

Sample Translation

Almost Human. Images from the Middle East

(Het zijn net mensen)

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Prologue

Hello everybody!

‘One more?’ The Médecins sans Frontières coordinator emerged from the field tent and studied his boots. I nodded, realising I’d have to come up with something fast or the tears would be trickling down my white cheeks in the next tent which wasn’t exactly what I wanted.

It was a rainy September day and I was walking around the village of Wau in Southern Sudan, a territory that the newspapers had paired with such phrases as ‘famine-afflicted’ and ‘war-torn’ for the past twenty years. The rebels were ensconced somewhere on the other side of the river. On our side, Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) had set up a camp for ‘starving refugees’. A cease-fire was in operation for as long as it lasted.

‘Are you sure you want to see it?’ one of my more experienced colleagues had asked in the capital Khartoum, ‘refugee camps can mess with your hard disk.’ Another advised: ‘It’s a question of automatic pilot. Think: can I use this for my piece? and nothing else.’

Well, it was pretty clear that what the MSF coordinator had shown me in the first two tents would be perfect for my piece. It was just like the News or an Oxfam Novib film. Round, swollen infant bellies – I’ve known since primary school that lack of food causes swelling and distension. Bones sticking through skin, like poles in a tent blown over by the wind. Toddlers so emaciated that their mothers are obliged to support their necks continuously to prevent them from breaking. I could use this for my piece.

The coordinator and I pass a poster. ‘Don’t Fight the Civil Population’ above a picture of plundering soldiers and defenceless civilians. The village in which the camp was located was closed: Islamic Purity Coffee House, Pope John Paul Secondary School, Nazareth Grocery Store, Office for the Registration of Pledges and Promises. The shutters were down, the doors were boarded shut and refugees

populated the verandas. Wau was a mishmash of refugees and local inhabitants, of people who believed in Jesus or in Allah, in spirits or tree deities.

We zigzagged past puddles and garbage to the following tent. There we would find another fifty people staring into space, sheltering from the rain, mourning their dead, waiting for the next food distribution. That's why misery is called lacklustre. I scribbled 'washed out' in my notebook.

We had arrived. In the first two tents, I had put on a serious face and taken a sort of mini-bow to conceal my awkwardness and keep the tears at bay. But here a reflex made me stick up my hand, stretch my cheeks into a grin and shout: 'Hello everybody!'

And then it happened. Suddenly the people lightened up. Little girls giggled, an old man shifted uneasily and children nudged their mothers: Look mummy! A two-year-old boy let go of his sister, grabbed my knee with both fists and toppled over. Mothers with emaciated infants burst out laughing and used their free hand to wave.

That's how my job as Middle East correspondent started in 1998 and five exhilarating years later it was over. While my things were making their way back to the Netherlands on a container ship, I decided to make a farewell tour among my 'contacts', people I had to thank for my visa, for personal introductions or for one service or another. The last person on my list was an Arab ambassador. We drank tea in his splendid residence in The Hague and I had one last go at my 'I speak Arabic, just listen' trick. The Ambassador told me that it was a remarkable moment to give up my work as correspondent, especially now that the Americans were advancing towards Baghdad. I told him that I had wanted to stop earlier but had held on a couple of months longer because of the war. An assistant entered the room, whispered in the Ambassador's ear and turned on CNN. We watched as the colossal statue of Saddam Hussein on al-Firdos Square (Paradise Square) in Baghdad was hauled to the ground. Jubilant Iraqis shouted at the camera and pounded the image with their shoes. *'Thank you Mister Bush!'* The presenter

spoke solemnly of ‘a historic moment’: the war was over. The nightmare of Saddam had evaporated. Baghdad was celebrating liberation. The same headlines graced the Dutch newspapers the following day.

The Ambassador zapped to the Arabic news channel Al-Jazirah, which was also broadcasting from al-Firdos Square although their editorial was slightly different. We witnessed American soldiers on the same square triumphantly throw an American flag over the statue of Saddam. This was followed by feverish negotiations and American soldiers removing the same flag in great haste. Al-Jazirah went on to show the footage of jubilant Iraqis but only from a distance so that it became obvious how few people were actually present on the square and that the majority were watching from the sidelines.

I said my farewells to the Ambassador and in the months that followed, I did what returning correspondents are supposed to do: I tried to write a book about the way things really are in the region I had been covering. I almost immediately ran aground. From time to time, I’d see someone on television or in the paper argue that fundamentalism was all about this or that and that there would only be peace in the Middle East ‘if Israel were to withdraw from the occupied territories’ or ‘if America were to stop supporting the dictators’. And I thought to myself: there are good arguments both pro and contra. I couldn’t resolve the issue and the book came to nothing.

Then I was reminded of my second week as correspondent. I had just returned from the Sudan and was waiting to have my papers stamped at the Ministry of Information in Cairo. It was a slow process and I got chatting in the meantime with a colleague who was also waiting to have his papers stamped. A true veteran. Within five minutes, he had told 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, those were the days! Huh? You’ve never heard of the Commodore?’ What a man. I told him I was a writer and had just started work as a correspondent. He grinned: ‘If you want to write a book about the Middle East

you should do it in the first week. The longer you hang around here the less you understand.’

It wasn't very kind of him and he probably meant it that way, but back in the Netherlands I finally began to understand what the old sod had been talking about. Before setting foot in the Middle East I had had ideas and images about the territory that came for the most part from the media. After I arrived, however, those ideas and images were gradually replaced by reality itself, and that turned out to be much less orderly and comprehensible than the media would have had me believe. And the first time I came face to face with that reality was in the third tent in Wau.

I had pictures at the back of my mind of the wretched people I'd seen on the News. In the first two tents I got to see wretched people, and if I hadn't shouted 'Hello everybody' without thinking about it in the third tent I would probably have left the place with the idea that they were indeed wretched. They were wretched people, of course, almost dead from starvation. But they were more than just that. The countryside around Wau is just as fertile as the Netherlands and those wretched people were farmers who had always taken care of themselves, until one or other warring party chased them from their land. The people in the starvation camp were suffering in the first instance from a serious case of bad luck.

As I looked back at five years as correspondent, more and more experiences like that began to surface. It got more exciting when I had a look at my archives and saw how Wau had been represented in the paper. I had incorporated the surprising reaction of what appeared to be wretched and exhausted people in the third tent in my article, together with an interview with a doctor in the camp infirmary. He worked with the most serious cases and tallied the statistics on a daily basis – 'eighty deaths per day in Wau'. He reported that contracted stomachs were his main problem: 'If they eat too much their intestines rupture, too little and they die. They are starving to death and we literally have to

withhold nourishment. According to the medical manuals, these people are already long dead.’

Editors tend to consider sentences like the latter as ‘highly quotable’ and the editor-in-chief decided to use it as the headline. A colossal photograph was selected to illustrate the point with the caption: ‘In a refugee camp near Ajip, not far from Wau in Southern Sudan, a woman gives birth to a child. In the same field-tent, a starving family member is on the point of death.’ On the right an emaciated man who is probably trying to work out where that mysterious sound of a clicking camera is coming from, in the middle a crying infant and on the left two midwives and a overwrought expectant mother.

It was a powerful image, but the editors could also have used a photograph of laughing people in the third tent, with a different headline by way of explanation. A statement from another doctor in the same camp, for example: ‘The resilience of these people is amazing. No Westerner could have survived this, but here they wait until there’s peace, walk hundreds of kilometres back to their village, plant their peanuts and pick up where they left off.’

It appeared that my time as correspondent had left me with different stories to tell about the same situation. The media could only tell one of them, often the story that tended to confirm already existing images, such as the wretched men and women in Wau who, according to the medical manuals, were already long dead and not the same incredibly resilient people who had been facing a stroke of bad luck.

That was frequently the way things had evolved in the past five years and it made the incident at al-Firdos square an appropriate conclusion. American and Dutch journalists considered the fall of Baghdad as a positive development. They acquired images of jubilant Iraqis who had toppled a statue of their dictator. The images were in line with their expectations and they thought: we’ve done our job. Al-Jazirah on the other hand saw the fall of Baghdad as the beginning of an occupation. In the same context, they looked for symbolic images and found them

in the triumphant American soldiers who spontaneously draped their flag over the statue.

Image and reality did not always square with one another and when this became clear to me, I knew exactly what story I wanted to tell. Not a book on how to democratise the Arab world, how tolerant Islam is, or who is right in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, but rather the opposite, a book that demonstrates how difficult it is to say anything meaningful on such a major issue in the Middle East. Or in fact a book about all those moments I said to myself: 'Hello everybody!'

Chapter 1

Journalism for beginners

[pp. 21-25]

The majority of correspondents learn their trade in their own country and only then are they despatched across the globe. With me it was different. I had studied social sciences and Arabic rather than journalism and had spent a year in Cairo doing research among my contemporaries. I had written a book about my experience and *de Volkskrant* and Radio 1 had come across my name.

When I arrived at my station – Cairo – I had little if any experience, and although they had allowed me to follow procedures at the paper and the radio I still looked at journalism as an everyday reader, viewer or listener: journalists know what's going on in the world, the news provides an overview, and the overview can be objective.

In the years that were to follow, few of my original ideas survived intact. When I was sent to 'do' Israel and the Palestinians, my belief in the possibility of unbiased news reporting died a death. Up to that point – from the first week in Wau up to and including the aftermath of the September 11 attacks – I had learned that journalism is not feasible in the Arab world and that it is simply not possible for a journalist to work out what is going on there, let alone a viewer, reader or listener at home.

The discovery was gradual and a number of things only dawned on me retrospectively. But my doubts had germinated pretty early, in the midst of all the stress that sets in when you wake up one day and you're a Middle East correspondent.

There I sat, my first week in Cairo, surrounded by unemptied removal boxes, when the telephone rang and someone from the paper said 'You're going to the

Sudan!’ I had just found an apartment and now I was being told to leave for a country I had never visited before! How did that work? Were there diseases in the Sudan I needed to know about? My heart began to race, even before I knew anything about visiting a starvation camp. More embarrassing still: I didn’t even know there was a famine in the Sudan.

The paper had called because one or other ‘Islamic Front Against Jews and Crusaders’ had blown up a couple of American embassies in Africa. Washington had responded by bombing the Front’s training camps in Afghanistan and a factory in the Sudan. According to the Americans, the factory had been manufacturing chemical weapons and was the property of the Front’s leader, a certain Osama bin Laden. Washington didn’t provided any evidence, however, and the regime in Khartoum maintained that the Al-Shifah (Healing) factory had been used to manufacture pharmaceuticals.

Standing in line in the Sudanese embassy in Cairo, colleagues explained what had happened. For years, Khartoum had kept western journalists at bay as much possible, afraid they would write about nothing but misgovernment, exploitation and war crimes. But now it appeared that the regime expected journalists to write stories with headlines such as ‘Americans destroy sole pharmaceuticals factory in poverty-stricken Sudan’. Visas were granted within the hour.

I booked a flight, sheltered under the wings of my experienced colleagues and headed together with the majority of Europeans to the Acropolis, a reasonable hotel run by a Greek family that had lived in the city for generations. We ate together, we couldn’t make international calls from our rooms and the only television in the place was in the lobby. The Americans headed without exception to the five stars of the Hilton, where the Sudanese government had also set up its temporary press centre.

I had no idea what I was supposed to do so I simply followed my colleagues the next day. They were extremely cordial and it soon became clear why they hadn’t been at all nervous in the plane the night before about what, where and how. Everything was made ready for us. On the site of the bombed-out factory,

the Sudanese had put together a collection of fragments from the American rockets and other ‘visually strong’ details of the devastation: keyboards surrounded by smouldering medicine jars, charred telephones and overhead projector transparencies with targets for the coming autumn. The Ministry of Information guided us to the hospitals with the wounded and to demonstrations in the city. The latter were minor but in close-up they seemed much bigger and that’s how they appeared on CNN: ‘Furious crowds protest in Khartoum against bombing.’ A press conference was held every day at which nothing new was said or announced. What sort of announcement could the regime have made: ‘Poorest country in Africa threatens the United States with sanctions’? But it was possible nevertheless to exchange occasional bits of news and gossip, and the export manager of Al-Shifah was still on site, tirelessly prepared to tell his story to journalists time after time: ‘The American president has to offer his apologies. There’s nothing more to it.’

That’s the way it was and the bombing turned out to be good for three days of news. The report (‘Cruise Missiles on Sudan’), the people’s reaction (‘Clinton lying on Al-Shifah’) and an analysis (‘Khartoum exploits US “aggression”’). The bombing had been covered, the export manager could begin looking for a new job and the news caravan rolled towards the next story.

The next story was not the famine in Southern Sudan, my colleagues informed me, even though hundreds were dying there every day. But I wanted to see the misery for myself and the paper said: see how far you get. I asked around and discovered that the south was temporarily accessible to journalists – part of Khartoum’s charm offensive. The fact that the Netherlands had pumped relatively large sums of development money into the Sudan made it easy to acquire a permit at the embassy for travel to the war zone. MSF were keen to pick up some publicity for their activities and they willingly provided a seat in their plane in exchange for the mention of their name in my article.

That’s how it happened.

The editors in the Netherlands called my trip to the Sudan a tremendous start to my career as a correspondent. That is precisely what it felt like, and, overburdened with confusing new impressions, I made my way back to Cairo. I had always seen refugees as victims, I suppose, but the biggest headaches MSF were having to face had to do with brawling and theft. Camp residents stole stuff from the relief workers and from one another, fought vendettas, sabotaged the distribution of food unless they were given privileged treatment... It would never have crossed my mind, but when the camp coordinator told me about it, I thought to myself: what did you expect? The same with the Sudanese officials and bureaucrats. I had assumed that they were out to put an end to the misery, but in Africa's poorest country there were different priorities. Local officials were aware that western aid organisations had to deliver the promised goods and that the career of an individual relief agent would take a serious knock if food relief did not reach the proper place at the proper time. The officials blackmailed the relief providers: permission for this or that food dispatch to the south of the country costs a thousand dollars, otherwise we leave it to rot in the harbour.

Back in Cairo I slept for twenty-four hours, unpacked a couple of boxes and before I knew it, it was Monday morning. I sat at my desk, lined up my 'Middle-East Correspondent' business cards, checked to see if the fax, telephone, computer and internet were connected, and came immediately face to face with a problem. What did it matter if a tourist had been kidnapped in Yemen, a spiritual leader blown up in Lebanon, the regime in Baghdad had organised violent demonstrations or a group of fundamentalists had been arrested in the south of my very own Egypt... How was I supposed to know about it? Watch the news, you might say. But now I *was* the news.

There turned out to be a procedure. All the newspaper, television and editorial offices subscribed to press agencies like Reuters, Agence France Press (AFP), Associated Press (AP) and their more lightweight competitors. These press agencies sent reporters to important events, and had paid stringers in every corner of the world. If one of the reporters or stringers working for Reuters, for example,

had picked up on a newsworthy story, he or she would call the coordinator. The latter would then discuss things with his or her superiors and if they got the green light, reporters and photographers would be dispatched. Their photographs and information would then be sent to the local capital or to London where they would put together a news report and send it on to thousands of editorial offices throughout the world without losing a minute. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week: press conferences, funerals, world records, shootings, election results, medical marvels, earthquakes, miraculous rescue operations, unexpected blizzards, border incidents...

The press agencies are the eyes and ears of the world, and in the business the flood of information they produce is called ‘the news stream’, or just ‘the press agencies’: ‘Hilversum here. The press agencies are saying that fundamentalists were arrested in your country. Can you give us more information?’ There were times at the start when I wanted to shout: ‘How can I give you more information when the local press sometimes sits on news for days on end?’ It was a standard question, of course, but the implications were verging on humiliating: if Hilversum had better and timelier information about what was going on in my territory than me, what then was my role?

Chapter 6

September 11 and the blank spots in the dictatorship

[pp. 94-99]

It's now difficult to imagine, but prior to my appointment in 1998, *de Volkskrant* had had serious meetings to discuss whether a correspondent in the Arab world was still necessary. Couldn't it be taken care of from Israel? At the end of the 1990s almost no one was afraid of Islam, and the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians appeared to be limping towards a final solution. If they managed to settle that issue, the Arab world would jump on the democratic train with the rest of humanity. 'History is history!' That's what they called it in those days and columnists grumbled that everyone was beginning to look the same: 'The world was becoming one gigantic McDonald's.'

It's all part of the game, but in this climate my observations about distorted news coverage of the Arabs didn't make much impression on my bosses back home. According to their pecking order, the Arab world was more or less on a par with Latin America: one full-page background article and that was enough for the time being.

But I was stuck with it. A dictatorship is like a map with blank spots, because it's impossible to get to the bottom of almost everything. During the more tepid moments in the supply of news, correspondents can talk around such blank spots by limiting their coverage to events for which verifiable information is available: summit conferences, diplomatic breakthroughs, bomb attacks. But when the news is genuinely big, the public demand information to which correspondents have no access. What do you do? The news industry also knows the meaning of competition, not only between domestic and foreign news but also between correspondents who want to get their territory onto the front page or who have an eye on someone else's job or budget. If someone asks you about what's going on

in your territory, it won't be appreciated if you answer: 'How should I know?' Once in a while for a laugh perhaps, but not every time. Otherwise, there is a danger that the chief editors might ask themselves during the next austerity round: 'Why are we investing in you when you never know anything?'

I became aware of this dilemma when the Syrian dictator Hafez Al-Assad died. Suddenly Syria was top story and the gates of Damascus flew wide open. The global news caravan was on the move and I had barely left the arrivals hall when I had to work. 'Our correspondent has arrived in Damascus. What's the atmosphere like from your perspective?' I hadn't a clue and, like my colleagues, hid myself behind a wall of facts: procession on such and such a day at such and such an hour, funeral in that town, president of A will attend but not leader of B, so many days of national mourning... That sort of approach worked from time to time, but it was tedious and might as well have been dished up from the studio. When it's about the death of a leader who had governed for so long, the editors want more: in what direction are things heading in Syria?

And that was a blank spot. No one doubted that Assad would be succeeded by his son, but after that? I had the impression that the regime was not exactly keen on the idea of sharing power with the very opposition they had been hard-handedly suppressing for decades. Security measures had brought Damascus to a standstill, sound trucks bleated all day long 'with blood and soul we support you, O Assad', and A4 pages decked the notice boards in the corridors of the Ministry of Information: 'Tomorrow morning at seven o'clock, assembly at the main entrance. Obligatory presence at the funeral of Our Eternal Leader.' Not exactly a waft of fresh air, and the few Syrians I spoke to were mainly afraid of chaos; better a new strong man than risky experiments, they said.

Where exactly were things heading in Syria? A successor is almost always in a weaker position than his predecessor because he still has too few people in his debt. He is supported by the powers that supported his predecessor, but they will only keep it up as long as they can go on filling their pockets and that means their

positions of power have to be kept intact. The possibility of a new wind in Syria was clearly pretty limited. Why after all would a dictator hand over power to someone else? Suppose he introduces democracy, it fails and there's a coup. Who would be first in line for the firing squad, family and all? Not to mention the risk of being prosecuted as a former dictator.

If you ask me, correspondents should say: we have no idea what the new leader or the people want. How could we? This is a dictatorship! Then explain what a dictatorship is and conclude that Syria will probably replace the one criminal leader with another.

But the senior correspondents from CNN and the BBC, specially flown in, said something different, and so did I. We quoted the excellent English-speaking spokespersons who were unexpectedly put forward by the regime and spoke of 'openness', 'thaw' and 'Damascene spring'. We reported that critics such as the aforementioned parliamentarian Riad Sef had been granted freedom of movement, that the new leader had announced 'modernisations': internet cafés, satellite dishes, mobile phones...

That's the direction Syria is taking, we suggested, and a story evolved that was remarkably similar to the story surrounding the funeral of the Moroccan king Hassan and the Jordanian king Hussein some years before: 'For decades, this country was subject to the hard-handed rule of its now deceased leader, a man of the "old school". He brought stability but also stagnation, and now the population is eagerly looking forward to the reforms his son is planning to introduce. He is part of a new generation, and young people are more familiar with the West. But we are left to wonder just how much *nerve* the new leader will display, especially since some vested interests are against renewal.' It was as if dictatorship had been a misunderstanding that the successor would explain, a bit like replacing a piece of software you had installed on your computer by accident.

The funeral, 'with a massive popular turnout that had come to pay its last respects to its president,' passed without incident, and the following day Syria returned to its place in the news pecking order next to Colombia.

Then came September 11. Suddenly the Arabs were ‘soup of the day’, to quote a Saudi commentator, and for correspondents it was party time. Not that we expressed our delight or admitted it to one another. Every professional group has its taboos and you didn’t have to be an anthropologist to realise that rejoicing at a war or a bombing was simply not done – even though all of us would probably have to look for a new job without wars and bombs. For me, the attacks meant thousands of euros in extra contributions to the NOS [national broadcasting service]. The paper granted me a substantial travel budget and almost unlimited space, prominent and with excellent photos. It almost made me hum ‘thank you Mis-ter Bin La-den’.

But my excitement quickly made way for frustration. Now it was time for correspondents to pay the price for decades of reporting on the Arab world. How could my public possibly know that the Arab world consisted of dictatorships and that everything is different in such a system? Western media may have ‘covered’ dictatorship, but only in supplements and documentaries. The suggestion is that such ‘backgrounds’ are superfluous and that you can understand the Arab world if you follow the news. But news meant the Arab League, violent incidents or Euro-African summit-like photo opportunities.

The first major question on September 12 was how much support Al-Qaeda had. How big was the enemy and how scared should westerners be? Bin Laden had committed the attacks ‘in the name of Islam’. If a hundred million Muslim Arabs were behind it then the West could expect a conflict of colossal proportions.

Hmm. In western countries you could bring in the opinion polls, examine parliamentary motions and editorial pages in the papers. But Arab ‘parliaments’ and ‘newspapers’ don’t deserve to be called parliaments and newspapers, and opinion polls either don’t exist or are not to be trusted – which of us would honestly say what we think to an anonymous voice on the telephone if we were living under a dictatorship?

The number of Muslims behind Bin Laden was a blank spot correspondents had difficulty filling in. In line with my colleagues, however, I gave it my best shot. I reported that the atmosphere on talk shows on Al-Jazirah tended to be sympathetic towards Al-Qaeda, that famous Arabs in the entertainment industry were frequently critical of America and that this did not cost them anything in terms of popularity. Theatre productions critical of the United States had been running for years, protest songs against American policy regularly climbed to number one in the charts and films in which the West was portrayed in a negative light were box-office hits.

It was pure guesswork and the more I was asked about Bin Laden's popularity the more I was tempted to give an honest answer, to proclaim on the radio and in the papers: 'I don't know. How could I? This is a dictatorship.'

I never did, of course, but what a difference it would have made in terms of transparency! Correspondents would no longer have to pretend to know it all when it came to Arab affairs and keep talking nonsense about the dictatorship's blank spots. They would be able to make clear that things are different in a dictatorship. That you should bear in mind that the human rights activist's salary is being paid by a western government when you hear her appeal for 'solidarity between East and West'. That the Arab academic who referred to fundamentalism as 'the great enemy' was under secret service surveillance, if he didn't work for them in the first place.

More explanation and increased openness with respect to the dictatorship would have allowed correspondents to 'decode' the magnificent quotes that emerged from the Arab world after September 11. The same goes for images, such as that of the angry crowd burning a flag and shouting: 'America Satan!'. After September 11, shots like that would certainly have been a source of anxiety for westerners, especially when they were left unexplained: when you see a demonstration you probably think of citizens using their freedom to express disapproval of one thing or another. But in a dictatorship, such 'explosions of rage' are frequently orchestrated or at least coordinated by the regime. Many of

the demonstrators either work for the secret services or – at the very least – are under close secret service surveillance. Bear in mind also that Arab regimes can kill two birds with one stone when it comes to such mediagenic ‘explosions of rage’. They give the impression to their subjects that they are doing their own thing and that they have the guts to stand up to mighty America. At the same time, they send a signal to western governments: this agitated rabble might be running the show in the future. Would you prefer to do business with *them*?

[pp. 101-104]

It is easy to be wise after the event, but I have the impression looking back that the important western media did not cope well with the aftermath of September 11. Not only did we fail to state that we honestly could not have known how much support Bin Laden could rely on among ordinary Muslims, but our coverage also missed the boat when it came to the second big post 9/11 question : why do they hate us?

The problem was in fact already present in the word ‘hate’. The battle with Al-Qaeda in the western media was really a battle *against* Al-Qaeda, like a Hollywood film with a good guy and a bad guy. People can identify with the good guy because they know who he was, what his dreams are and what he is afraid of. The bad guy on the other hand is pure evil, and all we get to know about him are his wicked goals: power, revenge, money. But why... The bad guy is an obstacle and you can talk about a happy end if the good guy kills the bad guy. The bad guy has no motives, dreams or insecurities; in fact he is not really human. A similar role appears to have been frequently set aside in the important western media for fundamentalists: they hate us so we have to get rid of them. How do we do it? Watch *Inside the Middle East*, this evening here on CNN.

Western coverage of Al-Qaeda in the aftermath of September 11 was biased, and it is possible to reason why with hindsight. Who should have explained the bad guy’s motives? Palestinian and Algerian terrorists, for example, had always explained their massacres to the western public. We even know that the Palestinians organised their hijacks and attacks just before the evening news in America to be sure of the opening. Such terrorist organisations had sympathisers in the West and a ‘political wing’ ready to explain demands in the media, clarify misunderstandings and participate in the discussion.

But Bin Laden’s video messages were in Arabic, used examples from Islamic history that westerners didn’t understand, and were littered with caricatural images of ‘Zionist crusaders’. Al-Qaeda did not have a political wing, and if it had it would probably have been silenced in the climate of anxiety and rage that

prevailed in the West after September 11. To cap it all, Al-Qaeda sympathisers were immediately locked up in the majority of western countries under the new anti-terror legislation.

There was a logic to it all, of course, because terrorists should not be given a public platform. As a consequence, however, Al-Qaeda did not have the opportunity to converse with western public opinion and Bin Laden tended to be explained and analysed more or less exclusively by his adversaries: western and Israeli analysts and anti-fundamentalist Arabs and Muslims. Explanations and analysis focused attention on two elements: Bin Laden as an Islamist variant of Hitler, and Bin Laden as a sort of extremist who argued in similar fashion to some animal rights activists and anti-abortion movements that his truth was the only truth and that it could be imposed with violence.

But Bin Laden's story had a third dimension that barely saw the light of day in the western media. For decades, western governments had been supporting the most important Arab dictatorships – including Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Algeria – with money, weapons and intelligence. Bin Laden referred to this western interference in every video and his message can be summarised in two words: get lost!

There was also a longer version that went something like this: Muslims are poor and weak because we are being oppressed and exploited by dictators. You westerners support those dictators. If we attack you, we drive a wedge between you and the dictators. In any case, we draw the attention of ordinary Muslims to the support their oppressors are receiving from the West. Then the dictatorships will collapse and we can get on with reconstructing our territory.

Prominent individuals in the West frequently referred to the September 11 attacks as 'a frontal assault on western civilisation'. But anyone examining Bin Laden's story will see that he presents his programme as one of self-defence. And the West – or rather America – might have received a thrashing, but Al-Qaeda's arrows are pointing at the Saudi royal family, the regime in Cairo and other Arab dictators. According to Bin Laden, the Muslim world is involved in a civil war.

America supports the enemy in that war and that is why America received a direct hit. But Al-Qaeda doesn't want to be boss in New York or London. Mecca, that's the jackpot.

This portion of Bin Laden's message was rarely part of the western news stream and few westerners were thus informed about all their enemy's motives. No debate emerged in the West concerning the support given to dictators and the powers that be kept calling on the Muslim world to enter into a 'discussion about their faith'. But a Muslim in a key country such as Egypt or Saudi Arabia who dared to initiate debate on the interpretation of Islam would immediately be sent to prison, because talking about faith is talking about politics. And the same Muslim would be tortured in prison by someone trained for the purpose by the CIA.

Chapter 7

A new world

When writing a book, you tell the major stories one after the other, but in real life they frequently tend to get mixed up. For this reason, I have to jump back in time to a moment – a good year prior to the September 11 attacks – when my job as correspondent fundamentally changed.

I transferred to *NRC Handelsblad*, where I had more freedom to concentrate on background. I went to work for the NOS News, which gave me the chance to study the medium of television from the inside. I also moved house. I was sick of Cairo's air pollution and third-world chaos and had just put a couple of nasty experiences behind me.

I had managed to make my way into an Egyptian prison via the Dutch acquaintance of a detainee and had emerged feeling ghastly. In the sweltering temperatures of a fifteen-square-metre cell with twenty occupants, feet deformed from constantly having to stand upright, infections and sores because the toilet was in the cell... I was suddenly sick to the teeth of the callousness with which some Egyptians treat each other. I almost exploded at a taxi driver when he continued to block the way of a blaring ambulance, and in the zoo a couple of weeks later I was certain the time had come for a trial separation from Cairo. Unhealthy animals in rusty enclosures, lousy public gardens and garbage everywhere. But the visitors were the worst. Screaming hysterically in unison until the monkey was reduced to a state of heart-rending panic. Pelting the elephant with fruit or stones, feeding the giraffe with plastic. I was in the zoo with a Dutch girlfriend and kids kept throwing stones at us – to them apparently we were in the same category as the animals. The kids were goading each other as they do, until one of them had the courage to run up to us: 'Fuckyouwoman!' For a moment I lost it and when I came to my senses the kid was lying on the ground. Onlookers hurried towards us and I started to apologise. But everyone

seemed very understanding and the boy even offered his excuses. I had always kept my cool in front of pains in the arse like this and I never encountered more respect than the moment I drew the line with violence. Time to get out, I decided there and then.

I looked at the map and thought: what could be more logical than Lebanon? In the guidebook clichés, Lebanon was the Switzerland of the Middle East, with snow-topped mountains and a well-educated and cosmopolitan population. Lebanon it was, but I had barely settled in when I was confronted with even more changes. The peace process between Israel and the Palestinians had run aground in a new violent conflict, the second *Intifada*. In the past, my colleagues in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem had covered both the Israelis and the Palestinians but when the violence started to escalate, I was summoned.

Next to the Arab world, I was now about to embark on a new Big Story, and what a story. There was little doubt that the September 11 attacks had brought the Arab world ‘closer’ to the Dutch population, but as one diplomat remarked: ‘Arabs and Palestinians are foreign office. Israel is home office.’

I spoke to the same diplomat during my first Queen’s Birthday reception in the Dutch embassy in Tel Aviv. I had attended four such receptions in Cairo and Beirut and when they played the national anthem on those occasions everybody sniggered in typically Dutch fashion. The same thing happened in Tel Aviv, but when the Israeli national anthem was cranked up, many of those present suddenly joined in at the top of their voices. This was new: both the restrained Dutch guests singing a national anthem with tears in their eyes, and the fact that a Dutch embassy had played the national anthem of the host country. One of the guests told me a little later that he was in the process of buying an apartment in Tel Aviv for Dutch Jews who didn’t feel safe in Amsterdam anymore with all those Moroccan gangs. Another informed me he had purchased apartments in Amsterdam for Dutch Jews who no longer felt safe in Tel Aviv with all that Palestinian aggression.

It was also evident in reactions from the Netherlands that my compatriots had invested much more emotional capital in Israel and the Palestinians than the Arabs. The paper received letters referring to my pieces on the Arab world, but not many. In one of them, someone with an Arab last name criticised the filtered image of his region of origin and in another, an Arab embassy made an effort to gloss over a human-rights violation. But the response was not exactly thunderous and the letters that did arrive were a bit of a joke. In line with the biblical people of Israel, I had wandered around the Sinai Desert on behalf of the travel supplement. The people of Israel had wandered for years in the wilderness and I had only spent three days there but, just like them, I had been unable to wash and I included this fact in my report. Shortly after its publication, I received a letter from someone well-versed in the Bible who noted that the people of Israel could never have smelled because the Bible says they were extremely clean. Letters like that ended up in frames on my wall, just as I laughed off the rare cancellation: ‘You’re telling me things I don’t want to know! I’m done with that paper of yours!’

But with Israel and the Palestinians, my laughter disappeared pretty quickly. After a couple of articles and TV satellite interviews, a river of reaction started to flow that was to prove unstoppable. Faxes with swastikas, threats, insinuations. If I made an error of fact in my coverage of the Arab world, the chief editors would very occasionally receive a letter with the message: your correspondent has made an error of fact. If I made an error of fact about Israel there were five letters: your correspondent is an anti-Semite. I once picked up the phone and a voice said: ‘You’re going to die.’ A Dutch-speaking Israeli once even snarled at a colleague in Tel Aviv: ‘If that Luyendijk keeps it up, you’re a dead man.’

It was a new world, and not only because the Netherlands demonstrated such empathy. I had occasionally used the expression ‘media war’ in an article, but it was only in relation to Israel and the Palestinians that I was finally to understand

what the expression meant. In a media war, everything is different, or so it appeared on my first trip.

At that moment, the second *Intifada* was a couple of weeks old. When it started, mortalities tended to be on the Palestinian side for the most part, but then a mob in Ramallah lynched a couple of Israeli reservists right in front of various camera crews that just happened to be in the city. That same evening, Israel bombed cities in Palestine for the first time since 1967 and that was the signal to the international press to shift themselves in large numbers to the Holy Land, and for the *NRC* and the *NOS* to shift me into gear.

There I was, open-mouthed, in the hastily set-up but nonetheless sublime press centre in the five-star Isrotel in the Israeli part of Jerusalem. I had seen press centres before, those of Hezbollah and the Arab dictatorships, but this was something altogether different. While I hesitated between free coffee, eight flavours of tea, three sorts of fruit juice and mountains of sandwiches, young Israeli men and women in olive-green army uniforms distributed handouts full of magnificent quotes. Efficiently, friendly and in fluent English, they provided details about the next press conference and the briefing to be given later that day by a defence specialist.

Such professionalism. Images of the lynching, itinerary to the cemetery where the reservists were buried... The world media was routinely provided with everything it needed and more: copyright-free archive material of Israeli soldiers administering first aid to Palestinians, telephone numbers of spokespersons who had the skill to represent the government's position in every major language and in bite-sized chunks, information folders, printouts of websites and piles of files: 'Terror or occupation – which came first?'

Colleagues who appeared to take all of this for granted were everywhere, pacing up and down with mobiles at their ears, negotiating 'what', 'where', and 'when'. Jerusalem Capital Studios, which housed the satellite links used by the correspondents for their news broadcasts, were next to the Isrotel. That was handy, given that many a reporter was expected to make a clarifying appearance

on television that night, even though he or she had barely set foot on Israeli soil, let alone Palestinian.

My eyes were opened in the Isrotel and I was to return there frequently in my thoughts. What kind of a world was this? The *Intifada* escalated and I commuted between Lebanon and the Holy Land, my astonishment increasing with every trip. It appeared that the correspondents had had a pile of ‘optimistic stories’ placed at their disposal, prearranged from A to Z: Jewish, Christian and Muslim children at the same school, Israelis and Palestinians picking olives together, making music together... You only had to call the Palestinian or Israeli organisers of such hope giving projects and the magnificent quotes, verifiable information and remarkable details were everywhere, literally.

I once received a call from the Israeli Government Press Office: ‘Exclusively for you, we have a Dutch-speaking Jewish woman who volunteered for service because she realises that Israel is in danger, an English-speaking terrorism expert who can interpret that danger, and a colonist whose son died in an attack.’ An American colleague informed me that his station only flew in reporters for a couple of weeks. ‘They have to score, score, score. If somebody presents themselves with a pre-produced script, they bite.’ I couldn’t get the idea out of my head next time I witnessed the heart-rending sobs of a colonist on TV: how many camera crews had he already taken to his son’s grave? And how do you go about it? ‘Government Press Office speaking, our condolences on the death of your child. We have three journalists here and it is your patriotic duty to speak with them about your loss.’

In Gaza, I visited a six-storey apartment building that had just been bombed by Israel. I talked to neighbours and survivors looking for illustrations of clichés such as ‘despair’ and ‘bewilderment’ with which my readership might identify. A woman told me that she kept thinking about taking her washing machine to be repaired. ‘But now I realise: it’s under a pile of rubble. Just like my husband.’

Bingo, excellent quote, and as I was leaving I saw someone shove brand new baby clothes under the rubble for the oncoming camera crews.

Things like that happened every couple of days and what amazed me most was the openness with which media manipulation tended to be discussed in Israel. The Israeli government introduced a standard twenty-four-hour interval after an attack involving significant civilian fatalities before taking retaliatory action: the world media was obliged to cover Israeli suffering first and use the acquired footage prior to their presentation of the Israeli response. Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem allowed camera crews to film at the bedside of terror victims, to quote an Israeli spokesperson, ‘in order to show as much blood, pain and tears as possible.’ After one exceptionally hefty Palestinian attack, the bodies were not removed for some time because the Prime Minister wanted to make a statement with eighteen body bags and a burnt-out bus as background décor. An Israeli minister cheerfully complemented a camera crew that had managed to film a couple of jubilant Palestinians directly after the September 11 attacks. In close up it looked like a lot of people and the images were frequently broadcast on American television. The Israeli Government Press Office proudly announced that it had forced CNN to do a series on the victims of terror – to make up for the fact that they had interviewed the family of the perpetrator after some attack or other. A Jewish-American businessman bragged to the Israeli media that he had managed to get rid of the hostile correspondent for the *Miami Herald* by threatening to withdraw his advertising budget.

Before I became a correspondent, I figured: you have reality and you have media coverage of reality. I considered a journalist to be a fly on the wall, an invisible microphone that simply recorded, just as commentators at a football match follow the score, hidden from the players in a corner of the stadium. Football might be war, but war is not football, not between Israel and the Palestinians. The parties involved continuously revised and manipulated the media.

It was a new world and my colleagues explained what lay behind it. I had understood a media war to be a war that attracted a lot of media attention, but it went beyond that. Compare the second *Intifada* for a moment with the border war now raging between Ethiopia and Eritrea, my colleagues would say. The latter is a classic conflict: two parties fighting one another with all the military means at their disposal; the strongest wins and the media cover it. But the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is a different matter. If they were to use every means at their disposal to attack one another, the whole thing would be over in the blink of an eye. Israel's nuclear arsenal, smart bombs, hyper-advanced tanks, fighter jets, helicopters, battleships, spy satellites and submarines clearly make it the superior power. It could drive out the Palestinians in twenty-four hours or less – and their neighbours at the same time if it wanted. This fact is regularly rehearsed in the Israeli media and political arena. But they don't exercise their superior power, and that reality cannot be separated from the enormous media attention focused on the region and the involvement of global public opinion. The same public opinion is in turn determined to a high degree by what people see in the media.

Hello everybody! In the Holy Land, the newspapers and television screens were not only windows onto the conflict, they were also platforms upon which the conflict itself was battled out. As an Israeli director of information once remarked: 'It's not about what's happened, it's about how it's presented on CNN.'