Nadia and Walid Al Sakkaf: the new faces of Yemen

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For ages, famous French author Joseph Kessel and Al Qaeda have seemed to be the only ones to find interest in Yemen. The wind of the spring revolution have blown strong enough to topple a 32-year single presidency and favor the access of civil right female activist Tawakkol Karman as Nobel Peace Prize winner in 2011. Yet the interest of the West fell sharply soon afterwards, leaving the country struggling with corruption, a political transition infiltrated by the compromised elite and a disillusioned youth. Yemen looks like a breathless and hopeless nation, crushed under under-development ratio: a 35 % unemployment, a 23 % inflation, 40% of people living under the poverty line, a 60% illiteracy and a vast majority of women without any freedom. A family, today a brother and a sister, wants to reverse the trend, change the narrative. Their banner: freedom of expression. Their weapon: the media they are creating.

**A family affair**

Meet Nadia and Walid Al Sakkaf. They have the same round and warm face, rapid gestures and the natural authority of those who command respect. The sweetness of their voices and their smiles tell nothing of their battle. To get a sense of it, one should travel back to 1991 when their father, Abdulaziz Al-Sakkaf - then a professor of economics at Sana'a University and founder of the Arab Organization for Human Rights - launches the first English-only Yemeni weekly newspaper. At that time, the country is into establishing the foundations of a precarious unification. Privately owned, the Yemen Times is finding an desirable spot between government medias and those of the opposition parties. Written in English in a largely illiterate country, it targets the expatriate community. In 1997, the Yemen Times goes online. In 1999, Abdulaziz drives to the opening ceremony of the first yemenite conference on human rights, an event he has initiated. He dies on his way, in a car accident, at 48.

At that time, Walid, his son, is managing the Yemen Time online. Nadia is in India, completing a computer master degree. They bundle up. Walid becomes editor-in-chief, Nadia a journalist. The Yemen Times survived to the loss of his founder. On his spare time, Walid launches the *Yemenportal.net,* an independent portal that gives spaces to dissenting views. He is arrested, his little sister questioned, the magazine under surveillance, the yemen portal censored. At night, Walid creates a software to bypass the blockage of its site, a circumventer. He is obsessed by censorship, fascinated by the power of technology.

In 2009, he gives the Yemen Times reins to his little sister. Walid wants to fully commit to the free access and constant improvement of his program, "Al Kasir". To date, it has been downloaded more than 80,000 times, from Tunis to Beijing. Through trail and error, Walid gets better, completes a PHD on censorship at the University of Orebro, Sweden. He steps aside, take some distance, to better come back: "*It is pointless to get excited about censorship if the Internet does not exist. So my plan is to equip Yemenis. If I do not do it, nobody will". Why the Internet?* "*Because it is the only way to catch up. It is the freedom of expression but as importantly of entrepreneurship* "he explains with shining eyes. A way to lift the country out of its no future no hope situation.

**To become a bridge**

The Al-Sakkafs are the new faces of Yemen, the one they would like to promote: an educated youth, often abroad, who would discards the lure of the West to change their own world, their community. Walid is the man in the shadows, the brother of the over-driven petite figure that dazzled the TED audience last year. Nadia 35 years old, a regional heavyweight in independent journalism, took the scene by surprise. Funny and subtle, she explained: "*I ​​want to break stereotypes, tell the story of my people in the language that everyone understands. People should stop putting labels on us.* " Why risking your life to defend information ? "*My father always reminded us that our role was to build bridges between cultures, between our country and the outside world. And that we should always defend human rights and help those in needs. We have been raised like this, girl and boy*". Yet, what changes the fate of a girl? « *A father*». Standing ovation. This year, Walid came back at TEDGlobal without his sister who is expecting a second child.

In Sana'a, she fights against nearly everything: her as a woman, a tribal culture, an apathetic population, almost no freedom of speech, foreign journalists landing and leaving the country in 24 hours, loaded with the usual clichés, an unreliable infrastructure, power cuts. Fear does even come to mind: "*The current regime is obsessed with its own survival. He has no time to take care of us*." The little lady could be made of steel. She has laughing eyes but a sharpened pen and a monumental drive. "*In the newsroom, I'm the boos. When I arrived, I realized 50% of men would not work for a woman. So I fired them*". She not only has a close watch on the editorial, with a focus on terrorism, drones, and corruption. She is also involved in denouncing forced marriages of underage girls or rapes at school. She hires women, trains them to the various journalism tasks, teaches them to express their opinions in a country that denies them their very basic civil rights. "*Little by little, I make them remove their veils. And most of the time I convince them: you can’t interview someone if you are completely veiled anyway.* "

**Women on the front**

With its 50 employees, the Yemen Times is now a media group with an Arabic version, forums, a monthly edition on personal development, printing services and its own FM radio next fall. This is not an easy route: last year, as expatriates fled in mass, the diffusion of the Yemen Times almost collapsed. Yet Nadia is far from giving up.

Entrepreneur, editor in chief and a mother of 2, she is becoming more and more political. Nadia has a clear idea of ​​the next step: "*If I become Minister of Information , I will fight for media independence and freedom. Our father passed us his work, but we choose: for Walid, this is technology, for me, human rights. We want to give our people the means and power to raise up. We must change the culture, the attitudes and the beliefs. Not only the leaders. And we must give a clear perspective to the youth. We want dignity.*"

Such are the Al-Sakkaf: two face, a vision, some hopes and a call to action: "*Before I was alone, isolated and vulnerable, confesses Walid. All that changed with the Arab Spring. We are the first row of protesters. Please do not let us down.*"

Walid and Nadia Al-Sakkaf: remember their name. And don’t be surprised if, sooner or later, one of those two makes it as President.

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Original French printed version (next page)

