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Tales Of The Islamic World With Thai Twists

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INTRODUCTION

With its evocative music and muezzins' cries, to its curvaceous, dazzling architectural detail, hearty fare, world-leading scientific advances and proud tradition of hospitality born out of the harshness of the desert, in which if you don't offer food to guests, they might not live, the Middle East has fascinated outsiders through the millennia.

After two decades of immersion in the East—East Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia—the author's attention naturally flowed into the Middle East, a region of a mysterious Pagan past, dramatically expansive early Islamic era, brilliant golden age of discovery, decline, lingering romanticism the and modern era marked by a return to Islamic roots—and in the early 2010s, loud calls for democracy.

Meanwhile, many Muslims who call Thailand their home, concentrated in the Deep South, have struggled to maintain their unique religious, ethnic Malay heritage and culture amidst an onslaught of assimilatory “Thaiisation” schemes through the decades, especially after the Siamese conquest of the Pattani Sultanate in 1904. A century later, the latest uprising began afflicting the war-weary region all the more. But there is always room for hope.

This book is written in the spirit that a clash of civilisations is hardly inevitable, and what's more that there can be greater reconciliation between all religions and races.

At a talk in early 2011 at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand called *Small Acts of Resistance: Popular Movements and Democratic Change*, Steve Crawshaw, former British journalist, and co-author of “*Small Acts of Resistance: How Courage, Tenacity, and Ingenuity Can Change the World*”, which was published before the uprisings in the Middle East, said of the region, “No one can tell what will happen next. Tiny acts add up to big changes. It's true that a butterfly flapping its wings can cause a hurricane.

“It's a universal truth that we can achieve more than we think.”

Several of these chapters were published in *The Nation* newspaper in Bangkok in the first decade of the 21st century. One each appeared in the *Palestine Times* and the *Hellenic Chronicle*.

*For my mother Barret,
my first teacher and
a companion in
cultural exploration.*

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PART 1: SIAMESE ARABESQUES

Thai-Middle-Eastern links are varied and fascinating. Down through the centuries there has been cultural overlapping in politics, business, culture and cuisine, to name a few fields.

The allure of the exotic Far East continues to fascinate Arabs and Middle Easterners today. What's more, while admiring Thai society, they have also contributed to it, leaving an indelible mark in selling products of all kinds, from Arabic perfume to Cambodian and Thai silk to Afghan jewellery.

They continue to prepare delicious *mezze* dishes and kebabs and other dishes of their homelands, which are eagerly devoured by guests in Little Arabia on Bangkok's lower Sukhumvit Road.

And today Thailand deserves a good reputation for providing Middle-Eastern refugees and economic migrants with a second start, helping them along in terms of granting work opportunities and a shot at UN recognition as refugee that can help them find resettlement in the West.

Furthermore, despite the ongoing uprising in Thailand's three southernmost provinces, there are signs indicating where Buddhist Thais and Thai and Malay Muslims in the region can get along, make a living and live together peaceably.

1. IN SEARCH OF REFUGE

Ali is a refugee in every imaginable way. Having endured a forced tour of duty in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), survived three years of imprisonment in his native Iraq, and ultimately escaping his country, he found himself adrift in Bangkok with nowhere to go. His legal status is precarious and his future bleak.

Still, Ali dreams of living a normal life and enjoying the basic rights of a permanent home, a job, and dignity.

Granted refugee status by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Bangkok in 1999, he has spent many years since then trying to reconstruct a life that was shattered in Saddam Hussein's Iraq. It has never been easy, but these days getting a chance at resettlement abroad is harder than ever for migrants like Ali.

A wave of anti-immigration policies is sweeping traditional resettlement destinations in Europe, North America, and Australia, triggered by concerns about letting in potential terrorists and taking jobs away from locals. Attracting particular scrutiny are young, single Middle-Eastern men. Having survived a dangerous year of military service in 1987 toward the end of the Iran-Iraq War, laying mines and taking part in commando raids along the frontlines, Ali was exasperated to find Saddam Hussein mobilizing his army again in 1990. Determined to avoid more perilous soldiering, he deserted the army, he says, "Just before Saddam went into Kuwait."

Following the Allied victory in the Persian Gulf War in 1991 and with Iraqi forces on the run, Ali and other Shi'ite Muslims from southern Iraq rose up against Saddam Hussein. They were hopeful that with Allied support they could create conditions for a better Iraq, and improve the lot of the Shi'ites, who comprise a bare majority in the country but had no political power.

But after liberating Kuwait, and unwilling to risk losing support in the Arab world by going so far as to overthrow the Iraqi dictator, the US-led coalition offered the Shi'ites no meaningful

support. The short-lived rebellion was crushed by Iraq's weakened but still potent forces.

Eight days before his August 2, 1990 invasion of Kuwait, Saddam Hussein met with April Glaspie, then the United States' ambassador to Iraq. It was the last high-level contact between the two countries before Iraq went to war.

From a translation of Iraq's transcript of the meeting, released that September, press and pundits concluded that Glaspie had in effect given Saddam a green light to invade.

"We have no opinion on your Arab-Arab conflicts, such as your dispute with Kuwait," the transcript reports Glaspie as saying. "Secretary [of State James] Baker has directed me to emphasize the instruction . . . that Kuwait is not associated with America."

Before the end of the Gulf War in early 1991, Glaspie was called to testify informally before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

She said she was the victim of "deliberate deception on a major scale", and denounced the Iraqi transcript as "a fabrication" that distorted her position, though it contained "a great deal" that was accurate.

In November 1992, Iraq's former deputy prime minister, Tariq Aziz, gave Glaspie some vindication. He said she had not given Iraq a green light. "She just listened and made general comments," he told *USA Today*. "We knew the United States would have a strong reaction."

"I was involved in the *intifada* in southern Iraq. The police caught me and I was sentenced to jail for three years," Ali says in the matter-of-fact tone in which he describes all the unhappy details of his life, not letting them crush his spirit.

Ali shared his story at a cafe on Sukhumvit Soi 3/1, in the heart of the compact but bustling Arab enclave in downtown Bangkok, which he visits regularly to socialize with friends and compatriots. It's a place where he can find some sense of belonging.

Behind a weary face, tired beyond his 33 years, lies a quiet pas-

sion; the sort of inner strength necessary to have taken anyone so far. As he recounts the horrors of prison life, his pain is masked by long drags on a chain of cigarettes: a cramped holding cell, often packed with hundreds of detainees; cold winters made harsher by windows deliberately fixed open; scorching summers made more intolerable by the same windows being forced closed; meagre rations of thin rice gruel; psychological and physical torture; and no contact with family or friends. Although Ali was released when his three-year sentence was up, the Iraqi police continuously monitored and harassed him, occasionally arresting him and jailing him for a night or two.

“I could not sleep in my home in Iraq. Sometimes, if they could not find me, they would put my mother or father in jail for the night,” he says.

Feeling the increasing pressures of police surveillance, and after talking with a friend who had been released from prison in 1998, Ali finally decided that he had no option but to leave Iraq. His friend, while imprisoned, had heard of a government plan to crack down on past “troublemakers” and those believed to have kept contact with dissidents abroad. “You cannot stay here. If you stay here, you’re dead,” Ali’s friend told him, warning Ali that he and others were to be framed for the recent bombing of a ruling Ba’ath Party office.

Moving through a series of safe houses, Ali made his way to Baghdad, where he made arrangements with traffickers to take him to Jordan, the starting point for what he hoped would be a new life. After paying several hundred dollars for the privilege of bumping along a notorious smugglers’ route known as “Line 12”, Ali was dropped off twenty kilometres from the Jordanian border. After hiking this last stretch through the desert, he was out of Iraq, but not out of trouble.

Making it to the Jordanian capital, Amman, which he and other Iraqis in Bangkok describe as being full of Saddam Hussein’s spies, Ali did what many Iraqi asylum seekers do there – he bought a fake

Iraqi passport and arranged, through another group of traffickers, a flight to a transit country. The transit country would offer him a chance to apply for refugee status, an important step towards his goal of resettlement and a new life in a Western country – anywhere from Australia to Denmark or Canada.

The route available for Ali was to Yemen. From there he found his way to Thailand.

Living in Bangkok, Ali worries how to stretch his paltry income – a 3,600 baht monthly stipend from the UNHCR, and when he may ever find a place to call home.

Having been rejected by the embassies of the US, the UK, and Sweden, Ali holds out hope that he may secure sponsorship from a charity group in Canada. But the chances are slim, especially for single males like him without a wife and children – assets and responsibilities that might make it easier to win resettlement.

“Iraqi people cannot stay or work in Thailand. Without proper identification, nobody can help you,” he says.

Ali’s status as a refugee was not enough to prevent one incident when he was arrested by police near Sukhumvit Road and detained for the night. To the police, Ali’s copy of his refugee status identification was no substitute for a passport with a Thai visa they were accustomed to seeing. In a complaint he filed with the UNHCR, Ali claims he was forced to pay several thousand baht to secure release.

Ali spends much of his time checking on the details of his case at the UNHCR and consulting with the Bangkok branch of Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS), one of the few advocacy organizations offering various forms of assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers.

“He’s a typical example of people who get stuck here,” Fabrice Lincoln, a volunteer legal officer at JRS, says about Ali. “The resettlement process has completely slowed down.”

Although barely getting by on his modest stipend, occasional 100-baht handouts from Arab friends, and other occasional payments sent from a brother who lives in the United States, Ali is luckier than many other Iraqis in Bangkok who end up at the Im-