HELLO EVERYBODY!

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HELLO EVERYBODY!

One Journalist's Search for the Truth in the Middle East

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Part III

‘And then I said: Well God, what I want to know, God right, all this hunger, misery, illness, catastrophe. Errrr, child abuse, child porn and the Holocaust. Why? And then He said: Well, because of this and that, and this and this and this and this and that. And then I said: Aha! Yes indeed. Yes-yes-yes, oh yes. Of course … No, now I understand. So it’s not that bad then, right?’

— Hans Teeuwen, *Sweater* (Trui)

‘There’s a war between the ones who say there’s a war and the ones who say there isn’t.’

— Leonard Cohen, *There’s a War*

For my father

Prologue

‘HELLO, EVERYBODY!’

‘One more?’ The Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) coordinator came out of the field hut and looked down at his boots. I nodded, and realised I’d have to come up with something pretty quick — otherwise in the next hut I’d have tears streaming down my pale cheeks, and that was really not what I wanted.

It was a rainy day in September, and I was walking around the village of Wau in southern Sudan — a place that newspapers had been labelling ‘famine afflicted’ and ‘war-torn’ for the last twenty years. Somewhere on the other side of the river were the rebels; on our side, MSF had set up a camp for ‘starving refugees’. For as long as it lasted, a ceasefire was in force.

'Are you sure you want to see it?' an experienced correspondent in the capital, Khartoum, had asked. 'Famine shelters can mess up your hard drive.' Another advised, 'Do it on auto-pilot. All you need to think is, *Can I use this for my article?*'

Well, what the MSF coordinator had just shown me in the first two huts was ideal for my article: pot-bellied children I'd recognised since primary school as the victims of starvation; bones showing through their skin like the poles of a half blown-down tent; toddlers so emaciated that their mothers had to support their heads to keep their necks from breaking. This was very useful stuff for my article.

The coordinator and I walked past a poster. 'Don't Fight the Civilian Population', it said, above a picture of plundering soldiers and helpless-looking civilians. The village where the camp was located was closed down. The Islamic Purity Coffee House, the Office for the Registration of Pledges and Promises, Pope John Paul Middle School, Nazareth Greengrocers — their shutters were down, their doors were boarded up, and their verandahs were full of refugees. People of all sorts had been thrown together here: refugees, villagers, people who believed in Jesus or in Allah, in spirits, or in tree-gods.

We wove our way around puddles and rubbish to the third hut. There'd be another fifty people sitting staring into a void there, sheltering from the rain, mourning their dead, waiting for their next food ration. They seemed to look right through me, as if someone had switched off the light in their eyes. So that's why despair is called dull. I wrote down 'extinguished' in my notebook.

We'd arrived. In the first two huts, I'd assumed a serious expression and had made a small kind of bow to conceal my

awkwardness and hold back the tears, but here I spontaneously raised my hand, forced my face into a smile, and called out, 'Hello, everybody!'

And then it happened. All of a sudden their faces lit up. Girls giggled, an old man shifted in his seat, and children nudged their mothers. 'Look, Mummy!' A little toddler of around two wriggled free from his sister, grabbed my knee with both mitts, and tumbled over. Mothers of emaciated infants burst out laughing and used their free hands to wave.

That was the beginning of my job as a Middle East correspondent, which began in 1998 and lasted for five years. As it came to an end, while my luggage was travelling back to the Netherlands on a cargo ship, I went on a farewell tour, visiting 'contacts' — people to whom I was indebted for visas, personal introductions, and other favours. The last person on my list was an Arab ambassador. In his stately residence in the Hague, the political capital of the Netherlands, we drank tea and I showed off my Arabic for the last time. The ambassador said that it was an odd time to give up a correspondent's post, just as the Americans advanced on Baghdad. I told him that I'd wanted to stop before but had hung on for a few months because of the war. An assistant came in, whispered something in the ambassador's ear, and switched on CNN. We saw the colossal statue of Saddam Hussein being torn down in Firdos (Paradise) Square in Baghdad. Jubilant Iraqis screamed into the camera lens and struck the icon with their shoes. 'Thank you, Mister Bush!' The presenter solemnly described it as an 'historic moment' — the war was over. They could put the nightmare of Saddam Hussein behind them. Baghdad was celebrating its liberation,

as Western newspapers announced the next day.

Then the ambassador clicked to the Arabic broadcaster, Al-Jazeera. They were showing Firdos Square, too, but their montage offered a different slant. In the same square, we saw American soldiers triumphantly throwing an American flag over the statue of Saddam. Then we were shown feverish discussions and the American soldiers rushing to remove the flag. Al-Jazeera went on to show the jubilant Iraqis from CNN, only they were shot from a longer range: you could see how few there were actually standing in the square, and that most of the people were watching from a safe distance.

I said goodbye to the ambassador, and over the following months I did what returning correspondents tend to do — I started work on a book about my region. But I got stuck almost immediately. Reading the papers or watching the television, I would see someone arguing that fundamentalism was all about this or that, that there'd be peace in the Middle East 'if only Israel would withdraw from the occupied territories' or 'if America would stop supporting the dictators'. And then I would think, *Well, there are good arguments for that; then again, there are good arguments against it*. I couldn't figure it out, and that's why my book wasn't working.

Then I thought back to my second week as a correspondent. I'd just got back from Sudan and was waiting at the Ministry of Information in Cairo to have my papers stamped. It was taking a while, and I got chatting to a fellow correspondent who was also waiting. He was a real veteran, and within five minutes was telling me in a whisky-soaked voice that his best friend had died in the Iran–Iraq war. 'The Commodore Hotel during the Lebanese Civil War, oh those

were the days! What? You don't know the Commodore?' He was that kind of a man. When I told him that I was a writer and I'd just started as a correspondent, he grinned: 'If you want to write a book about the Middle East, you'd better do it in your first week. The longer you hang around here, the less you understand.'

That was unkind, and probably meant that way, but back in the Netherlands I began to understand what he'd been talking about. Before going there, I'd had certain preconceptions about the Middle East, mostly derived from the media. Once I arrived, my preconceptions were slowly replaced by reality itself, which proved to be rather less coherent and understandable than the media had depicted. The first time I came up against this was in that third hut in Wau.

When I went there, I'd had in the back of my mind those images you see on the news of miserable-looking people. In the first two huts I got to see miserable-looking people; and if I hadn't blurted out 'Hello, everybody!' in the third hut, I'd have probably left with the idea that these people were miserable, too. And they were miserable, of course — they were all but dying of starvation. But that wasn't the whole story. The area around Wau is just as fertile as the Netherlands, and those miserable people had been farmers who had always provided for themselves until the warring factions had chased them off their land. The people in that famine camp were mainly suffering from a serious case of bad luck.

As I looked back over my five years as a correspondent, I recalled many similar experiences. Things became even more interesting when I consulted my files and saw how Wau had been depicted in the newspaper. My article had included the surprising reaction of the apparently miserable and 'extinguished' people in the third hut, as well as an interview with

the doctor in the camp infirmary. He worked with the worst cases and fought daily against the statistic of 'eighty deaths a day in Wau'. His biggest problem, he told me, was their shrunken stomachs: 'If they eat too much their intestines burst; if they eat too little, they die. Even as they literally starve to death, we have to withhold food. According to medical textbooks, these people are long dead.'

That last sentence is what editors call 'a great quote', and the news floor had used it as the headline. They'd illustrated the piece with an enormous photo, captioned: 'In a refugee camp near Ajiep, not far from Wau in Southern Sudan, a woman gives birth. In the same field hut, a starving family member lies dying.' On the right there was an emaciated man, probably trying to figure out where the curious noise of a clicking camera was coming from; in the middle, a little boy crying; and on the left, two midwives with an anxious, expectant mother.

It was a powerful image, but the editors could also have chosen a picture of the smiling people in the third hut, and taken a different quotation as the headline, such as this one from one of the other camp doctors: 'The resilience of these people is unimaginable. No Westerner could have survived this, but here they wait for peace, walk hundreds of kilometres back to their villages, plant their peanuts, and pick up where they left off.'

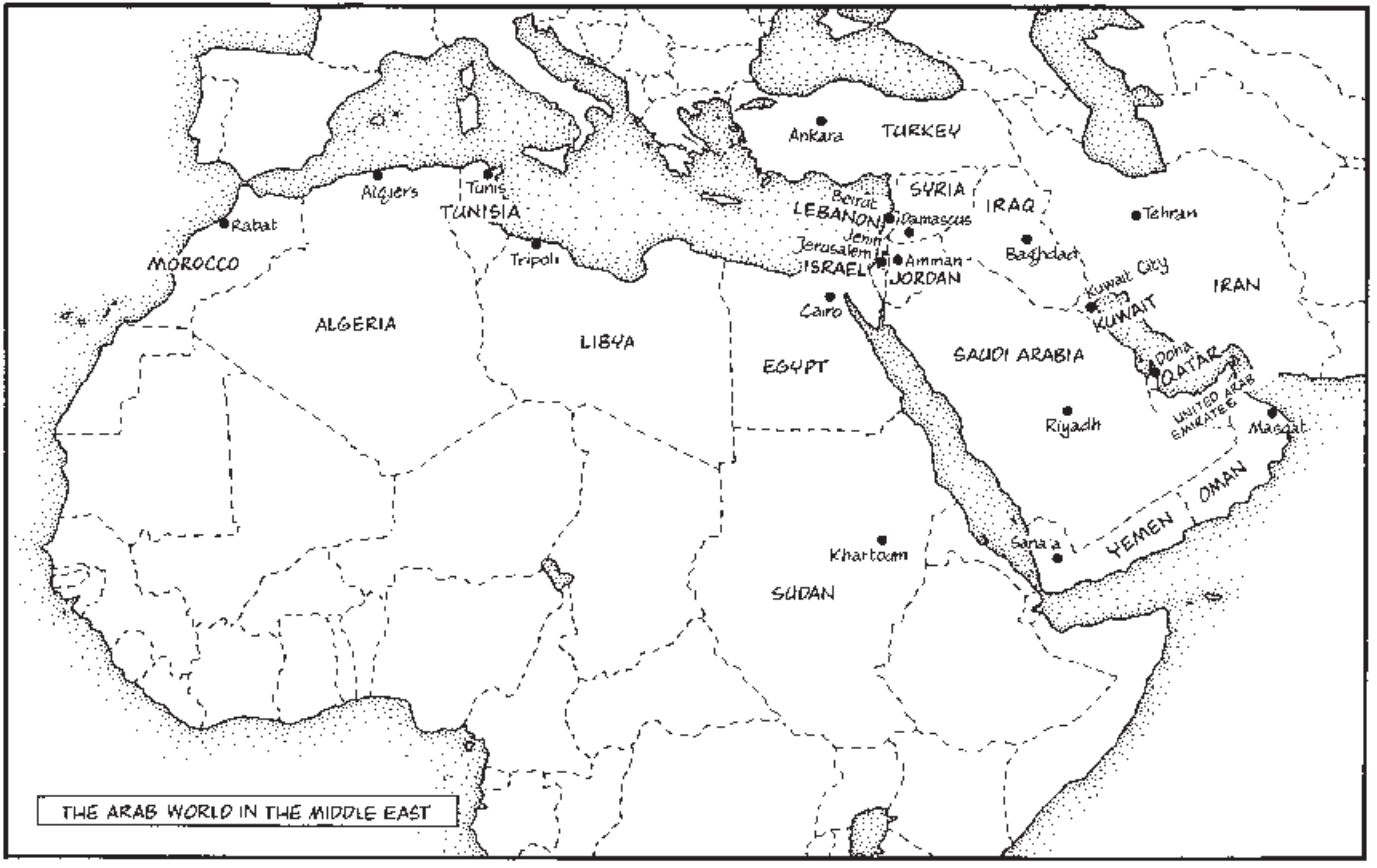
As a correspondent, I could tell different stories about the same situation. The media could only choose one, and it was often the story that confirmed a commonly held notion, like the picture of the miserable people in Wau who were already dead according to the medical textbooks, rather

than an image of unimaginably resilient people dealing with a lot of bad luck.

During those five years I had plenty of experiences like this, which made the events at Firdos Square such a fitting conclusion. American and European journalists welcomed the fall of Baghdad. They were sent images of overjoyed Iraqis toppling a statue of their dictator, which matched their expectations, and they considered their job done. Al-Jazeera viewed the fall of Baghdad as the beginning of an occupation. They sought symbolic images of their viewpoint, and found one in the image of the triumphant Americans spontaneously throwing their flag over the statue.

This was how image and reality diverged, and when I realised this I knew which story I wanted to tell. I didn't want to write a book explaining how the Arab world could become democratic, how tolerant or intolerant Islam is, or who is right or wrong in the conflict between Israel and Palestine. I wanted to write the opposite — a book that shows how difficult it is to say anything meaningful on such a major issue as the Middle East. Or, perhaps, simply a book about all those moments I found myself thinking, *Hello, everybody!*

PART I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