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Honey and Onions

'You get all sorts of figures in this country.'

HISHAM NAZER
Planning Minister

'The Arabs are said to have invented the zero. It may explain why their aptitude for figures is nil.'

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'*Yoam asal, wa yoam basal* – one day honey, another day onion.'

Saudi proverb

'Welcome,' said the Saudi Arabian minister of information, Shaikh Abdo Yamani. 'I am sorry it took so long for your visa, but we confused you with someone else.'

This is not an unusual occurrence. When the understandable siege mentality of the world's fastest-growing country competes with the labyrinthine formalities of the Egyptian-style bureaucracy which is being grafted on to it, the result is inevitably inertia or confusion.

Even Prince Abdullah, the third most important man in the country, could not arrange an immediate entry visa for a British colonel from Durham seconded to his National Guard. Telexes and messages wafted between London and Riyadh and became mislaid, ignored, and increasingly urgent. The colonel travelled back and forth from London to Durham for three months until the visa was eventually granted.

Two Scotland Yard detectives were less fortunate. They wanted to investigate a murder which had taken place on board

a British ship in Jidda Harbour, but received no replies to their visa requests even after soliciting the help of the British ambassador. Their fundamental mistake, later explained to a fellow-diplomat by the Saudi Arabian ambassador to London, Shaikh Faisal Alhegelan, was to apply for visas for two policemen. They should have made a request for 'two sailors' to join the ship, thus preventing the fear that foreign police might meddle in Saudi Arabia's arcane legal processes. 'What they don't know in Riyadh won't harm them.'

Death, especially, creates opportunities for officialdom to exercise its power. A British yachtsman, resident in Bahrain, was washed overboard, drowned, and his body picked up in Saudi waters. Having 'arrived' in the country without authorization he was unable to 'leave' until the most strenuous diplomatic endeavours managed to prove he was not an illegal immigrant, spy, or presented any threat to the kingdom.

Although many of the money-rush countries are difficult to enter, Saudi Arabia is the only one requiring proof of non-Jewishness in the form of a baptism certificate, a regulation which deters no one sufficiently determined. The visa charade is reciprocated, for protocol reasons, and has one unexpected bonus: the British embassy in Jidda earns £250000 a year in fees.

'Now you are here,' continued Shaikh Abdo Yamani, 'you are our guest. We will arrange for you to see anyone you want, *insha'allah*. For us, the best propaganda is the truth.' His deputy, Dr Abdulaziz Khouja, nodded agreement. 'We don't mind what anyone says about us because we are confident that what we are doing is correct.'

He provided a guide and a car, and sent me to one of his officials, Mr Abdul Kareem. 'Unfortunately you have come at the wrong time,' explained Mr Kareem. 'I will try to make some appointments for tomorrow. The problem is that all the responsible people are at the airport saying goodbye to His Majesty who is going to the eastern province. Actually, many of them are going with him.'

When King Khalid travels within Saudi Arabia he is accompanied by about 1800 people - officials, ministers, various contingents of the armed forces. The previous evening, five

army trucks full of soldiers going to Dammam to provide an honour guard had crashed into each other, killing fourteen and injuring one hundred. News of the accident was suppressed, and did not appear in the local newspapers. Truth has its limits.

For the next six days I went to the Ministry of Information at eight-thirty every morning and sat drinking black tea until twelve-thirty when the day's work appeared finished. Every day, appointments were made for *bukra* (tomorrow), and every day the offices were half full of functionaries who sat yawning, reading newspapers, scratching their crotches, picking their bare feet, stroking their moustaches, playing with worry beads, smoking cigarettes endlessly, and cracking their knuckles.

Occasionally the telephone rang, and was watched with fascination for a few seconds before someone answered. The others listened to the conversation before such excitement palled, and then returned to gazing at newspapers, yawning and snoozing. There was one five-minute prayer break when offices emptied and corridors became makeshift mosques.

No one could accuse the Saudis of over-achieving, but behind the sloth there is obvious danger. Desert bedouin still comprise one-third of the country. Few of them can read or write, and life expectancy is forty years. Yet it is probably the easiest place in the world to earn a fortune, be a success, and have a position in what passes for society. There is only one qualification: be born a Saudi. Most foreign firms are required by law to have a local partner who may, or may not, work for the privilege but who will certainly earn a percentage of any transaction.

For those without opportunities, there is always a government job. Even automatic lifts have operators, and most offices have four or five male receptionists. Women are not in evidence, and there is no provision for them to be so in future: government buildings are constructed without women's toilets.

Expatriate Arabs, prevented from bringing adult relatives into the country, are restless. An Egyptian engineer earns less than a Saudi cleaner. A Syrian or Palestinian, who speaks several languages, is paid £400 a month. A Saudi office-boy earns much the same. When inflation was at its highest, Saudi government employees had a raise of fifty per cent. Non-Saudis received nothing. 'It gets worse every day,' complained a

Syrian. 'Apart from everything else, we live more expensively than them. They eat only rice and meat. We like vegetables and all sorts of things. But what can you expect? We are only here for the money. What else is there? Sand? The only advantage is that they can't throw us out. The country would collapse. The under-secretaries can't even write proper letters.'

Further delay and confusion is caused by the strictly observed Ramadan fast, and by an annual migration of the whole government from Riyadh to Jidda and thence to the summer capital of Taif, a beautiful hill city whose facilities would be strained by an annual Rotary Club dinner. Boxes of files, contracts, bids, papers and documents of every conceivable nature are all transported there, and then moved back to Riyadh at the end of the season. Many are mislaid, creating panic in a country where the simplest manoeuvre needs a multiplicity of forms and signatures – three are required before official government drivers can fill their own cars with gasoline.

Large firms, anticipating the problems, equip each employee with seventy passport photographs so that every request is duplicated and delays kept to a minimum.

Until recently, there was a further complication: no one knew the correct time of day. This did not really matter because the Saudi attitude towards time, developed over thousands of years, makes Iran seem like a paradise of punctuality. There are still three separate methods of calculation within the country. Muslim sun time establishes midnight at sunset. If you are invited to dinner on Tuesday morning, it means Monday evening – that is, if you are on Greenwich time (add three hours for local Saudi time), or ARAMCO time (add another hour for daylight saving).

As they tussle with these dilemmas, even the most optimistic adopt a philosophy known as the IBM factor – *Insha'allah* (God willing), *Bukra* (tomorrow), *Ma'aleesh* (Never mind, anyway). However well prepared, nearly everyone loses money on a first business deal. Sitting at home, or in an office, it seems the warnings must be exaggerated. There is, everyone knows, a market for anything: live sheep from Australia,¹ prayer mats, sand, pure water from Loch Katrine in Scotland, reinforced plastic domes from Aberdeen, 200 000 lunches a day flown by

Saudis seem content to sacrifice the intellectual luxuries of Western democracy for the tedious conformity of their own country. Are they mad? Are they anaesthetized by cascades of money into a belief that the pampering and self-indulgence of private life amongst the élite in Riyadh is a substitute for real life? Or are they so mesmerized by the rapidity and confusion of the money rush that radical feelings are suppressed because they fear any political change will be catastrophic?

That most famous 'simple bedouin', Shaikh Zaki Yamani, who can be a little too 'simple', a little too charming, a bit too smooth and smug, adds in his slow well modulated Arab-American accent, 'There will be great changes in the next few years as people return from university, and some of our projects are finished. Our great challenge is not to lose our muscle. Look what happened to the Kuwaitis. They have gone all soft. None of them work. That must not happen to us.

'We must keep positive things like our democracy. Yes, this is a real democracy. Anyone can go to the King and say, "Look, Khalid, this is not right". Can you imagine people telling the Shah what's wrong with Iran? That's the difference between our societies.'

It is true that the offices of the family farm are open to all, yet Saudi Arabia is incubating revolution. 'The evil day is inevitable,' says a banker. 'If you pay everyone enough, all you can do is postpone it.' And when it comes the only hope is that it will be bloodless because the armed forces are too incompetent to use the extraordinary numbers of lethal weapons which are being swapped for oil.

The military provides the country's best vaudeville. As King Khalid leaves the Jockey Club, members of the National Guard, eager to assert their patriotism, cram into blood-red jeeps and cars to provide a cavalcade. There is much crunching of gears and squealing of tyres and shouts of unintelligible enthusiasm combined with alarm when it is thought too many are clambering into the same vehicle. The King, swaddled in his huge Rolls-Royce, is already being driven off.

Crash, kerthump . . . One jeep, its occupants anxiously watching the departing Rolls, shoots backwards by mistake, neatly scraping a staff car containing assorted top brass. The