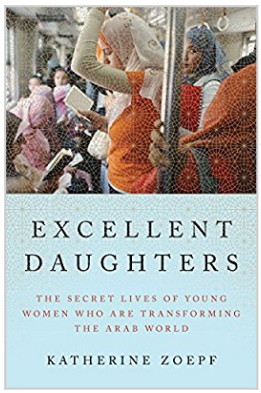

Excellent Daughters: The Secret Lives of Young Women Who Are Transforming the Arab World

By Katherine Zoepf

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For more than a decade, Katherine Zoepf has lived in or traveled throughout the Arab world, reporting on the lives of women, whose role in the region has never been more in flux. Only a generation ago, female adolescence as we know it in the West did not exist in the Middle East. There were only children and married women. Today, young Arab women outnumber men in universities, and a few are beginning to face down religious and social tradition in order to live independently, to delay marriage, and to pursue professional goals. Hundreds of thousands of devout girls and women are attending Qur'anic schools—and using the training to argue for greater rights and freedoms from an Islamic perspective. And, in 2011, young women helped to lead antigovernment protests in the Arab Spring. But their voices have not been heard. Their stories have not been told.

In Syria, before its civil war, she documents a complex society in the midst of soul searching about its place in the world and about the role of women. In Lebanon, she documents a country that on the surface is freer than other Arab nations but whose women must balance extreme standards of self-presentation with Islamic codes of virtue. In Abu Dhabi, Zoepf reports on a generation of Arab women who've found freedom in work outside the home. In Saudi Arabia she chronicles driving protests and women entering the retail industry for the first time. In the aftermath of Tahrir Square, she examines the crucial role of women in Egypt's popular uprising.

Deeply informed, heartfelt, and urgent, *Excellent Daughters* brings us a new understanding of the changing Arab societies—from 9/11 to Tahrir Square to the rise of ISIS—and gives voice to the remarkable women at the forefront of this change.

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Editorial Review

Review
“Zoepf… distinguish[es] herself from those who came before her… western female authors who since the last century have implemented well-placed clichés and buzzwords associated with women in the Muslim world… an eye-opening account of women from various backgrounds in the Middle East… Zoepf’s deft meta-commentaries… [are] a promising signal that this genre is turning over a new leaf.”-Nahrain Al-Mousawi, *Middle East Eye*

"Shocking and moving... Zoepf's knowledge of Arabic, her open and inquisitive mind, her combination of lucidity and empathy, and perhaps her own background as a lapsed Jehovah's Witness allow her to understand these women's lives on their own terms without losing her footing either in their world or in ours." - *New York Times Book Review*

"Chilling...[*Excellent Daughters*] is like a "Lonely Planet" guide to the dark underbelly of the purity culture of Muslim societies...[It] exposes the tragic dynamics of power and control that lay siege to the bodies, minds and souls of women and girls through inherited rules of patriarchy, tribalism and morality. *"* - *The Wall Street Journal*

“Zoepf’s book directly challenges the Western idea of what it means to be an empowered woman, and a woman in the Middle East, and a reformer. It is a book that can change minds about people who are changing their own world. And it is a book of many stories that, taken together, hold the best kind of danger.”—*New America Weekly*

“ Zoepf’s deeply personal investigation into the small but radical acts these women commit not only illuminates the choices these women make every day, but also subverts many of the assumptions Western readers make about the Arab world.”—
Washington Post
“Many of the women and girls in Excellent Daughters strive toward freedom, but they do so in ways that most Westerners would be unable to parse. Zoepf has achieved not only intimate access to this population, but also profound insight into the joys, anxieties, and revelations they experience behind the collective abaya. Superbly reported and compassionately told, at once clear-eyed and forgiving, these brave narratives will foster understanding, forgiveness, and respect. This moving book is an act of cultural translation of the very first order.” —Andrew Solomon, author of *Far From the Tree* and *The Noonday Demon*

“Zoepf… fluidly merges memoir with reportage while showing the Arab world from a unique perspective…. In her absorbing, window-opening book, Zoepf reveals the variety of women’s lives and interests away from political headlines and conventional stereotypes, and their power, often by small steps, to transform their world.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“With superb reporting brio, and smart cultural analysis Katherine Zoepf conjures in vivid detail a hidden world that is often caricatured and misunderstood. Her portraits of these women are graceful and absorbing. She offers a rare and moving vision of the arab world in flux.” —Katie Roiphe, author of *In Praise of Messy Lives*

"Katherine Zoepf has written an unforgettable book. Deft and haunting, smart and empathetic, beautifully observed and sometimes heartbreakingly tragic, Excellent Daughters should be required reading for anyone who cares about the condition of women or indeed the condition of the world. This is a landmark work of non-fiction that is both astonishingly intimate and globally important."-Liza Mundy, Bernard Schwartz Fellow at the New America Foundation and author of *The Richer Sex: How the New Majority of Female Breadwinners Is Transforming Sex, Love and Family*

“With superb reporting brio, and smart cultural analysis Katherine Zoepf conjures in vivid detail a hidden world that is often caricatured and misunderstood. Her portraits of these women are graceful and absorbing. She offers a rare and moving vision of the arab world in flux.” -Katie Roiphe, author of *In Praise of Messy Lives*

"Katherine Zoepf's book is so well written, so well reported and so well calibrated that it demands to be read over the course of an evening. During that evening I learned a great deal about the modern Arab world and the role of women in it, and also how they will remake that world in profound ways within our lifetimes."-Peter Bergen, the author of *Manhunt: The Ten-Year Search for Bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad*

"*Excellent Daughters* offers a fascinating report from inside the minds of young women in some of the world's most repressive and segregated societies. Katherine Zoepf gives a much-needed voice to the other half of the population in recent years' revolutions, war and upheaval in the Middle East. And whether the characters in the book speak excitedly of entering arranged marriages or why they've chosen to leave their families behind to forge careers and lives of their own, the secrets told by these 'excellent daughters' will challenge an outsider's perspective of women's rights and the choices they make. Changes for women in the Middle East have long been underway, and this book makes clear they look intriguingly different from how we may have imagined them." -Jenny Nordberg, award-winning journalist and author of *The Underground Girls of Kabu*

“*Excellent Daughters* takes us behind the veil –exploring the lives, experiences and beliefs of young Muslim women in rapidly changing societies across the Middle East. The stories Katherine Zoepf tells are engrossing in their details and their ability to take us into a world that is hidden from us by the prescriptions of Islam and Muslim men. Equally important, however, they offer insights into the modern Arab world that countless treatises on “the politics of Islam” or “the future of the Middle East” cannot match.” -Anne-Marie Slaughter, President and CEO, New America, and former Director of Policy Planning, U.S. Department of State

About the Author
KATHERINE ZOEPF lived in Syria and Lebanon from 2004 to 2007 while working as a stringer for *The New York Times*; she also worked in the *Times*’s Baghdad bureau in 2008. Since 2010, she has been a fellow at the New America Foundation. Her work has appeared in *The New York Observer, The Chronicle of Higher Education, The New York Times Magazine,* and *The New Yorker,* among other publications. She is a graduate of Princeton University and the London School of Economics.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

This is a work of nonfiction. Because it grew out of my experiences reporting in the Arab world for other publications, some of the stories and details it contains have been published before, in other forms.

Hundreds of girls and young women in Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates were generous enough to share their stories with me. They all understood that I was working as a journalist. Still, I've changed some names in the text, and I have not always given family names. I've done this whenever the subjects themselves requested it, and in a few cases where they didn't, because I was concerned that identifying them might cause embarrassment or compromise their safety. I also changed some identifying details.

As an outsider—and one with less than fluent Arabic, at that—I naturally feel some trepidation about drawing any conclusions about a population as vast, diverse, and quickly changing as the young women of the Arab world, and about writing in depth about a religion, Islam, that is not my own. I have tried to get things right and have discussed my ideas and findings with scholars of the Arab world and scholars of Islam—and as often as I could with the young women themselves, as well—but any failures of interpretation or analysis are mine alone.

Shoppers examine Valentine's Day gifts in a Damascus souk.

PROLOGUE

DECEMBER 2007—RIYADH

The twenty girls at the party in Reem's garden had all been classmates in a Riyadh private school. They were now seventeen and eighteen, and university students, but to me they seemed much younger. I wondered, at first, if I'd forgotten how eighteen-year-old girls behave; I was about to turn thirty. But the longer I sat among them that evening, cross-legged on a carpet laid over hard ground, under a bare fluorescent tube that bathed us in greenish light and seemed to make the sky above us appear particularly black and starless, the more girlish their mannerisms and chatter seemed. There was a great deal of cuddling and handholding, and there were effusive announcements of fondness. New arrivals were greeted with rapturous squeals. Even though I was both taking notes and paying particular attention to names, there were so many nicknames—sometimes several for the same girl—that I had a hard time keeping track of every Dodo, Soosoo, and Lulu.

The gathering was a good-bye party of sorts. Our hostess, Reem, was leaving in the morning on the hajj—the pilgrimage to Mecca that all Muslims are obliged to complete at least once during their lifetime, if they are able—and she had invited some old school friends over for the evening to mark the occasion. She was congratulated, again and again, on her undertaking. I had wondered if the holy pilgrimage might feel less momentous to a young Saudi like Reem than it did to so many of the young Muslims I'd met in other countries. The Saudi government's Ministry of Hajj sets yearly quotas for domestic as well as foreign pilgrims, but, for Reem, preparing for the hajj hadn't required entering a national lottery or filing complicated visa applications—only a short domestic flight and, given the five days of prescribed rituals to perform, a scant week away from home before returning to Riyadh for the Eid al-Adha holiday. But the seriousness with which Reem discussed her hajj preparations, both practical and spiritual, as well as the shy pride with which she accepted the sincere congratulations of her friends, banished this thought.

There were also congratulations—and some gentle teasing—for Nouf, one of Reem's closest friends, who

had just become engaged. While the others laughed, Reem explained the teasing: Nouf had passionately wanted to have her wedding at Disney World in Orlando, Florida, but her father had refused to consider the idea. Nouf was a quiet, tomboyish-looking seventeen-year-old who sat next to me for most of the party, and didn't seem at all put out by the mockery. She had always loved Disney, she told me earnestly. In honor of Reem's departure for the hajj, Nouf was wearing her best sterling silver Mickey Mouse earrings. She had colored enamel Mickey Mouse earrings for use on less momentous days, and she explained that she never went out without wearing one pair or the other. Nouf said she had decided that the next best thing to being married at Disney World would be to spend her honeymoon at Disney World. Even if the actual marriage was to take place in Riyadh, as her family insisted, it still might be possible to arrange some wedding-like ceremony in Florida.

"Just some small something at Cinderella's Castle," Nouf said. "That would be nice."

Nouf hadn't had a chance to talk to her fiancé—about her Disney World idea or, in fact, about anything else. She had once seen the man, of course, on the day that he and his family had come to her house for the *showfa*, which literally means "the viewing," and is a Saudi couple's first step on the path to marriage. But the young couple hadn't then been given time for conversation. Nouf's friends wanted to hear every detail of the few minutes that Nouf and her fiancé had spent together, along with the representatives of their two families, in Nouf's father's *majlis*—the Arabic word means "the place of sitting"—a formal home reception room. But it had all happened so fast, Nouf explained, that she didn't really have much to tell them. Nouf's mother had come to find her in her bedroom, asking her to go downstairs and carry in a tray of soft drinks for her father's guests. Such a request can mean only one thing, as every Saudi girl knows, and Nouf had been too nervous to take a good look at her future husband. Recounting this for the other girls at the party, Nouf sounded happy and a bit dreamy. Even as she described nervousness, I couldn't detect any hint of it in her tone. And, although her friends were doing their best to draw her out on the subject of wedding plans, Nouf seemed to have very little to say. It was only when one of them switched the topic back to Orlando that she became more animated.

I was surprised by the intensity of Nouf's Disney preoccupation. Was she, at seventeen, too young and sheltered to grasp the seriousness of the decision that her father had, in effect, made for her? After the *showfa*, Nouf's father had negotiated her *mahr*, or bride price. Reem, at my side, wanted to make sure I understood that the *mahr* was intended as a cash gift for the bride herself, from her fiancé. She glanced down at my notebook, to make sure I was getting everything. Foreigners sometimes had the mistaken impression that Saudi fathers "sold" their daughters, she explained, but, in fact, the money for the *mahr* went to the girl—who might then choose to give it to her family. Reem seemed so embarrassed by my next question, which was about the amount of a typical *mahr*, that I dropped the subject, but I later learned that a *mahr* for a virgin from a good family can run into the tens of thousands of riyals, or even higher (widows and divorcées fetch much less).

Once Nouf's *mahr* was settled, the two families had gathered once again for the *milka*, the formal signing of the marriage contract. But this "engagement party," as Saudis tend to render *milka* in English, had been gender segregated: the women of both families had made a great fuss over Nouf while, on the men's side of the celebration, a government-approved religious authority known as a *mimlik* had officiated as the *fatiha*—the first chapter of the Qur'an—was recited and the marriage contract signed by Nouf's fiancé and, on Nouf's behalf, by her father. (Nouf had agreed to the engagement, but, as she later told me, it would have been almost unthinkably difficult to oppose it. Saudi law requires a bride to sign her own marriage contract, but since she isn't present for the official signing of the contract before the *mimlik*, her signature is regarded as a formality.) Was it possible that Nouf was concentrating on Cinderella's Castle because it was the one aspect of the proceedings that she might be able to control? Or, given the impossibility of becoming acquainted with her fiancé before their wedding, was a fairy-tale narrative, where a meet-cute leads straight

to love and to “happily ever after,” the only model of romance that made sense to her? I wondered, even if this was the case, didn’t most of us make sense of our lives in a similar way, by adapting the stories we tell ourselves—even filtering the basic information we are willing to absorb about the world—to fit our circumstances? Nouf appeared serene. She explained that her family would probably allow her to speak to her fiancé by phone at some point before the wedding party. She was already thinking about how best to tell him about her honeymoon idea, and hoping that he’d approve of it.

I asked the group of girls if it was customary for a bride-to-be like Nouf to get to know her fiancé by phone in the months before the wedding. There was a brief silence, and Reem and Nouf looked at each other uneasily. “It is becoming more common,” Reem said. Many of the Saudi families in their circle permitted such phone calls, she explained, so that the young couple could become a little bit more comfortable with each other. Perhaps, Reem suggested, they might wish to discuss plans for furnishing and decorating their first home. Reem seemed to be straining to come up with unassailable reasons for a couple who were engaged to be married to talk to each other; her tone made it clear that while any mention of feelings or shared futures was out of the question, practical matters might be more excusable. Several days after Reem’s party, a mother with two teenage daughters told me that, with divorce rates in the Kingdom now approaching Western levels, particularly among newlyweds, some families believed that a few phone calls during the engagement period could help a young couple to begin married life with more realistic expectations. But, morally speaking, Reem explained, speaking to your fiancé after your engagement but before your wedding party was a gray area, a matter over which a girl would have to struggle with her own conscience. Socially speaking, on the other hand, it was black and white: it was something you wouldn’t admit except to very close friends. “I don’t know if you could really say that it’s acceptable,” Reem concluded, carefully.

A tall girl named Manal broke in. “What are you talking about? I think it’s very normal these days. This country is changing. In Jeddah, they even have mixed weddings now, with men and women celebrating together.”

“No!” Reem was almost shouting, and Nouf and the other girls looked shocked. Reem, in her role as hostess, seemed to be speaking for all of them. “That’s just not possible,” she said. “Not in Saudi Arabia.”

For a moment, Manal held her ground. “But they do! In Jeddah they do! I have relatives there, and they say . . .” Manal trailed off into awkward silence, seeing her friends’ reactions. The Red Sea port of Jeddah is well known as Saudi Arabia’s most liberal city; the millions of pilgrims who, for centuries, have passed through Jeddah en route to Mecca, about fifty miles inland, have left it with a more diverse population and a more international outlook than other Saudi cities. Riyadh, on the other hand, lies in the far more conservative central highland region known as the Najd. Manal’s mention of family members in Jeddah hadn’t gone over very well with this group of well-brought-up Najdi girls. Manal seemed to be looking at me for signs of support, and I was torn. I wondered if I should say something approving in response to her attempt to introduce more liberal Saudi social practices into the conversation. Manal clearly hoped to interest me, the American visitor, when in fact I was far more interested in the effect of her words on the others. This was partly out of professional instinct: the *New York Times* foreign desk had sent me to Riyadh to help report a series of articles about increasing religiosity among young people in Muslim-majority countries, so it was useful to hear the girls describe what they considered conventional, or socially acceptable. But to my surprise, I also found that I couldn’t help reflexively sharing the general annoyance with Manal. She seemed to be showing off, trying to strike a sophisticated pose. Perhaps she’d even intended to be a little bit shocking. But it was clear that she had miscalculated and, in suggesting that her relatives moved among a Jeddah set that held mixed-gender social functions, gone a few steps too far. Manal’s old schoolmates looked scandalized and disbelieving. Observing them, I was amazed at how instinctively Reem and her friends reinforced and policed one another’s opinions. Finding herself stranded, Manal backtracked. “Of course it’s wrong, and I myself would never go to a mixed wedding, but I have heard that in Jeddah, some families do

have them," she concluded, meekly.

Reem's texted invitation had referred to a barbecue, but the menu was entirely composed of desserts. As we talked, a pair of Filipino maids served hot chocolate puddings with molten centers in tempered glass ramekins, and filled a portable grill with coals for the girls to toast marshmallows. (In societies where alcohol is anathema, confectionery sometimes serves a similar social function. Throughout the Gulf countries, it is common to see groups of young men, their traditional white or checkered headdresses starched, ironed, and folded into the latest trendy styles—one popular style, which involves folding the headdress into a stiff point in the middle of the forehead in a manner that is said to resemble the water spout on a roof, is known as the "brain drain"—gathered shoulder-to-shoulder around primly decorated little tables in local branches of French patisseries like Paul, Ladurée and Fauchon, eating cake with tiny forks.)

At about nine o'clock, Reem stood up for a moment to supervise the maids. While the three of them bent over the grill, I looked around. Imported domestic labor is so inexpensive and plentiful in the Kingdom that Saudis don't consider it an indicator of wealth (I later heard a Saudi acquaintance mention, as an example of the hardships endured during a deprived childhood, the fact that her family had only one full-time maid, and I visited the homes of unemployed Saudis who nevertheless employed several servants to do their housework). And though Reem's family clearly lived well, the garden where we were sitting was not the kind of lush, manicured paradise that I'd seen when I'd visited the homes of rich Saudis, but the much-used yard of a large and active family. Houses in Saudi Arabia and the other oil-rich Gulf countries are traditionally surrounded by walls, usually about three meters high. And though, in the Kingdom at least, these walls are built more for privacy than for the sake of security, I always wondered whether the very fact of the barriers might make the world beyond them seem more dangerous to the people who lived within. (I never had the chance to test this: my only experience of compound life was the months I spent living in the *New York Times* bureau in Baghdad, where the walls did serve a protective function.)

Inside the stucco-covered walls of Reem's family compound there were piles of plastic toys, and what was supposed to be a lawn had been worn away by hard play. A few scrubby patches of grass still clung to the sandy earth near the back steps of the house, and carpets had been spread out in this area so that we could sit comfortably. When Reem sat down again, holding a skewered marshmallow, she pointed out a rough, shed-like structure next to the gate in the outer compound wall that opened onto the street. This was her brothers' *molhaq*, a kind of cabin that Saudi families construct on their property—outside the main house and next to the men's entrance in the perimeter wall—so that the unmarried sons of the household have an appropriate place to receive guests. The *molhaq* had been built for the boys when, on the appearance of the first physical signs of adolescence, they were deemed "too big to see women," Reem explained. The boys could receive their friends in this *molhaq* without the risk of these friends' catching sight of their female relatives in the main house. Reem's brothers spent most of their time in the *molhaq* now, with their big screen television, their minifridge, and their PlayStation, Reem said, wrinkling her nose in a manner that suggested the *molhaq*'s aura of stale fast food and questionable teenage hygiene. This evening, for the sake of Reem's soirée, the boys, along with their father, had been banished from the premises entirely.

I noticed scaled-down soccer goals at either end of the lawn and I asked Reem if these, too, belonged to her brothers. Reem grinned and, with the air of someone admitting to an embarrassing habit, told me that she and her friends used them too. Most of the young Saudis I've met since then, male and female alike, have been similarly passionate about soccer; in a country with no movie theaters and little public life, soccer players and clerics are, as a Saudi journalist once pointed out to me with a bitter laugh, the only celebrities. Among the girls in the garden that December night, Reem and Sara, a very pretty girl wearing a black ribbed tank top, and with matted dark brown curls that looked as if they hadn't been brushed in weeks, turned out to be the group's most soccer-obsessed. Sara told me that she'd even gone to watch a few soccer games with her father and brothers as a child, and several of the girls exclaimed enviously over this. Saudi women aren't

permitted to attend sporting events, Reem said. “But when it’s a very little girl, no one really notices if her father brings her.”

By now, a strong smell of burnt sugar suggested that the maids were finding fewer takers for the toasted marshmallows. The evening air was growing cooler, and I wondered if I should go back into the house to fetch my *abaya.* The conversation had turned to high school reminiscences. The girls missed the daily company of their school friends, they told me. They showed me photos from Reem’s scrapbook. Since many Saudi girls and women don’t allow their pictures to be taken, a photograph of school life is likely to be an image of an empty room. The classrooms in the photos were full of signs of life—half-eaten snacks, messages scribbled on blackboards—yet lacked people, as if the girls and their teachers had been called away, in the middle of a busy school day, for a fire drill. It had been a school tradition for a girl’s friends to decorate her desk for her birthday, and I was shown more than a dozen photographs of desks festooned with balloons and streamers, and piled high with cards. Last, the girls showed me photographs of the school auditorium, as empty as the classrooms had been, but decorated and ready to receive their mothers and other female relatives for their graduation ceremony the previous summer.

Now the girls were dispersed among a handful of Riyadh-area women’s colleges and university faculties. A half dozen, including Reem, were studying law, a fact that surprised me a little. It had recently become possible for Saudi women to study for law degrees. But because the Saudi justice ministry did not license women as lawyers, doing so looked to me a bit like an exercise in futility. The girls, on the other hand, seemed untroubled by the nonexistent job market. Reem thought that Saudi law firms would soon begin hiring women to prepare legal documents and to perform other tasks that did not involve appearing in court. Some of the other law students at the party were even more optimistic, and assured me that the justice ministry would soon begin licensing women lawyers, “by the time we graduate,” if not before. (Saudi Arabia licensed its first female lawyers in October 2013.)

By about ten o’clock that night, one of the maids began appearing discreetly among us again, whispering to one girl or another, “Miss Nouf, your car is here” and “Miss Sara, your driver.” Each girl thus summoned ducked into the house to retrieve her long, black *abaya* and black head covering from the row of pegs in the hall, then returned to the group for a few moments, transformed, her hair and body swathed in black fabric. About half of the girls used two black scarves, pulling the second one over their faces as a finishing touch, after covering their hair with the first. Now unrecognizable, these gauzy black ghosts hugged and air-kissed their friends before waving and disappearing through the gate in the outer wall of Reem’s garden into the desert night.

• • •

Like a generation of young Americans, my interest in the Arab world was substantially shaped by the September 11th attacks. As clichéd and insufficient as it sounds to me now, that I came to be toasting marshmallows in Riyadh with Reem and her friends was a direct result of the terrifying events that day. It pains me to write this, having come to know so many kind and honorable Saudis in the years since, but a drive to learn as much as I could about the Arab world began then, in the fall of 2001, with an initial period of shocked obsession with Saudi Arabia. It grew out of an anxious determination to understand the country and the culture that had produced fifteen of the nineteen hijackers—the men who killed one of the gentlest and most studious of my college classmates, a kind and quietly humorous girl named Cat MacRae, along with nearly three thousand others. And, because I often have a hard time grasping big political or economic concepts until I find stories that help me to see how they work in the lives of ordinary people on a practical, even intimate, level, I experienced this as a longing to meet people there in the hopes that I might find out how the world looked from where they stood. The way the hijackers had been thinking, as fundamentalists, was of special interest to me, too. What kind of a person was willing to abandon loved ones and earlier

ambitions, and to do such terrible things, for the sake of a set of ideas?

I was still very new to New York that September. After a summer spent staying with friends and waitressing at a French restaurant, I used the Labor Day weekend to move into a cramped apartment on a noisy stretch of Fourth Avenue in Brooklyn along with two Colombian girls whom I'd met only once before. The following week, I started a new job at *The New York Times*, as Bill Keller's research assistant. There had been a reshuffle of the *Times*'s top editors and Bill, who had been the paper's managing editor, was moving upstairs to the tenth floor of the old *New York Times* building on West Forty-third Street, where the *Times*'s columnists and editorial writers had their offices. Bill was to be writing a column every other week for the op-ed page. He told me that he was used to doing his own research and that he wasn't sure what to do with an assistant, and this did nothing to diminish my anxiety. I was twenty-three years old, and I wanted badly to be useful. Bill was, I could tell, almost as shy as I was, and it was the kind of shyness that always set off a sort of chemical reaction with my own, exacerbating it; during the early months, I had to concentrate on not twisting my hands together as I spoke to him.

Bill planned to start out with a few columns about the American West, he told me. He had grown up in California and worked at *The Oregonian* as a young reporter, and he felt, he said, that the western states sometimes got less attention than they deserved. He had decided to spend a few days in Oregon and northern California researching a column about a drought in the Klamath River Basin, and so, on the morning of Tuesday, September 11, I arrived at the *Times* very early. It was my second day working as Bill's assistant and, wanting to start off on the right foot, I hoped to make some progress in organizing Bill's trip to the West Coast before Bill himself got in to the office.

A few minutes before nine a.m., I was on the phone with the *Times*'s travel agents, discussing the prices of flights to Oregon, when the woman who had been helping me mentioned, with a lack of alarm that later surprised me, that she and her colleagues had just seen the news about the World Trade Center. I didn't know what she meant and so, while I tried to get the *Times* Web site to reload, the agent explained that there had been a terrible accident: a plane had crashed into one of the twin towers. I asked if it would be all right if I called back later about the airline tickets, and I hung up the phone. I walked into the hallway outside the little, windowless office that I shared with Bob Herbert's assistant, but the working day at a newspaper tends to start late, and no one on the tenth floor seemed to be at work yet. It occurred to me that there were televisions in the main newsroom, on the third floor, so I took an elevator downstairs.

Down in the newsroom, people were beginning to gather in semicircular groups around the various televisions, watching smoke pour out of the World Trade Center's north tower. As I joined a growing crowd in front of a television set that was suspended over a cluster of Metro editors' cubicles, there were gasps and murmured exclamations: United Airlines Flight 175 had hit the south tower. As a child terrified by the biblical descriptions of Armageddon that I heard about from my mother, who became one of Jehovah's Witnesses around the time I started school, I'd wondered fearfully about what it might look like and, in particular, how people would know that the end of the world had arrived; now, it seemed, I had an answer. For what seemed like an impossibly long time, the group of us in front of the television stayed frozen in place, scarcely moving or speaking. It wasn't until a third plane hit the Pentagon, over half an hour later, that I became aware that, all around me, there were people shouting instructions into telephones and people stuffing things into bags as they ran for the stairs that led out of the building. I took the elevator upstairs again.

By that point, Bill had arrived. He turned when he noticed me standing, uncertainly, in the open doorway of his office, and he asked if I was all right. He was about to go uptown to collect his young son from school, he told me. I could go home too, if I felt I needed to, he added, kindly. Hating how useless the question sounded, I asked Bill if there was any work that I might be able to do for him while he was gone. He said

that he didn't think so. When I got back to my desk, I started looking for articles about Osama bin Laden, and about the reaction to the attacks in the Arab world. I read for hours. I began to wish that in college I'd studied, not French and Italian literature, but history, maybe, or international relations, anything that might help me to make better sense of this.

In the months following the September 11th attacks, Bill wrote about nuclear terrorism (I ordered a potted spiderwort for his office after reading, in an article for the "dirty bombs" clip file I was gathering, that the plants could detect radiation), about Colin Powell and Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz, about the invasion of Iraq, and about the fruitless search for weapons of mass destruction there. Bill never did make the trip to the Klamath River Basin, or write much about the American West. I became quicker at transcribing Bill's taped interviews and was amazed and heartened to learn, through listening to dozens of them, that shyness could be a useful quality for a reporter. On the weekends, I read books about Islam, and everything I could find about modern Arab societies. I bought an Arabic phrasebook. I yearned to find a way to travel to the region.

The chance to do so came quite unexpectedly, almost three years later, in the summer of 2004. By then, the Jayson Blair plagiarism scandal had led to another change in newsroom leadership, and Bill had become the paper's executive editor. I had left New York for a brief stint at the London School of Economics, where I began studying Arabic in earnest, continued to read obsessively about the Arab world, and soon missed the pace of work at a newspaper. Finally, after some kind encouragement from the *Times*'s foreign editor, Susan Chira, who offered to cover the cost of airfare to Damascus in exchange for a few months' tryout as a stringer, I flew to Syria. As a frustrated graduate student in London, I had longed to do something "serious," to report on terrorism and sectarian conflict and the effects of the war in Iraq on neighboring countries. On my way to Damascus I thought, equally vaguely, that I'd stay and try to report in Syria for about six months. Instead, the changing Arab world has absorbed me now for over a decade. I lived first, for about three years, in Damascus, and after that, just across the anti-Lebanon mountains in Beirut (the distance between the two capitals, as the crow flies, is only about fifty miles, but the cities often felt to me as if they were separated by decades). I worked mainly as a stringer for the *Times* and, when I could find the freelance assignments for other publications that would pay my way, I tried to visit as much of the region as I could. After that, I spent a few years shuttling between home in New York and assignments in the Middle East. And I've ended up spending an ever-increasing proportion of all this time reporting, not on what a colleague during my one brief, three-month stint in *The New York Times*'s Baghdad bureau used to call "the usual Fate of Nations stuff," but about the lives of ordinary young women like Reem and her friends.

I'd argue, now, that ordinary young women's equally ordinary struggles can tell you quite a lot about the Fate of Nations, but it took me some time to begin thinking about young Arab women as a subject in their own right. Though it's embarrassing to admit, this had a great deal to do with a self-conscious fear, early on, that women's issues were somehow unserious. Even more discomfiting was the realization that I identified with many of the young Arab women I was meeting. I had moved to Syria when I was in my mid-twenties, but the sense of fellow-feeling I'm describing was not a question of age; I had felt nothing like it for any of the confident girls I'd known at Princeton. Rather it was because, having been brought up in suburban Cincinnati as one of Jehovah's Witnesses, I recognized in many of the young Arab women I met a pained struggle to reconcile the values they'd absorbed growing up with a changing world and their own changing hopes. I could never have explained to my college classmates that I'd been taught as a child, for example, to believe that higher education was a selfish, worldly goal, and that women must remain "in subjection to their husbands," deferring to the authority of the male heads of their households in matters large and small—let alone my continuing sense of guilt at having eventually rejected these teachings. It was startling to meet, for the first time, women my own age whose experiences of these matters so closely mirrored my own.

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The Arab world is, demographically speaking, a very young region: close to two thirds of the population in the Arab countries is under the age of twenty-five (in the United States, the ratio is reversed). In the months after the September 11th attacks, many commentators began describing the Arab youth bulge in alarmist terms. Thwarted by corruption in their governments and educational establishments, choked by unemployment, pushed and pulled by the competing forces of modernity and Islamic fundamentalism, was it surprising, these writers asked, that so many disaffected young Arabs had cheered the attacks on the World Trade Center? Reading these articles about young people in the region, I was struck by the absence of strong female characters; young Arab women tended to appear as voiceless victims, if they appeared at all. But even in the most patriarchal societies, women are rarely completely powerless. And as I started to spend more time in the Middle East myself, I began to suspect that these victimhood narratives involved some oversimplification.

When I first began reporting in the Arab world, political leaders and academics often complained to me that the *shebab*—the youth—in their countries were uninterested in human rights or politics. But the Syrian, Lebanese, and Egyptian young people I was getting to know were anything but apathetic. In the case of young Arab women, the gap between reputation and reality seemed to me even greater. Home on visits to the United States, even seemingly sophisticated and well-meaning people told me that they believed Arab women had been brainwashed. But many of the young women I was meeting in the course of my reporting in the Middle East seemed to me to be leading lives that so clearly gave the lie to that notion that I would cringe at hearing them thus patronized, however unintentionally. I began to pay closer attention to young people's stories, focusing in particular on the women, and this book is the result. Because it grew out of my work for the *Times* and other publications, some of the material within it has appeared before, in other forms. The stories and conversations it contains were drawn from my reporting in five countries—Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—that are very different politically and culturally. Together, they are an attempt, however partial, to portray the generation of Arab women that has been coming of age in the years since the September 11th attacks and that helped to lead the Arab Spring revolutions, and to describe, through the specifics of their lives, this time of accelerating change in the region.

As recently as 1975, the Moroccan sociologist and pioneering Arab feminist Fatima Mernissi described the notion of an unmarried female adolescent as "a completely new idea . . . where previously you had only a female child and a menstruating woman who had to be married off immediately so as to prevent dishonorable engagement in premarital sex." Yet, today, in most Arab countries as in the United States, there are more young women attending universities than there are young men. While I lived in Damascus, Syrian girls began attending Qur'an memorization schools in numbers surpassing those of boys attending similar schools, learning to reason from the Qur'an and often using that training to argue for greater rights and freedoms from an Islamic perspective. Women in several Arab countries have begun to fight the laws that protect men who kill their female relatives in the name of family honor. Saudi women's rights campaigners have become so voluble and confident in recent years that they have provoked backlash from more conservative women who are uncomfortable with calls for women to be allowed to make decisions without consulting a male guardian—and the fact that these conservative women can publicly participate in such an antifeminist backlash is itself an indication of how quickly Saudi women's freedoms are expanding. At the start of 2011's Arab Spring, the world watched as young women, some in headscarves and others in tight jeans, joined men in antigovernment protests that ultimately toppled authoritarian presidents in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. It was a twenty-five-year-old woman, Asmaa Mahfouz, whose self-produced video, uploaded to YouTube, is widely credited with sparking the mass protests on Tahrir Square that ultimately brought down the government of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak.

Looking back on the conversations I had within the walls of Reem's garden, and on the thousands of other moving, sometimes hilarious, and occasionally infuriating discussions I've had with other young women in

Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries, these women all seem to have come of age in a sort of metaphorical walled garden. As a group, they have gained better educations and greater freedoms than young Arab women at any other point in history. The social pressures to marry and to uphold family honor still exist, of course, but in recent years, an increasing number of Arab women have been allowed to experience adolescence and young womanhood in some of the same ways that young Western women typically do, as a time to define themselves and their values, and to pursue personal goals. Often, their lives are still restricted in ways that young Western women their age would find difficult to tolerate, but these restrictions can also help to create strong bonds, and an inspiring sense of common purpose. Sitting in the garden that evening, I was amused by the intensity of the girls' nostalgia for their high school days, which after all had ended only six months previously. But as I came to know the girls better—I spent another two months in Riyadh on that trip—I came to see it as an understanding of the power and importance of female friendships, and a recognition of the fact that these years of relative independence were a privileged period in their lives.

But many of these gains for women rest on fragile foundations. Though there was a moment during the Arab Spring when the popular revolutions seemed to open up the possibility of change throughout the region and for all of its inhabitants, that moment has disappeared. As I write this, an exceptionally brutal extremist group known as ISIL or ISIS or, simply, the Islamic State, has declared a caliphate with its capital in Raqqa, in northern Syria (which, when I last saw it, was a somnolent Euphrates River town best known for its cotton production and its Ayyubid-era blue-glazed ceramic jugs and bowls, a major destination for archaeologists excavating the surrounding tells, but few others). In the territories it controls, the Islamic State has forbidden girls and women from going to school, from applying for work, and from leaving their homes without male relatives as chaperones. It has forced thousands of non-Muslim Syrian and Iraqi girls into sexual slavery, and it has reportedly pressed some Syrian Muslim families to hand over their daughters as short-term "brides" for its fighters. (This general picture of female subjugation is complicated by the fact that the new restrictions on women in the territories the Islamic State controls are being enforced by other women armed with whips and, sometimes, automatic rifles; the Islamic State employs an all-female religious police force known as the al-Khansaa Brigade and, with a nod to gender equality that is rare in Salafist circles, the leaders of the new Islamic State have declared that, in the caliphate, jihad is an obligation for both sexes.) Even in Egypt, some of the young women who helped to lead the Arab Spring uprisings have experienced a vicious, misogynistic backlash. Years of gender-based discrimination won't simply self-correct, and many of the ill effects of the disruption brought about by the Arab Spring are falling disproportionately on female shoulders. Yet we don't often hear the stories of the women who are bearing the brunt of these upheavals.

In places that are segregated socially along gender lines, there's often a kind of natural affinity among women. Foreign female journalists in Arab countries are free to work in the public sphere, but they also tend to be welcomed into the private sphere—the domain of women, the world of Arab family life—in ways that their male counterparts only rarely are. In the most conservative parts of the Arab world, it can be difficult for male journalists to speak freely with women at all, and this means that, too often, the perspectives of those women are left off the page. At home in the United States I've often been asked whether it isn't especially difficult, as a woman, to work as a reporter in the Arab world. I tend to feel that the very opposite is the case, that female journalists in Islamic countries operate in a privileged space, and that they're permitted glimpses behind closed doors that may be unavailable to men.

Behind those closed doors, I've observed a great deal of mutual support and protection. Young Arab women are living in the crucible as battles over the future of the region are increasingly being fought in the domain of women's rights. Whatever their personal feelings about these rights—I've spoken to many young women throughout the region who viewed feminism with suspicion, if not hostility—their lives are being reshaped as a result. And I've met many young women who are seizing opportunity in unexpected ways, and helping others like them to do so, too. A few of the women whose stories appear here are activists but, because most are not, some of these seized opportunities and acts of courage may appear small. But if there's anything I

hope to do with this book, it is to make the case for small gestures: the world changes because of wars and terrorist attacks, but it also changes because a daughter makes slightly different decisions from the ones a mother made.

I learned, soon after I began working in the Arab world, that it was a mistake to read too much into girlish manners and elaborate demonstrations of modesty; both may be usefully employed to mask vaulting ambition. Unfortunately, that didn't stop me from making the same error again sometimes. When, in 2014, I heard the news that a Saudi woman had opened a law firm for the first time, I reread my notes from the evening in Reem's garden and was disappointed at how many pages I'd devoted to Disney World honeymoons and how few I'd written about the first cohort of Saudi women law students. Sometimes, I reminded myself, this is what a vanguard looks like: ponytailed and giggling and eating marshmallows.

Women stroll past a portrait of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

One

AND LET THEM THROW THEIR VEILS OVER THEIR BOSOMS

AUGUST 2004—DAMASCUS

I was waiting for the kettle to boil when there was a knock at the door of my new apartment.

"I'd like a cup of tea, please," said a man I didn't know. He wore a red-and-white checked keffiyeh twisted around his head, and he was covered in dust. I recognized him as one of the workmen installing floor tiles in the apartment above; in the weeks since I'd moved in, my afternoons had been filled with sounds of clanking and scraping. Behind the stranger, I noticed stacks of dull, grayish marble tiles on my third-floor landing. (I had been used to thinking of marble as a luxury, but here, in pre–civil war Syria, it was cheap.) Perhaps the man had been carrying them upstairs when he'd paused for breath in front of my door?

"Oh," I said, stupidly, confused by the interruption yet pleased to have been addressed in Arabic that I could actually understand. "Tea."

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