

Between

a Rock

and a

Hard Place



A taxi ride shows that it's not easy being an American Christian in the Middle East

Elliot Paulson

I love it when Americans ask me where I live these days. My answer: "Between a rock and a hard place." Not many people can say that. Here's why. English-speakers usually pronounce Iraq as "eye rack" or "a rack." However, when Middle Easterners say Iraq, it sounds closer to "a rock." Therefore, given the countries we share borders with, we can literally say we live between Iraq ("a rock") and a hard place. Several hard places, actually. Look at a map. It's a rough neighborhood.

But lately I flinch when Muslims ask me where I am from. My answer: "Nice weather today, isn't it?" Seriously. Here's why.

Exactly ten days before the Second Gulf War officially started, I hopped in a taxi on the way to the airport. I was on a journey of about 4000 frequent flyer miles, which is not all that interesting except that I was flying on a Muslim country's flagship carrier (complete with direction finder for Mecca for those who want to pray enroute), I would be flying on the edge of Iraqi airspace, and I would be changing planes

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in a Muslim country smack in the middle of the Gulf. That's not all that interesting either, except that I would be reversing my route just hours before every commentator was predicting missiles would start falling on Baghdad.

As the taxi driver effortlessly navigated his 1600-cc, LPG-fueled tin can through red lights, angrily honking at motorists who dared to try to pass through the intersection on the green, my wife's parting words were ringing in my ears. "Try to stay inconspicuous.

Don't advertise the fact you are an American."

I promised I would heed her warning and even joked with her that on my trip, if I had to speak English in public places I would pronounce words with a Middle Eastern accent.

My taxi driver was a sociable fellow, and during the normal pleasantries he innocently asked, "Where are you from?"

We'd already noted the temperature and precipitation in our chit-chat, so I obviously couldn't divert his attention with, "Nice weather, isn't it?"

So I offered him another deflec-

tion. "I'm from Anchovy Province." This made him jerk his head toward me and squint his eyes in a fiercely doubtful examination of my facial features. (This also meant, of course, that he took his eyes off the road, but that had little practical effect on his driving.)

During our conversation he'd picked up clues that I wasn't a local, so before he could blurt out an expletive of incredulity, I slowly raised my right index finger to my olfactory organ and said with a grin, "Isn't it evident from my nose?"

He chuckled and glanced back out front just in time to cut off a bus and

barely miss a push cart.

The natives of Anchovy Province are famously proud of their Roman noses, and mine, though not as noble as their benchmark profile, is nonetheless more prominent than most here. My driver glanced at me again and laughed, pleasantly surprised at my knowledge of his culture.

I seized my chance to make him forget his original question about my origin. "Where are you from?"

"Tea Province."

"Why, that makes us practically

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neighbors,” I said. Anchovy and Tea Provinces are next to each other.

“You know,” I went on, “if you ask me, I think that Tea Province is the most beautiful province in the whole country.” (Note: If my kids ever tell you that I say this to every taxi driver, no matter which of the 80-some provinces he is from, I will deny it.)

His smile showed that he agreed with me, and I could tell his thoughts wandered back to the pristine air and the hillside tea groves of his homeland, displaying their thousands of shades of green framed by sapphire skies. But he snapped back to reality

being unpatriotic, let me explain. When I meet a Middle Easterner, I can't always tell immediately what his opinion of Americans, and therefore of me, is going to be. A man sporting blue jeans and a golf shirt might be as anti-American as one who is clothed in 7th-century Arab garb. I've found that my joke about my choice of birthplace usually softens even the most prejudiced Middle Easterners, whether they are anti-capitalist leftists or anti-Christian Muslims. Once I have shown them I am not a stereotypical American, we can have a decent, mutually-respectful dialogue. But as much as pos-

one thing, but aren't you proud to be an American?”

Well, I prefer to say that I am grateful to be an American. But I certainly cannot say I am proud of everything that is known as American culture or of American foreign policy. Living for 18 years in a Muslim country has given me a broader world view than most Americans have.

But infinitely more important, I know that it is no great personal character virtue to have been born in a given place. I am not the only human being who had no choice where he or she was born. And certainly, no one can claim any personal merit

from his or her birthplace. In fact, we have nothing that we have not been given, including our natural talent, intelligence, and health. So, along with our birthplace, finding any of these things as a

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as an overloaded and seriously listing minibus belching black diesel exhaust roared past us on our left, cut in front of us and swerved to the right curb, squealing his brakes and tossing his human cargo about, just to pick up a single passenger for whom there was no room. After leaving his own skid marks and cursing the minibus chauffeur, my driver shifted into first and pulled back into the traffic flow.

“No, really, where are you from?” he repeated.

Seeing no way out, I gave an honest answer, but camouflaged in a cough. “Amggouffhhkkhaa.”

“What?” he persisted, with furrowed brow.

“America,” I said as quietly as possible. Then louder, “But don't blame me, nobody asked me where I wanted to be born.”

Now, before you accuse me of



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sible, I avoid smashing into the rock of brandishing my passport.

Now don't get me wrong. I am thankful I was born in America. I grew up in relative prosperity, peace and health. I had the luxury of choosing a university, a course of study, and a profession. I had the freedom to both select a faith and to practice it with little or no discrimination or social cost. I am deeply aware of my blessings, and thankful for them. So total denial of my American heritage would put my conscience in a very hard place.

Some may ask, “Being thankful is

source of pride is totally in vain (1 Cor. 4:7).

In addition, Jesus said that the more we've been given, the more we will have to give account for (Luke 12:48). Along with the great privilege of being an American Christian comes a great burden of responsibility to do good to all nations (Gen. 12:3, Matt. 28:18-20).

This phrase, American Christian, leads me to a second between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place situation we constantly live in. Your average Muslim here has never met either a Christian or an American. Not that

they make the distinction: they think that all Americans are Christians. If you are born there, you are a Christian, just like if you are born here, you are a Muslim.

The fact is, Muslims get literally all of their impressions of Christians and Americans from Hollywood and/or the Islamic press. They see every American actor and every American politician as Christian. So, if I voluntarily identify myself as a Christian to Muslims, they hear me confessing that I am immoral, imperialistic, or both. That is the rock on my one side. To avoid hitting my head on it, I almost never use the word Christian when describing my faith to Muslims.

But some may protest, "First, you are not proud to be an American and now you are ashamed of being a Christian. Repent! The Bible says we are not to be ashamed of the gospel!" (see Rom. 1:16).

To which I reply, "Being ashamed of the gospel is one thing. Distancing myself from Muslims' uninformed and prejudiced opinion of Christians is another. When I have a chance, I say that I am a follower of Jesus the Messiah by choice, not by birth. I tell them they can call me by a variety of names: Messianic believer, disciple of Jesus, member of the fellowship of Jesus. Sure, these are strange terms for Muslims, and when I see their faces contort with incomprehension, I put them out of their misery by saying, "Or you can call me a True Christian."

I know that sounds like arrogance, just the opposite of the humility that Jesus taught us to have. Who am I to say that I am a true Christian, implying that someone else is not? Yet, I am in a hard place. I must still somehow show Muslims that I am different than the bulk of the Hollywood stars and Washington pundits who come to their media-manipulated minds. So I quote Jesus himself, hoping they'll get the point: "Not everyone who calls me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven; only those who do the will of my Father will enter." (Matt. 7:21)

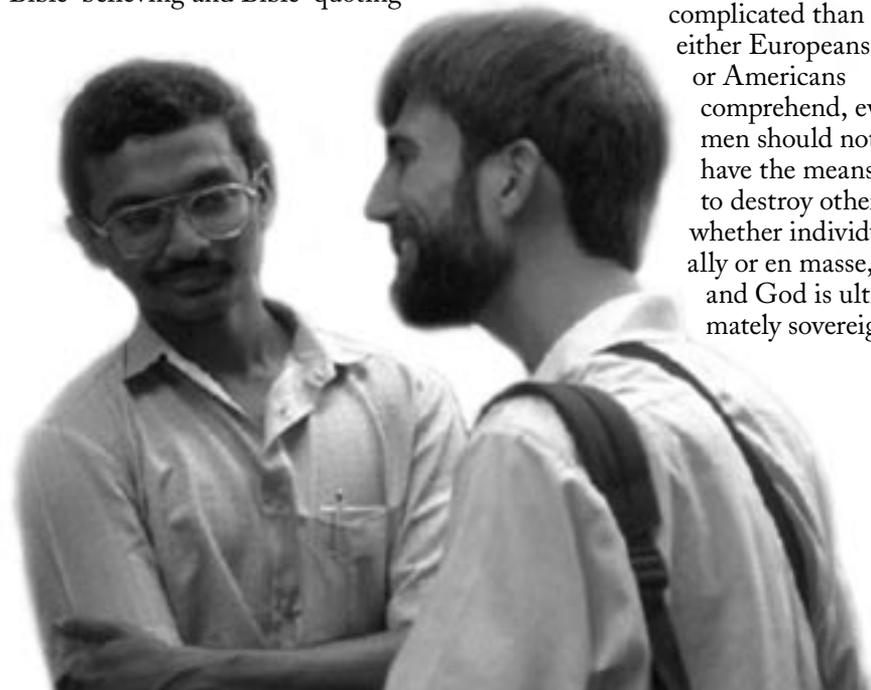
If you think that I could soften up that hard place by simply explaining to Muslims the distinctions between the varieties of nominal, liberal and conservative/evangelical American Christians, and if you then think that by identifying myself with conservative evangelicals I will enhance my credibility and reputation with Muslims, think again. Sadly, most Muslims are unaware or have forgotten that a Nobel Peace prize-winning and evangelical Christian former president opposed this war. But informed Muslims know full well that many of the most hawkish politicians and a large slice of the current president's constituency are Bible-believing and Bible-quoting

"Which one?" I replied with a grin. He took his eyes off the road one more time and glanced at me.

"Do you mean the American one or the one here, in my adopted homeland?" His smile and nod showed he appreciated my identification with his people.

He never did say what he thought of Americans, and therefore, of me. But by the time I reached my destination, an American Christian and a Middle Eastern Muslim had agreed on lots of important principles: innocent people should not die in war, the motives of politicians are rarely clear, let alone pure, the Middle

East situation is a lot more complicated than either Europeans or Americans comprehend, evil men should not have the means to destroy others whether individually or en masse, and God is ultimately sovereign.



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Christians. In short, Muslims see these Christians as the ones launching the missiles. Like I said, a rock and a hard place.

But back to my taxi ride. My Muslim driver had not yet revealed his opinion of my being an American. He probed some more. "What do you think of your president?"

As I paid my fare, I placed my hand on his shoulder and sighed, "You know, younger brother, if only they would ask us, you and I could solve the problems of the world, couldn't we?"

Handing me my change, he smiled one more time. "You're right, older brother, you're right." 🌐