

MY FRIEND, MY ENEMY

Travels through the Middle East

• DYLAN LEE LEHRKE

My first impression of Syria was an aberration — a knife fight on the edge of the Aleppo market just as the fading light of dusk restored color to the whitewashed city. The fight flared twice, scattering people, knocking aside tables and shattering bottles, but it lasted only a moment before one man retreated down the street and vanished into the crowd. The incident left me with the distinct feeling that I had finally entered the Middle East, as if violence was somehow synonymous with this place.

Earlier, as I made my way through Turkey, I wondered exactly where Europe ended. I had moved steadily east and south from Prague, measuring my progress by the games of the World Cup — a victory for the United States in Dubrovnik, a loss in Athens. I arrived in Istanbul the same day the Turkish team returned home to a hero's welcome for its number-three finish. The celebration was not shrouded in a Muslim veil as I would have thought, but draped in a red flag of pure nationalism. The party in Taksim Square was filled with high-treble pop music, beer and fireworks.

In spite of the quasi-Western atmosphere of Istanbul, my immersion into the Muslim world began there, in the Blue Mosque. The Muslim house of worship was the antithesis of the Lutheran churches of my childhood. The lighting hung low, just above the height of my head, unlike the out-of-reach chandelier illumination of Christian cathedrals. Instead of being crowded

with pews and pulpits, the Mosque was an open space of vast carpets. The feeling in the mosque contrasted starkly with my own religion experiences — the intimidation of statues four times larger than life and stained glass filtering light into dark hues. The mosque was instead bright and inviting.

As I left, I felt as if I were re-entering the West. The mosque seemed an island, and I longed for more of Arabia. So I set out across

Turkey. I had no visa for Syria, but knew it was my destination. I didn't stop

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in Ankara to try to obtain the proper documents since I knew the border for what it really was, an imaginary line drawn in the wake of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Surely I could not be kept from crossing an imaginary line. But when I arrived, I saw that the line was not made up. The reality of a vast no-man's land and standing army made me less certain of my venture.

When I stepped into the border station, I was met by President Bashar Al-Assad. His immense image dominated the main lobby and a more personal portrait was hung in the office of the station commander, who promised to telephone Damascus on my behalf. To both our surprise, it took only five hours before he was handing me my stamped passport and wishing me "welcome." I hitched a ride on the first bus I found and arrived in Aleppo as evening approached. Desperate to see something after being cooped up in a border station and buses all day, I set out to the market where I witnessed the fight.

As I wandered away from the market, the true nature of Syria was quickly made apparent. In the small streets, I was surrounded by children who repeated the words of the border-station commander — "welcome," they said in unison. Then they repeated every word I said. My blond hair attracted the locals, and I couldn't travel two blocks without being invited in for tea, coffee and broken English. "My friend," they would call out from a cafe, and as if it were a self-fulfilling prophecy, it wasn't long before we were friends. The coffee given to me was Arabian in potable-form — thick as oil, gritty as sand and hot as the unmoving midday air. I preferred the tea, which was served extremely hot to demonstrate the host's hospitality. Hot tea meant you had to stay longer while the beverage cooled.

I spent a few days in Aleppo, but realizing the limited extent of my visa, was forced to move along. I headed to Hama, a small city known for its quaint waterwheels and a massacre of civilians in 1982. Its history seemed a contrast, as did its physical appearance.

From a distance, the city appeared monochrome, constructed of one material. But as I approached and walked in the cracks that are its streets, the picture changed. On a small scale, Hama was vibrant. Its streets were lined with colorful shops and its cars were decorated with feathers, ornaments and lights.

It was not long before my visa had waned. I had gathered a large circle of friends across Syria and Lebanon, but I was constantly saying goodbye.

But I had not traveled Syria by myself — President Assad was by my side the entire way. He rode with me in every bus, directed traffic at all the intersections and was a customer in each shop. Although I had met many friends, it was my enemy, a dictator, who was my constant companion. It was only him I was glad to leave.

I had circled the Holy Land and now crossed the Red Sea and the Sinai to Israel. The land I crossed was faded, color washed away by long exposure to the sun's rays. I felt that the sun had hit the hills for far too long and, one day, it would be so faded away that the next morning at sunrise, it would all be gone. It was gone for me the next day, as I came to the border before nightfall. It was another concrete line in the sand.

The Israeli border guard looked at my passport with worry, examining the stamps to Syria and Lebanon closely. My travel-worn appearance did nothing to inspire confidence, but after a full search and legion of questions, they stamped my passport, barring me from ever returning to Syria with the same document.

I joined my friend in Tel Aviv and she escorted me to her favorite spot in the Israel, the northern-most point of the country. I stared in frustration across the border I could not cross without the assistance of an Israeli armored division. A little more than a month ago, I had been in Lebanon and Syria, places now barred from me.

We sat on the beach, watching an army post stand guard on the cliffs above us and the navy offshore fire flares into the sky. The glow lit up the night and I could see the waves crashing on empty shores and in the distance could make out the land of "my friends." The border guards must have not seen these friends, for after the flare extinguished, they shot another into the air, still searching for a mad bomber, a terrorist, an aberration.