

Jean Bachoura – State of the (Writing) Nation Transcript
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I went to the same high school as Osama Bin Laden.

At 12 years old, I convinced my parents to send me to the prestigious boarding school, for the sake of my academic future. The campus was stunning, nestled in the Lebanese mountains, umbrella pines as far as the eye could see and a vista overlooking a valley straight down to the Beirut coastline.

Brumanna High School, BHS, a Quaker school established in 1873 by Theophilus Waldmeier. I can still see his bronze bust guarding the administration building.

In the evenings, clouds of dense mist would engulf the campus and amber streetlights would exaggerate their outline. It felt like a scene from the video game Silent Hill.

We had weekly assemblies at the main hall where a minute of silence was mandated.

My PE teacher would often recount: ‘Osama’s father came to Brumanna to visit him one day. It was during recess and my father, who was also a teacher, was on duty. Osama’s father stared at the children running around the basketball court for some time before walking up to my father and asking him, ‘which one is my son?’

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I wonder what Osama’s teachers were like during his time at BHS. I don’t recall many teachers having an impact on me, besides Miss R, my English literature teacher.

Ms R was something else, she oozed intelligence, poise, bohemian elegance, and a sense of awareness. She had an allure to her. She had an aura about her. She never talked down to us, she treated us like adults, that was new to us.

This was around 2003, just as the US invasion of Iraq was springing. Slowly, our English literature curriculum shifted to encompass more current events. Homework assignments switched from analysing *A Midsummer Nights Dream* to watching news from several different channels and dissecting the information being communicated. Not just the information, but how it was delivered. What words were used specifically to discuss the same topic, and what connotations those words had. What agendas were at play?

We discussed how George Bush Junior had an odd way of pronouncing Saddam Hussein, Sodom Hussein, Sodom, like he was purposely mispronouncing the Iraqi presidents name to illicit an emotional response.

We discussed how western media coverage of the Iraqi war seemed so removed from the devastation it was causing. CNN used wide camera angles, and documented the war with panoramic views, like some horrible landscape painting.

That green night vision footage showing countless American bombs falling over the city of Baghdad. This ancient cradle of civilisation was being destroyed before our very eyes and it was made to look like a computer game.

Just as infuriating was the Iraqi Information Minister repeatedly stating that US troops are nowhere near Baghdad as the US tanks were rolling through the streets. Western media nicknamed him Baghdad Bob. Youtube comments refers to him as the 'true Father of fake news.'

Ms R would say: 'As global citizens you have a duty to be informed. Ignorance is a luxury. Consume as much news from as many different sources as you can and make up your own mind.'

The veil had been lifted.



Thin rays of sunlight burst through tiny holes in the steel barrel roof of Souk El Hamidiya. Some streams intersect at points within the ten-meter-high expanse. Others end in a bright yellow speck on the volcanic cobblestone paving. Each shaft memorializes the bullet that caused it. Most of these are from World War I and The Great Syrian Revolt against French Occupation, I'm not sure what new additions have been made recently.

Leila troops over the irregular cobblestones in rose gold ballerina flats, loose linen pants and a sheer silk top. I follow her, cautious not to trip over my feet. This market is incredibly crowded on the quietest of days. Almost any product can be found here, or within a connecting market. Syrian souks are different to traditional shopping centres. Each section is designated to a particular category of products. For example, you have the pyjama market, which connects to the toy market, which connects to the electronics market, the gold market, silver market, mosaics, silk,

Tupperware, etc...Each market has up to fifty stalls selling similar products. It's an absolute wonderland; bursting to the seams with bright colours, textures, kitsch, kitsch, kitsch.

It also connects to some of the most famous touristic attractions in Damascus; ancient temples, palaces, khans, mosques, hammams. The souk is disorienting, and you can easily be led astray by the countless merchants trying to reel you in. Asking for directions is not always the best idea, you could be caught in the middle of a rivalry between merchants and purposely misguided.

I look up to the bullet holes every time I'm overwhelmed by the streetscape. I find solace in the beautiful array of light.

She passes through a large patch of sunlight, coming from an opening in the market facade. It renders her silk top see-through, highlighting her lace Simone Perele bra. Several men dressed in abayas and taqiyahs stare at her as we pass by. They mutter profanities under their breath.

'Mum, people can see your bra.'

'Let them. They aren't people, they're cockroaches.'

'Put a jacket on.' I plead.

'Let them cover their eyes.' It's a hot, dry day. Leila is no mood for bullshit.

We approach a brightly lit lingerie stall where a group of women, all covered in long navy robes and tightly wrapped hijabs, argue with the clerk.

'One thousand!' A woman shouts.

'Sister believe me, *wallahi* that's under cost price.' The clerk responds.

'That's all you're getting from us!' An older woman adds.

'Aunty, please don't embarrass me, give me what I ask.'

'You either take it or we're going across to your neighbour. Now, put it in a bag and give it to my daughter!'

The clerk concedes and begins folding a bright red lace babydoll lingerie set; complete with garter, g-string, bra and feather whip. The juxtaposition of conservative Muslim women openly shopping for some of the most provocative lingerie I've ever seen brightens my day. This is a common occurrence in the souk. Not many people are aware of the innovative world of Syrian lingerie. It is a

feathers with embroidered pearls. We have disco ones; we have mobile phone models that sing.'

'We have marriage board games, marriage monopoly. For the wife to entertain the husband. The wife has to excite the husband.'

He pulls out a crystal embroidered set. "What colours do you have?" I ask him.

"Black and gold, navy and gold, red and gold, gold and gold. '

'Do you have a larger size? One of my girlfriends is quite big boned. Variety is important.'

'How big?' He asks suspiciously.

'Umm, she's about my height. Broad shoulders... God knows what they put in the food over there.'

'*Galibiyat Nancy*, we call that one. Because of her song *Ahh Wu Noss*, now the village, village girl is in fashion. This size should, should work.'

'Let's just stop there. We'll cut it earlier. I don't know how I feel about that one, I kept on fucking up the pages again.'

'Oh, I thought it was one of your better ones.'

'You reckon?'

'Yeah. Which is a shame because you didn't finish-'

'How long was that? No, no. But I was thinking we'd cut it before then, anyway.'

'That's nine minutes and forty-three seconds.'

'Coz the way I'm thinking is we cut it straight, like in the middle of me talking