's main thoroughfares, which begins in the desert hills on the east side of town and ends at the Red Sea. On the beach, families picnic and go for camel rides and sport about in fanciful neon-lit donkey carts. Between the beach and a spit of land that holds the summer royal palace, a majestic fountain spouts eight hundred and fifty-three feet into the air, making it the tallest in the world. (Jeddah also boasts the world's largest Chuck E. Cheese pizza parlor.) Everything of value that Saudi Arabia produces-i.e., oil-comes out of the Eastern Province, on the other side of the country, where supertankers ply the Persian Gulf on their way to refuelling the industrial world. The Jeddah Islamic Seaport, on the other hand, is devoted almost entirely to imports-food, clothing, appliances, furniture, and electronics, which fill the stores in this highly consuming but notoriously unproductive society.

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded in its modern incarnation in 1932, by Abdul Aziz ibn Abdul Rahman Al-Saud. The first oil boom hit in the early fifties, and soon desert nomads were docking their yachts in Monaco and renting entire floors of the Ritz. By 1981, per-capita income was more than twenty-eight thousand dollars, about equal to that of the United States at the time. Saudi Arabia seemed to be on the way to becoming the richest nation in history, the global landlord. Oil prices have fluctuated since then, but today, with oil again at more than

thirty dollars a barrel, the Saudi per-capita income is less than seven thousand dollars, around that of Mexico. (Statistics in the kingdom are rarely more than guesses. An employee at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry cheerfully told me, "At the chamber, we cook our own figures.")

The oil wealth of the country runs first through royal pockets. Various businessmen and economists speculate that as much as thirty or forty per cent is skimmed by the Al Saud family. "We build forty-million-dollar palaces for even minor princes," an architect told me. Those closest to the crown are staggeringly wealthy. "Abdul Aziz bin Fahd, a son of King Fahd, is in his early thirties, and his wealth alone could solve the entire unemployment problem of Saudi Arabia," Mohsen Al-Awajy, a lawyer and a spokesman for Wahhabi dissidents, told me. "There are billions upon billions in his account. Nobody can challenge him. Nobody can ask the royal family, 'Why?' "

Still, with Saudi Arabia containing one-fourth of the world's known oil reserves, the government has no need to tax its citizens. Education and health care are free. But there is little evidence of public wealth or charity. As I explored the kingdom, I noticed few parks or playgrounds or museums. There are not enough universities or private schools to serve the population; practically no research institutions; few public arts groups; and no human-rights organization. Philanthropy fails to make up for the government's neglect; for one thing, the absence of taxes means that there are no charitable deductions and therefore no financial incentives for giving.

The fact that there are no secular charities or non-governmental institutions or, of course, political parties-civil society, in other words-means that there is no moderate, stabilizing middle ground between the government and the clerics. This situation has, naturally, elevated the power of religious conservatives. Although many of its own citizens struggle to make do, the Saudi government sends about two billion dollars a year in aid to other Islamic countries, building mosques and madrassas, underwriting religious universities, distributing books and tracts, funding charities-and supporting jihad. These donations, approved by the small inner circle of elderly princes who run the government, are made with an eye toward placating the country's religious extremists; they also insure that the Wahhabi strain of Sunni Islam, the official dogma of the kingdom, will be the Muslim voice heard above all others.

Life in the kingdom changed after the 1979 attack on the Grand Mosque. Wahhabi clerics, with their fear of outside influences, waged war on art and the pleasures of the intellect. Music was the first victim. Umm Kulthum and Fairouz, the songbirds of the Arab world, disappeared from the Saudi television stations. A magnificent concert hall in Riyadh was completed in 1989, but no performance has ever been held there. The Islamic courts have even banned the music played when a telephone call is placed on hold. There had been some movie theatres, but they were all shut down.

Since the mosque attack, religion has become a steadily increasing part of the Saudi school curriculum, so students have less exposure to science, art, and languages. "My kid is in the fifth grade," Omar Bagour, a columnist for Al Madina and a professor of economics at King Abdul Aziz University, told me. "Out of twelve subjects, seven are pure religion. You tell me a system of this nature is going to bring into the labor force a highly qualified Saudi? Bullshit." The religious establishment, however, wants education to become even more Islamic. "Educational systems of atheist nations and civilizations cannot be like the systems of a believing nation," Saalih Ibn Humayd, a Saudi cleric, warned in a recent speech. "This country represents the power of Islam. . . . Any attempt to change this status will be vehemently opposed."

The religious establishment makes sure that millions of Islamic books are translated into other languages each year, but very few books are translated into Arabic. "Censorship of books is more rigid now than forty years back," Muhammad Salahuddin, a columnist for Al Madina, told me one night at dinner. "Back then, I could buy a copy of 'Das Kapital' in Mecca. Now you cannot dream of finding such books."

Although there are several popular Saudi painters in the kingdom, the Wahhabi ban on the representation of human beings or animals makes for geometric abstractions and unpeopled landscapes, a studied avoidance of the real. There was even a cultural war over the Starbucks logo-a mermaid, which, strictly speaking, is neither human nor animal but mythological. The religious police complained about the emblem when the company opened its first store, in Riyadh, in 2000; under pressure, Starbucks changed its logo. Government authorities

eventually overruled the complaint, and by the time I got to Jeddah the mermaid was back on the company's signs.

One evening in Riyadh, I went to the National Museum after evening prayers. It is a spectacular building, made of Arabian limestone and designed, by the Canadian firm Moriyama & Teshima, to resemble the gently bending wall of a desert wadi. I walked through the vast exhibition halls alone, except for a Saudi couple and their young daughter. I could hear their footsteps echoing just behind me, and their voices, hushed in the emptiness. The display cases told the history of the Arabian Peninsula, from the dinosaurs and the early petroglyphs to the triumphant arrival of Islam. Eerily absent from the exhibit are representations of the people who lived there. I suppose that was why there were practically no other visitors in the museum; it was a story with no characters.

In one of the grand halls, I noticed an odd cul-de-sac, under a stairwell, where I found a painting of a human face—the only one in the museum. It was a wall drawing from the village of Al Fao, from the second or third century A.D., depicting a man with a garland around his curly hair. It looked like a Roman Christian icon; at that time, Jews and Christians were making inroads among the polytheists of the peninsula. The man had wide, round eyes, like the figures in the frescoes of Pompeii. I suppose it was a tribute to the importance of this miniature portrait that it was displayed at all; still, to be hidden under the stairs, almost as if it were pornography, made me admire as never before the power of the human form.

One day in Jeddah, I went across town to see Jamal Khashoggi, who was then the deputy editor of the Arab News, the main English-language competitor of the Saudi Gazette. We met in his office. He is a tall man with a trim beard and a pale, moon-shaped face. He had covered the Afghan jihad sympathetically, and had been a friend of bin Laden's; but he had rejected the Islamist movement when it turned toward terror. After September 11th, he was practically the only Saudi journalist who addressed the cultural failures within Saudi society which contributed to that tragedy. "Despite the enormity of what happened, we are still in denial," he wrote a year after the event. "We still cling to unlikely conspiracy theories and eye the truth with suspicion. The most pressing issue now is to ensure that our children can never be influenced by extremist ideas—like those fifteen Saudis who were misled into hijacking four planes on that fine September day, piloting them, and us, straight into the jaws of hell."

After tea had been served, Khashoggi and I began talking about the term "schizophrenic," which many Saudis use to characterize the quality of their lives. Khashoggi said it referred to the split between what he called "virtual" Saudi Arabia and "real" Saudi Arabia. "The virtual Saudi Arabia actually exists in its rules and in the minds of the people," he told me. "For instance, in virtual Saudi Arabia there is no satellite television. In principle, and by law, you are not allowed to own a satellite dish. But in reality we are the biggest consumers of satellite television in the Middle East. Not only that, Saudi businessmen are also the biggest investors in satellites. In principle, and by law, Saudi Arabia is not supposed to have interest-based banking, but in fact ninety per cent of our banking system is interest-based. And it goes on and on. The solution for Saudi problems is to bring the virtual world and the real world together."

I asked Khashoggi what role the press could play in the country's efforts to change. "I don't think the press can play a role," he told me. "I don't see a single paper calling for reform. The papers are not structured in a way to make that possible." (Every editor-in-chief is ultimately approved by the Minister of Interior, who is also in charge of the country's secret police.) Khashoggi pointed to a broad petition for reform that had been put forward, in February, by a hundred and four Saudi intellectuals. Crown Prince Abdullah, the de-facto ruler of the country, had received the signers warmly, but not a single newspaper had published their list of demands. The limits of press freedom were always changing, Khashoggi explained. "We are pushing the boundaries but at the same time being cautious," he said. "Now it's accepted that we can get on the toes of the mayor but not those of the governor."

Later, I met with Hussein Shobokshi, a columnist for Okaz and a wealthy building contractor, who embodies the progressive, often American-educated business community. (He graduated from the University of Tulsa.) Shobokshi was a member of the board of trustees of the private female college in Jeddah. He is a good-looking man, with large, sleepy eyes and a wry sense of humor. His father was head of Okaz and the founder of the Saudi Gazette, and Hussein is a major stockholder. He told me that there had been some progress in press freedom in the past decade: "Now we don't get locked up because of what we say; we get locked up because of what we do."

The girls'-school story, Shobokshi said, was "a very important dialogue between the government and the press. But there is no new cause celebre."

"If you were trying to point young reporters to one story that could shake the country, what would it be?" I asked him.

"Sewage," he said emphatically.

Twenty years ago, Shobokshi told me, Jeddah had been provided with the money to build a modern sewage system that would accommodate the fast-growing city. The government official in charge of the project, however, took the money and built himself a mansion in San Francisco and a palace in Jeddah that is equipped with a discotheque and a bowling alley. As a result, Shobokshi said, the streets in Jeddah are constantly filled with tanker trucks to drain the city's cesspools. Worse, sewage has got mixed into Jeddah's groundwater, and this has contaminated drinking water in many parts of the city. "We have new diseases of the eye and skin that didn't exist here ten years ago," Shobokshi said. "Lung and breast cancers are forty per cent above the national rate. Hepatitis is so high that it has to be classified as an epidemic. Marine biologists tell me that certain fishes have become extinct because of the overflow. Swimming will be history."

Shobokshi said that he had travelled to Delft University of Technology, in Holland, for advice. "I gave them all the figures. They told me, 'Hussein, you've got a time bomb.' The sewage right now is dumped in a huge lake above the city. The walls of this lake are made of sand. And Jeddah is on a geological fault! They said that if there's an earthquake of five on the Richter scale it will take six hours for the entire city of Jeddah to be flooded with sewage water one and a half metres deep."

"What happened to the guy who stole the money?"

"The government investigated and it was ruled that he should pay a penalty and go to jail," Shobokshi said. "But then he was pardoned because his brother is the private secretary to the King."

Shobokshi confided that he was initiating what he called "the first-ever class-action lawsuit in the kingdom." He was gathering five thousand signatures and had hired ten young lawyers to prepare the case. Nobody had yet written about the suit in the press, and he agreed that if the Saudi Gazette published a series of stories about the sewage crisis he'd give the paper a scoop about the lawsuit. He had me hooked, and he knew it. "This is history with a capital 'H,'" he said.

Afew days later, I was handed the draft of an article by Mamdouh al-Harthy, the new reporter. He was from a prominent Bedouin tribe, but instead of a thobe he usually dressed in upscale casual Western clothes-jeans, oversized T-shirt, and sunglasses-with the name of the designer prominently displayed on every item. "Chicks notice such things," he advised me. When we went to the mall together, he stopped in his tracks like a bird dog and watched a pair of girls, entirely swathed in black, descending an escalator. "Check 'em out!" he said, without irony.

Mamdouh was a child of the souk. His father owned an elegant shop downtown that sold dates and candies. He had a merchant's facility with languages, speaking Urdu and Turkish, and his English was so colloquial that I never thought to worry about his writing ability. He had been working on a story about the hajj travel industry. His first draft began, "Hundreds of airplanes flying hajjis to Saudi Arabia to performed hajj .most of those planes go back with no single passenger such as the Turkish airlines .other airlines claimed they r full occupied." I read through the brief piece, wondering what he could possibly mean by "the income is very pen fetal."

"What do you think, chief?" Mamdouh asked.

"I want you to write this for me in Arabic," I said.

"No problemo," he said, but he sounded a little puzzled.

When he finished, I took his Arabic draft to one of the Sudanese translators.

"It's excellent Arabic," he told me.

I went back to Mamdouh. "How far did you go in school?" I asked.

"I've got a B.A. in English literature."

That stopped me. "O.K., now you're in charge of your own education," I told him. "Stop watching girls. Read a book in English. Watch BBC. Rent American movies. Whatever you do, do it in English. In the meantime, write your articles in Arabic first, then translate them."

"O.K., chief," he said, but he sounded discouraged.

All the reporters had problems writing English-that was what the Indian editors were there for. The editors could sometimes salvage pieces that were inscrutable to me. But I wondered why the paper refused to hire an experienced bilingual reporter. Every other week, it seemed, a new reporter came on board, often someone just out of high school. They weren't really expected to produce. Some reporters went weeks without writing a single story, and when they did it might be about an event that had taken place ten days before. Many mornings, the paper didn't carry any local news at all. I began to wonder if it was an accident that the local reporters were ill-equipped to handle the job.

I was heartened, therefore, to read some engaging stories from the Gazette team in Mecca. "The tent city of Mina, on the outskirts of Makkah, is all ready to welcome the pilgrims," the Gazette reported on the eve of the hajj. Five hospitals with more than seven hundred beds were set up. Thirty thousand butchers staffing five slaughterhouses were on hand to dispatch hundreds of thousands of sacrificial animals. According to a story filed by Hasan Hatrash, four thousand Boy Scouts would have new software available to help pilgrims locate their cots among the forty-four thousand air-conditioned tents that filled the valley like a white-capped sea. "Scouts until recently used to serve in excess of ten thousand lost pilgrims a day," Hatrash wrote.

The second morning of the hajj, immediately after the dawn prayer, the pilgrims proceeded to Mt. Arafat, twelve miles outside Mecca. There, nearly fourteen hundred years ago, the Prophet gave his last sermon. The second day is supposed to be a day of repentance and self-examination, but the air was charged with politics. "Don't you see how the enemies are gathering and are preparing to wage war on you?" the Grand Mufti, Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah Aal Al-Sheikh, said in his noon sermon. Many pilgrims told the Gazette team that they hoped Iraq would be "victorious" in the coming conflict. "America wants to control the Arab world and its wealth. We are all soldiers for Iraq," a Syrian hajji said.

Later that day, Hatrash called me. He was furious because many of the stories that he and his team were writing weren't getting into the paper-"and Najla Fathi gets a big story about a conference five days old!" It was true that Najla's story, about a cultural symposium in Mecca, was a little stale, but it was the only piece we had in the paper reflecting the participation of women in the hajj. Hatrash also had a piece about the first baby born during that year's pilgrimage, on Mt. Arafat, but another story, about a hajji who had a heart attack and was brought back to life, didn't run.

"You sound terrible," I observed.

"It's the flu, mon," he said.

"I thought the lemons were supposed to protect you."

Hatrash admitted that he'd neglected to buy any. I worried that he was too ill to supervise the other reporters; some of them were also getting the flu. "Now we will have to expect that they will bring it back to us," Dr. Shoukany said unsympathetically. "For the next two weeks, everyone will be sick."

The Gazette story the next morning was "faithful stone the devil, make sacrifices." After spending the night praying under the stars, the pilgrims had returned to Mina, each collecting seven pebbles along the way. Then they threw the pebbles at three stone pillars, called the Jamarat, which is where Satan tried to tempt the prophet Mohammed. The Stoning of the Devil, which lasts for three days, is the climax of the hajj; it is also the most dangerous period, as people jostle to the front to throw their rocks, and sometimes shoes or umbrellas, crying "Allahu Akbar!"

Mazhar Siddiqi, Sabahat's father and the national-affairs editor at the Gazette, was upset by the quotes from a couple of pilgrims who said that they were imagining George Bush when they hurled the pebbles at the Devil. "What is behind this?" he asked me. "Saudi Arabia never has been a place that would talk against other countries. It has always been known for its neutrality." The subhead of the stoning story was "14 pilgrims killed in stampede." Around ten-thirty on the first morning of stoning, a group of hajjis leaving the Jamarat ran into another group just arriving; there was some shoving that quickly turned to panic. Fourteen deaths were sufficiently routine that they didn't merit a separate article.

"Something else we missed," Mazhar said grumpily the morning the pilgrimage ended. "It was the safest hajj in memory." This was despite three stampedes, and thirty-two pilgrims who died in traffic accidents, and five without valid permits who were run over as they tried to evade a checkpoint, and one Pakistani who was swallowed up by the sand while taking a nap. Altogether more than four hundred deaths were reported, most owing to natural causes. Hundreds more pilgrims suffered from heatstroke or food poisoning, but fortunately there were no epidemics. Of course, when the Gazette team came back to Jeddah, everyone in the office got sick.

I kept pressing Sabahat Siddiqi to produce a draft about the aftermath of the girls'-school tragedy. Sabahat, who is Pakistani, reads Arabic poorly, and so Najla agreed to study the news clips and assemble some notes for her. Najla began by reading bound volumes of Okaz in our library. Then she called Al Madina, which was only a few blocks away. She was told that she could request pages for fifty riyals each (about fourteen dollars), but as a woman she could not enter the information center, nor would library clerks bring the clippings to her in the ladies' section.

"The public library should have all the clippings on microfilm," I suggested.

"Women aren't allowed in the public library, except one day a week," Najla informed me. And since there was a limit on how much she would be allowed to copy-no more than a few pages at a time-it would take her weeks to gather all the material.

I told her I would call the editor of Al Madina and ask him to help her. Also, I was sure there was a library at the women's college which she could use. The important thing was to get the facts about what occurred when the fire started, and what the government had promised to do afterward.

"There's another problem," she said. "There are some people who don't like knowing about depressing things, and one of those people is me." She paused. "What makes me upset is that, in my reading, I see that maybe some people are covering up."

She wouldn't tell me what she had learned. After a few weeks, I asked her why she hadn't gone to Mecca to interview the families or visited local schools to see if fire codes had been enacted. "Things are getting better," she insisted. She refused to dig any deeper.

Her reluctance puzzled me. Perhaps she was afraid of the authorities; one of the editors had told me that the women believed I was forcing them to do stories that were critical of the government. But Najla was one of our most ambitious reporters. Perhaps she felt protective of her society and didn't want to expose its shortcomings, although she had not hesitated to express criticism in conversation. In any case, her caution was so deeply embedded that I could not break through. Without her aid, Sabahat could not continue, and the story died. The first anniversary of the school fire came and went, largely unremarked in the Saudi press.

In frustration, I made some inquiries on my own. When I first heard of the tragedy, I had imagined that the girls were trampled as they fell in a stairwell or had been crushed against the door. Then I spoke to Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl, a law professor at U.C.L.A. and a member of the board of Human Rights Watch. He told me that he had received a call from a businessman in Mecca who claimed to be the father of one of the dead girls. "He was at work, a ten-minute drive from the school," Abou El Fadl told me. "He got a call and rushed over, and there he encountered police and firemen. He pushed his way through, and then he noticed the muttawa'a." A few minutes later, the father said, his daughter ran to the gate with a group of girls. The girls pleaded for someone to let them out. "She was screaming, 'Break the lock! Break the lock!' " Abou El Fadl continued. "The smoke was overwhelming, it was very hot. One of the girls was screaming that her clothes were sticking to her skin."

Seventeen fire engines had responded to the alarm, along with members of the civil defense. Between them and the desperate students stood the muttawa'a. None of the representatives of Saudi society standing outside the gate of the girls' school-the police, the firemen, the parents, the bystanders-were able to summon the collective will to ignore the muttawa'a and save the girls. The man who called Abou El Fadl said he was afraid of challenging the religious police. They sent his daughter back into the school to get her abaya. She burned to death. "He said, 'I want the criminals tried. They murdered my daughter. Help me bring justice,' " Abou El Fadl told me. But that was the last he heard from the man.

No one was prosecuted for the deaths. The chief of police in Mecca told the Associated Press at the time that he had arrived to find a muttawa'a-he mentions only one-quarrelling with a police officer. "I immediately instructed him to leave, and he did," he said. The government said that there would be a follow-up investigation, but nothing came of it.

Men in white, women in black: the basic Saudi wardrobe expresses a polarity between the sexes that is absolute. The men look monkish in their gownlike thobes, made of cotton or silk, and the black bands around their head scarves reminded me of halos. They are as nearly covered up as the women (except those who, like Najla, choose to conceal their face). At first, I was frustrated by how little information I could gain about a man from looking at his white clothes, but soon I learned to read the accessories-the pen, the watch, the shoes-each of which was freighted with status. Nearly every Saudi man has facial hair. A long, full beard marks a man as pious. An untrimmed beard, a thobe that is a couple of inches shorter than usual, and the absence of a headband to hold the scarf in place: this is the costume of fundamentalists and the muttawa'a. Some Saudi men wear socks and shoes, but many prefer flat sandals made of ostrich or crocodile skin. Head scarves have a red-check or white-on-white pattern, but even these seemingly identical garments are full of nuance to the Saudi eye, which picks up the Valentino or Christian Dior name sewn into the weave. Heavy platinum Rolexes or tag Heuers complete their wardrobes. (Islam allows only women to wear gold.)

The strict separation of the sexes is a comparatively recent phenomenon, as Abdullah al-Shehri, a professor of linguistics at King Abdul Aziz University, explained during a long conversation in a Starbucks. "There is a religious term, khalwah, which means a man and a woman who are unrelated and are behind a closed door," Abdullah said. "There is another term, ikhtilat. This is an invented term. It's heard only in Saudi Arabia, and is never mentioned in any religious text. It means 'mixing of more than two men and women.' There is a confusion between these two terms in the Saudi mind. The Prophet said whenever a man and a woman are in khalwah Satan will join them. But ikhtilat is part of the Saudi tribal culture. Before I was born, in the thirties and forties men and women used to celebrate weddings together. Now bride and groom have separate wedding celebrations."

"Traditions say that eating alone with your female relatives is shameful," Raid Qusti, a journalist, wrote earlier this year in a daring column for the Arab News. "Where in our religion does it say that sitting with your own family is forbidden?" Qusti complained that many Saudi men thought it was taboo to utter a woman's name in public. "Ask any Saudi male in the street what the names of his wife or daughters are, and you will either have embarrassed him or insulted him. Islamic? Not in any way." There are some parts of the country where a woman never unveils-her husband and children see her face only when she dies. "Women will always be the core issue that will hinder any social progress in Saudi Arabia," Qusti wrote. "We limit their roles in public, ban them from public participation in decision making, we doubt them and confine them because we think they are the source of all seduction and

evil in the world. And then we say proudly: 'We are Muslims.' "

A middle-aged Saudi told me, "I am worried about the next generation. They don't see any real women at all. You don't see each other's wives, daughters, sisters. Everything is masculine. And yet they are bombarded by images. They can easily see porn. They live in the imagination of sex all the time. We don't grow naturally, to be loved, not to be loved-we don't undergo these changes. Two-thirds of the marriages here are basically loveless. Many men cheat-there's a lot going on underground."

Some Saudi men openly joke about their behavior when they leave the country. "We're all sex maniacs, by the way," one said to me. He regularly flies to Morocco for female companionship. "There's a part of me that I share with all men, where women are concerned. And there's a part I share with Arab men. But there's a big part that only Saudi guys have in common."

The absence of socialization between men and women struck me as a potent factor in terrorist fantasies. The hijackers who killed themselves on September 11th were propelled in part by the notion of being rewarded in the afterlife with the company of virgins. Such abstractions don't seem quite so strange in a country where images of women piped through a satellite dish seem more vivid than actual Saudi women-whom the male reporters at the Gazette liked to call B.M.O.s, or "black moving objects."

The abaya obliterates fashion and curtains off women's bodies, but the gowns are various and full of meaning to those who can read the signs. "Some go from the head, some from the shoulder, some are open, some are closed," Najla explained to me. (We were speaking on the phone, as usual, since individual meetings between the two of us would have been frowned upon.) Sabahat's gown, she pointed out, buttoned up the front and had an attractive embroidered trim. There are others that look a bit like opera capes, with stylish hoods. Najla wears a closed abaya that is like a cotton poncho and is called a baltu. "My baltu is my personal design," Najla said. Every year, she goes to a tailor to have a new one made. "I always try to make it more conservative," she said. "A few years ago, I saw some abayas with a covering for the hands. I added that." She used to cover her entire face as well, but her glasses made that impractical, so she wears the niqab, a covering that goes over her nose and under the gold rims of her cat's-eye glasses. "By the way, some people think we make faces under the veil-and we do," she confided.

"Why do you cover your face at all?" I asked.

"In the world of male prejudice, why not?" she said. Another time, she told me, "I just don't like people staring at me."

She began wearing the abaya when she was about fourteen. She gave it up when she came to the United States to study, although she continued to wear the head scarf, with a long shirt and long pants. When Najla returned home, she adopted the full veil. "There's not any other girl in my family who has done what I did," she said. "They uncover their faces, they shake men's hands. I don't."

Before going to America, she studied biology at King Faisal University, in Dammam, living in a dorm, her window facing a high wall so that no one could see in. "After maghreb, the sunset prayers, I'd get really sad," she recalled. "I couldn't live there any longer. I was spending time learning English just to get my family to agree to let me go to America to get my degree. I didn't want to come back to Jeddah, because I was afraid they would make me marry someone I didn't like."

Hearing Najla's stories, I pictured her parents clenching their teeth as they dealt with this strong-willed daughter. "After three years in King Faisal, I said to my family, 'No more!' I quit school and came home. They said, 'Get married.' I said no." Her brothers were in America and she wanted to go, too. Najla's parents agreed to let her finish her bachelor's degree in Kentucky. "My first interest was in politics," she continued. "I spoke to my dad. He said, 'You won't go into politics-I won't spend a penny on you!' " Reluctantly, she began studying microbiology.

After she got her bachelor's degree, Najla wanted to remain in the States for more study, but her family ordered

her home to get married. "It was to someone I really didn't want," she said. She had never had a date in her life. The marriage ended quickly. "I had a divorce. I forced him to do that."

Divorce is a drastic step in a country where women's lives are so circumscribed. Without a man in their home, divorced women are shunned in Saudi society. As a consequence, they tend to form their own community; there is even a road in Riyadh called the Street of Divorcees. Nonetheless, a recent study found that more than twenty per cent of Saudi marriages end in divorce within a year. Saudi marriages suffer from all the usual afflictions-infidelity, incompatibility, household violence-but the biggest problem is polygamy. In Islam, a man is allowed up to four wives at a time, and many Saudi husbands continually change partners, a practice that causes constant heartache.

Having ended her marriage, Najla continued to push for independence. "I got out of microbiology," she said. "I thought, It's my life. I'm going to do what I want. I'm going to be a politician, no matter what other people think." She went back to Kentucky and got a master's degree in political science.

I asked her what she understood politics to mean in a country with no political system. She said that she was referring to something like social work. "It's a term I use," she said. Speaking of her Gazette work, she said, "This job might not be at the level of what I understand a 'politician' is." She added, "As a journalist, there are so many ways you can push society forward. But is it effective?" Another time, she admitted, "I no longer know what I want."

Najla travels quite freely, although she needs her father's written permission to leave town. Her family has a driver, but Najla doesn't like him, so within Jeddah she usually goes by cab. Either way, she thinks that it is improper to be confined in the same vehicle with a man. At the very least, she believes, there should be a partition between the woman and the driver. The best solution, she says, is allowing women to drive. "We have to pay for drivers," she said. "This is a burden on women."

Until 1990, there was no law forbidding women to drive-the social prohibition was sufficient. That year, more than two hundred thousand American troops-including women G.I.s who drove trucks and jeeps-arrived in the kingdom to repel the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Fifty Saudi women decided that it was the right time to challenge tradition. They met in front of a Safeway in Riyadh and ordered their drivers out of their cars, then took a thirty-minute spin through the capital. The police detained them, but there was no legal reason to arrest them. The Interior Minister immediately banned the practice. The Grand Mufti at the time, Abdul-Aziz bin Baz, helpfully added a fatwa, calling female driving a source of depravity. The female drivers' passports were seized, and those who were employed lost their jobs. Several of them had been professors in the women's college of King Saud University, and the King himself suspended them after their own female students protested that they did not want to be taught by "infidels."

On a warm Saturday morning, I went to the beach with Hasan Hatrash, Hasan Baswaid, and Mamdouh al-Harthy. They took me to a secluded compound north of town, run by the Sheraton. It was designated for Westerners, but nearly everyone there was Arab; it was one of the few places in Jeddah where men and women could mix freely. Hatrash brought his guitar, and a keyboard for me. We spent the day jamming, playing blues and reggae tunes beside the Red Sea. At one point, Hatrash launched into "Redemption Song," by Bob Marley. "Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery," he sang. "None but ourselves can free our minds."

Then we had a barbecue with a mixed group of their friends. After dinner, someone brought out an oud, the Arabian lute. Hatrash picked up a drum; Hasan Baswaid took over the keyboard; and the music took a sinuous turn. We sat there till late at night, men and women together, enjoying the light breeze wafting across the water from Africa-a fleeting vision of what Saudi Arabia could be like without the enforced piety that holds the sexes apart.

One afternoon, I was in the Al Mamlaka mall, in Riyadh, waiting with other shoppers for the stores to open after sunset prayers. A group of Filipinos who were hanging out in front of Planet Hollywood abruptly rushed away, like a flock of ducks taking flight. Behind them came a muttawa'a. He was a squat man with a wide, red face and a black beard down to his chest. Over his shortened thobe he wore a sheer black mashlah, a ceremonial robe, with gold piping on the sleeves. As he walked, he leaned backward into his authority, his thumbs stuck in the lapels of his mashlah. On either side of him, and a step behind, were two Saudi policemen; they were comical bookends,

tall and skinny, with berets and stringy fundamentalist beards. I decided to follow them around the mall, which has four stories, the top floor for women only. We circumnavigated the complex as the muttawa'a shooed the men to a nearby mosque, reprimanded women whose attire failed to conform to his standards, peeked in store windows at decapitated mannequins to make sure that no surreptitious shopping was taking place, and looked in restaurants to make certain that they were closed for prayers.

Later, I asked Prince Alwaleed bin Talal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the mall's owner, who is one of the richest men in the world, about the bullying muttawa'a. "I personally talked to the boss of that chap, who was a bit on the rough side," he told me. "If you talk to their leaders, they are logical, pragmatic people. I said, 'Your guys are scaring the heck out of people.' He gave them orders to change."

The religious police often seem intent on making themselves ridiculous: they will randomly black out faces in advertisements in the malls so that a men's store will feature a headless photograph of a man in a Hugo Boss suit, while posters in a nearby Gap are untouched. Yet most Saudis fear the muttawa'a. The week before Valentine's Day, the muttawa'a began going through card and flower shops, attacking anything that was red or had hearts on it; florists hid their roses as if they were contraband.

A number of Saudis told me that many of the muttawa'a are ex-convicts who would be unemployable except for the fact that in prison they memorized the Koran. They receive a bounty from the government for every arrest they make: reportedly, three hundred dollars for every Saudi, and half that for a foreigner. One Jeddah resident described them as "an occupying force." He told me that they had recently burst in on the graduation ceremony of his daughter's French elementary school and ordered the children to stop singing "Alouette."

One evening in Riyadh, I was climbing into a cab when I noticed something highly unusual: a woman standing on the corner with her head uncovered. She was remarkably beautiful, and looked directly at me. I could see that she was frightened. I almost asked if I could give her a lift, but that would have been an unthinkable breach of custom: as an unmarried couple in the same car, we could both be taken to jail. So I said nothing. My cab had to make a U-turn, and when we came back past the corner I saw the woman running. She now had the hood of her abaya over her hair. She ran to a shop and tried to open the door, but it was closed for prayers. Then I saw that she was being trailed by a Suburban with the emblem of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice on the door. The woman went from door to door, banging on the glass. Every instinct in me cried out to help her, yet I could think of nothing that would not make the situation worse. I rode on, feeling guilty and helpless, as the muttawa'a closed in.

At times, the main target of the muttawa'a's energy seemed to be not virtue but love. Boys and girls are kept strictly separate throughout their education, and the muttawa'a patrol public places, trying to keep romance at bay. Flirting takes place in opportunistic bursts, at stoplights or in the mall, where telephone numbers are furtively exchanged. Some young people adopt riskier strategies. To see his girlfriend in public, Mamdouh, the Bedouin reporter, dressed up in an abaya. "I do it all the time," he confessed.

Hasan Baswaid told me that the best way to get around the muttawa'a and meet girls was through the Internet. He had met a nice girl in a chat room, and he began talking with her on the telephone. Finally, they arranged to meet in a cafe, each bringing a sister as an escort. They enjoyed the date, and within three months Baswaid decided to propose. The girl accepted, and there was a small engagement party, which included meeting with her relatives to haggle over the dowry. "After that, she is my wife," he told me the day of the meeting.

The next morning, Baswaid returned to the office a married man—although he and his wife couldn't live together until after a wedding ceremony, which would be held a few weeks later. We met that day in the Okaz cafeteria. Like most newly married men, he was a little nostalgic for his bachelor days. We began talking about parties, and he recalled a rather wild event he had attended a few years earlier. Except for the feast days at the end of Ramadan and the hajj, all holidays, including birthdays, are nominally banned in the kingdom. One year, however, he visited his cousin in Dubai, and his cousin's wife, who is American, held a Halloween masquerade.

"She wanted me to dress up like a woman," he confessed.

"And did you?"

He laughed, a little embarrassed. "I went to the party for about fifteen minutes, then said I had to leave. I went upstairs with my cousin's wife. She owns a beauty salon." The relative put Nair on his legs and shaved his arms and mustache and even his eyebrows. "At the time, I wore my hair really long. So she curled it. She gave me some panty hose and a dress with socks in the bra. And then I went downstairs." The disguise was convincing, and he began to flirt-plopping himself on a good friend's lap. Soon, of course, the guests figured out who he really was. His buddy was mad, but the women were intrigued by his role-playing. "They were, like, kissing me. They even let me come into the women's bathroom!" He had a great time, he said. "But I hated myself in the morning. I woke up with no eyebrows."

"What does your family think about you being here?" Hasan Hatrash asked me one afternoon. We were sitting on the floor of the Gazette newsroom having lunch-a large platter of grilled chicken and rice, which we ate with our fingers.

"They're all terrified," I admitted.

"How did we get into this situation where everybody thinks we're terrorists!" he said miserably.

The West's fear of the Arab world was mirrored by many Saudis I talked to. Young people who had been studying in the West were afraid to return there. Businessmen confessed that they would feel humiliated if they tried to travel to the United States and were fingerprinted upon entering the country. These were men who had once enjoyed the nearly universal access that a Saudi passport vouchsafed them. For most of the country's business and intellectual leaders, and for many of the royals, the Western world had been a refuge from the intellectual and sensual sterility of the kingdom. I suspected that many had nurtured a secret escape plan in case the extremists gained complete control-they would retreat to second homes in Santa Barbara or Miami. But now such places seemed hostile to them. These elite men who had prided themselves on living in two worlds felt trapped in their own stern culture, and they were suffocating.

One morning, several of the Gazette reporters admitted to me that they were depressed. "Last night, I didn't even sleep," Hasan Hatrash told me. "I just sat on the beach. Till four in the morning. When I do sleep, it's like I'm dead for three days."

I worried about them, especially Hatrash. He was always forgetting to eat, and during meetings he jiggled his leg nervously. In many respects, he was our best reporter, but music was his passion. There wasn't a place for him in a society that smothered art and other pleasures. The fact that he was in his late twenties, lived at home, and couldn't meet women-and couldn't afford to marry one if he did-also weighed on him.

In the Gazette, Baswaid reported on a survey of more than two thousand students in Jeddah, aged thirteen to twenty-five, that was conducted by a researcher at King Abdul Aziz University. Sixty-five per cent of the boys and seventy-two per cent of the girls showed symptoms of depression; seven per cent of the girls admitted that they had attempted suicide (more than twice the rate of the boys). Drug use was nearly five per cent for both sexes, as was the rate of alcoholism. "Five per cent alcoholism among intermediate and high-school students in an Islamic country is jarring to our ears," Dr. Saud Hasan Mukhtar, a professor at the university, told Baswaid.

One afternoon, I went to the gym near my apartment and started doing yoga exercises. A Saudi man saw me doing a headstand; he walked over, bent down, and cranked his head sideways.

"Is that good for depression?" he asked.

"It might be," I said.

"Can you show me how to do it?"

I helped him up against a wall, and after a while he learned to hold the position. When I went back to the locker room, it was prayer time, and four men happened to be praying on the floor directly facing my locker. I waited for them to finish. One of them asked me afterward if I would start a yoga class. "Maybe it will help relieve the stress," he said.

Such polite entreaties caught me off guard. Before arriving in Saudi Arabia, I had expected loud confrontations that went on into the night, as I had experienced in Cairo in the spring of 2002. But there was little of the natural exuberance, humor, and mischief that are so much a part of the Egyptian character. What I found instead was quiet despair, an ominous emotional flatness.

In March, a soft-spoken retired chemistry professor invited me to have lunch at his house, in Riyadh. The place was impressive; it had marble floors, and two large public rooms with the chairs pushed against the wall, in the Islamic style. I learned that his wife and daughters would be joining us-an extraordinarily kind and open gesture for such a conservative man.

The presentation of a Saudi family is a careful ritual. The protocol begins with the entry of the youngest son, who in this case was an officer in the Saudi Air Force and a veteran of the Gulf War. After we chatted for a few minutes, the older son, a banker, joined us. Then the father came in, and accepted a kiss on the top of his head from his older son. They invited me to the kitchen to eat, rather than the dining room, which was an honor. The professor's wife appeared and sat down at the head of a long table, and we began to eat from eight huge platters of food. Then, one by one, his four grown daughters and daughters-in-law came to the table. They were all intelligent, well educated, and hospitable, and the conversation was so agreeable that I was unprepared for the argument that followed.

The professor began talking about the black boxes in the hijacked planes that had struck the World Trade Center. He questioned the Americans' claim that they had not survived. Then he spoke about the unsolved anthrax poisonings that followed the attack, suggesting that it was the United States government that had carried them out, to scare people.

"What kind of country do you think we are?" I said heatedly. "Do you think we are really so wicked that we would poison our own citizens?"

"You have gotten angry in my house," the professor said, offended.

The conversation inevitably turned toward the notion that the Mossad or the C.I.A. had engineered the hijackings. The logic is based on two assumptions: that these organizations were scheming for an excuse to attack the Arab world, and that Arabs are too incompetent to have pulled off the attacks. I had had the same discussion countless times, although the Saudis who voiced this view didn't seem to hold on to it with the same tenacity as Egyptians I had met the year before.

"Let's ask your son," I suggested, when the professor said that none of the hijackers had sufficient training to handle a commercial airliner. "Let's ask the pilot how hard it is."

The officer looked at his father and said, "To ram a skyscraper on a cloudless day? I should think it would be the easiest thing in the world."

The room was quiet-the family stunned, I think, that the youngest son would openly contradict his father. "Do you accept his testimony?" I gently asked the father, but he only turned away.

I had the sense that the generations were engaged in a struggle over the future of the country, but it was not at all clear that the young had a better vision of what needed to be done. I went one evening to a diwaniyya, a weekly men's dinner that is a kind of literary and political salon. We sat on the floor until past midnight, eating from platters of lamb and rice. Most of the men were professionals: lawyers, editors, doctors. "We were educated in America, and I see the world going against everything I have built," said Dr. Mujahid al-Sawwaf, a lawyer in Jeddah and a

former professor at Umm al-Qura University, in Mecca. "We were always for liberalism, but some of the terrorists were my students."

"My daughter is for bin Laden," another of the men admitted. "When I go to wake her up, I see pictures of Palestinian girl martyrs on her wall. It scares me to death. If we go into her room at night, she'll be listening to Britney Spears, but as soon as we close the door she's listening to martyr songs."

The other men nodded. "They come to us and say, 'Dad, why didn't you fight in 1948 and 1967?' They see us as cowards," a dentist said.

"One of the children said to me, 'Uncle, is it true that when you went to the West you became a puppet like our leadership?' Our kids don't want to study in America, as we did."

"Bin Laden changed our life. He proved that mighty America is vulnerable. To us, we're afraid of our future, but the youth think America is on the verge of collapsing and it's time for us to fight it."

"We are afraid of our children."

On a bright April morning, I drove up to Taif, a lovely mountain town two hours outside Jeddah that is famous for its roses, and met a reporter from a Saudi business paper. We were trying to see the brother of Hani Hanjour, who is thought to have been the pilot of the airplane that crashed into the Pentagon, and we parked outside the imposing two-story marble house where Hanjour grew up. His father was a provisioner for a nearby military base.

It wasn't until sometime after midnight that Yasser Hanjour came outside and got into the back seat. Slight and meek, he looked unsettlingly like his sad-eyed older brother. Yasser told me that he was in the women's garment business. As he saw it, his brother's story was a simple one. Hani had never wanted to be anything other than a pilot. He had trained in America, where he had suddenly become very religious. When he returned from his first trip there, he applied for a job at Saudi Arabian Air Lines but was turned down. He disappeared into his room for six months.

"Why was he so depressed?" I asked.

"You know the reason," the business reporter said impatiently. "This joblessness." Yasser shrugged and agreed.

There was a sameness to the stories of the hijacker pilots. They had become Muslim extremists in Europe and America-presumably as a way of holding on to their sense of who they were in the engulfing West. Their own cultures offered them no way to be powerful in the world. Traditionally, the Saudi government absorbed nearly all the university graduates, but after the oil shock of the mid-eighties the government, which became saddled with debt, could no longer hire as before. Unemployment and idleness became central facts of life for young Saudi men (as they had always been for Saudi women). Bin Laden gave young men with no control over their lives an identity, and a wanton chance to make history. "Death is better than life in humiliation!" bin Laden said.

That is a constant theme of bin Laden's speeches. One of the critical documents in understanding his goals, and his appeal, is his "Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," written in 1996, in which he cites the sources of Arabs' shame. Although the "Declaration" calls on Muslims everywhere to fight "Jews and Crusaders," the heart of its argument is a populist attack on the mismanagement of the Saudi economy. "Everybody talks about the deterioration of the economy, about inflation, and about the ever-increasing debts," he writes. "More than three hundred and forty billion Saudi riyals are owed by the government to the people-in addition to the daily accumulated interest, let alone the foreign debt! People wonder whether we are the largest oil exporting country?! They even believe that this situation is a curse put on them by Allah for not objecting to the oppressive and illegitimate behavior and measures of the ruling regime." In a country where discontent with the ruling family is widespread but rarely expressed directly, where resentment against the power and influence of the West is nearly universal, and where unemployment is creating a class of well-educated but idle young men, bin Laden's words resonated so strongly in part because no one else would say them.

"Our society is confused," Abdullah al-Shehri, the linguistics professor, told me during another Starbucks seminar. He was from the same tribe as three of the fifteen Saudi hijackers, but that scarcely sets him apart in a country whose inhabitants are so intimately bound together. "It bothers me a lot when I see things about our society that are negative or backward, which in the West are blamed on religion. You can easily look back at Muslim history, at the Umayyads and the Abbasids, and see how powerful Islamic culture was back then. What has changed is the mentality and the culture. Islam is a religion of tolerance, but now there is a sense of frustration and defeat that makes people hate others. For some, hate becomes their only weapon. If you can't beat them, hate them."

"From now on, you should be Mr. Sewage," I said to Hasan Hatrash, who was not quite persuaded. "It will make your career. This is a 'Holy shit!' story, I guarantee you."

He laughed. "Yeah, I see your point, mon," he said.

The sewage story would require Hatrash, who had never finished college, to learn about geology, epidemiology, sewage treatment, dams, city building codes, and legal procedures. He was intimidated, but he was also a quick study. His self-taught English was so fluent that he could pass for an American (or a Jamaican). He also spoke passable Japanese and German. He began to explore the story cautiously, not entirely trusting my enthusiasm. What was the point of writing an expose in a country where it couldn't be published?

I took him to interview Hussein Shobokshi, the contractor who had originally told me about the sewage problem. He received us in a dark office whose walls were covered with beautiful examples of Arabic calligraphy. I pulled out my legal pad and my tape recorder; Hatrash took a folded sheet of notebook paper from the pocket of his thobe. I asked Shobokshi why he was bothering to sue Jeddah's former director of sewage. Saudi courts have always been protective of government officials.

"Hyundai won a case against the Ministry of Public Works," Shobokshi told us. "So that got me thinking, Maybe the judicial system is willing to raise the bar a bit. We began collecting testimonials. It's been my crusade."

Shobokshi started cataloguing the costs of the sewage crisis: real-estate prices have dropped by seventy per cent in some districts; the beaches are polluted and marine life is dying; sewage is eating into the city's limestone bedrock. He gave us references for medical sources and environmental studies, including one commissioned by the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry that he said warned of a hepatitis epidemic. "We will see people dying, and buildings will collapse. It will certainly get worse before it gets better."

When we left Shobokshi's office, Hatrash was excited. He began talking about all the sources he was going to interview. I asked to see his notes. I could see some figures—more than sixty per cent of the palm trees were dying, for instance—scribbled on the folded paper, but the texture of Shobokshi's conversation was missing. I gave him a little lecture about the importance of capturing quotes and then sent him off to pursue the story.

Meanwhile, I went to speak with Ramesh Balan, the managing editor of the Gazette. A non-Muslim from southern India, he darts around the newsroom like a hummingbird, and he talks faster than he moves. If you could hold him in place for a moment, you would observe a dashing, graying man in his mid-forties. One day, he emerged from his office and cried, "Look at this!" He was waving a copy of the Arab News. The headline reported the arrest of eight Al Qaeda suspects involved in a January shoot-out in Riyadh. "Local coverage, here on the front page!" he said with jealousy. "I'm going to retaliate."

Ramesh handed me a bunch of letters to the editor and said that perhaps they would inspire an assignment. I came across a handwritten letter from a Saudi soldier. "Please help us," it said. The writer complained that all the soldiers in his unit had just seen their salaries cut in half.

I called Hasan Baswaid over to my desk. "Do you know anybody in the military?" I asked.

Baswaid nodded. He had more connections than anyone else in the office. I handed him the soldier's letter. "Why

don't you call around and see if other soldiers are having their salaries cut? This could be a big story."

Baswaid quickly set the letter back on my desk. He put his hands together as if he were in handcuffs. "This could put you in the calaboose," he said with a sheepish grin. A little while later, however, he came by my desk and told me of a rumor that had washed over the city: the bin Ladens were changing their name.

"They're going to call themselves 'A'wadh,' " he said. It was Osama bin Laden's grandfather's name. Their motivation for making the change was understandable-if it was true.

"Hasan, get this story and your byline will be on the front page of every paper in the world."

Baswaid shrugged and gave me a look.

"Let me worry about getting it published," I said. "Do you think you can get someone to confirm it?"

Baswaid became very sober. "I know his son Abdullah a little," he said.

"Can you talk to him?"

"Maybe."

Baswaid started making calls on his mobile phone. Meanwhile, I went to visit Ramesh. He was smarting from a confrontation with Dr. Ahmed Al-Yusuf, the Gazette's editor-in-chief, a man I saw only rarely. Ramesh said that he had wanted to run a big story about Libya withdrawing its ambassador to the kingdom after a clash between Muammar Qaddafi and Crown Prince Abdullah at an Arab League meeting. Dr. Yusuf ordered that the story be played down. "He doesn't know what real press freedom is!" Ramesh said. He took a few deep breaths. "I'm about to have a nervous breakdown!"

I told him about Hasan Baswaid's story. "Will you print it?" I asked.

"If they don't print it, I'll quit!" he exclaimed. He suddenly seemed exhilarated. Ramesh then offered me an exciting piece of information: the sewage workers in Jeddah were on strike. We both felt a little giddy. We could envision the Gazette front page with the bin Laden name change, a city sewage strike, and a reference to the withdrawal of the Libyan ambassador-what a news day!

I sent Hasan Hatrash off to the municipal yard where the sewage trucks typically gathered. "The drivers aren't on strike," he reported. "They are afraid, because the police are impounding their trucks." As a result, the drivers were staying home, letting the waste build up.

"Why in the world would they do that?"

Hatrash said he would find out, but it was already after ten o'clock, and the paper's deadline was only an hour away. Meanwhile, Baswaid was standing at my desk expectantly. "I found Abdullah bin Laden," he told me. "He's having dinner right now at the Italian restaurant."

The restaurant was in a strip shopping center off Medina Road, about twenty minutes away-less, given Baswaid's driving, which I decided to think of as a kind of video game. There was a small patio in front of the restaurant, and four young men were seated at a table, laughing. Baswaid and I entered with studied casual chatter, planning to make it all seem natural. Abdullah and two of his friends wore thobes; the other friend was in jeans and wore a rasta hat. All were in their middle twenties.

We sat down at a table next to theirs, and Abdullah took no apparent notice. He was tall and clean-shaven and his head was uncovered. His hair was close-cropped, almost stubbly; his nose was long and flat, like his father's. The mild eyes were the same.

Baswaid got up and went inside the restaurant, then returned to the patio with a pack of cigarettes. He pretended to have just recognized Abdullah, and walked over, smiling. A few pleasantries were exchanged, then Abdullah turned to be introduced to me. In the Saudi style, he brushed my hand and touched his heart.

Baswaid asked the question. Abdullah denied the rumor. "It's my name, and I am very proud of it. There is no way to change it," he said. He didn't sound plaintive or embarrassed.

"Should we do a story anyway?" Baswaid asked as we watched the young men getting into an S.U.V. with darkened windows. I suggested that Baswaid continue to ask around, to find out, for instance, if the Saudi Binladin Group, the family construction company, was changing its name. There was still a possibility that the family would seek the change on their passports, but more reporting would be required before the story could run.

The next morning, the Gazette's front page did carry Hasan Hatrash's story, headlined "jeddah sewage disposal stops." The drivers were perplexed, he reported. "We don't know why the cops are harassing us," one said. Homeowners were already complaining of overflowing septic tanks that were flooding the city streets. In a single skillful anecdote, Hasan caught the sense of a disaster in the making:

Irfan Khan, an Indian, who had just got back from work to find his ground-floor apartment in a total mess from overflowing toilets, was livid with rage. "Come, look at my carpets, my kitchen-how will I ever live here now!" he raved. "Get back in!" he broke off to yell at two children wanting to try out the stepping stones dotting a cesspool on the street. "Now there'll be mosquitoes and disease-and already there is a Dengue fever scare in the city!"

By the time the article appeared, the impact of the sewage problem was obvious throughout Jeddah. In many places, the streets were wet; hideous lakes were forming out of gurgling spouts. Nevertheless, no other newspaper had taken notice of the crisis.

Hatrash then learned that the police were confiscating the trucks because the drivers hadn't paid a new disposal fee at the sewage pond. At my urging, Hatrash tracked down the idle drivers. He came back and wrote a story that began, "Police have impounded trucks in the past week because of a failure to remit a new disposal fee."

"How much is the fee?" I asked.

"Five riyals."

"This whole city is drowning in shit because of five riyals? Hasan, paint the picture! Sewage collection has stopped. Toilets are overflowing. The streets are turning into lakes of excrement. And why?"

"All because of a measly five riyals!"

Hatrash went back to work. The story was terrific. The police had been pressured by the mayor's office to confiscate the trucks of the drivers who refused to pay the new fee. But the drivers were being forced to pay out of their own pockets, and many of them scarcely had enough to cover their gas. Sewage from the streets was streaming into people's houses, and although homeowners were willing to pay any amount for service, the drivers were afraid of losing their trucks. The health department warned about the danger of hepatitis, but the mayor's office refused comment, saying simply that the problem would "end soon."

For the first time, the Gazette was looking like a real newspaper. The headline of Hasan's next article was "municipality caves in-sewage disposal resumes in jeddah." Strangely, we were again the only paper to carry the story.

Within a week, the drivers were idled once more, over the same dispute. "I just learned something interesting," Hatrash told me one morning. I was gleefully reading his latest piece, titled "problem over, says mayor, as jeddah sinks in sewage." There was a full page of photographs showing impassable puddles in the streets and flooded front yards. "I have a source who tells me that the decision to impose the new fee came from the governor, Prince Abdul Aziz bin Majid," he continued. "The Prince sent a letter ordering this new plan to be implemented. They

wanted the five-riyal toll to pay for the new sewage dam." The twenty-five-million-riyal dam, which would back up the existing one, was to be built by the Saudi Binladin Group.

Hatrash said he had spoken to a geologist who pointed out that the new concrete dam was potentially worse than the old sand one, because it would expand the reservoir and add significant pressure to the earthquake fault that ran directly below it. One great tremor would let loose a torrent of sludge that could turn Jeddah into a modern Pompeii.

"Let's make a story out of it," I said.

"It would be such a relief to tell the truth," Hatrash said.

That didn't happen. Once the rumors about the Prince's involvement began to circulate, the story died. We soon learned that not only was the Prince behind the five-riyal toll but he was fronting a new company that proposed to build a sewer system for the city, which would cost the kingdom twenty billion riyals. None of this information, however, ended up in the Gazette. The editor-in-chief would never print it. Meanwhile, the truck contractors were forced to pay the fee, and the immediate crisis passed-but the Prince paid no political price for endangering the health of the citizens and despoiling the city.

A few weeks later, the Gazette received a tantalizing letter-a plea from a group of Indian taxi-drivers. Fifty of them had been brought to the kingdom seven years before with the promise of office jobs in private companies and a guaranteed monthly wage of six hundred riyals. (They included a copy of the contract with their letter.) Upon their arrival, the employer seized their passports and their residence permits, and told them that they actually would be "limousine drivers"-that is, cabbies-and that, rather than receiving a wage, they would be required to pay rent on their taxis. Some of the men didn't even have a driver's license, but they were all thrown out onto the chaotic streets of Jeddah. After enduring a series of indignities, including beatings, fifteen of the men had gone on strike. The men were crowded into a hovel, stranded, hungry-virtual prisoners.

There is no clear figure on how many expats (as all foreign workers are called) are in the kingdom-four million, nine million, nobody knows-but very few people know how many Saudis there are, either. "Since King Faisal's census in the sixties, the actual population figure has been a state secret," a source close to the Interior Ministry told me. "The King saw the figure was low, and he immediately doubled it." According to C.I.A. statistics, the native population is about nineteen million, but the actual number of Saudis may be as few as ten million. Certainly one has the feeling, in the cities at least, that there are almost as many expats as Saudis.

Expats hold seven out of ten jobs in the kingdom, and ninety per cent of all private-sector positions. A 1999 study revealed that they sent home about fourteen billion dollars that year. For decades, the Saudi government has been attempting to replace foreigners with native workers, but it has run into resistance from employers who don't want to hire their own people. "Saudis aren't qualified," Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdul Aziz, the secretary-general for tourism, told me. "Showing up for a job is not a priority for them. Even the culture of working as a team is not there." Increasingly, the unemployed natives tend to view the Bangladeshi houseboys, the Lebanese waiters, and the Egyptian barbers with resentment rather than gratitude. "We hate it!" a Saudi friend exclaimed when I asked how he felt when he had to speak English or Urdu just to order coffee. Entry-level service jobs, however, are forms of employment that Saudis refuse to accept.

The expat readership of the Gazette would, I thought, see the Indian-cabbie story in a sympathetic light. I arranged for three of the drivers who had signed the letter to come to the Gazette offices to talk to Faisal Bajaber, a smart Indian reporter who had just graduated from high school. The cabdrivers were led by Nainan Philopose, a small, intense man in a dirty shirt; he arrived carrying a file of documents. He had the bearing of a man who is not easily intimidated. His wife was desperately ill in India, he told us. He had planned to visit her, but, when he sought his passport from his employer, company goons had dragged him to a detention center for illegal aliens. The owner of the limousine company beat him in front of several immigration officers. Philopose and some other men had complained to the Indian Embassy about their treatment, to no effect. Because they were expats, they had no real legal standing in the country. Their employer had made them sign documents in Arabic that they couldn't

read, as well as some blank sheets of paper. One of the drivers told Faisal that the owner of the company had his own jail, where he locked up drivers who defied him.

I watched Faisal interviewing the drivers in Urdu. Although he had lived nearly his entire life in the kingdom, Faisal was not allowed to attend the public universities, because he didn't have Saudi citizenship. And yet he spoke five languages; his English was nearly flawless. He asked detailed questions and took careful notes. He had the makings of an excellent journalist.

Faisal presented the story at a reporters' meeting. Dr. Shoukany listened sleepily until he heard that the owner of the limousine company had a private jail. Then he nearly jumped out of his chair. "He's not a prince, is he?" he asked. "No? Well, we'll go after him!"

After several weeks, Faisal produced a draft. The owner of the limousine company had dodged him, saying only that the drivers were lying. Now the drivers and the owner were headed for labor court, where such disputes are nearly always resolved in favor of the Saudi employers. Faisal called me to say that there was a problem with the story.

I went into Ramesh's office to find Faisal and Dr. Yusuf, the editor-in-chief, who was reading the draft. The reporters were frightened of him. He was a slight man with shrewd eyes and an unexpected giggle, but he had an unguarded temper and he didn't mind humiliating his employees. Yusuf wasn't really a newsman—he was a former professor of advertising—but I tried to appeal to his sense of community. There really was no reason for the Gazette to exist if it didn't address the kinds of concerns detailed in the cabdriver story.

Yusuf waved the draft dismissively and observed that Faisal hadn't talked to the Indian Embassy. That seemed a small, if valid, point. Faisal had a letter registering a complaint by the Embassy on behalf of the drivers. Yusuf also noted that the court hearing was the following morning. "We don't want to put pressure on the government," he said.

"What's wrong with that?" I asked.

Yusuf explained that the cabdrivers would pay the price for any quixotic effort on our part to champion their case. Then he handed the story back to Faisal. I protested a bit, but walked out compliantly. Maybe Dr. Yusuf was right. I didn't want the penniless cabdrivers to be punished because of my principles. I recalled the story of Abd al-Karim Mara'i al-Naqshabandi, a Syrian expat worker who had been sentenced to death for allegedly practicing witchcraft against his employer, a nephew of King Fahd. The evidence against him was absurd. Human-rights workers jumped on the case, when they discovered that Naqshabandi's employer had wanted him to falsely testify against another employee, and, when he refused, made the witchcraft charge. Naqshabandi became a cause celebre, but he was preemptorily beheaded—a grisly message to outsiders who meddled in Saudi affairs.

The next day, the cabdrivers went to labor court. Faisal told me that the Arabic document that they had signed when they first arrived in the kingdom released the owner from any financial liability. The owner also produced other documents, apparently made up from the blank sheets of paper the drivers had signed, which said that they owed him several thousand riyals each.

"What will happen to them now?" I asked.

"They're going to prison," he told me.

Faisal's story on the drivers never appeared.

"See that building?" a lawyer said to me under his breath as we drove down Tahlia Street. He indicated with his eyes a large two-story structure at the corner of Medina Road. "That's the political jail." There was nothing notable about it except for the absence of shops or signs on the ground floor. I didn't see any obvious security forces around it. The lawyer said that he had had clients detained there in the past.

"Who's in there now?" I asked.

"Who knows?"

The nature and the scope of the repression were hard to calculate. I did encounter frequent roadblocks, designed mainly to trap illegal residents. American intelligence officials had told me to expect that the Saudis would monitor my phone calls and e-mails-and even break into my apartment and clone my computer. So I was on guard.

In contrast with Egypt, where nearly everyone knew somebody who had been illegally arrested, and often tortured, in Saudi Arabia few people could say that they knew someone who had been detained for political reasons. Jeddah residents were always looking over their shoulders, but had only vague rumors to report when I pressed them.

I did meet a man who had been tortured by the Saudi secret police ten years before. "They tickled me here," he said, showing me his hands, which were scarred by knife wounds. They thought he had helped a dissident escape the country. "If I knew how to do that, I would escape myself!" he had told them.

"You are being watched," a Gazette editor once told me. He spoke to me in a stairwell, where he assumed we wouldn't be overheard.

"How do you know?"

"A man came this morning from the secret police to see Dr. Yusuf. After this, Dr. Yusuf called me in to ask about you."

I asked what Dr. Yusuf wanted to know. "How you were doing, what you were up to," the editor said.

That didn't sound so sinister. Dr. Yusuf repeatedly asked about my welfare and kindly expressed concern for my safety, especially since, during my stay, several Westerners were assassinated. No one from the Ministry of Information came to see me, no minders were assigned, and if anyone could follow me in Jeddah traffic he represented a force beyond reckoning.

But suspicion darkened the atmosphere in Saudi Arabia, even among people who worked together every day. I asked Mahmoud Shukri, a seventeen-year-old reporter, where his friends were going to school. "We don't tell each other things like that," he said. When he asked my advice about college plans, we had to meet outside the office, to avoid being overheard. "If you let people know what you are up to, they might be envious," he explained. Telephone numbers were especially hard to obtain. One of the more experienced Gazette reporters kept an old ledger with handwritten numbers he had compiled over the years; it was perhaps the most valuable document in the entire office, given the reluctance of many Saudis to be listed.

By now, I had begun to look at Saudi society as a collection of opposing forces: the liberals against the religious conservatives, the royal family versus democratic reformers, the unemployed against the expats, the old against the young, men against women. The question is whether the anger that results from all this conflict will be directed outward, at the West, or inward, at the Saudi regime.

I went to the Ministry of Interior, in Riyadh, hoping to gain permission to talk to members of Saudi intelligence who had investigated the September 11th hijackers. The ministry is one of the largest branches of the Saudi government, with half a million employees. Its building is a giant inverted pyramid, which looms like a Death Star on the edge of downtown Riyadh. I was told that the architect was a poet, and that the building was a structural catastrophe. It certainly projects an air of menace. Inside the marble atrium, black tubular elevator columns rise through the interior balconies. The summit of this upside-down building is a dome with an eight-pointed star.

My appointment was with Dr. Sa'id al-Harthi, who was an adviser to the Interior Minister and the chairman of the board of Okaz-and therefore at the top of the Gazette masthead. All lines of power in the Saudi press converge in

this building. I had been promised an interview with Prince Naif, the Interior Minister, and had prepared a long list of questions about the hijackers. A year after September 11th, the Prince had asserted that Zionists were behind the plot. "I cannot still believe that nineteen youths, including Saudis, carried out the September 11th attacks with the support of bin Laden," he said. "It's impossible." Then, in February, Saudi police rounded up more than ninety Al Qaeda suspects; nevertheless, Prince Naif maintained that there was no terrorist threat in Saudi Arabia. It seemed like a bizarre blindness on the part of the man charged with protecting the kingdom, and I was eager to hear his explanation.

Dr. Harthi had other ideas, however. He wanted to talk only about the Gazette. He asked me what I thought could help sales. "The circulation has shrunk to nearly nothing," he said. He had a copy of the paper on his desk and glanced at it without actually reading it. "I think the name is the problem," he continued. " 'Saudi Gazette' sounds like a government publication."

I told him that it would sell more copies if it were a better paper-if it covered local news and took more courageous editorial stands.

"I don't think that Prince Naif would really be that helpful to you," Dr. Harthi said. It took a moment for me to realize that he had abruptly cancelled my appointment.

A few hours after I visited the ministry, a house blew up in central Riyadh. Later that night, I was having a sheesha-flavored tobacco in a water pipe-with one of Naif's assistants and asked about it. "Some guy, he had a lot of explosives in his house, and it blew up," he said unconcernedly. It seemed far more ominous to me.

I wanted to see how the law worked in the kingdom, so in April I asked Hasan Baswaid to do a story on a new legal code, put into effect in May, 2002, which guarantees defendants the right to consult with an attorney. It also contains a prohibition against torture. The kingdom had been struggling to conform to international legal standards in order to succeed in its bid to join the World Trade Organization. There are only about seven hundred judges in the entire country, all of whom are trained exclusively in Sharia, or Islamic law.

Baswaid landed an interview with Khalid Abu Rashid, a prominent attorney, and I went along. I asked if the new code was creating a class of Western-style criminal-defense attorneys. "Here our cases are very simple, not complicated like in America," Rashid told us. "We have been mainly concerned with financial crimes. Other types of crimes, like murder, are very rare here, and they are mainly revenge killings among tribes." Those score-settlings seldom get to court, he explained. Crimes such as robbery, he said, "always happen with foreigners, and when they're captured they immediately confess-not just about the new crime, but about all the rest. They do not ask for lawyers."

On the table in Rashid's office were homemade maamoul-date-filled pastries-and fresh dates from his native province. He wore a silver watch with diamonds that caught the light. "The judicial system is fixed because it depends on Sharia," he said. "For example, the idea that a killer should be killed in return, this will not change. What can change are the procedures that must be followed before you can kill someone."

When we left, I made a joke about how eager people in Saudi Arabia were to confess. The justice system often demanded the incontestable proof that only confessions can provide. A Western-style prosecutorial quid pro quo didn't seem to be operating here: people frequently confessed to crimes that guaranteed them the death penalty. Torture, I supposed, was the unmentioned motivator.

In February, after Saudi security forces arrested the eight purported members of Al Qaeda in connection with the Riyadh shooting, all the suspects confessed to murder. "The voluntary surrender of culprits to police and their confessions reaffirm their desire to return to the right path and correct their mistakes," a member of the Interior Ministry told Asharq Al Awsat. Similarly, Saudi authorities charged seven British citizens with a series of bombings in Riyadh in 2000 and 2001 that were alleged to have been part of a mob war among bootleggers. Six of them confessed on Saudi television. The Guardian of London published a story arguing that all the men were tortured into making the statements, or else the confessions were fabricated; the bombings, the paper insinuated, were

actually targeted assassinations by Islamists against Westerners who consumed alcohol. Soon afterward, more bombs went off-yet all the accused men remained in jail. After considerable pressure by the British government, the men were released. One of those arrested, Ron Jones, later said that he had been beaten on the soles of his feet. Another detainee said, "They threatened to plant drugs in my house to get my wife and child beheaded."

Many Saudis say that the level of state terror has declined. Recently, the Saudi government has allowed a human-rights delegation to monitor police and prisons. But there is a stark difference between the way the Saudi government treats its own citizens and the way it treats foreign workers. "There is a huge population that is not thought of as human at all," Khaled Abou El Fadl, the U.C.L.A. law professor, told me. "If you exclude Iraq, then Saudi Arabia would be one of the worst offenders in the Arab world. In Saudi Arabia, there is a well-established practice of 'disappearances,' people who have been missing for ten or fifteen years."

In Saudi Arabia, the death penalty is usually carried out in public. The senior public executioner is a man named Ahmad Rezkallah, who has been chopping off the heads of murderers, rapists, and drug smugglers in the public square for twenty-three years. He has killed more than three hundred people in that time, seventy of them women, who are dispatched with two shots to the head. "Most of the women I executed were strong and calm," he told Al-Majalla, an Arabic-language magazine published in London. "Women in general have nerves of steel." His technique with the men is to poke the condemned person in the back with the tip of his sword, which causes the head to jerk upward. Then off it comes.

The practice of public execution gives the Saudi legal system a medieval reputation in the West. Admittedly, over the past two decades there were five times as many executions in Saudi Arabia as there were in Texas. However, the Saudi method succeeds as deterrence-crime is very low. Moreover, in Texas, where I live, clemency is as rare as a snowstorm, and the governor holds himself aloof from the process of pardons and paroles. In Mecca province, the governor himself chairs a committee of reconciliation that asks the families of victims to spare the life of the convicted man or woman. Before killing the condemned person, the executioner once again publicly begs the family of the victim to show mercy. "I go and ask the family of the victim to give the criminal another chance," the executioner told Al-Majalla. "It has worked many times and the family has forgiven the criminal at the last minute. There is clapping and cheering. The scenes of happiness are indescribable." Sometimes wronged family members insist on carrying out the execution themselves, which is permitted in Saudi Arabia. They usually make a mess of it.

When American soldiers crossed into Iraq last March, many Saudis were furious. "The U.S. is dying to slaughter the Iraqi people!" Prince Amr Muhammad Al Faisal, an architect in Jeddah, said to me on the eve of the invasion. "They're thirsty for it! They can't wait!" But many who denounced the invasion in front of their friends privately confessed to me that at least a part of them welcomed it. "This entire region is in a fossilized state," Prince Amr conceded. "What is happening in Iraq is going to shake up the whole business. My guess is it will lead to greater nationalism. There will be more robust participation in decision-making, although not necessarily a democracy like in the West."

"We need a push," one reporter told me. "Maybe this is it."

The actual press coverage, however, was sharply critical of the Americans. On March 23rd, the front page of the Gazette showed an Iraqi child with his head blown off. The Arabic press and many of the satellite channels framed the bombing of Baghdad as "America's war on children." The lens of Al Jazeera focussed on Iraqis kneeling in front of the coalition troops with their hands behind their heads: it was a war designed to humiliate the Arabs once again. The Wahhabi clerics ranted against the infidels. "The Crusaders have come to take over!" one imam in Jeddah intoned in a sermon. The Saudi public was understandably inflamed. One Jeddah merchant waved a copy of Al Watan in my face and pointed at a photograph of an Iraqi boy being treated for hideous burns. "Do you think he will grow up and think that America is a great nation?" the man demanded.

The Gazette had chosen not to send its own correspondents, even though the war was next door. Its editorial slant was clear from the beginning. "wounded u.s. soldiers in shock and awe," read a headline a week after the war began. Like every other paper in the kingdom, the Gazette began to gloat when the Iraqi troops made a stab

at resistance. There was a front-page story about the Imam of the Grand Mosque calling for an end to the "unjust" war. "Muslims across the Kingdom prayed for Baghdad's victory against the U.S.-British 'aggressors,' " the story said.

One steamy evening, I went to a sheesha bar with Dr. Khaled M. Batarfi, a columnist for Al Madina (and now its managing editor). As a child, Khaled had been Osama bin Laden's next-door neighbor. Khaled was constantly laboring for peace and was on a mission to help Saudis and Westerners understand each other. I had become quite fond of him. We began discussing what we thought would be the long-term effect of the war on Saudi Arabia. In Khaled's opinion, America's aggression showed that it was intending to remake the Middle East in its image. "But what you really want is to divide the kingdom into several states so you can take our oil, and we will have no power to resist you," he said.

Many Saudis believed that the invasion of Iraq was the opening act of a drama that would end with their main ally and protector consuming them. "The whole world is undoubtedly seeing the American cowboys as having come for only one aim: killing, destruction, and bloodshed," Khaled's newspaper proclaimed in an editorial that morning. One of the relentless themes of the Saudi media was that the twin objects of American power were oil and murder.

The next morning, at the Gazette office, Ramesh came into the local reporters' room with a mischievous look on his face. "Well, we're all pro-American now," he said.

"What do you mean?"

He told me that all the editors-in-chief in the kingdom had been ordered to drop their anti-American line.

At lunch that day, I asked Khaled Batarfi if Al Madina was really going to change its editorials. He gave me a resigned nod. "The editors were told, 'No more pictures of dead babies. Also, don't call it an invasion.' "

Indeed, by the next morning the entire Saudi press had moderated its position on the war. It was a strange experience for me, with all my preaching about the need for a free press. The newspapers suddenly appeared more sober and responsible, and I felt a sullied sense of relief.

In the days after the war, reports began to appear about young Saudis who had responded to the calls for jihad against the Anglo-American coalition. "volunteers achieve martyrdom" is how it was reported in the Gazette. One of my reporters, who had lost a friend in Iraq, invited me to meet some other young members of his tribe. They were Bedouins, and inside the middle-class apartment in south Jeddah where his brother lived there was a room that replicated a desert tent-the ceiling draped with fabric, and bolsters on the rug to lean against as we sipped tea. Inside the tent were four men in their twenties. The death of a friend was nothing new, they told me; they had already lost a number of young male relatives in Afghanistan, and another one in Iraq.

I asked them how they thought Saudi Arabia would be different ten years from now. The youngest of them, who had a wispy beard, said, "I think the Americans will invade Saudi Arabia, and a quarter of the population will be in American jails." Another told me that he prayed the Saudi government would evolve into a pure Islamic state, following the Taliban model.

The oldest Bedouin was a delicate man with long fine fingers and a pointed goatee that gave him a noble and slightly stylized appearance. His round wire-rimmed glasses caught whatever dim light there was inside the pavilion, making it hard to read his eyes. I was drawn to him, perhaps because of his intellectualism and his romantic, revolutionary air. The man who was killed was his cousin. I asked him what force had pulled his relative to Iraq. "It's when you have this power inside you-and in this closed country you can't get it out-that you go to such places," he told me.

His cousin couldn't find a job, he continued, and he didn't have the connections to get into the military. He himself had experienced the same problems. "Since the first Gulf crisis, I graduated with a good major, and the government promised me a lot of things," he went on. "I have the ambition to have a Ph.D. or a great job, and I

suddenly found that the government put a new rule. They stopped any new government employment! The price of electricity and gas doubled, and the phone, and even rice and sugar. But they said be patient, we have to pay the price of the war. They promised it was just for a short period. It's been thirteen years now! I graduated seven years ago and still have no job." He said he often thought about becoming a martyr himself, like his cousin, who must have gone directly to Paradise. "Paradise is better than this miserable life!"

I asked him what he had studied in school.

"Library science."

With all their talk about martyrdom, there was another dark thought in their minds. "It might be government policy to send these guys to Iraq, instead of having them here, acting up," the oldest one said.

"Who are you talking about?" I asked. "Who is sending them?"

"Somebody who wants to make moral points around the world. They want to have these guys get killed instead of staying in the country and helping it out."

The others nodded. They saw a conspiracy between the clergy and the government—a plot to eliminate them, the unemployed Saudis. "It's been a holocaust for young people, what's happened in Iraq and Afghanistan," the librarian said.

These young men recognized the pointlessness of jihad, at least the way it was being promoted by the bloodthirsty clerics—who were, after all, government employees. There had to be a reason that the government would allow such dangerous talk, and in the minds of these young men the reason was that they were expendable. And a part of them said yes to that. They wanted out, and the only exit was Paradise.

I met my reporters for the final time in the Gazette conference room. I had a deep sense of disappointment about how little I had accomplished. Many of the stories my reporters had labored over never got published. There were a few good pieces, such as a profile Najla had written of the American consul-general in Jeddah, Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley, but Dr. Yusuf was angry that the piece had not been cleared with him.

I handed out a few mementos, including Texas Longhorn key chains for the women, for the day when they finally could drive.

There was a brief farewell party for me, with punch and pastries. Dr. Yusuf gave me a watch. The party was delayed a bit by my insistence that the women be allowed to attend. Najla handed me a card that everyone had signed. I said goodbye without once seeing her face.

Hasan Hatrash wasn't there. I found him in the cafeteria, his shoulders hunched, drinking a cup of tea and picking at a half-eaten piece of chocolate cake. He looked shattered. "I just got out of the hospital," he told me. "The doctor told me I shouldn't drive, but I wanted to come here and see you." He said he had low blood pressure, but that wasn't the real problem. "I told the doctor, when I sleep I can't wake up. I can't even put my thoughts together! He said that's depression." He seemed to me like many other young Saudis, whose lives are so unrealized and unexpressed. I wanted to give him some final word of advice, but I could think of nothing useful to say.

On May 12th, a few weeks after I left the kingdom, Al Qaeda bombed three Riyadh housing compounds, killing thirty-four. A subsequent bombing in November killed eighteen. Throughout the fall and into winter, there have been frequent raids and shoot-outs with suspected terrorists, and Saudi authorities claim to have prevented several other catastrophic attacks, including at least one directed at the royal family. Reformers have seized upon this volatile moment to campaign for certain progressive changes, such as an independent judiciary and popular elections. The government has begun a very difficult process of trying to bridle the radical voices in the mosques and cull certain hateful passages from the textbooks used in Saudi classrooms. The press was allowed to cover these events more freely than in the past; then again, the coverage served the government's interest in quelling

Western critics of the regime.

When I read some of these more candid reports, my optimism about the Saudi press resurfaced. In March, Jamal Khashoggi was hired to be the editor-in-chief of Al Watan—a sign, perhaps, that the government was going to allow the press more freedom. And, indeed, Khashoggi published searching articles about the legacy of Wahhabism and cartoons ridiculing the religious police and the corrupt clergy who encouraged the suicide of Muslim youth. "Those who committed yesterday's crime are not only the suicide terrorists, but also everyone who instigated or justified the attacks, everyone who called them mujahideen, even everyone who kept silent," Khashoggi wrote after the May bombings. But days later Khashoggi was fired. Soon afterward, Hussein Shobokshi, the businessman who had been planning the class-action suit about Jeddah's sewage problem, wrote a column in Okaz in which he fantasized about a future Saudi Arabia. The story is powerful because it seems so ordinary, and so unreachable. He writes about returning from a business trip in Riyadh, where he has received a prize on behalf of the kingdom from an international human-rights conference. His daughter, a lawyer, picks him up at the airport and drives him to the office. On the way, they talk about voting in the municipal elections the next morning. He tells her to hurry, because he doesn't want to miss the broadcast of the finance minister proposing a national budget. After the article appeared in Okaz, the government ordered the paper to stop publishing Shobokshi's column.

Soon after I returned home, Najla wrote me a note saying that she had been fired. She asked for my help in finding a job. Then I heard from Mamdouh al-Harthy, who said that he had quit the Gazette and wanted to go to journalism school in the West. And Hasan Hatrash wrote to say that he'd gone to Malaysia for a vacation. One day in Kuala Lumpur, he was invited to play with a band. "I had the time of my life, and the number of chicks who wanted to talk to me was more than I could handle," he reported. "The good news is, they invited me to play with them in their second gig at a bigger club on Sunday. Wow! Finally, I'm living!"

He decided not to go home.

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