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Transcript

Film Screening: 'Karama Has No Walls'

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Leonie Northedge:

My name is Leonie Northedge and I'm a research associate with the Middle East and North Africa Programme, working on our Yemen project, the Yemen Forum, and it's my pleasure this evening to introduce our three speakers. So immediately to my right I have Nawal Al-Maghafi who is a freelance film producer and film maker who's made a number of documentaries, including about Saadah. To my left I have Abubakr Al-Shamahi who's a freelance journalist, and he's Editor of CommentMidEast.com which is an online platform for young writers to write about the Middle East, and he's also written articles for outlets such as *Al Jazeera English* and the *Guardian* and the *Majalla*, and then I have Awssan Kamal who is currently the coordinator for the Yemen Relief and Development Forum, which is a new charity based in London working towards development goals in Yemen.

Nawal Al-Maghafi:

It's quite difficult to speak after that extraordinary film. I was asked to come here today and to speak to you about social media and the effect it had on the Yemeni revolution, and I put together a few points to speak about but, after watching that film, I don't know whether that matters any more. I was there during the revolution and I was here and we tweeted and we facebooked and we put videos on YouTube, but in reality those are the true heroes of the revolution, you know, the people that had had enough of giving up their human rights or the human rights abuses in Yemen. They'd had enough of living in poverty, they'd had enough of the basic human rights taken away from them, and so they just went out into the streets, and they weren't scared about losing their lives, they went out to fight for their basic rights.

In Yemen it was different than Bahrain than Egypt than Libya, in the sense that we don't have internet access like those countries, so social media didn't really drive the revolution. It wasn't used as a platform to plan the revolution, but it helped people, it helped those that did have social media access in getting the stories out, the stories of these heroes out to the international world.

The bulk mobilization efforts happened through word of mouth, through radio, through brochures and through SMS messaging. Sabafon, which is the second biggest, if not the biggest mobile network in Yemen, was helping the revolutionaries and had an SMS messaging where you could sign up and be in an address book, and get a text when the next protest was taking place. Also, there's only two per cent internet penetration in Yemen and that's

mainly because internet in Yemen is very expensive so people don't have access to it, and also it's very slow. Another factor is that there's 42 per cent illiteracy in Yemen, so it's quite difficult for people to use social media.

Newspapers and magazines in Yemen were either private, government-controlled or party-affiliated, and so independent media in Yemen was lacking. So social media filled that void, in that independent journalists and citizen journalists in Yemen were able to use social media to tell their stories. There was also a tent at Change Square called the Media Committee. These people were in charge of taking videos and giving up-to-date posts on Twitter and on Facebook about what was going on in Change Square, and these were used by national and international media in telling the stories of the protestors.

Actually, I want to tell you a personal story that I faced during my time in Yemen when I went to film the film on Saadah. Even though people didn't really have access to social media as much as they do in developed countries, I had an old man come up to me in Saadah and he gave me DVDs of footage that he'd compiled through the six wars that happened in Saadah and he asked me to take the DVDs, and he said, 'Can you please spread them in the screens that everyone watches around the world?' He didn't know how it worked, he didn't know that we upload them on the internet and show everyone, but he just knew that this social media, these screens that people are looking into are having such a huge impact in the world and he wanted the world to know what they were going through, and so he gave me these DVDs to give them out.

Social media also facilitated amazing youth initiatives that have had such a great impact in Yemen, such as Support Yemen, Resonate! Yemen and TEDxSanaa which just took place recently. Twitter was also very popular in countries like Bahrain. In Yemen it wasn't as accessible as in Bahrain where they could give live photos of what was going on there and then, but people that were abroad were able to use Twitter to find out what was going on in Yemen. But the problem with that was the credibility, that the international media ended up using Twitter to give accounts of what was going on in Yemen. However, that was a problem in that rumours ended up turning into facts because people were using them to quote inside their articles.

Although social media was an important tool out of many, and it played a significant role in the mass movement, it was really these people that told their stories in their own way that made the revolution in Yemen take place.

Abubakr Al-Shamahi:

Basically, like you, the film has slightly changed what I was going to say just to start it off. I've basically been asked to give a bit of background into the event itself and then where we are today two years on and, to be honest, after seeing it again it jogs your memory. It jogged my memory of the things that I saw there, the tributes and the kind of solemn surroundings of Change Square. To be honest, two years on, what I'm going to talk about now, it depresses you because it actually quite – it makes you angry, the sacrifice that a lot of these people had and how Anwar's father said that him and his friends, Anwar and his friends, had kick-started a revolution and that they were going to change things, and yet, unfortunately I'm going to have to tell you all the bad things that are happening right now.

So *Karama Has No Walls*, 18 March, obviously there had been killings before this; this wasn't the first death, or the first death of innocent protestors in Yemen. Ta'izz, Aden, Sana'a itself saw killings. However, this was the first, I suppose mass killing, 52 dead. I think with Libya and with Syria we kind of got used to these numbers, but 52 dead, or 53 – that's the London bombings, and that's all in the space of an hour or less of people getting shot in cold blood, as you saw from the video and the film. I think that's the first point, the cold-blooded manner of how it happened.

The second point is that these people thought they were going to change. So I showed this film last year at SOAS and we had Laura Kasinof who was the *New York Times* correspondent in Yemen at the time, and she said that she spoke to tribesmen there the next day because everyone thought that they were going to go and bring their weapons and there was going to be an outbreak later of civil war, and they said, 'No, we're not, we're going to stay non-violent because the world will notice if we stay non-violent.' And, unfortunately, the point is two years on we still have a lot of the same issues.

So what's going on now? The first point is – and in my own opinion this is the most important problem that Yemen faces – is poverty and hunger, and it's something that Awssan's going to go into later on but I just wanted to bring it up, just because we can talk about overtly the politics of everything, but I feel that this is the most important thing to talk about first. The average Yemeni, the people we saw in that video and the film – this is their number one issue. I think some of the stats I've got, two-thirds of the Yemeni population is rural, and 80 per cent of Yemen's poor is rural. So if you just imagine the number of people who are living in poverty in this country, and how it was ripe in a way for revolution and, in fact, one thing I've noticed is that it's actually the poverty of rural Yemenis that probably is the biggest uniter of the Yemeni people.

Like I say, even though we're not talking about politics I don't think it is apolitical, the issue of poverty and hunger. You've got the protest movement that basically – some of the most famous images were people holding up bread and highlighting the fact that food prices have risen, that the government should have done something about it, the government should have encouraged, say, farmers to plant new things. I've spoken to farmers in areas of Yemen who said they'd love to grow crops and vegetables and coffee and these things, but why should they, they'll carry on growing qat because it provides them more money and essentially can give them a bit of money to lift them out of poverty.

The second point is the conflict formerly known as the war on terror. So in 2012 there was a government counter-attack against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. They continue to operate in remote areas. Drone strikes have greatly increased so in, I think, 2012 there were more drone strikes in Yemen than Pakistan or Afghanistan which are traditionally seen as the principal arenas in the conflict between the United States and Al-Qaeda affiliates. Yemen is still an ally of America; that has not changed. However, I think, in my own opinion, it's become much more important. The Yemeni government – Hadi's power base in a way is the international community, and especially the Americans, they provide him the support that he needs to push through a lot of the things that he probably wouldn't be able to get away with normally in Yemen with the other power bases. He made that clear in his own first speech at the UN General Assembly when he specifically referred to the Americans, specifically said that they were supporting the Americans, and there was, incidentally, no mention of drones and drone strikes despite that being now a pretty big topic in Yemen.

So, like I say, Yemen's growing in importance in the US–Al-Qaeda conflict, and third is – sorry I'm having to run through these very quickly just because there's a lot of issues and a lot of problems going on in Yemen. So national dialogue. The national dialogue is obviously taking part in Yemen right now. Incidentally, started on 18 March this year, so the two-year anniversary of *Juma'at El-Karama*, the 'Friday of Dignity'. I'm not sure if that was deliberate. It's too early to say, to be honest, whether it will be successful. I think one of the main issues for me is that we don't see the national dialogue as necessarily the be-all and end-all for Yemen's future, we don't see it as so important that – in essence, if we think of too much of it then it will fail. We need to keep expectations low – I think everyone's expectations were already low, but it would be best, in my opinion, to keep them low because if they go too high then, at the end of the day, it will be doomed to failure.

One thing that I have noticed myself personally is, from viewing videos, and I'm sure a lot of people here will have viewed the video of the debate/argument between Amal al-Basha, who's a liberal human rights activitist, and Sadeq al-Ahmar, who's the leader of the Hashid tribal confederation and, whatever you may think of the two sides or the argument, it was interesting seeing that. I think for most Yemenis watching that – so a Yemeni woman basically giving it to the head of the biggest tribe in Yemen – that's something interesting and I don't think that would have happened in 2010. And it's been interesting seeing Yemeni society holed up, like a microcosm of Yemeni society, in the Mövenpick Hotel.

Two more minutes is brilliant to bring up the southern issue, which for me is the most important issue that we have, and the most important issue facing Yemen today, and the stability of the country and the unity of the country itself. So, without going into details, there have been huge rallies in southern cities, in Aden, Mukalla and elsewhere. From anecdotal evidence – I mean it's hard to say but from my own anecdotal evidence it does seem that the majority of southerners want to secede. Now, that doesn't mean that they're united in themselves, there's obviously huge divisions in their own movement.

Ali Salem al-Baid who was the former leader of South Yemen and former vice president of Yemen has rejected a complete national dialogue, he wants talks on the basis of north and south, and basically going for complete talks on independence and that'll be it. And, to be honest, again in my opinion, that won't get the southern movement very far. I think, at the end of the day, the international community – there's no support for secession, and it seems quite difficult for me to kind of see them being able to fully secede without any support from the international community. But the point is that that doesn't mean the resentment will stop, and the resentment in the south will continue. But the point is that the government now have an opportunity to win around the southerners, to kind of put something on the table that will basically want them to continue as part of the united Yemen.

Have they taken this opportunity? It's hard to say. There have been goodwill measures but, at the same time, that goes hand in hand with more killings of protestors in the south, so I think the issue we have here is – and for me personally as a British Yemeni – is I worry for the future of the country when we have such a huge issue going on, when the unity of the country is at stake and, whatever the rights and wrongs of secession and unity are, the point is if Yemen does carry on on this path where we have, in effect, open rebellion in one part of the country, then I only really see a dark and gloomy future ahead in the near future at the end of the day.

Awssan Kamal:

I will concentrate more on the narratives today. I knew this movie was going to be very effective and it touched me the first time; I actually had tears in my eyes and I was trying really hard not to have tears in my eyes today because I knew I had to deliver this speech and talk about what I came here to talk about. So today I will talk a bit more about the narratives – what are the messages that this movie has delivered to us really? It was really about the stories of the people. It was the fathers, the mothers, the sons, the daughters and the brothers of those people in that movie who touched us more than anything else. *Juma'at El-Karama* was a milestone for the Yemeni revolution.

For us here in the UK – I was based here, unfortunately I wasn't in Yemen during the revolution so it was very, very difficult for me to just watch from the outside – but we tried our best, and as I go on with this presentation you'll hear more about our efforts in the UK and how it developed as the milestones went along. *Juma'at El-Karama* was a massive milestone for us here in the UK, which turned things around. It literally turned things around. So where we are: dignity. It is the barrier. *Karama* means dignity, and dignity is something that all Yemenis take very, very, very passionately, and we are a passionate people. We are a proud people who don't want to give anything up.

So the stories and their narratives. In the UK it was quite simple for us. We started – and I will briefly go and give you a quick… and get you to understand what the Yemeni community in the UK's demographic and history is like. So we have been – the UK Yemeni community came to the UK in the 1860s, it's one of the oldest non-white communities in the UK, and it's probably the first community to build a mosque in the UK, which was in Cardiff. Aden and the Suez Canal – Aden was a major port and the Suez Canal opened the kind of movement of Yemenis from the port of Aden over to other port cities like South Shields, like Cardiff, Liverpool, and this is where you see the majority of Yemenis. They then moved inland into areas like Birmingham, where you see the majority of Yemenis today – so around 25,000 estimated in Birmingham – and there are an estimated 70,000 to 80,000 Yemenis in the UK today.

Going on from that, today you see people from Yafa, Dhala, you see people from Ibb, and if you're quite familiar with those areas in Yemen they're mostly in the middle areas of Yemen. You also see people from Aden and Ta'izz, there are people from Sana'a within our community. Going forward, what I really want to explain about is what we've been doing here as community members and how the activism developed over the years, or over the past

three years for me personally. So this is my story more than it is anyone else's, and it's part of the community and what we've been trying to achieve.

What happened is, about three years ago we started with three people going out to communities and trying to approach them with this new idea of getting people included and trying to build a community that's more inclusive, that allowed people to talk and that allowed people to have a voice in what happens next. And that's basically what it's all about, what happens next. So we went out, the idea was to build an organization that would allow youth in the UK to have a voice. Very simple. Nothing more than that. And it was literally that brief that we gave people.

So we went out, we sat down in chewing sessions, if many of you have sat down in them. We sat down with youth in cafes, and we sat down and we went out to the football fields and stood with people and started playing football with them. But the question was always the same: what do you want us to do? We had the power and we had the time to spend. Unfortunately we didn't have the funds but we did have the power and we had the time, and that's what we did, we went out to all the cities. This developed a network and this is where it becomes interesting. The network was very important when the revolution started because it was the same network that was utilized to bring people together, and within a week or two there were around, I think it was about 500 or 600 people that came from all over the cities to demonstrate.

The activism was not just on a demonstration level, so in the UK we quickly learnt, and groups quickly learnt that they could advocate, they could write letters, they could send emails, they could start making videos, and there were even people in the UK, like Sarah Ishaq, who went over to Yemen and developed movies and filmed movies or directed movies. So it was really important how the diaspora was reacting to everything that was happening. The great thing is the US diaspora was also in connection with the British diaspora, and they were literally watching over what we were doing, so every time there was a move that was done in the UK it was replicated over in the US, so it became a very interesting relationship between the UK and the US.

This activism developed, and as it developed there was a need for the building of these organizations, or to start up these organizations. So very quickly we realized that there was a need for the humanitarian, and I come to the milestone of *Juma'at El-Karama*. *Juma'at El-Karama* got me involved personally with building organizations, or building a movement. I co-founded Support Yemen, and we started communicating with people inside the

country and said alright, what we need is narratives, and we come back, the stories. This is what we really need, stories of people, what is happening out there? What is happening to families? What is happening to children? What is going on? And very, very quickly we realized that there is this humanitarian situation.

Now, unfortunately, for many years the humanitarian situation was deteriorating. Once I got into the field of the humanitarian world, or the sector of development and relief, I realized that the humanitarian situation has been deteriorating for the past 10 years. This I was blinded to. I came from the corporate sector, I didn't really understand what was happening in Yemen much – I'm first generation but really considered myself second generation, spending 20 years in the UK out of my 28, didn't really think about Yemen much. The more I read about the situation the more I found out what was happening on the ground. This became really, really interesting to us.

So the activism turned into active work. It literally meant active work. We first set up a shoebox appeal. That shoebox appeal turned into a container being sent into Yemen. This took us away from the barriers that the community has built against organizations, which is: we don't want to give cash. But when you say to someone, 'give us a tin of beans', for some reason they understood it. This helped us develop. Within a year we were able to build an organization. We now have Yemen Relief and Development Forum. It's an umbrella of about eight organizations and about 45 individuals. We have prominent names in the development sector. We're quite proud to say that we have – the head of the Disasters and Emergency Committee, he's a Yemeni. We also have the support of Dr Hany El-Banna who's the founder of Islamic Relief.

It helps us a lot in developing our work, but at the same time, and at the end, it is all about the committee, and it's all about the advisory group. So every time we meet with the trustees we say, 'Actually, the Yemenis want this, let's do this.' As I'm talking today we have now delivered two projects in Yemen. I'm really sorry I went on about what we do as an organization and what I did, but I had to stick to plan because I know with what I watched a minute ago, it was very, very strong and it affects people in many ways, and I think I'll just end there.

Leonie Northedge:

Thank you very much Awssan. It's been a pleasure listening to all three of our speakers, I think, in terms of reflecting on their activities relating to Yemen in terms of activism and reporting what is happening in Yemen.