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THE SLOW ROAD TO TEHRAN

A REVELATORY BIKE RIDE THROUGH EUROPE AND THE MIDDLE EAST

An extract from September Publishing

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

First published in 2022 by September Publishing

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, www.refinecatch.com
Printed in Poland on paper from responsibly managed, sustainable sources by Hussar Books

ISBN 9781914613029
EPUB ISBN 9781914613036

September Publishing
www.septemberpublishing.org

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PROLOGUE

'For it is not death or hardship that is a fearful thing, but the fear of death and hardship.'

Dervla Murphy, *Full Tilt* (1965)

I can see the road clearly, threading its way between the mountains and the sea. I trace my finger along it. At times it is distinct and solitary, at others it disappears into the darker line of the motorway or the crease of a coastal ravine. I look up, expectant.

'See,' I say. 'Here.'

The man seems unimpressed. He rubs a hand down his chin and I hear the quiet rasp of stubble against flesh. For the first time, I notice the smudge of grey beneath his eyes. He looks older than his twenty-seven years.

'There's no road,' he repeats. He doesn't acknowledge the map. The map is irrelevant because he knows this country well.

'But look,' I tap my finger. 'It seems to go all the way, no?'

Finally, he glances down. I notice he has tufts of grey at his temples too. The poor man, I think. He is not a fixer by trade but an electrical engineer. I recruited him to help me because he was known about town. Samer, the man who connects people; the guy who gets things done. But so far our relationship hasn't gone well. First, he kept me waiting for three hours due to a 'minor gas explosion' at home. Then there was the flyover incident with the forklift truck that nearly killed us both, and which went some way towards explaining the grey smudges and tufts.

And now this. You might have thought, considering Samer's somewhat relaxed approach to traffic signals, that a quiet coastal track would appeal to him. But he seems determined to put me off this route.

'There *is* a road,' he concedes. After all, there's no real denying it. 'But it's bad.' He stabs at the pale, shaky line, crushing four villages beneath one plump digit. 'There's sand. And cracks. Bad for cars. Bad for bikes.' His eyes flick to the bulky three-gear contraption leaning against the wall, its royal blue frame tarnished russet at the joints. On the handlebars, a dayglo zip-bag declares 'BEIRUT BY BIKE' beside a logo of a rather athletic cyclist in a jaunty bandanna doing a wheelie. Having been cycling around the city for several days now, I admit it's not an image that I recognise. 'Bad for *that* bike.'

I put down the map, resigned. The truth is, I've already made up my mind to cycle up to the border in the north. It is December 2014 and I've come to Lebanon to report on the worst refugee crisis the region has ever known, as millions of displaced Syrians flee the devastating war at home. For the past week, I've been in Beirut interviewing politicians, activists and aid workers to try to gauge the impact of the conflict on Syria's smallest and most vulnerable neighbour. But my report feels dry and lacklustre. To understand the issue fully, I'm aware I need to access the tented camps beyond Tripoli on the coast. I need to speak to the people living and surviving on the front line.

How to get there poses a challenge, however. Taxis are expensive, while buses have a frustrating tendency to dawdle for hours or neglect to turn up at all. In a sudden eureka moment, it occurs to me that a bike may be the solution. To Tripoli, it is under ninety kilometres door-to-door, so doable (just) in a day. And the road looks ideal, hugging the shoreline and unspooling like Ariadne's magic thread all the way to the north. From Beirut, it seems to me that I should be able to travel the entire route without once having to navigate the madman's gauntlet of the motorway.

Plus, I admit the idea excites me. I have cycled in a few

interesting places before – India, Mexico, the Balkans – but never the Middle East. For this reason, the thought also scares me, and I've spent the past few hours trying to find someone to accompany me on the ride. So far, however, I have failed.

'You shouldn't go to Tripoli anyway,' Samer says. 'Jihadists are still fighting. You could be shot. Or …' He hesitates.

'Or …?'

'Worse.'

'Worse?'

'Yes, worse.' He seems irritated now, as if talking to a child. 'Kidnapped, tortured. Worse.'

I look at him, unsure how to respond. A lengthy silence passes as he finishes one cigarette and lights up another. The Cedars packet is a similar colour to my bike, and probably equally as life-threatening. 'So you don't want to come, then?' I ask finally.

He blows out a long, slow trail of smoke, then stands up and reaches for his leather jacket. It is heavily worn at the elbows and smells wholesome and musty, like damp wood. 'No, Rebecca,' he says, and I know from his tone that our conversation is at an end. 'I'm afraid you're on your own for this one.'

After Samer leaves, I think long and hard about what he has said. He is not the first person to caution against cycling the coastal path or travelling to the northern governorates alone. And the bicycle has admittedly seen better days. Even the men at the rental shop laughed when I suggested taking it outside Beirut, presuming that I was joking.

But my instincts suggest it will be okay. Friends in Tripoli have reported that, despite pockets of unrest, the city streets are safe. And if the road proves unrideable, I can always just try another tack. So, after lengthy consideration, I decide to ignore Samer – and Mohammed, and Midhat, and Halifa, and all the other locals who seem to see cycling through their country as a mark of mental illness – and take the plunge.

* * *

Escaping Beirut isn't easy. Extricating myself from the city's noodle-like tangle of ring-roads and overpasses feels like fighting off an attack by a many-tendrilled cephalopod. But once I've finally wrested free, my entry onto the coastal path is all the sweeter. From that moment on, it is a thrilling, beautiful ride. The road, doubted by so many, is indeed sandy and uneven, but also quiet and pleasant and almost perfectly designed for a bike. Following an early puncture – repaired for free by a passer-by, who charitably risks his young son's life by sending him on his BMX down the eight-lane motorway for a repair kit – the trip is smooth and straightforward. For several hours, I dip up and down the cliff edge, through whitewashed villages that blaze with reflected light, brushed by a crisp winter breeze seasoned with jasmine and spice. Wisps of music drift from hidden fishermen's coves and I recognise Fairuz, the 'Jewel of Lebanon', and Mohamed Mounir, the 'Arabic Bob Marley'.

By the time I reach Tripoli, I'm in a relaxed, buoyant mood. The Sunni and Alawite militia groups reportedly operating in the area are nowhere to be seen, and I make it up to the border without incident.

This uneventful mini-adventure teaches me several important things. First: always carry a puncture repair kit when cycling. Second: Lebanese people are astonishingly helpful. Third: Lebanese drivers are homicidal maniacs. Fourth (most importantly): never trust people who say things can't be done. Of course *some* things can't be done. I couldn't have cycled to the moon, for example – or even realistically beyond Lebanon itself, which is hemmed in by a warzone in the north and its long-time adversary Israel in the south. But there's measured risk and there's recklessness, and I feel that often the two are confused. Activities that many may judge as foolhardy frequently transpire to be nothing of the sort, the dangers illusory and overblown.

Following this brief coastal junket, the thought occurs to me: if I could cycle across Lebanon when so few seemed to think it feasible or wise, could I not go further? Across a larger country,

perhaps? Or even a continent? Could I – possibly, at a push, with enough chamois cream and a good tailwind – make it from my home in London *all the way through the Middle East?*

The idea seems absurd. But it comes on with a rush, as if the notion has been sitting there all along just waiting to be found. I will travel with nothing but the barest essentials and speak to local people to understand their concerns. I will peel back the layers of artifice and prejudice to unearth the human stories underneath. And I will do this, like Patrick Leigh Fermor, not as a vagrant or tourist, but as an errant sage or cognoscenti with an eye to revealing the truth.

At least, this is what I'll tell my mother. Lacking Fermor's earnest romanticism, I harbour few illusions. I am more Sancho Panza than Don Quixote, and arguably more Rocinante than either: ageing and unqualified and – in sporting terms, at least – undoubtedly past my prime.

Like Fermor, however, my destination isn't in doubt. For him, it was the 'mysterious and lopsided' Black Sea and the 'levitating skyline' of Constantinople. For me, it is the dark burgundy foothills of the Alborz, where a city shrouded in mystery lies in a pool of violent sun.

The thought is immediate and unambiguous. If I go anywhere, I know Tehran should be the prize.

INTRODUCTION

'I am neither of the East nor of the West, no boundaries exist within my breast.'

Rumi, thirteenth-century Persian poet

My interest in the Middle East began aged ten with a journey down the Nile.

I remember the trip vividly. My family and I were booked on a boat that would take us from Aswan to Cairo over the course of a week. Each morning we would rise at 4.30am to reach the temples and tombs before dawn, then return five hours later for a pot of hydrating milky tea. Those early alarm calls felt exhausting, as we were herded blindly onto the coach in the dark – but there was no way around it. By 7am the sun was already high overhead, gleaming like the blade of an executioner waiting to strike. It felt like a completely different sun from any I'd ever known, not warming or life-affirming but keen-edged and cruel. Among the ruins, clammy tourists in straw fedoras clustered in islands of shade as if shipwrecked and awaiting rescue. Meanwhile, my brother and I would dash from shadow to shadow, pretending the sunny areas were crocodile pits or briny swamplands determined to suck us into their grasp – neither of which felt like such a stretch of the imagination.

For me, the most enjoyable parts of these excursions were the trips underground. Entering the burial chambers felt like being transported into a new world – not a descent into a fiery abyss but into a cool Elysium of gilded sarcophagi, frescoed tombs

and beautifully baffling hieroglyphs engraved from ceiling to floor. Here, away from the heat and tumult of the surface, was a subterranean wonderland that glowed in silent splendour; a place where power seemed etched into the earth itself and humans walked shoulder-to-shoulder with the gods.

'Egypt in Arabic is called *Misr*, which means "frontier",' our guide, Abduh, told me one afternoon. I had just escaped a thrashing at table tennis by the loss of our final ball over the balustrade and was sprawled on my belly scouring the water for crocs. 'This suits us, I think. Long ago, we were the great gateway to Africa and Asia. Maybe one day, *inshallah*, we will be again.'

Or this is how I imagine our conversation might have gone based on the spidery mess of jottings in my diary. I kept a journal every holiday until my mid-teens, but the one from Egypt is the most detailed: a tumescent *magnum opus* bursting with Polaroid photographs, primitive hieroglyph sketches, scraps of papyrus and declarations of unrequited love for Abduh, whose great marmot of a moustache and dominance on the ping-pong table more than qualified him in my eyes as husband material.

Egypt fascinated me. What happened to these imposing monuments, I wondered, now eroded and shattered by time? Or to the pharaohs who created them, whose spirit were considered divine? It had never occurred to me before how power shifts through the ages, and how empires rise and fall. To me, Britain had always been Great, its position as enduring and inevitable as the air that we breathe. But 5,000 years ago, we were forging homes from dung and willow rods while Egypt was erecting limestone pyramids on foundations the size of ten football pitches. And when Egypt was celebrating its first female leader, it would be another three millennia before we would feel ready to do the same.

Before we parted ways, Abduh gave me a dried lotus flower for my diary. 'You seem to like our country,' he said, as I hastily shut the book so he wouldn't see his name plastered in tiny scarlet hearts across the page. 'Make sure you return. You've only visited

a small part of it – the safe, easy bits – and there's so much more to see.'

I promised him I would. Twelve years later I kept my word, and from then my interest in the Middle East grew steadily. Over the next decade, I returned several times to Egypt, both for work and leisure, as well as to elsewhere in the region: Lebanon, Turkey, Oman, the UAE. Each visit revealed more of this cryptic corner of the globe, while exposing how little I truly knew. These places confounded me, each a bewildering Gordian knot of cultures, faiths and histories spanning back far beyond the beginnings of my own native land. As an outsider, I knew that there was a limit to how much I'd ever understand. But I felt a growing desire to at least fulfil my pledge to Abduh: to look beyond the 'safe, easy bits' and see the place raw.

On my return from Lebanon, I immediately began preparing for my journey to Tehran. When asked about it, I told most people I would be 'touring the Middle East'. But this was a quick answer to a complex question because there are many Middle Easts to choose from. There's the one stretching from Morocco to Pakistan and the one from Egypt to Iran. There's the one involving Turkey and Sudan, and the one excluding both. There's the one focused on Arabia and the (rare) one embracing the 'Stans. The lines of this difficult patch of land have never been firmly drawn. Or, more accurately, they've been drawn too many times and never from within. The term itself reveals the problem: middle of what? East of what? Certainly nothing relating to the people who live there – people who may justifiably be perplexed by the criteria of this club into which they've been cast.

The idea of the Middle East is a relatively modern phenomenon. In the nineteenth century, Western diplomats preferred a more binary approach, splitting the East into 'Near' and 'Far'. The Far East largely referred to countries beyond India, while the Near East designated a hazy tract of land between India and Europe focused chiefly on the territory ruled by the Ottoman Empire. 'The

limits of the Near East are not easy to define,' British historian Arnold Toynbee wrote in 1916. 'On the north-west, Vienna is the most conspicuous boundary-mark, but one might almost equally well single out Trieste, Lvov or even Prague. Towards the south-east, the boundaries are even more shadowy …' Following World War I, the epithet became fuzzier still – as well as increasingly redundant. Why have a collective term linking parts of Eastern Europe to Western Asia, after all, when the common denominator (the Ottomans) had collapsed?

Meanwhile, the area between Turkey and East Asia was swiftly assuming greater strategic importance. The British soldier and diplomat Thomas Edward Gordon was not the first to label this zone, but in 1900 he became the first to commit the moniker 'Middle East' to paper and therefore into the history archives. For him, the region was centred around Iran and Afghanistan, which he saw as crucial buffers against Russia. Two years later, US naval officer Alfred Thayer Mahan referred to the 'middle East' (sic) to indicate approximately the same area, echoing Gordon's concerns and calling on Britain to strengthen its naval fleets between Suez and Singapore.

Nowadays, this sprawling land of soft borders continues to change shape with the seasons. The US, EU, UK and UN all employ different definitions, each nominally conclusive, their smudgy uncertainties disguised. The frontiers of the so-called 'Middle East' remain so pliable, in fact, that commentators sometimes choose to ignore it and employ more useful, concrete names. The 'Arab world' is one, although this excludes Israel and Iran, both of which most Westerners would see as distinctly 'Middle Eastern'. The 'Islamic world' is another, but this extends far beyond the region into Africa and Asia, with Indonesia and India between them accounting for a quarter of all Muslims across the globe.

So what *is* the Middle East? Nobody really knows, it seems. And yet everybody knows. In the West, its form rises before us, fixed and inviolable, splashed daily across the media. It

suggests chaos and repression, conflict and terror. It appears alien and menacingly 'other', with values that clash wildly and incontrovertibly with our own.

It wasn't until recently that I truly began questioning this image. In 2011, as murmurings of protest grew into mass revolt across the region, I was working at the International Bar Association (IBA), a global legal organisation with a tenacious Human Rights Institute. As the IBA's lead reporter, I covered the Arab Spring extensively, with a focus on human rights violations, military abuses and constitutional crises. For the Arab people, this was a time of profound hope and acute despair, as dictators tumbled like dominoes and new devastating forces rose unstoppably in their wake. Every day, the press was filled with reports of gross atrocities almost impossible to imagine – yet what was often missing, I felt, was context. Where had this unrest come from? What was the driver? With two-thirds of its population aged under thirty, the Middle East has long been a young region ruled by old men, so why were these demonstrations happening only now?

The answers to these questions frequently seemed glib. This was a world of simple dichotomies – tyranny versus terror, democracy versus dictatorship, East versus West – while the voices of the people, trapped between the extremes, were rarely being heard at all.

The Middle East has always been a difficult place for Western journalists to cover. It is too thorny, too delicate, too detached from our own immediate concerns. And prejudice is pervasive. Since 9/11, the region has largely been reduced to a troika of incendiary tabloid bullet points – *Bombs! Burqas! Bigots!* – which both reflect and perpetuate bigotry at large. 'It is no coincidence that racist violence is on the rise in the UK at the same time as we see worrying examples of intolerance and hate speech in the newspapers,' Christian Ahlund, chair of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), said in 2016.

His comments followed an ECRI report that was particularly critical of the *Sun*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* for 'fuelling prejudice against Muslims' with 'reckless disregard'.

More recently, the outgoing chair of the Independent Press Standards Organisation, Alan Moses, echoed these concerns. 'I have a suspicion that [Muslims] are from time to time written about in a way that [newspapers] would simply not write about Jews or Roman Catholics,' he remarked in December 2019. In fact, he said, the portrayal of Islam had been 'the most difficult issue' he had faced during his five-year tenure as head of the watchdog.

It is not just the British media exhibiting these worrying trends. In 2015, a study by the universities of Illinois and Arkansas reported that 81 per cent of domestic terrorists presented on US news broadcasts were identified as Muslim, despite the fact that – according to FBI data – Muslims only comprised 6 per cent of all domestic terror suspects in reality. Likewise, research by the consultancy firm 416 Labs found that only 8 per cent of *New York Times* headlines about Muslims from 1990 to 2014 were about positive issues, while 57 per cent were negative. Their investigation concluded that the average reader is 'likely to assign collective responsibility to Islam/Muslims for the violent actions of a few'.

In recent years, far-right Western leaders such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán and Andrzej Duda have done their best to fan these flames, bolstering the strength and legitimacy of Islamophobia throughout the world. With such powerful voices shaping the public narrative, it hardly seems surprising that most Europeans have come to view Syrian and Iraqi refugees as a 'major threat', even though their chance of being murdered by a jihadist is roughly the same as being struck and killed by lightning. Or that three-quarters of Americans say they're too scared to travel to the Arab world because of its perceived dangers – despite the fact that eight in ten cannot even identify the region on a map.[1]

[1] Survey data from the Pew Research Center (2016) and YouGov (2017).

While covering the Middle East, I wrestled with how to cut through this bombast. Was there a way to depict the region with a clearer lens? The problem was not simply the bias in the media, I knew, but the nature of journalism itself: an industry led by crises and conflict – 'if it bleeds, it leads' – because this, on the whole, is what people want to read. Dominated by stories of violence and villains, the media inevitably paints a deeply distorted image of the world in which dangers are magnified and the very worst events come to appear as the norm.

What was needed, I felt, was a new type of reporting – one that shifted the focus away from politics and bloodshed to the everyday lives that lay beyond. One that depicted the region not as a homogeneous sphere of chaos and fanaticism but as a sweeping, splintered mosaic, often as different from itself as from those looking in from elsewhere.

What I needed, I knew after my brief jaunt through Lebanon, was a *bike*.

When I told friends and family that I planned to cycle alone from London to Tehran, the response was mixed. Many were supportive, several … less so. Most people's concerns focused on three core personal traits that, notwithstanding some tremendous good luck on my part, would in all likelihood prove my undoing: being a woman (vulnerable to sex pests); being a Westerner (vulnerable to terrorists); and being a journalist (vulnerable to tyrants).

'We think you'll probably die,' one friend helpfully informed me, looking at me with the kind of wary fondness usually reserved for unruly toddlers or puppies that have soiled the carpet. 'We've put the odds at about 60:40.' Others were less optimistic. A family member with a particularly unfortunate sense of humour sent me a copy of Rudyard Kipling's 'If', stressing the importance of keeping my head 'when all about you / Are losing theirs', while a man in the pub described me as a 'naive idiot who'll end up decapitated in a ditch – at best'.