



A Look at the Middle East: The Experiences of an Israeli Woman Journalist

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On Heels in the Middle East

by Ksenia Svetlova

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In her first book, journalist Ksenia Svetlova offers a personal, firsthand look at the Middle East as she experienced it in her job as an Arab affairs correspondent, which involved working and traveling in countries that normally ban entry of Israelis. Through the various stories recounted in the book, Svetlova presents to readers the main events in the region over the past two decades, along with people who shaped the Middle East as we know it today. All this is done from the perspective of a woman traveling alone across a conservative Muslim region, an Israeli of Russian descent who is fluent in Arabic and who can play with her identity and hide it or highlight it as needed. The book helps readers better understand the region's complexity, and encourages compassion and empathy toward the peoples of neighboring countries by lending familiarity with their history.

In the preface, Svetlova underscores that the book is a personal and regional account based on her experiences as an Arab affairs

correspondent at Channel 9 television and other outlets. Already at the age of 25, as a young journalist at an emerging news channel, she was sent on daring assignments, and the book presents highlights of these experiences. As part of her job, she covered people and events that shaped the modern Middle East: the revolution in Egypt, the funerals of Yasir Arafat and Rafiq al-Hariri, and the United States invasion of Iraq. Thanks to her Russian roots and credentials from television channels in Russia that provided a cover story, Svetlova is one of very few Israelis who succeeded in entering critical hostile areas and relating their experiences to an Israeli audience.

The book's writing style is accessible and clear. The author does not get bogged down in complex phrasing or an embellished style, but presents her stories with historical background and context that highlight the complexity of the situations she was in and the sense of danger or insecurity that she experienced. The result is a readable and enjoyable book that provides an in-depth knowledge of the Middle East through the author's personal experiences.

In addition to the preface, the book has 12 chapters, each of which describes a visit by Svetlova to a different country in the Middle East, whether as part of a job assignment or a personal visit as a tourist, used to learn about a new area. Each chapter has a variety of stories that take place as part of the visit—interviews, random encounters, trips to unfamiliar destinations, unique experiences, and personal insights.

The first story in the first chapter (pp. 17-22) is a kind of microcosm of the stories that follow throughout the book. The author relates how she received her first assignment overseas in March 2003, covering the United States invasion of Iraq and the beginning of the war. Svetlova, who immigrated to Israel from Russia as a youth and describes herself as having always been very interested in the Middle East, was supposed to travel to a Gulf state—Qatar. She is sent on behalf of a new,

low-budget news station that is not experienced in these kinds of arrangements, and does not entirely understand the significance of sending an Israeli correspondent to a country with which Israel has no diplomatic relations. Arriving in Moscow, she discovers that her assignment has been changed and she must travel to Bahrain. She needs to learn the local history and culture within a few hours, and upon arriving, she uses all of her journalistic skills and especially a lot of improvising, daring, and some Israeli *hutzpah*, and succeeds in boarding an American aircraft carrier in the Arabian Gulf.

There are advantages to her being a woman in the Middle East, as she has access to voices that are heard less, specifically, the voices of local women. In some of the conservative societies that Svetlova visits women are barred from expressing their opinions openly or speaking with men who are not family members. Based on woman-to-woman conversations, the author succeeds in presenting the stories of a variety of women.

A motif that runs throughout the book is Svetlova's experiences as a woman in conservative Arab Muslim countries. The title of the book, *On Heels in the Middle East*, is more than descriptive. While Svetlova insists on wearing high heels on her journeys, the title reflects challenges of foreignness, incompatibility with the place, and of course her standing out as a woman who is not shy and does not easily blend into the background. The feminine dimension is also highlighted by the dilemma of attire that is discussed in the book: on several occasions Svetlova faces the question of how to dress for meetings or when going outside—whether to cover herself as per local custom, or to dress in a way that is comfortable for her and that expresses her character.

Out of respect and the reluctance to stand out too much, and with the belief that “the journalist is not the protagonist but rather an observer” (p. 112), Svetlova adapts to her

surroundings and tries to dress modestly. She brings different sets of clothes with her, but it is evident that despite her efforts to blend in to the surroundings, her foreignness is visible to all. Indeed, on several occasions she discovers that notwithstanding her attempts, she has not succeeded in meeting the requirements. For example, before she enters an interview with Sheikh Ahmed Yassin (pp. 78-82) she receives a bag with clothes that she must wear; and in the Dahiya quarter in Beirut (p. 113) she discovers that it is not customary to wear a colorful head covering, and her red headscarf makes her an object of attention. While it sometimes seems like a minor detail, the way she dresses affects her ability to interact with locals—a fact that would apparently have had less significance if she were a man. Ultimately, Svetlova's femininity does not prevent her from succeeding in her assignments, but it has a central role in her ability to move around and to feel secure.

At the same time, there are advantages to her being a woman in the Middle East, as she has access to voices that are heard less, specifically, the voices of local women. In some of the conservative societies that Svetlova visits there are many restrictions on women and they are barred from expressing their opinions openly or speaking with men who are not family members. Based on woman-to-woman conversations, the author succeeds in presenting the stories of a variety of women, such as the Iranian Yasmina, who lives in Dubai and enjoys the freedom and choice of opportunities there (p. 270); the French Aline who fell in love with a Shiite man, converted to Islam, moved with him to Lebanon, and works as a correspondent at *al-Manar* (pp. 109-111); or Ludmilla, a Russian woman who married a Lebanese-born Palestinian, and after the breakup of the Soviet Union moved to live with him in the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp, without understanding what kind of a life awaited her (pp. 136-137).

Another motif that arises in the book is Svetlova's dual identity—Israeli on the inside and Russian on the outside. While her fair Slavic

external appearance prevents her from fully blending in, it also gives her a protective cover, as in countries that she visits she benefits from adulation of Russia, which enables her relatively extensive freedom of movement. Needless to say, as an Israeli only, she would not have had the opportunity to approach these places, and so the stories that she provides expose the Israeli public to a world that is usually closed to it.

Departing from the familiar news coverage of international journalists in these places, Svetlova's Israeli identity is evident in the questions that interest her and in her attention to details and her environment. When she meets Lebanese journalists at a jazz bar, educated young people from the local elite who identify her as a correspondent at a Russian television channel, Israel comes up in the conversation as a hostile and threatening entity. She listens to their conversation and is saddened by the fact that she can't reveal her true identity to them or express herself freely. In most of her assignments she broadcast in Russian and did not have to endanger herself, but the occasions when she was asked to transmit recordings in Hebrew to Channel 2 required her to dedicate greater thought to logistics in order to maintain her personal cover and security. Knowledge of Arabic helped her build trust among those she interviewed and enabled her to engage in open discourse in her environment, but this topic does not receive much emphasis in the book.

From the memoir it is evident that Svetlova also gains professional journalistic experience—technical actions like recording materials and transmitting them, or placing the tripod in the middle of the street, require less attention and are executed more easily, and she sheds layers of fear that accompanied her at the beginning. Peaks in this process are witnessed during her coverage of the Ashura ceremony in the Dahiya quarter in Beirut (pp. 113-122) and her interview of Hamas leader Musa Abu Marzook at his home in Damascus (pp. 233-240), when her phone is

taken from her, and she continues performing her job while at the mercy of his men.

Even though she occasionally tries to describe her concerns and doubts, it is evident that she is driven by her journalistic curiosity and does not cower in the face of these challenges. Her meetings with arch-terrorists are especially surprising, as she must remind herself—and her readers—that these individuals have much blood on their hands, and none should be deceived by their friendliness and courtesy in offering her dessert or inviting her to lunch at their homes. Similar to the manner in which she conducted her news coverage, her description of these situations in the book showcases the objective experience—what is said and what is done—along with her subjective and somewhat critical commentary.

In the preface Svetlova clarifies that for her the human story is the one that reveals the undercurrents and the broader picture, and this is the way to get to know the Middle East in depth and understand its events. Familiarity with the Middle East is not just knowledge of its history but also all of the human stories—of the people she interviews and of her personal experiences. In the book she moves from the role of storyteller who unravels the stories of others to the role of protagonist. The book is not written as a chronicle, there is no continuity or connection between the chapters, and sometimes there are repetitions of historical descriptions that aim to provide readers with the contexts necessary to understand the situation. Consequently, it is possible to read each chapter on its own, although this repetition sometimes interrupts the flow of the narrative.

Svetlova hopes that the book will arouse curiosity in readers to learn more about the Middle East and about Israel's relations with countries in the region, and that readers will understand that Israel is not an island or a "villa in the jungle." Regarding the former task, the book certainly meets the goals, and on several occasions I found myself delving into an issue that she raises and researching it further.

However the paradigm shift that Svetlova seeks to bring about is mainly wishful thinking.

The book presents many facets of the region and shows that the Middle East and the Arab world are not monolithic entities, and there are countries with varying levels of openness to Israel and different degrees of democracy and liberalism.

Despite the sense of adventure and curiosity they embody, the stories are shrouded in danger. Most of the events described highlight Israel's uniqueness in the region and the hostility that is felt toward the Jewish state. The book presents many facets of the region and shows that the Middle East and the Arab world are not monolithic entities, and there are countries with varying levels of openness to Israel and different degrees of democracy and liberalism. The book conveys to readers the processes underway in respective countries and indeed does a good job

of describing the undercurrents that continue to influence the Middle East today.

The average Israeli reader will likely not rush to visit Lebanon or Libya after reading the book, even if s/he has foreign citizenship, is proficient in a foreign language, and has a non-Israeli appearance, but reading the book provides readers with an understanding of the region's complexity. In turn, readers may develop more compassion and empathy toward the peoples of neighboring countries and recognize the need to strive for peace with them.

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