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FIRST PERSON

A Clash Of Cultures In Qatar

Elissa Lerner*Special To The Jewish Week*

For months I've been trying to explain to myself what life is like in Qatar, and why it is important to be experiencing it. How is it that I'm adjusting to seeing women in niqabs and burqas everywhere I go? That hearing the muezzin's call to prayer five times a day is mundane rather than strange? That hearing the Koran over the radio in a cab or in my friend's bedroom is no longer threatening? It's not the costume, or the song and dance that jar me, but the content of the script and the motivations of the actors that remind me why first-hand experience is so critical these days.

I never imagined my desire to study Arabic would bring me to Doha, Qatar, mere months after graduating from Duke University. At Qatar University's Arabic Program for Non-Native Speakers, I, along with around 50 other students, mostly Muslim, from around the world — including Bosnia, Nigeria and South Korea — have had the opportunity not only to learn Arabic but to live in one of the most culturally and economically promising states in the Gulf.

Qatar regularly makes headlines for Education City, the Doha Debates, and the recent opening of the Museum of Islamic Arts (which is as wonderful as they say). But there is a gap between the future-oriented upper echelons lauded in the media for their quest to blend tradition with modernity, and others whose conservative values cling powerfully to the ground.

I've been living in the women's hostel — the Qatar term for dorm. Aside from the campus' gender segregation, cultural values governing the hostel impose a strict 10 p.m. curfew on

female students, who may only leave the compound once a day aside from going to university. The women must follow a very modest dress code, even within the women-only walls. And regardless of a woman's age, permission to leave the hostel requires obtaining her father's signature.

Yet these rules don't prevent the girls here from letting their hair down (literally and figuratively), from watching music video channels, or from throwing impromptu dance parties. The girls here have intricate methods of clandestinely flirting with guys, and somehow manage to tailor their concealing black abayas to show off their figures. The system, for the moment, is meant to be bent, not broken.

But beyond the clothes and the malls and the movies — which provide a kind of common language — there remains that impenetrable fortress of religion. I have a few non-Muslim friends here. They appreciate the weirdness of not being part of the dominant religious culture, and I think they enjoy the marginalization of it. But for me, and for any Jew who has tried living outside of a large and supportive Jewish community, marginalization is commonplace. It's the immediacy and interdependence of religion and politics here, though, that slap you in the face.

The students, both on my program and in the hostel, have been talking a lot about politics, given the hype surrounding the American election. This inevitably yields a comment, typically negative, about the relationship between America and Israel. Perfectly nice, respectable people who I still count among my friends and acquaintances will say things like, America's foreign policy is controlled by Israel. Or that the Jews run American politics. (When I clarified to one friend that I was Jewish, he apologized and said he knows not all Jews are bad,

he just meant the Zionists). Or, my personal favorite, that Israel in fact doesn't exist; it's just the name of a piece of land "they" stole out of Palestine.

I live, joke, eat and socialize with these people, and sometimes I even exchange ideas with them. I remind myself that they aren't saying these things to be mean or hateful, but that it's just the rhetoric and misinformation that has surrounded them since birth.

And my experience has convinced me that change can happen. In September, my friends and I went to the desert to celebrate Eid Al-Fitr. The entire country was on holiday, marking the end of Ramadan, and I did my best to join the festivities. It was moving to think that our Jewish and Muslim ancestors had stared out into the same Arabian endlessness of stars and sand I was sitting in, but it was also jarring to think that no one could really appreciate that with me.

That night when we came home, I sat alone in my room, said a few blessings over apples and honey, and took a moment to appreciate the irony that Rosh HaShanah was that same day. Holidays are for family, and I definitely did not have one here. Then again, Hanqis, our niqab-wearing on-call nurse from China-controlled Turkistan, who understands what it means to be a minority, remembered to wish me a happy new year the next day. And my friend, who had never uttered the word "Israel" in her life, now does. So who knows, maybe I'll fry up some latkes for Chanukah and see who bites. ■



Elissa Lerner, a graduate of Duke University, is also a graduate of The Jewish Week's Write On For Israel program for high school juniors and seniors.