

Arabia Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

AUTHOR DAVE EGGERS
SPEAKS WITH PRODUCER
MAMDOUH AL-HARTHY,
JOURNALIST HASAN HATRASH, AND
DIRECTOR HAIFAA AL-MANSOUR



DAVE EGGERS



MAMDOUH AL-HARTHY



HASAN HATRASH



HAIFAA AL-MANSOUR

Last year, the San Francisco-based author Dave Eggers published his book, *A Hologram for the King*, a vision of Saudi Arabia where the Western world of holograms and the Internet comes up against the hard realities of today's Saudi Arabia. Eggers, whose novel was nominated for a National Book Award, spent weeks in the Kingdom researching, meeting an extraordinary Saudi filmmaker whose first feature, *Wadjda*, premiered at the Venice Film Festival to considerable

acclaim, and two Saudis who inspired key characters. *World Policy Journal* assembled Haifaa al-Mansour, Saudi Arabia's first female film director; Mamdouh al-Harthi, a brilliant journalist and documentary producer, cast in *Hologram* as a driver who leads the narrator into the depths of the Saudi mind and spirit; and Hasan Hatrash, journalist, filmmaker, and musician, with a similar role in the novel, who in real life produced the Portfolio in the Winter 2012-

2013 issue of *World Policy Journal*. Eggers served as the moderator for this 90-minute roundtable discussion on art, freedom, and politics in Saudi Arabia and the post-Arab Spring Middle East.

DAVE EGGERS: We thought it would be most interesting to talk about issues of culture and the state of the youth in Saudi Arabia. To start off, we can see where you think the situation is for artists in Saudi Arabia now versus 10 years ago. Haifaa, having made your first feature film there, then making the rounds with your films depicting Saudi Arabia in a very honest, unflinching light, you had the cooperation—or at least the blessing or lack of interference—from the government. So now you're able to export your film, which has a warts-and-all depiction of the Kingdom. Let me have you take it from there.

HAIFAA AL-MANSOUR: Of course, Saudi Arabia opened up tremendously compared to 10 years ago. For me, as a woman, I can walk in the mall. Before, I used to be really reluctant to go to the mall if I wasn't completely veiled. I would always take care, if there is something showing, otherwise the police would come. But now I feel a lot more at ease going out. The changes in Saudi enabled me to shoot the film in Saudi Arabia. There is more acceptance for a woman doing something different, and there is a lot of official support. We've seen two Saudi girls going to the Olympics. Changes are still slow, maybe not as fast as we wish. Women in Saudi are still not allowed to drive, and there's the issue of guardianship, like a woman can't open a business without having male supervision. But, still, Saudi Arabia has changed a lot. I feel there is room for women to assert themselves.

There is room for women to push boundaries, but they have to trust themselves.

EGGERS: Hasan, I chose 10 years as a very arbitrary marker, but you may have an alternate one in terms of looser restrictions on artists. I know you—as a musician, a filmmaker, and you've worked in television, and you write—I wonder if you might give us your perspective. I know that when we met three and a half years ago you had just worked on a documentary that was broadcast in Saudi Arabia and was somewhat controversial. I don't know if things have changed.

HASAN HATRASH: First of all, there's been a significant awareness and openness to art in general. Keep in mind that Saudi Arabia is basically an Islamic-ruled country. And in this country, the problem is that culture and religion mix—a dangerous concoction that created a society of religious non-believers, so to speak. You can see people acting in a religious fashion, but inside they are not really acting religious in the sense of humanity. Certainly the Internet and satellite TV have played a massive role. Ten years ago, if someone knew I played the guitar, it would've been a heretical move for me. I would've been prosecuted. I would've been jailed. Now I can go and sit by the beach and play my guitar, and no one even looks at me. Second of all, cameras and videos. The Internet and satellite TV gave people submerged in their religion and culture the eyes to see that it is okay to see a camera. Now I can go out easily playing the guitar or shooting a documentary. I shot two or three documentaries in the last two years, which I didn't have any problem with—versus seven or eight years ago when I would've probably been jailed.

EGGERS: Have there been any policy movements toward openness of the arts and filmmaking, or has it been more of an understood evolution?

NOW SAUDI IS PART OF A GLOBAL MOVEMENT. WE HAVE INTERNET; WE HAVE YOUNG PEOPLE. IT WON'T BE EASY TO CONTAIN.

HASAN: It is mostly an urban, social movement. There is nothing on paper, except four or five years ago when the King issued a decree allowing people to use cameras to have the liberty to shoot anywhere in the Kingdom—except, of course, on military bases. So that was the seed that pushed the youth toward video cameras and other art forms—graffiti, hip-hop, rapping, playing music.

EGGERS: Let's back up and talk about the advent of widespread Internet access. When did that happen, and what effect has it had?

MAMDOUH AL-HARTHY: Of course, after September 11, the whole world changed. The great impact, I believe, was seen in Saudi Arabia and the U.S. In the U.S., in terms of politics, in Saudi Arabia, in terms of openness. Before that, in Islam, they used to say taking pictures is *haram* [forbidden], listening to music is *haram*. After September 11, things changed, people became more open, and now, they are even more open thanks to the Internet and the new social media. I remember when we used to go film in the streets, the religious police would ask, "What are you doing?" and "What for?" They would do an investigation about this filming. The Internet definitely made a huge change. Everybody can now make their own show on YouTube or other websites.

EGGERS: Can you explain the connection between this openness and 9/11?

MAMDOUH: The government is more aware that we live in a restricted society, that we are not living a healthy life in terms of culture, or the way we think, or even the religion that is suffocating people. They are aware now that they should let the people breathe. Let's stay away from extremism and radicalism. Let's open the society slowly, gradually, and yeah, it works for us, as artists. We are benefiting from this.

WORLD POLICY JOURNAL: I would like to look broadly beyond Saudi Arabia in the region. Where do you see Saudi Arabia in terms of these kinds of freedoms compared with neighboring countries, especially those that have gone through the Arab Spring?

MAMDOUH: I believe that the Arab Spring did not affect Saudi Arabia. But I believe—I heartily, strongly believe—that change is coming. When do I expect it? Five years, or, maximum, 10 years. The change will come.

EGGERS: In what form?

MAMDOUH: In all forms. It's a wave, a huge wave that will change Saudi Arabia.

HASAN: Exactly. What is happening in Saudi Arabia right now is exactly what happened in the U.S. in the 1950s. We are facing the same cultural and social change. Now, women are rebelling, youth are rebelling, and I can see, in the course of time, taking us to the 60s and 70s—where the U.S. used to be. Okay, it shows that we are about 40 years backward from where you are now, but it shows that we are taking the same steps. It's only a matter of time.

WPJ: As Dave suggests in his book, it is really in a Saudi manner that these changes are happening, right?

HASAN: It's not a Saudi-tailored change. It's a global change. We're just part of it. We're going with the flow. Luckily, 60 percent of our society is below 25 years of age, with nearly half of them studying abroad right now. So imagine, all of this collected youth coming back five to 10 years from now. It's going to be a different Saudi Arabia.

EGGERS: That was one of my main questions, and we talked about it when we all met in Saudi, and that is the effect of the nationwide brain drain from the well-educated youth who find that there are limited opportunities in the Kingdom. They choose to study and stay abroad. Is that changing now? Are you finding more young people returning and choosing to start careers there, or do you find that it is still a significant problem, where people find more opportunities elsewhere so you lose some of the young's best and brightest? Haifaa, maybe you would like to answer.

HAIFAA: I think a lot of Saudis go back home, because Saudi is very tribal. People have very strong ties to their homes, their tribe. And honestly, Saudis have a lot of opportunities for young people too. There are more opportunities for them to have a better career in Saudi. But regarding what you said about the freedom and evolution around Saudi Arabia, I think, compared to the neighboring countries, Saudi Arabia has the least censorship. Like when I tried to apply for funding for my film, I was rejected by lots of sources, because they were very reluctant to support a film of that kind. Even if you notice in the press, we have lots of writers who try to push the

boundaries. We are not an Egypt. We are going in the right direction. By contrast, the fundamentalism in Egypt and Tunisia, for example, is taking the country backward, while we still are moving forward. Here, more freedoms are opening up. They are trying to stabilize the country by giving opportunities for young people so it has affected the country. Maybe people are not revolting, but the country is trying to make sure that things are taken care of—and that is really for our benefit.

EGGERS: How much of this openness has to do with King Abdullah? He is getting on in years. If he were no longer with us, would there be a regression, or do you think this is a movement with no turning back?

MAMDOUH: It is really hard to project, because we don't know how the system will go in Saudi. But it is very hard to control. Now Saudi is part of a global movement. We have Internet; we have young people. It won't be easy to contain and close the society as in the 90s or the 80s. Saudi Arabia is moving toward reform and opening up, because it is the natural course now. It would be really hard to fight that.

HASAN: You cannot predict what will happen in the future, but you can look around in Tunisia, Egypt, and now Syria. The Muslim Brotherhood are taking over, plus the Salafis. So, if those guys succeed in their countries, if we join the Brotherhood and the Salafis, the country will return to the 80s again and just be as closed up as possible. The other scenario is the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis in Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria. Then, we will witness a great openness and more liberation from within. Those are the two scenarios.

MAMDOUH: Take into consideration that when we talk about openness in Saudi Arabia, we always portray Saudi Arabia as Jiddah, Riyadh, and Dammam. They are the only three big, open cities, and they represent not more than 15 percent of Saudi Arabia, which has a large number of illiterates. We in Jiddah, Riyadh, and Dammam are the minority.

EGGERS: Mamdouh and I met when he was helping me go to the King Abdullah Economic City, and one day we tried to go to the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, and we were not allowed in there without it being agreed upon. But we talked a lot then about these experiments in the university where men and women were mixed more freely and shared classrooms. I was attributing this policy to King Abdullah's experiments in having more freedoms and openness in these experimental mini-cities outside of Jiddah, so that you can ease your way and experiment with these kinds of progressive policies outside of the city centers. Do you think this is an important aspect of progress, and do you think it will continue? Some were suggesting that there will be quicker progress away from Jiddah, away from other cities. This is where these sorts of incremental movements toward more openness and rights for women will be enacted. Is that your sense of it, Haifaa, or do you think that—now that things are moving quicker generally—that these experiments are still necessary?

HAIFAA: I come from a very small city, and my father comes from the most conservative place on earth. But now I see it is opening up. I see it in my own family. My family is very Saudi, traditional to the core, and I see them changing. My brother sent his daughter to study in America and that is

considered a revolution in their house. They are small town people, yet they are opening up to the world. They are trying to find opportunities for them. They are not rich, because jobs are not as accessible for those small towns. They want to have a better life, so they are more and more tolerant. They are more relaxed. We must provide an alternative voice to what is happening, because the mosques are dominated by individuals who are always telling people to be conservative. We need to have alternative places where people can say different things. It is very important to provoke, to bring debate, and to make people think and reconsider. So it's very important to have those places.

MAMDOUH: The new economic cities are there to bring change. There's a high rate of unemployment in Saudi Arabia for a lot of youth, so those cities are supposed to take those young Saudis, train them, and try and find them jobs. The economic cities are made to bring cultural change and to take on the employment problem in Saudi Arabia. Throughout history, if you want to bring about change, either in a company, or in a country, it should be bottom-up. Successful change should be bottom-up.

EGGERS: Could you talk about turning around perceptions the rest of the world has wrong or outdated about life in Saudi Arabia? What work do you feel you have to do as an artist to change minds and educate people about contemporary Saudi society?

HASAN: I found a lot of opportunities abroad, but as Saudis, we linger in the past with our faith, with our families. Still, I've found the challenge of changing our society appealing. One of the many challenges here is the backward mentality of the religious non-believers, in which they mix every-

thing, including art, and suddenly things become unwanted. Haifaa and others like us, who are open-minded and bring artistic views into our lives, faced a lot of problems. We became very isolated in the beginning. We followed literally what Gandhi said, "Be the change you want to see in the world." I personally became the change. I had the guts to look different, to have long hair, to hold my guitar and play, to take my camera and go out. I faced a lot of problems. Once, I got jailed just for playing guitar. But eventually, things worked out. Now I look at the allies that I have—people who know me, look to me as a role model for the new generation. It makes me feel that everything is worth it, and we're going to still keep doing it, keep pushing the boundaries. Like Haifaa said, the media here is much more liberated than in the Gulf States. As a writer for an Arab newspaper, I have seen that personally. We've pushed the barrier much more than any of the Gulf States.

EGGERS: Haifaa, you've been traveling everywhere with your film. We met in Colorado. I know you were just at the Venice Film Festival. Can you tell us where else have you brought the film and your experience with how the film has been a window on contemporary Saudi life, and what sort of perceptions you have challenged and upended here in the U.S., Europe, and elsewhere? I'm assuming it's very satisfying to educate people about the full spectrum of Saudi life instead of the more limited perceptions or assumptions people may have that are probably outdated.

HAIFAA: As an artist, I wanted to put a human face on Saudis. We struggle with conservative ideologies. We come from a world that has created its own existence because it has been closed for so long. And that makes

it an exciting place to do a story as a filmmaker. But I'm not in a position to defend or educate as much as tell human stories, like opening a window and letting people discover for themselves. It's safer for me as an artist to step away.

EGGERS: To the rest of the world, the position of women in Saudi has always been of interest. I wonder if you can offer predictions of where women might be in five years in terms of their place in Saudi society.

HAIFAA: Definitely women will participate in politics. They will vote, and after that, with the limited place we have within democracy, it is hard to predict now. The Arab world is so unpredictable. We never thought of the [Arab Spring] revolutions until they happened. No one predicted them. But women, especially younger women, are not passive. Women will definitely have more rights, especially in politics.

MAMDOUH: I'll be optimistic. Within five years, I think we will have a minister who is a woman. I hope so. Otherwise, if we get more extreme, and we become more conservative, then I think we'll go back to the Stone Age.

EGGERS: Do you think that's a possibility? I wonder if there will be a backlash, or a reversion. Here in the U.S. we go through

WOMEN DRIVING IS SUCH A POLARIZING ISSUE IN SAUDI NOW. BUT MORE WOMEN ARE NOW DRIVING, SO IT WILL HAPPEN REGARDLESS OF WHETHER THE TRAFFIC SITUATION IN SAUDI CHANGES.

more progressive times and then we reverse course, and we have a more conservative four to eight years, which we recently did. Is there a fear that the changes that are already going on might provoke a backlash among the more conservative elements of society and say, "This is moving too fast," and there would be a crackdown and, like you say, a going back to the Stone Age? Are you worried about that?

MAMDOUH: It's a possibility depending on neighboring countries. If the Muslim Brotherhood takes over Syria and Egypt and Tunisia, then we'll go in the same direction.

HASAN: From what I see, we have a majority of youth in the Arab world, in general, and all of them are quite open-minded, educated, if not academically, then by the Internet. I see a backlash not really happening. We have a majority of youth studying abroad. Most of them love art, and I can see a lot of movement in the world of art happening, and I think they will have a lot to say against any backlash.

WPJ: Do you think women will be able to drive in five years? That seems like a touchstone of women's rights there.

HASAN: In Saudi Arabia, the issue of driving is not a religious issue, it's a cultural issue. The traffic police system in Saudi Arabia is extremely bad. It's bad for male drivers. Did you know that we have the highest rate of accidents in the world—

HAIFAA: Come on, Hasan, don't use this excuse.

HASAN: I'm explaining. I want women to drive yesterday. I'm sick and tired of driving my sister and my mother, but I'm being

logical. What I'm saying is that the system is bad. Before women will be able to drive, first let's see a good, strict traffic system. Then, I will say, "Yes, maybe in five years or in 10 years." But if women drove now, with this kind of system, there's going to be a massacre. I would love to see them drive, but first I would like to see solid, strict rules and regulations.

HAIFAA: Women driving is such a polarizing issue in Saudi now. But more women are now driving, so it will happen regardless of whether the traffic situation in Saudi changes or not. There will be backlashes, and women will have to face a very conservative society. But we will see more change.

EGGERS: Maybe we can talk about what everyone is doing next. Haifaa, are you working on a new film? Will your next film be set in Saudi?

HAIFAA: We'll definitely work on another film in Saudi. Saudi is such an exciting place to tell stories because it's so interesting, so complex. It has religion; it has politics.

EGGERS: You have all become important ambassadors from Saudi, and you've all had significant roles in bringing art from Saudi to the rest of the world. So is that a good responsibility, something you take on willingly and that you cherish and relish, or do you feel a weight of having to represent the nation to the rest of the world? Haifaa—would you prefer to direct a murder mystery set in Italy that had nothing to do with Saudi society, or would you feel like you were abdicating your responsibility as an artist from the Kingdom in a position where you had the attention of the world?

HAIFAA: As an artist, I would love to do things in Italy. Why not? If I get an offer from Hollywood, I'm not going to turn it down. No way. Of course, Saudi Arabia is the place where I can produce more. I know the place. I feel like I belong here. I know how to tell a story from that place. There are few people who can do that, so I have a unique perspective. I don't feel like it's a burden. I feel like it's an honor to go and represent the country and to speak about Saudi. Yeah, it's conservative, and there are radical ideologies with very religious people, but beneath that, there are really nice people. It was nice to hear about Hasan growing his hair long and playing guitar. Saudis are fun. Beneath all of the politics and conservative cover, you'll find lots of humor. It's a great place to tell a story.

EGGERS: Exactly. When I met Mamdouh, in Jiddah, he showed me around while I was in the country. Mamdouh is one of the funniest guys I know, and we instantly had a rapport, and his sort of looseness and irreverence surprised me right away. It was one of the reasons we got along so well. We had an unusual situation where we had planned a couple of events. I was supposed to go to a dinner and to go to a reading in Jiddah and talk to local writers, and then we realized that my flight wasn't leaving from Jiddah but was leaving from Riyadh that night. So Mamdouh got me a ride. We found a guy who would drive me to Riyadh that day and I got in the car. We didn't know this guy. You just put me in some random car.

MAMDOUH: I just told him that this is a gift of the King.

EGGERS: Here I was thinking my good friend Mamdouh, of course he'll be putting me in a safe car with somebody that he knows. But we were desperate, and I had a six-hour drive, so we had to leave immediately. Then in about 10 minutes of driving, this young man was on the phone, and he looked over at me. While he was talking to his friend on the phone, he looked over at me and said to his friend, "American: BOOM BOOM!" sort of in this kind of scary way. I didn't know what he meant. It got me a little nervous. Just the words "BOOM BOOM" were disconcerting while I was alone in the car with him driving at 140 kilometers per hour. So we got to be friends during that drive, even though we had a significant language barrier. By the end, it was just indicative of perceptions on both sides, and we had to build trust and understanding during the drive even through gestures, looks, smiles at photos I showed him, and the few words we could exchange.

HASAN: I'm thankful I'm here in Saudi Arabia because with oppression comes inspiration. I mean for me, living and suffering made me who I am today. For that, I'm very thankful.

EGGERS: Thank you all so much for being with us. ●