

Being Muslim in Tenderloin

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Nada, who avidly reads the Quran, has been exposed to more assimilating influences than her mother because of her fluency and often being in the company of her cheeky, pubescent American classmates. Her learning has come at a price.

"Here, I am known around the building, and at school," she says, now at home and at ease in Curran House. She has learned she must "stick up for yourself — act like I'm brave."

That's especially true at school. Because of her dress, boys tease and ridicule her.

As a Muslim girl, "we are not even supposed to look at boys," Nada says. "The African American boys call me 'bomb-thrower.' They are bullies."

The sidewalk swearing and the F-word rile her father up. "He really gets aggressive," Nada said. Her mother won't even walk Nada's youngest brother, Muhamed, 7, a block and a half to Boeddeker Park — widely accepted as a safe public place for families.

Nada, active in the Curran House community, gives the neighborhood outside an F. "Dogs pooping in the street, people urinating, women reaching down in their pants for hidden drugs, people smoking." There is much to offend any young person, let alone a Muslim who aspires to become a high-level interpreter, or a chef, or a pediatrician, dreams her parents encourage, but goals that would be unrealistic if she were in Yemen, where the literacy rate for women is 35% and barely more than a third of school-age children, even before today's troubles, attended secondary school.

"The neighborhood needs changes," Nada concludes. "Boeddeker Park is great now. And Glide does good things. But it's not enough."

PART 2: ISOLATION

Jamal Kaid, weary from work, is relaxing on a couch in the Curran House lobby. He's thin, darkish, handsome, chiseled features, trim mustache, dark eyes that don't avoid looking. He wears a fresh, long-sleeve, dark blue cotton shirt and crisp denims. Jamal is the father of six: Bilal, 25; Jamil, 21; twins Alma and Omar, 18; Nada and Muhamed.

The family, except Bilal, lives in a three-bedroom apartment on the fourth floor with an open kitchen facing a small living room. Bilal is in Yemen, trying to get out.

Yemen is in shreds and Bilal is escaping with his pregnant wife, scurrying across the parched country, clearing the roadblocks in a van with Americans who have a kind of diplomatic immunity, headed over the Arabian desert in 120-degree heat to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia's capital. There, he expects to get papers to bring his family to San Francisco.

"He got into a van," Jamal said. "His wife, too. With a lot of Americans. He came from a dangerous place. Went across country. A lot of stops. Nobody touches Americans. If you're with them, you're safe."

Jamal doesn't know what will happen when Bilal arrives in San Francisco with his wife. He would like to put them up in his apartment, but that would make nine people, and it's against building rules.

The Kaid family has had an open road to citizenship, Jamal says. His grandfather was a U.S. Navy captain killed in the Korean War. The U.S. government awarded his grandfather's family in Yemen U.S. citizenship. Jamal's father came to San Francisco and got a green card in 1969,



Jamal Kaid, 45, was born and raised in Yemen where his family was well-to-do. He immigrated to the United States in 1989. He and his family — wife Nabiba and five of their six children — have lived at Curran House since 2009.

soon had dual citizenship and then divided his time between the countries.

Jamal first came here in 1989 to live with his father, doing construction work and odd jobs. The estimated 7,500 Muslims in San Francisco mostly work in blue-collar jobs, drive taxis and have small businesses like grocery stores, a contrast to the highly educated Muslims in the South Bay, ensconced in the tech industry.

Expensive San Francisco is home to some of the poorest Muslims in the Bay Area: 39% earn \$20,000 or less, according to the 2013 Bay Area Muslim Study on ethnic and residential demographics. Arab ethnicity data doesn't exist for the Tenderloin where Arab organizers say Yemen, of all Arab countries, has the most immigrants.

Jamal sometimes works 10 or more hours a day, five often six days a week, doing maintenance work for a company he won't name because it doesn't pay overtime. He used to be a carpenter, he says, and dreams of having his own little business with a fine array of tools and a car or van for transportation. The modest size makes it a typical business model in Yemen.

He married Nabihah in Yemen in 1989, and when he brought her and their growing family to the U.S. they first lived in an apartment on Geary before getting into Curran House. Jamal's father died three years ago.

The Kaid family's culture and Islamic religion have made assimilation a formidable task, even in ultra-liberal San Francisco. Hewitt says the family is isolated in Curran House, "everywhere, really — they're living in a rich city without the help of others. People don't know where Yemen is or about the culture." And the fallout from 9/11 has added a stubborn stain of bias.

San Francisco has been slow to stitch Arab culture into the city's social fabric, though Muslims have had a presence here for decades with the Arab American Grocers Association, which counts about half of Tenderloin's 70 corner store owners among its members.

Citywide, membership is shrinking. President Shakib Kalleh, who runs a small grocery on Union Square, says the association has 475 members, down from 650-700 a decade ago. City Hall is "giving a free hand to big corporations"

"They're living in a rich city without the help of others. People don't know where Yemen is or about the culture."

Sharen Hewitt
CURRAN HOUSE RESIDENT

and the chains, while increasing regulations and restrictions and boosting the minimum wage. All that and rising rents are forcing corner store owners into other businesses, Kalleh says.

Fidel Radman, whose Radman's Produce Market at 201 D Turk St. was the first Tenderloin mom-and-pop that converted to fresh food and produce under Supervisor Eric Mar's 2013 legislation, is a member of the association.

The first mosque in San Francisco opened in 1965 in Bernal Heights, and the latest, three years ago, at 118 Jones St., a block from the Islamic Society. In the Bay Area, there are 84.

In May, the Board of Education took a baby step toward inclusion by passing a resolution to explore offering Arabic and Vietnamese K-12 starting in 2017.

Sometimes even well-intended efforts to include Arabs socially miss the mark, as the double whammy that happened during the recent Ramadan, Islam's holy month June 17 to July 17. That's when Muslims worldwide fast during daylight hours and increase their normal five-times-a-day praying.

A kickoff party at Curran House — where there are three Muslim families, including the Kaid — also heralded the gay pride parade. TNDC circulated a pink, invitational poster: "Pride Ice Cream Social & Ramadan Celebration," June 17, 5:30 p.m. to 6:15 p.m. — the party at a time when Muslims fast.

Moreover, the Quran prohibits homosexuality, with Yemen one of six Arab countries carrying the death penalty for gays.

Muslim men, comprising 90% of Yemeni immigrants, appear to assimilate in the land of opportunity better than women, except perhaps for young women and girls who embrace education and

find new and liberating pathways.

When Alma, Jamal's oldest daughter, graduated from Wallenberg High, she became the first female in his extended family with a diploma. She starts at City College in the fall at the reopened campus in the neighborhood.

"I was crying when Alma graduated, I was so proud," Jamal says. "Such a good day. We all gave her a big hug."

By contrast, Alma's mother's generation of Yemeni women exist in a swirl of often debilitating challenges.

Lucia Volk, San Francisco State University professor and cultural anthropologist, interviewed 15 Yemeni women from the Tenderloin on their health and well-being. Six years ago, she reported her findings in a Medical Anthropology Quarterly article, "Feelings of Isolation and Distress Among Yemeni Women in San Francisco's Tenderloin." For her paper, the Yemeni consul estimated then that 1,000 Yemenis lived in the TL, though a knowledgeable source puts it at 50-plus living in a few buildings in the neighborhood.

"A consistent theme is a strong sense of social isolation, both from the mainstream culture and other Muslims, including other Yemenis," Volk wrote.

Their inability to speak English and their Yemeni clothing were barriers that set them apart. The floor plans of their homes were even a factor.

"Their small apartments with an open kitchen-dining room-living room plan prohibit the women from receiving guests according to Yemeni rules that require separate areas for men and women," Volk wrote. "High crime rates on the street inhibit the women from moving around the neighborhood."

San Francisco's polyglot culture has never imagined any home floor plan



Kaid, above, stops in at Cool Super Discount Market, a Yemeni-owned variety store at Taylor and Eddy half a block from Kaid's apartment. It's a gathering spot for Yemeni Americans. He chats with store manager Hasbem Algabim (right). The store does not sell alcohol, in keeping with the owner's Muslim faith. **Abdo Mohamed Ali Hussein, right,** a recent arrival to the Tenderloin from Yemen, frequents the store for news and conversation about the war-torn country. He says it cost him \$3,000 to get the United States, but he could not afford to bring his wife and two children with him.

that separated the women of the family from the men. So the Kaid's must live in a more democratic setting, architecture reflecting a cultural belief in gender equality.

But most revealing, Volk wrote, was when Yemenis separated from each other. That led to Americanization, which escalated isolation: "Everyone is looking out for themselves."

The loneliness, Volk said, caused fatigue, depression and weight gain.

English language classes and educating non-Muslims to Islamic culture were suggested steps to alleviate these conditions. But Volk said she hadn't a clue how to counter, in the short term, the space issue and social isolation.

Jamal, Hewitt and The Extra reporting team visited the Yemeni grocery at Taylor and Eddy to meet some friends of Jamal's. Adal Alahami's Cool Supermarket is a grocery and variety store rolled into one — fruit and vegetables in an area soon to quadruple, toiletries, cigarette lighters, Giants T-shirts, and more.

"You have to have everything, if you don't have liquor," prohibited in Islam, Alahami says. Even so, two of the other four Yemeni businesses in the Tenderloin are liquor stores. The others are a deli and a deli-grocery.

Cool Supermarket is also a meeting place for Yemenis to trade news and commiserate about the war.

Alahami recently let Hewitt and Jamal put a Yemeni relief donation on the counter. "We got \$100," Hewitt says. "That's dimes and quarters from the poorest neighborhood in the city. We sent it to the Red Cross."

Jamal chats with Hashem Algabim, the clerk behind the counter whose father is in Yemen. Nearby, Abdo Mohamed Ali Hussein, a recent arrival, seems waiting for something to happen.

Hussein, 62, gaunt and homeless, is a short man whose English isn't good, but he indicates he left Yemen a month ago and arrived in San Francisco where his sister lives. Getting to America, he manages to say in English, cost \$3,000, a king's ransom. He looks exhausted.

"Hard to me," he says, "hard time." To bring his wife, son and daughter would have cost an impossible \$25,000.

Back at Curran House, the group takes the elevator to Jamal's apartment.

Inside, a boy from down the hall is playing with Muhamed. His mother is in the small kitchen with Nabihah. Alma and Nada sit on chairs playing with the boy's kitten, Lucky. Jamal makes quick introductions and settles on the couch with the two boys.

On one wall is a 20-by-20-inch poster showing Bilal, rollicking with Muhamed. The mom talks about taking food in S.E. General for Jamil, who has recurring health problems from being hit by a car. The Extra team is offered sodas — declined — and bread Nabihah baked, half-inch-thick brown discs of wheat the diameter of a large saucers, tough to bite through, but rewarding with a nutty and tasty finish.

PART 3: JAMAL'S STORY

Jamal took off work today to be interviewed by The Extra, and he is sitting in the lobby, fresh shirt and denims. He's talking about his kids. "Jamil loved dancing and wanted to be a famous singer. He wrote poetry, yes, both in Arabic and English."

But his mind turns to Bilal and his son's wife, who fled Yemen with bombs bursting in air. "With Americans, in a bus," he says. "Very dangerous. But nobody touches Americans, it's like they have, what is it, diplomatic immunity. He is in Riyadh now. He's got his papers. He'll get a green card, and in three years he'll be citizen. When I married my wife, she became citizen."

It's mid-July and Ramadan is nearly over, meaning an end to the extra praying, fasting and reading the Quran's 114 chapters. In two days, it will be time for great feasting and a resumption of normal days. Jamal has plans?

"I'm not Muslim," he says. "I respect Islam. But why are Muslims always fighting?"

He became a Christian about eight years ago. He wanted his family to be "the first Christian family in Yemen." (Actually, Yemen has about 3,000 Christians, among its 26 million population, according to Wikipedia.) But his wife wouldn't buy it.

"I wish all of them be Christians. What do we get from Islamic religion? Bad reputation. I'm crying about Mus-



War in Yemen: The official version

Yemen Consul Mansoor Ismael says Yemen "isn't as dangerous" as "the media" makes it out to be. Yes, cities are being bombed, but traveling in the interior is relatively safe. He says he has a list of 4,000 people wanting to go back to Yemen to get married or to help relatives.

"My phone rings every 10 minutes from callers wanting to know when an airport will be open." He expected one to open in a week to allow in food supplies. Once there, visitors will find astronomical prices, he says. "A tank of gas that was \$60 is now \$300."

Earlier this month, the United Nations declared its highest humanitarian emergency level for Yemen where 80% of the population now needs assistance. The U.N. envoy from Yemen, according to a July 2 Chronicle wire story, said the country is "one step" from famine.

—Tom Carter

lims." They are "only hurting people. They break mothers' hearts. And the old ones with long beards, they don't do anything."

His friends in Yemen could hardly believe it when he went with them to pray at small mosques. He'd pray to Jesus. "They thought I was faking," he says. "They laugh. But I'm Christian because I believe in it." He says he'd be in danger if he went back now because Muslims are killing Christians and vice versa. "I don't care if I sacrifice for Jesus. They can cross me," he says, referencing a crucifixion.

Jamal is a great admirer of Dr. Michael Yousef, the calm-voiced, Egyptian American televangelist with a 3,000-member ministry in Atlanta. He broadcasts in 115 countries. One tenet he preaches speaks to Muslims and

fundamentalist Christians — that homosexuality is immoral.

"The first time we're in San Francisco it's the gay parade," Jamal says. "We leave town."

"But then I look around, and people from all over the world are coming here for gay parade," Jamal says with resignation. "So we stay. I don't have anything against them." What counts, he says, is "honor and dignity."

On Sundays he goes to the Holy Virgin Cathedral, a Russian Orthodox church in the Richmond, a stunning edifice with five domes covered in dazzling 24-carat gold leaf. The interior, lined with icons, religious paintings and mosaics, is illuminated by a voluminous chandelier, a contrast to minimalist furnishings in the Tenderloin mosques.

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