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The Pen is Mightier than the Sword

Ahmed Al-Salem
Syracuse University

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THE PEN
IS MIGHTIER
THAN THE
SWORD
BY AHMED AL-SALEM

Author's Note: The only person that came to mind when I was asked to conduct and write an interview with a professional person was my father. I didn't know how I would go about piecing together all the information I received from the interview but I knew that I wanted to illustrate all facets of his personality. I stared at my messy notepad and got lost in thought until my alarm clock made a sound notifying me it was midnight; the spark I was looking for found me and I started typing.

ART BY SYLVIA HEO
DESIGN BY TROY SOLOMON

It is ten in the morning on a hot day in Saudi Arabia and a business man is still in bed. At this time most of Saudi Arabia's employed are already immersed in a normal days' work eager for the clock to strike twelve so they can break for lunch. The digital clock on the nightstand watches the business man sleep, wishing that it could yell to awaken him. It has been four years since the clock has been purchased, and not once has it been allowed to speak. Its only function is to tell anyone who glances at it the current time. The clock displays ten thirty five. The lifeless body steals a glimpse at the clock and does not like what it sees. It rolls over and goes back to sleep and the clock rolls its eyes in frustration.

The man gets up when the time on the clock finally pleases him. He takes his phone and calls for breakfast to be made and gets in the shower. The clock finally gives out a sigh of relief. Downstairs in the dining room, a business memo lies on the breakfast table waiting to be read. Every morning, Saturday through Wednesday, a memo is placed on the breakfast table. It brings the news of the forthcoming day, and it tells the man what his day has in store for him. On this particular day, the memo will not be touched until eleven o'five.

The business man is Hamza Mohammed Al-Salem. He is the third of nine kids from a Saudi father and a Lebanese mother. He has five kids of his own: Ahmed, Rasha, Ibrahim, Sara and Nouf, three girls and two boys. He entered the Saudi military at the age of sixteen with his elder brother believing that the country was about to declare war on the state of Israel. The war never happened and his zeal for warfare faded as quickly as it came. But he remained in the Saudi military for twenty five years and fought in "the Siege of Mecca" and also alongside the Americans

in the First Gulf War. He remained in the military despite his wishes to leave because the Saudi military is a fraternity that is extremely difficult to withdraw from. He eventually received his chance in 2006 after a year long protest where he refused to go to work. The Saudi military let him retire and he started his own business which was something he could not do if he was still an active member of the military. He currently owns a consulting firm in Saudi Arabia with his business partner and also writes two weekly columns in the largest newspaper in the capital city of Riyadh.

The way in which he starts off his day is peculiar. Mr. Al-Salem enjoys his sleep and will not get up unless he has a full night of sleep. He is a man who enjoys late nights more than he does early mornings. "There are twenty four hours in a day and it does not matter to me when I work as long as everything gets done within those hours," he explains. This is one of the many benefits of owning a business and he takes advantage of it everyday. When asked if his schedule ever interferes with his work, he sighed and said, "Never...except if I let it."

Mr. Al-Salem is a great Arabic writer. While he was stationed in Mecca he spent thirteen years studying Islam and the Arabic language at one of the most prestigious Islamic universities in the world. He memorized every page of the Holy Quran by heart and since modern day Arabic is based on the Quran, he knows every grammar rule in the language. I asked him to explain the complexity of the Arabic language, and I had to interrupt him after twenty minutes of an intense and detailed explanation. He constantly writes throughout the day both at work and at home.

The first professional written work he looks at every weekday is the memo. He writes it the night before, and it details every-



thing that has to be done the next day. The document is written on a computer and then printed and placed on the breakfast table. The memo is in Arabic and professionally designed even though it's only for his personal view: "Writing the memo in a professional manner helps keep me motivated the following day in keeping up with all the work. It's harder to take something seriously when it's written casually," he says.

On a weekly basis he has to write multiple consulting reports to companies who are his clients. His business deals with international companies who aim to initiate projects or businesses all over Saudi Arabia. Those companies enlist Mr. Al-Salem's company, which is called Zushan, to help provide the necessary market reports, connections and business plans to achieve success in the venture. This means a lot of professional writing for Mr. Al-Salem and his business partner. Due to his talents as a writer, none of the reports are outsourced and are all written by him. He usually spends his days writing these reports while his business partner meets with potential clients: "I do a lot of writing throughout the day. Market reports are the driest work I write on the job. Letters and business proposals are the complete opposite as they let me use my creative side."

Since all his writings are done in Arabic, some need to be translated into different languages: "This is the worst thing about writing for my business. All the creativity and beauty of Arabic gets lost in the translation. This is especially true when it comes to personal letters, as imagery and delivery is at the mercy of the translator."

This is not the case when it comes to journalism. Mr. Al-Salem writes for the Al-Jazirah News Daily,

Riyadh's most popular newspaper. Newspapers still carry a lot of weight in Saudi society. The TV media is heavily censored and no one can negatively attack the Saudi government. Newspapers are given more freedom than the TV media, and therefore columnists can talk about political and social issues facing the country. Newspaper columnists who gain popularity can sway political issues by writing a strong column against or for a certain ruling. Mr. Al-Salem is debatably the first or second most popular columnist in Riyadh. He started writing columns when he was protesting the military's refusal to let him retire. He blends his knowledge of economics and finance with religious thought to argue about certain topics and issues. His knowledge of religious rulings gives him the authority to give religiously valid arguments against social issues that he does not agree with. The Saudi society is one of the most conservative in the world, and religion is a powerful force when it comes to convincing people. One social issue that Mr. Al-Salem was against was the prohibition of female drivers. No woman in Saudi Arabia is allowed to drive a car. This is the only country in the world that has such a law. The Shura which is the board in charge of making laws based on Quranic rulings states that female driving is haram or forbidden by Islamic texts: "There is no Quranic verse, no Prophetic saying, and no Islamic teaching that prohibits a woman to drive a car, yet the board says it is haram," he says with an irritated voice. By using his in-depth Islamic knowledge, he has disproven many Saudi scholars in their attempt to use religion as a reason to keep women from driving. Currently, there is an effort to change this law in Saudi Arabia.

One ethical issue that Mr. Al-Salem faces is

that of corruption. Since his word is a powerful force in the Kingdom and many princes, governors, and business men read his columns, many try to convince him to write articles serving their best interests: "This is a huge issue in this country. Everyone is looking for a shortcut and when they see that I am a guard at one of those shortcuts they try to persuade me to get through. But I vehemently stand against them and refuse them the right of passage.

A request for me to be biased is a request for me to be untruthful." He has made many enemies for going against the wishes of many of Saudi Arabia's elite: "In the end of the day, God is the lord of men and when we die, all of us have to answer to Him. If being truthful pleases God and angers men then I will do it every time." He then recited, in Arabic, a famous saying of a famous Muslim sage and Islamic scholar:

"Truthfulness is the greatest of stations, from it sprout all the various stations of those traversing the path to God; and from it sprouts the upright path which if not trodden, perdition is that person's fate. Through it is the hypocrite distinguished from the believer and the inhabitant of Paradise from the denizen of Hell. It is the sword of God in His earth: it is not placed on anything except that it cuts it; it does not face falsehood expect that it hunts it and vanquishes it; whoever fights with it will not be defeated; and whoever speaks it, his word will be made supreme over his opponent. It is the very essence of deeds and the well spring of spiritual states, it allows the person to embark boldly into dangerous situations, and it is the door through which one enters the presence of the One possessing Majesty. It is the foundation of the building of Islam, the central pillar of the edifice of certainty and the next level in ranking after the level of prophethood."

He stopped, and I felt like he smiled: "Writing is my sword of truthfulness whether it is a report on a land thirty miles from Riyadh or a column admonishing the Saudi police for corruption. The cool thing about it is that I never have to fight with a sword, I only pick up a pen."

It is three in the morning on a hot night in Saudi Arabia and a business man is getting ready

for bed. He picks up the memo that is still heating from the printer and places it on the breakfast table. He climbs up the stairs and, once in his bedroom, he glimpses at the clock that stands on his night stand. He covers his eyes with the familiar military bandana and turns off the light. The clock gives a sigh and awaits until the man awakens the next day.