

DINING WITH AL-QAEDA

THREE DECADES
EXPLORING THE MANY WORLDS
OF THE MIDDLE EAST



HUGH POPE

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the Many Worlds of the Middle East



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PROLOGUE

I have lived and worked in the Middle East for more than three decades, and this book contains what I feel to be my most compelling experiences from journeys and meetings in some two dozen countries. I have visited many of these lands repeatedly, first as a traveler, then as a student of the Arabic, Persian, and Turkish languages, and then as a foreign correspondent, most recently for the *Wall Street Journal*.

I chose the stories to underline what I believe is essential to understanding the people, governments, and social forces at work in the region. They sidestep the ins and outs of theoretical debates, acronyms, and quickly forgotten politicians' names. As I wrote these pages, I imagined an enthusiastic student or well-educated traveler trying to make sense of the Middle East and frustrated with dry and theoretical approaches.

I wanted to share my confusion, insights, and the hilarious moments as I was educated out of my initial bafflement and into an understanding of the absurd paradoxes of dysfunctional states. I met people trapped between ruthless tyrants and an insensitive outside world. I experienced not only cruelty, fear, and war, but also poetry, love, and adventure. Along the way I want to explain how I came to terms with a very muddled East and also suggest new ways that a meddling West can better come to terms with the region.

I believe that the United States and other nations' policy mistakes of the past

decades are based on a fundamental blindness toward the people and circumstances of Middle Eastern countries, and an overreadiness to think of the region in terms of simplistic ideological labels like “Arabs,” “Islam,” or “terror.” As President Obama’s new American administration took office explicitly promising to listen to and to reassess its approach to the Middle East, I hope my observations can be a source of new ideas, empathy, and change.

Avoiding classic territorial subdivisions, I have made the scope of this book the whole Middle East. This is not to say that the Middle East can usefully be seen as a single political grouping; indeed, every country of the region prioritizes its relations with outside powers over any mutual solidarity, and there can be bewildering differences of ethnicity, language, and religion. There are, however, also continuities and overlaps in Middle Eastern societies, history, and geography. This book ranges therefore from Turkey in the west to Pakistan in the east, from Afghanistan in the north to Sudan in the south. There is a particular focus on Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and, of course, Iraq.

The first five chapters recount my introduction to the Middle East and how I became a foreign correspondent. The next five chapters follow my deeper explorations, from dodging through the streets of Jeddah with a Saudi businesswoman to the chilling night I sat up until dawn talking with a missionary from the al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan. Three chapters then take a frank look at state formation, dictatorship, and governance in the region. The final five focus on Iraq—before, during, and after the U.S. invasion.

Above all, however, this is a book of stories, from unexpected hiccups with my Egyptian girlfriend, to reeling from explosions in the Iran-Iraq War, to enduring ten weeks trapped in a forgotten, besieged, and famine-struck Sudanese town. Rather than trying to fit every idea into any single political or economic scheme, the artificial, virtual framework that traditional news reporting uses to explain events, I have allowed myself to go with the flow of the truer and more interesting confusion of everyday life. I have tried to recreate on these pages the sense of plunging into the cumin-heavy vaults of the Aleppo bazaar or the edgy backstreets of Baghdad as if you were at my shoulder, so as to communicate as intensely as possible the Middle Eastern reality and vivacious human contact that make the region so addictive to me.

Along the way, I show why it was so hard to accurately report my developing understanding of the Middle East to a Western, and especially to an American, audience. I was lucky to write for the *Wall Street Journal* in its golden age. Yet even in this most prestigious of American newspapers I found it hard to keep my stories out of the ruts of traditional coverage of good “moderates” versus bad “radicals,” a misleading focus on an Arab-Israeli “peace process” that has yet to proceed anywhere, and the way many people overemphasize the role of “Islam” as an analytical tool in assessing the Middle East.

The idiosyncrasies of the region, I believe, are more the product of universal problems of inequality, circumstance, and international politics, not uniquely Middle Eastern religions or ideologies. The lives of Middle Easterners, the majority of them only a generation or two away from an illiterate peasant background, differ greatly from those of Americans and Europeans, especially members of Western elites likely to read newspapers that I wrote for, including the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and London's *Independent*. This is not because there is some insoluble "clash of civilizations" but because of bridgeable disparities in education, security, prosperity, and expectations.

Outsiders find it hard to see that despite the Middle East's occasional agonies, its people are like any other and can have fun too. The stress and conflict in media reports are only part of a much larger reality, just as Middle Easterners should realize that the normality of Western countries is not all as presented in Hollywood films and TV sitcoms. I hope that this book allows a wide audience to see the countries of the region in a new and less confrontational light, to hear the voices of its peoples, and sometimes to laugh out loud.

—HUGH POPE
Istanbul, April 2009

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I. MR. Q, I LOVE YOU

Oriental Studies Meets the Middle East

Two watermelons can't be held in one hand.

—AFGHAN PROVERB



I urged my gaze back down to the book of Arabic grammar that lay open on my lap. However hard I pressed my lips together, the curling script kept dancing away from me. My eyes went back up to the flimsy door of my hotel room, rattling in its frame. The knocking was growing insistent. I prayed that Jean-Pierre Thieck, the exuberant Frenchman who had persuaded me to visit Syria, would soon return.

Over lunch on a faraway houseboat moored to a grassy canal bank near the River Thames south of Oxford, Jean-Pierre's wild stories of Eastern adventures had put me under his spell. Now we lodged on the upper floor of a brothel in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo. He had left on an obscure mission and, as the evening lengthened, he had not returned. From time to time, bursts of machine-gun fire echoed over the rooftops. I was only dimly aware of the cause of the fighting. I was paying more attention to the man banging on the door, a tall, virulent Iraqi truck driver from the next-door room. He was clearly determined to break in: first through the door, and then my own efforts to defend my virtue.

"Mr. Q! Mr. Q!" the Iraqi roared, beating the plywood panels. "Open the door!"

Then came silence. He'd be back, I knew. I gave up on the cartoon images of the grammar's polite get-to-know-you conversations. *Arabic Without Pain* was its title, but the promise was false. I sat staring at the wall, anxiously waiting for

Jean-Pierre. I was a second-year student of Persian and Arabic at Oxford University, and felt as if I was getting nowhere. Back at home, it humiliated me that friends in other faculties were climbing the foothills of scientific achievement or testing the boundaries of philosophical debate, while I spent most of my first year copying the ever-changing curves and dots of the Arabic alphabet chalked up on a blackboard as if I were in primary school. The droning of the lecturers, bored numb by our hours of simplistic drudgery, often left me fighting with sleep. None of it seemed relevant to real life. The narrow historical scope of my Oriental Studies course seemed so disconnected from everything I read in the newspapers about the dramas of the modern Middle East.

Still, those same news stories had made me anxious about traveling to the region alone. Over our houseboat lunch, Jean-Pierre, then visiting Oxford for his research into the administration of Middle Eastern cities in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, had gaily insisted that I fly out on my next vacation to join him in the field. When I eventually tracked him down to the cardamom-coffee-scented corridors of a French institute in the Syrian capital of Damascus, he swept me off to Aleppo, two hundred miles to the north. Guidebook in hand, I begged to stay in the colonial-era Baron Hotel, with its creaky, cavernous iron beds, its skyward-ho airline posters from another age, and its threadbare memories of guests like Agatha Christie. After one night, however, Jean-Pierre declared the atmosphere of genteel decay claustrophobic and demanded that we decamp into a rough-and-ready hotel around the corner. It took me awhile to realize that the reason the floor below us was populated by fleshy, middle-aged ladies was that this was a whorehouse known locally as Madame Olga's.

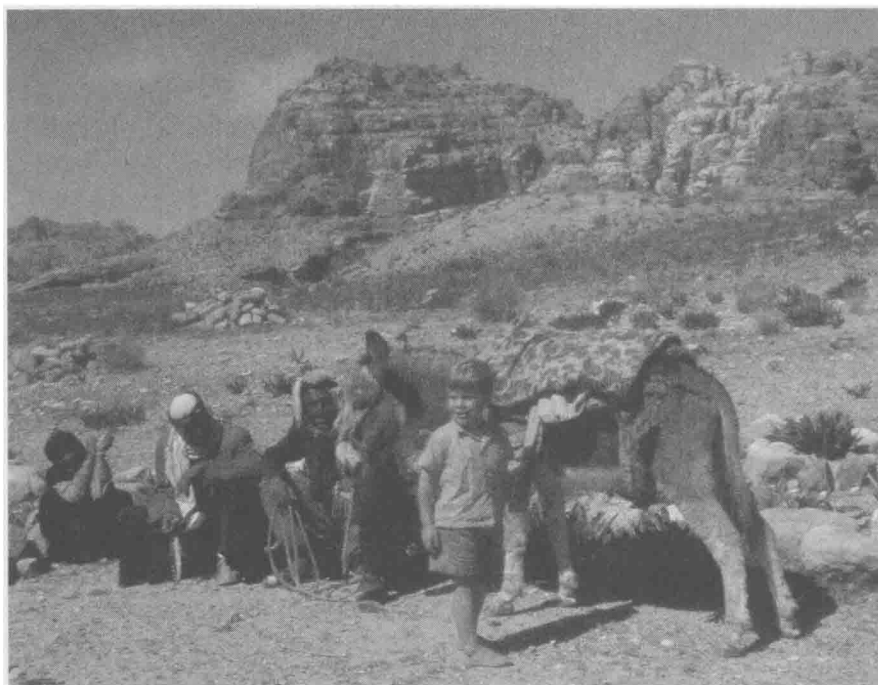
We spent three weeks in Aleppo. Sometimes Jean-Pierre took me to help with his research, notably in an ancient Aleppo merchant's *khan*, or trading house in the bazaar. Here we dug out everything from nineteenth-century photographs to handwritten Korans to Chinese porcelain, buried deep in a cluttered storeroom behind the colonnaded courtyard, where years earlier camel caravans unloaded their wares. I jostled with donkeys and black-swathed housewives through the narrow souks of the bazaar, drinking in the smell of spices and the elixir of being utterly distant from England. Nearly everyone wore ankle-length gowns, not Western dress. The medieval-looking arched alleys had shops on aged wooden platforms, with a knotted rope suspended above to help the shopkeeper heave himself in. At other times I stayed at home and struggled on with my Arabic catechism, sitting upright on one of the two beds in our bare room of whitewashed cement. My ritual of study kept the chaotic rush of new experiences at bay and offered the distant promise that one day I might be able to comprehend them.

My academic efforts, however, were rapidly being overtaken by a crash course in

Middle Eastern reality. At five A.M. on our first morning in Madame Olga's, we awoke to dozens of large explosions shaking the city. Later that morning we discovered that the Syrian army had ringed and sealed all roads into the city. The shopkeepers had declared a general strike, locking down their metal shutters in what I was to learn was the time-honored but often futile fashion of Middle Eastern urban protest. Now a few keystrokes on a computer can dig out reports on the Aleppo troubles of March–April 1980 as part of the Syrian government's unending quest to crush its domestic opponents. Some commentaries say power-hungry Islamic extremists were fighting to overturn the secular order. Others note that moderate Islamists were finding sympathy among businessmen frustrated with impoverishment and corrupt economic mismanagement. Apparently, conservative Sunni Muslims were chafing at domination by the schismatic Alawite Muslim minority who monopolized the country through their strongman, President Hafez al-Assad. Perhaps all of the above was true. Back then, I couldn't have told these concepts apart, and nobody was framing events in these easy sound bites anyway. News agencies and radio stations in Beirut eventually carried a few confused reports from Aleppo, but they were short, appeared days later, and vaguely quoted "travelers from the city." We did not hear about these. Not even Jean-Pierre's vivacious cross-questioning of everyone we met could explain what was going on.

The populace lived in a swirl of conflicting rumors. The bazaar was nearly empty except for the soldiers. A few tradesmen watched in silence as army platoons smashed the padlocked shop fronts open with sledgehammers, making the stone vaults ring with metal clangs and explosions of glass. The army conducted searches for Islamist dissidents, district by district, house by house. I spent most of the first evening on our tiled balcony, hypnotized by the lines of tracer bullets lacing through the night sky. Armored vehicles clanked along the nearby main road, occasionally passed by columns of open trucks filled with frightened civilian captives in pajamas or flowing nightgowns. I could read stress on the faces of everyone, but the population was not necessarily cowed. One of our ladies at Madame Olga's did her share, emptying a bucket of water over the heads of two soldiers as they left the establishment. That image of a prostitute servicing the oppressors but at the same time supporting supposedly "Islamist" rebels implanted in me a long-lasting suspicion of all ideological interpretations of the Middle East.

The soldiers arrested Jean-Pierre and me several times. They were unpredictable, either extraordinarily friendly or so nervous that they armed their guns and rocket-propelled grenade launchers and rammed them into our bellies. Once, when Jean-Pierre's loose-leaf photocopies of Ottoman texts were mistaken for the flyers calling for shopkeepers to strike, we spent an uncomfortable hour in one of the impromptu torture and interrogation centers set up in construction sites on the edge of the city.



With my donkey outside the ancient city of Petra on the edge of the southern Jordanian desert, age four. My family took me on frequent trips to the eastern Mediterranean as a child, one likely cause of a lifelong addiction to the Middle East. 1964. (*Phyllis Garle*)

Jean-Pierre charmed the officer in charge, teaching me that an ability to make people laugh was an essential survival skill. Protected by Jean-Pierre, the edginess was exhilarating. I soon gave up trying to read the few history textbooks I had taken with me.

We did escape for a while from Aleppo, leaving Madame Olga's and its insatiable Iraqi truck drivers behind. One day, Jean-Pierre suggested we visit nearby Alexandretta, over the border in neighboring Turkey. I brushed off my guidebook to line up the most interesting ancient sites to see along this stretch of the Fertile Crescent, cradle of some of the world's first civilizations. I felt a comfortable surge of familiarity. My father, a scholarly detective in the decipherment of ancient scripts, and my mother, a handsome Englishwoman of the indefatigable school, had marched me through countless eastern Mediterranean classical ruins. This was done with little reference to contemporary peoples around them, rather as my university course in Oriental Studies seemed uninterested in modern Middle Eastern culture. At Oxford, Lawrence of Arabia's exciting epic of desert adventures was considered more

part of English literature than the Islamic history we had to study from difficult modern theorists. I had not yet discovered the delights of reading accounts by Victorian adventurers, imperial proconsuls, and romantic travelers who could really communicate their broad and intimate relationships with the Middle East, great writers like Richard Burton in the Arabian deserts, Freya Stark in remote mountain villages, Gertrude Bell as she paced the boundaries of modern Iraq, and John Glubb Pasha, who commanded Jordan's Arab Legion. My era judged such nonacademics as lightweight and unworthy. The fashion was for bookish specialization and, partly thanks to the shaming impact of Edward Said's critique of "Orientalism," there was a scorn for Westerners dabbling in Eastern adventures. "Persian," one British professor warned me sternly, "is not a subject for dilettantes."

My antidote to all this was Jean-Pierre, and a new lesson in how to take in the Middle East came in a nondescript village a few hundred yards after the tortuous formalities of the Turkish border crossing. Just as I was relishing picking up speed again, the beat of a drum and the wail of a reed horn made Jean-Pierre's ears prick up. He pulled his car onto the shoulder and headed over to a small crowd gathered in an uneven space before one of the mud-brick houses. A wedding party was getting under way. With cheerful waves we were ushered into seats of honor next to the bridegroom in a wide circle of chairs. I marveled at Jean-Pierre's unending appetite for conversation but was unable to follow more than the overall cut and thrust of the talk. The afternoon wore on.

"Jean-Pierre, shouldn't we be leaving? It's getting dark."

"Take it easy, Hugues. Don't you see how fascinating this is? A pure Kurdish celebration in the midst of Turkey. They've cast aside all their inhibitions . . ."

"But Jean-Pierre, please. If we're to get to the mosaic museum in Antioch, we have to . . ."

He wasn't listening anymore, dragged away by an invitation to join the line of young men who were dipping and dancing to the music, their leader delicately twitching a white handkerchief high in the air and then sweeping it low over the beaten earth courtyard. Jean-Pierre joined in seamlessly yet outrageously, energizing the line with his extra, laughing pirouettes, a jester who had found his court. His hosts would have been surprised to learn that he was actually half Jewish, brought up in the house of a French banker. His conception was as exotic as his life, being the fruit of a brief affair between his French Marxist mother and an English trade union leader from the northern town of Wigan, both of whom had attended the same Socialist conference in Vienna.

Just being part of his sparkling circle made me feel like I was on a romantic Eastern journey. His boisterous chat and infectious laughter charmed all into believing that they were living a special moment, flattered by his boundless curiosity about their lives and politics and disarmed by his wide-open blue eyes, broad forehead, and

bald head. Certainly, our hosts were upholding the Eastern obligation of hospitality. But in this Kurdish village, Jean-Pierre intuitively understood how to unlock the clannishness of the occasion, which, if we had driven straight on past, would have been bound by narrow conventions of a village whose livelihood derived from two wheat harvests scratched out each side of the blazingly hot summer months. However, it was linguistically and culturally impenetrable to me. I had a lot to learn and felt like an outsider.

"Jean-Pierre, let's go," I pleaded again. My Oxford cocktail party training had at least helped me spot a natural break in proceedings as people got up and moved around. "We're not going to find a hotel at all if we don't leave now."

"The party's only just starting. Come on!" He led me into a house where torn limbs of freshly roasted lamb lay heaped on a mound of rice.

I had no choice but to follow my guide. I was forced to set aside my English reserve, which I now realize was actually my anxious determination not to be separated from my long-laid, book-guided plan, from my habits of chairs, tables, and restaurants, and from my control over the company and conversation. Jean-Pierre cheered me up by teaching me to plump rice into a ball with my right hand. He reminded me in a whisper that, in the absence of toilet paper, the left hand was used only with water for personal hygiene. Seeing my nose wrinkle, Jean-Pierre rolled his eyes and insisted that this toilet procedure was actually far more pleasurable.

"Don't be so disgusting," I snorted.

"I've even installed a special tap for the purpose in my flat in Paris, you know," he teased me. "It's much cleaner than our filthy ways."

He turned to discuss an aspect of sheep grazing with our host, and I applied myself to the feast before me, and in the right hands of my neighbors, who would pass choice morsels on to me. When I next ate with a knife and fork, I noticed a hard, metallic coldness that I had never tasted before. Many years later, a new generation of upmarket restaurants in Turkey, after decades of imitating Western manners, would come full circle and make a marketing point of doing away with the cutlery.

Back in the village, I spent the night on a thin mattress on the concrete floor of our hosts' main living room, shared with half a dozen other men snoring and scratching away. Hopes that we would be away at dawn came to naught, as a new host captured Jean-Pierre for a breakfast that took yet another millennium. Twenty-four hours later, my touristic plans were in tatters, but Jean-Pierre had acquired an encyclopedic overview of the villagers' life, hopes, and relationships that no guidebook could ever have captured. I gave up on ancient sites and simply followed him, understanding a little more each day. I learned to enjoy the Middle East for what it was, not what it had been or what the guidebooks told me to expect. Above all, Jean-Pierre taught me how to use a magic cloak of unprejudiced openness that guarded him from all suspicion. It was a gift that would serve me well.

• • •

Jean-Pierre was, however, not all innocence. He was an enthusiastic homosexual and, thanks to events in a Chicago bathhouse, HIV positive years before either he or anybody else in the Middle East had heard of AIDS. He spiced his love of people with several sexual contacts a day, and I now shudder to think what a swathe the illness may have cut through the communities in which we stayed. He passed away in 1990, adored by a wide circle of friends and honored by French academia with a collection of his writings titled *Passion d'Orient*.

Before those warning twinkles in Jean-Pierre's eyes forced me to take note of it, I had no idea of the homosexual current that runs through much of the Middle East. Unlike in the West, consorting with another male is usually not a statement of sexual identity but mostly a pragmatic solution to the lack of available women. I bumped against it often. After a visit to a Greek Orthodox church in Aleppo, I was astonished to find one of the junior priests looking me up in my hotel and offering me a "massage," which, he claimed, was his day job. And three weeks after I moved to a Syrian village to try to perfect my Arabic, living cheerfully among families with children, all the men in the extended family of my kind hosts invited me to drink tea after dinner.

The conversation took a familiar turn.

"Who are you, Mr. Q, really?"

All eyes were on me, sympathetic and expectant. I sighed.

"I've told you a hundred times. I'm English! Mohammed here and his sister Ayshe visited me in Oxford."

It was true. Jean-Pierre had introduced me to the village during my first visit to Syria in 1980, and I had subsequently guided this pair of unexpected guests around the colleges for a day.

Everyone smiled indulgently. My denials that I was Israeli or American were never taken very seriously. Clearly, they didn't believe a word I was saying.

"No, no, what are you, Mr. Q? What are you?"

"I'm a student, a student! If I was a spy, they would have trained me a bit better than this, wouldn't they?"

The looks all implied that they had seen through my double act long ago and had forgiven me.

"Mr. Q! What we want to know is this," their spokesman said. "Are you Iraqi? Or are you Lebanese?"

This went beyond the most imaginative accusations hurled at me yet, and I looked around the happily smiling group in absolute incomprehension.

"Relax, Mr. Q! What we mean is, do you like to do it, like an Iraqi, or have it done to you, like a Lebanese?"

I retreated the next morning to a new abode in Damascus, where I learned to

limit propositions from all and sundry by growing a mustache. Although unlovely, I wore it as a prophylactic talisman for the next fifteen years.

Men assumed that European men were easy game, just as they did European women. Jean-Pierre showed me how a disproportionate number of my contemporaries embraced the Middle East with their interest in male company in mind. It was an attraction to the East shared by famed Western explorers, painters, and adventurers in the past, from T. E. Lawrence to the legendary photographer of the Arab marshes and deserts, Wilfred Thesiger. Indeed, Peter Avery, the Cambridge academic with whom I first discussed my interest in studying Persian, practically sat me on his knee. The achievements of such men had played a big role in firing my imagination, and I wondered whether my lack of a homosexual drive would doom my small attempt to follow in their footsteps. Perhaps their ability to go with the Middle Eastern sexual flow was the key to the success of their exploits—or at least the route to learning some decent Arabic. Perhaps it would lessen the alienation I felt dragging me down when Jean-Pierre was not on hand to interpret events. I even criticized myself for my confused unwillingness to adopt this lifestyle, fearing that without it I would never be able to commune with the storied inner world of the East. In more desperate moments, I wondered if it was my own primness that was perverted.

It took a long time for me to realize that it was actually the absence of women in the public space that was disorienting me, or, given that I had lived in a brothel, perhaps I should say the lack of educated women. Problematic attitudes burst from a Syrian epic film set in medieval times that I went to see in Aleppo. It quickly taught me more about male perceptions of the lusts of war than all my years of reading short, dry accounts of battles in Oxford's Oriental Institute library. For two hours, the turban-clad costume drama indulged in a merry abandon of nonstop massacre, pillage, merciless executions, and the indelible delusion of a rape scene in which the female victim gave a postrape smile of happy satisfaction.

Seeking entertainment during my introduction to Aleppo under siege, Jean-Pierre took me to a nightclub, open in the afternoon because of the curfew. We watched women strippers work a meager audience of bedouins in checkered kaffiyehs, blowing the proceeds from a market-day sale of sheep or goats on the establishment's bootleg whisky. One lady from Angola danced around a chair as her prop but surprised us with her choice of background photographs as she removed her clothes: huge black-and-white images of Adolf Hitler. The few waiters made a show of rushing up to the stage after each successive act, holding a battered, champagne-shaped bottle in one hand and its cork in the other. The audience had no idea of what real champagne was, I supposed, and the performance may have resembled a nightclub scene from 1950s Egyptian films. But I wasn't ready for the climax. As the lady made her bows, the waiters shouted "pop" and flung the cork of what turned out to be an empty bottle onto the stage. Western ways and images might