

## ZURASUDAN

### The Discovery of Wisdom

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*And not equal are the good deed and the bad. Repel (evil) by that (deed) which is better, and thereupon the one whom between you and him is enmity (will become) as though he was a devoted friend.*

Al-Qur'an, Fussilat, 34

#### **Beneath the floodwaters!**

*A distant but raging flood was advancing toward us in waves, driving everything before it. We had no choice but to witness the terrifying scene from the farmhouse where we live. The flood strengthened when it merged with the river that flowed in front of the farm. Soon, the surging and raging waters reached the farm and swept everything away—fences, trees, animals, debris.*

*The farmhouse had been built on the farm's highest point, right in the middle of our land, at least 500 feet from the main entrance and about 30 feet higher than the lowest part of the fields that sloped down to the river. Anxious and unsure, I was hoping that the waters wouldn't rise this far up. I impulsively hugged my kids and tried to find a safe spot for us. I was formulating rescue plans when the floodwaters rose higher and reached the house.*

*Not long after that, the waters began to hollow out the house's foundation. I had accepted the oncoming danger and was constantly alert, continuously watching the waters. However, my wife and children were very calm; it was as if they were unaware of the situation. I, on the other hand, was terrified, trying to find a way of fighting against the rising waters to save myself and them.*

*The floodwaters completely undermined our huge house's foundation and sucked it up like a paper model. Now, we were all under water. I was fighting with all my strength, but I couldn't find any direction in the utter darkness; I only remember desperately trying to swim up out of it. As I swam, I saw a radiant, circular beam of light ahead, large enough for two or three people to pass through horizontally. I swam toward the light as hard and fast as I could; when I finally reached near it, I was welcomed by a bright, lush green place that exuded peace and relief. It was almost like paradise on earth; it was that beautiful... . We all flew from the floodwater's dark passages to that oasis. But I was still shaking. My wife Hatice was calling my name, but I couldn't see her. In fact, I wasn't even sure she was calling me. I listened harder, trying to understand her ... a massive explosion... and then Hatice was saying something to me again.*

Before my wife could complete her sentence—perhaps because of my nightmare or the gunshots echoing around—I tumbled out of bed irrespective of her words and reached Ferman immediately.

- Ferman, what's happening? What's that noise? What happened to these animals? Why do you keep shooting?

As I bombarded him with questions, Ferman replied:

- I don't know what happened either. First, the dogs started barking, and then all the animals in the chicken coops and the stable started screaming as well. I've looked around, but I haven't noticed anything unusual. Just in case, however, I fired my gun in the air.

We checked our surroundings again but didn't notice anything suspicious; maybe it was a thief who ran away when the dogs started barking, or maybe some of the foxes around the house wanted to visit the chicken coop—who knows? I didn't want my wife to worry, so I went back

to the house, concealing my worry as best as I could; she was in the kids' room, trying to put them back to sleep.

- It was nothing serious. When the dogs and the other animals all shouted together, Ferman thought it might be a thief. But when he didn't find anything suspicious, he fired his gun in the air. We took a look around together, and everything was all right.
- But we were a little worried. The noise woke the children; they were afraid.
- It's all right, sweetheart; it's all passed. There is nothing to worry about. If the kids have fallen asleep, you should also go to sleep and get some rest.

But, Hatice couldn't sleep and was instead wondering what my nightmare was about. I, on the other hand, become very secretive when it comes to personal issues. I cannot completely experience my emotions, whether pain or joy. I am restrained by my reasoning and rules. So I kept quiet about the nightmare.

It was one of those pitch-black nights when the full moon hasn't yet completed its cycle. Even though everything looked very calm, it felt like a storm might blow up any minute. The sun, which had made the roof an oven through the day, had transferred its duty to the moon, which continued to burn us into the night.

It was a hot summer day in 2004, which is why we were sleeping with all the windows wide open. The owl, our dweller at the bottom of the eaves, hooted three times at length at midnight, as it always does.

Hatice had put our tired children to bed. They were young, one eight years old and the other six. Whenever I get the chance, I tell them a bedtime story I know or I pick up a book and read them a fairytale. That night, they were both already asleep by the time I had finished the story.

It was around the time when the night finally takes you to sleep and the kangal dogs had begun to bark with all their might. Roused by the dogs, the chickens, cocks, and turkeys had made a choir, and the sheep and goats had joined in with their bleating. Woken to this horrible din penetrating the darkness, Ferman, the farm's keeper, had dashed out, grabbing his rifle as he went.

Meanwhile, on the farmhouse's top floor, my wife Hatice was trying to wake me up. I was muttering and sweating buckets and, although she couldn't understand my grumblings because I was wincing and had closed my eyelids tightly, she knew I was having a nightmare. She said to me

- Honey wake up! My love, sweetheart, wake up!

As my wife attempted to awaken me, the rumbling sound of the fired rifle had consumed the entire farm; it was as if all hell had broken loose outside. My wife cried out

- What on earth is this?! What's going on? Honey, wake up! Something is happening outside!

The night was gradually becoming clear in my mind. I couldn't understand which was the dream—the flood or the rifle shot? Did Hatice call out to me through the flood, or did she hear the terrible din outside the house and was worried because of my washed-up condition? Having been roasted in the daytime heat, I had tons of questions in the embers of the night.

Did I have a nightmare? It was obviously a very disturbing dream that had deeply affected me, especially with regard to its authenticity. There was definitely something very interesting about this dream. Everybody has dreams, but only a few of these dreams really tug at your heartstrings and force you to think that they are sending you a message; one may have three or five such dreams in one's entire lifetime, or maybe none...

The dream I saw that night scarred me deeply, but I couldn't interpret its meaning properly. I had an intuition that something serious and

dangerous was about to happen. But I was certain that in its aftermath, we would all survive. What was this danger, and when and how was it going to occur? I didn't know. Was there any truth to my instincts and predictions? I didn't know that either.

Until the night of that dream, I had led quite an ordinary life. Barring some challenges I had faced, I could say that I had lived a wealthy and comfortable life, especially compared with many others.

Just like everyone else, I had faced my share of troubles, problems, pains, and frustrations, but none of them had been formidable or powerful enough to damage my quality of life. I had a job I loved, a good wife, and two children who were the light of my life. I earned enough to meet my family's needs and mine. I had developed strong bonds with my family, my relatives, and my friends. I was living in a farmhouse built on 15,000 square meters of land, close enough to use all the facilities and luxuries that Istanbul had to offer, and yet I was away from all of its hustle and bustle; the area was quite lovely for a lot of people. I saw myself as someone who had a blessed and comfortable life. I never thought about modifying anything with respect to my job or my settled life. I loved my wife, my children, my job, my home, my social surroundings, and my lifestyle.

### **Emergence of Zurasudan**

In 1996, we had attended an exposition in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to promote our products. After the exposition, within two or three days, we had performed the Umrah. In my mind, I had a very nostalgic image of the Ka'bah. I envisioned it as the essence of Mecca, the heart of a region that had contributed to changing the course of history. However, I was disappointed that I couldn't find any traces of this historic fabric, neither the atmosphere nor the scent, while I wandered around Mecca excitedly. I sank into the despondency of not finding a trace, a monument, or a texture that would take me back 1,400 years.

The Ka'bah was my last hope. On the screen it appears as if there is nothing more to the Ka'bah—no traces of history except its existence itself—but, I didn't give up hope. I moved toward the Ka'bah with all these thoughts whirring in my mind, feeling like I would soon find myself in a tunnel that would take me back 1,400 years. My disappointment, risen from Mecca, continued to worry me because, although I was getting closer to the Haram, I was still talking to myself. I saw the walls of the Haram and reached the huge and magnificent doors; it was still difficult to ease my worries. I didn't feel like I was seeing the Ka'bah when I found myself in the big yard outside as I passed through the door, the gilded columns, and the marbled porticos. There in the Ka'bah's yard, I was searching for another road, another place that would lead me to the so-called real Ka'bah.

However, I was disappointed. I realized the fact that I lived in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that I've visited the Ka'bah under the circumstances of this century. No trace could be found of either Hz. Muhammad (S.A.V) or the Golden Age (Asr-ı Saadet). The Ka'bah itself and the zam-zam water streaming from the fountains situated in the Haram's yard were the only things left to me. I composed myself, accepted the truth, and began to perform my Umrah duty. As I completed my duty, I continued my search. I looked for a trace that would take me back in time. I realized that the Cave of Hira, the cave in which Hz. Muhammad (S.A.V) secluded himself and received his first revelations from God, and Jabal Nur, the mountain of light, had remained unchanged for all these years. I ran there immediately. Yes...for a moment, I found myself in the beauty of the past, along with the loneliness and seclusion. I yielded to the weakness of the flesh and the greatness of the divine hand.

After returning to Istanbul, I continued my routine job and family life for a few more years. In 2004, I had sorted out my job and my life. I was married and had two children, and my financial wealth necessitated fulfilling my pilgrimage duty, the Hajj. I was aware that it was a mandatory pilgrimage, but I had a very bad feeling about it. My experiences during my

Umrah duty had been discouraging, and I was worried that I would never experience any spiritual pleasure like others did. Thus, I postponed my trip. That year, when the Hajj registration began, the imam of the Gökçeali Mosque spoke at a lecture about the responsibilities of those who continued to postpone their Hajj duty and eventually died without fulfilling it even when they knew it was mandatory. Hearing this, I realized that I was overwhelmed by the responsibility of my Hajj duty. It was not guaranteed that I would live for even one day more, and the sin of continuously postponing my responsibilities was significant. I immediately decided to perform my Hajj duty. I consulted my wife, and after we agreed on whom we would leave our children with, we made our Hajj application. When our application was finally approved, we asked my wife's mother to take care of our children, and she, thankfully, agreed to leave her husband and her old mother-in-law to watch our children.

In January 2005, we were ready to go on our Hajj pilgrimage, which was going to take 21 days. We were in a rush until the day we arrived at the airport. Between work on one hand and preparations on the other, the date of departure arrived with much left unfinished. As we changed into our ihrams at the airport, we were ready to depart leaving everything behind. Our plane landed in Jeddah, and on arriving at Mecca from the highway, we saw the distinctive throngs and overcrowding of people. We were surrounded by many people who had arrived before us because of the Hajj period. We checked into our hotel and waited in the lobby. After some time, everyone gathered and we set out for the Ka'bah.

As the area around the Ka'bah was very crowded, our guide took us to the top floor of the porticos around the area. From a corner of the balcony, we watched the Ka'bah from above; the people circumambulating the Ka'bah seemed like planets revolving around a center, which is the basic dynamic of the cosmos. Squinting at the view, people appeared to be Milky Way stars encircling the Ka'bah. Just as we cannot experience the earth's revolving around itself and around the sun, we can only hear the humming

of centuries of divine rotation around the Ka'bah, but we cannot experience the effect of this amazing phenomenon. Soon, we will all join the universe as individual particles and settle in the orbits of our centers without experiencing anything...

People cry in prayer because of their intense joy and gratitude: "Lebbeyk Allahumma Lebbeyk!"; "My Lord, we are here"; "Your wish is my command, My Lord"; "We came to submit ourselves in the names of existence and creation"; etc. People who collapsed in a heap of excitement and astonishment just like a child; who didn't want to waste even a second; who clung to all the prayers and prayerbeads they knew; who snuck into corners and appealed for mercy in an embarrassed and shy way; who prayed, bowed down to, and groveled to Allah; who circumambulated and worshipped—all of these people had gathered here following a common summons, as if Raphael had blown the trumpet to announce the day of resurrection and everyone was flocking to the Lord's court, concerned and bewildered, with fixed hearts and eyes.

People generally prefer to move in groups as they have heard stories about those who got lost during Hajj worship. In addition, most people do not understand the local language and are travelling abroad for the first time; therefore, there is an increased need for groups with guides. In particular, the crowds and intensity can cause panic and frustration for elders, and to avoid potential mistakes, groups and guides are very much essential. It is for these precautionary measures that prospective pilgrims are grouped together; pilgrims traveling in groups reduce risks.

Our group was also prepared for a classical Hajj pilgrimage, which entailed restrictions such as specific hours when we had to be back at the hotel. These rules were sometimes difficult to endure because of people who had come expecting a tourist vacation rather than Hajj duty, which aggravated me; we were on our Hajj duty, and it was difficult to tolerate these people. The group psychology and group responsibilities made



me uncomfortable, and I couldn't worship and pray peacefully. After a couple of days, I realized that it would be better if I fulfilled my duty independently. I decided to become a haji according to my own beliefs, according to what I had read and learned independent of group rules.

I told my wife that I did not want to be a part of the group and that we could fulfill our Hajj duty separately as much as possible, and she was very understanding. I showed her the doors to return from the Haram to the hotel and the main signal points of the Ka'bah and the Haram.

From that day onward, other than some specific destinations, we traveled independently from the group. Thank God, my wife adapted to this independence very easily; she could find her way from the Ka'bah to the hotel and back to the Ka'bah again, and only then did we begin to savor the joy having undertaken the Hajj pilgrimage.

## **FOOTPRINT OF MY HEART**

During the Tawaf, you look in front of you, or at least, I did, so you mostly see feet, naked human feet. During the circumambulation, I saw so many different types of feet! I didn't know that feet varied as much as faces. Just as you can partly identify people by looking at their faces, feet were serving the same purpose for me. I was almost able to describe the people I saw by looking at their feet just as if I had seen their faces; the different feet's colors, ages, types, and states said a great deal to me.

Among all these feet, the dark-colored, cracked, and crooked ones attracted my attention most. The suffering and cruelty they had been subjected to had blighted these feet, and their owners' entire struggles, living cheap, simple lives on one dollar a day or less, were reflected in their flat soles. The men's poverty, pain, and difficulties had seeped into the cracks of their feet. These feet were different from the others; they were oppressed, despised, and persecuted. At times, I witnessed that the bodies those feet belonged to were despised by fat, fleshy feet.

You can witness differences in feet as much as in faces; just as each face bears the traces of an identity, there are whispering signs in footprints—their colors, shapes, and states—that tell much about who we are.

After a while, these weak, cracked feet distressed and agonized me; we stood next to each other but we were poles apart. We were so ignorant of each other even though we were moving forward side by side in the same place for the same purpose. The cracked, aged, dark-colored skin of those feet, their suffering, oppression, labor, and struggle, their owners' hard, poor lives, all could be seen on their soles. Poverty, pain, and difficulties had sunk into each crack. These feet differed from many of the others; they were despised, suffering, and oppressed, and the more I saw them, the more agonized I became. I was walking in the same place as these people and for the same purpose, but facing their alienation and our ignorance of each other increased my pain.

Until that day, I wasn't aware of my own feet's condition because I had been studying others'. My feet were well groomed and smooth, with no trace of cracking or aging. Seeing the differences brought me to my senses and made me realize the flow of my life. My feet and my life were nothing like the other men's cracked feet that were worlds apart from mine. There was no sign of pain and suffering on my feet, so what kind of fellowship did we have? I couldn't understand. I was ashamed of my feet's smoothness, and when I was around the others, I was trying to hide my feet or rub them on the ground and wear them out so that mine could resemble those cracked feet rather than the fatty ones.

I realized that not every foot has a trace. My smooth, well-cared-for feet didn't have a story like the cracked feet; my feet didn't have the life experience the others had had. Given the differences in our feet, how ignorant were we overall in not even noticing each other? My pain mixed with my embarrassment. I was trying to hide my feet, to really wear them

down, but it was just an escape; I was just confessing my sins. Supposedly, my feet would also be scratched and consumed, but I was concealing my guilt; no matter what I did, the traces weren't going to show up on my feet, and I knew that.

Why are some feet fat, large, and smooth where others are weak, cracked, and burned? Which group was I close to? One foot didn't see the other one; instead of helping, it pushed around the other one to get ahead. One foot could not feel the pain of the other one and even overrode the weak feet carelessly. What kind of a pilgrimage was this? Yes, what kind of Hajj?

Who am I, where am I, and what do I live for? To whom am I close or distant? Which feet class do I belong to, the smooth and fatty feet or the weak, cracked ones? Even though I was not smashing, despising, or violating those feet, mine weren't like theirs. Whether I attempted to wear them down, whether I hid them from myself or not, alas, I belonged to the smooth and fatty feet class.

We were performing our duty, with millions of our haji brothers and sisters. I didn't know their stories or their living conditions, and in just a moment of observation, my carelessness embarrassed me. I encircled the Ka'bah again and again, but alas, I had lived in the softness of comfort without leaving a trace! I realized that I would never leave a footprint if I did not change the path I was on, the "foot class" I was in.

I circumambulated the Ka'bah again and again. I watched feet again and again. I contemplated. And I decided to change my heart's "foot class" first.

-My Lord! Forgive the misguided years I've spent throughout my life. Forgive! Forgive my mistakes and weaknesses. It is surely beyond doubt that you are forgiving and gracious. You forgive and cover...

I have never seen or heard the cries and squirms of the traces I saw that day in my life. My inattention was caused by the defects and faults of my previously comfortable life. Until then, I had lived in ignorance without

hearing the call of others' pain. I had only been hearing the sound of a gear tooth and had only struggled to increase my comfort. It had felt like a good life, but what was life anyway? How many leagues was it from death? What of those who wake up when they are dying and those who die while they are still alive? What was I living for? My job, wife, power, wealth, family, kids—none of these reasons belonged to me. I was living without realizing that I would not have anything...

I had forgotten! Actually, I had never understood. My pain and my embarrassment and then again my pain were stirring up each other, and I become smaller and smaller and smaller. I was so humiliated that I would have hidden in those footprint cracks if I could have.

I knew I didn't want to live among the dead any more, and so I had to die in the land of the living. I had to get rid of my ego and kill everything inside me that did not serve my purpose.

- My Lord! Show me a way, a door, My Lord!

## **PURSUING THE TRACE**

- My Lord! Help your desperate and confused servant. Open a door.

That was my prayer; that was what I wanted. Finally, I was using the miracle of my lord who graces the mind and the willpower. I was plunged into a quest, knowingly and willfully through hope, prayer, helplessness, and incompetence, and my days continued in this way. I was waiting for someone to stop and say something, to show me the way. Among all these prayers, I wanted one of the verses to flow in my heart and show me the light, a path I could follow.

I was following my path under the boundless mercy of my lord, sitting there in the Ka'bah, right next to the Maqam-e-Ibrahim, and all of a sudden,

some white grains right in front of me attracted my attention. I'd never seen those kinds of grains before; it seemed like there was some kind of writing on them. Their shapes and the fact that five or ten of them were just standing upright in front of me intrigued me, and I had this powerful, indefinable urge to pick them up. I was looking for a sign, a reason, an opportunity. Was it in front of me? I didn't know, but I had to take every possibility into consideration. I picked them all up, and I intended to collect others in the Ka'bah if there were any.

During the Hajj, although it can be risky to bend down while the pilgrims encircle the Ka'bah, I had this irresistible desire to collect the grains; as I myself circumambulated the Ka'bah, I began to observe the grains I collected. These grains were not some kind of a stone; as I looked through them I realized that they were some kind of seed or feed. Separately, I had been mistaken—there were no writings on them.

I, looking for a sign, picked up these grains as if I had been following the guiding cramps in the tail. Even though it was risky to bend down among the pilgrims, particularly while people were shouting "Don't bend down!," I continued to harvest the traces, and my crop was 51 or 52 pieces.

There I was, staring at my crop and trying to find the sign I was looking for, maybe even the answer to my prayer, "Open a door, my Lord." Was this corn the key to my door? Were they related to the road I was searching for? Was the sign I was looking for hidden in these grains?

I wasn't sure. Maybe I was being naïve and this was only a delusion or a fantasy. I don't know how I got carried away with such a romantic idea. For a moment, I condemned my fancifulness and myself. Then I backed away from that emotional intensity and came to my senses. What was I doing anyway? Was I making fun of my own emotions like a lunatic, or did I really believe that all this had a meaning?

I was asking questions, and by asking, I was trying to see, to understand, and find an answer. Finally, when I pulled myself together, I realized that it was nonsense to sit and fantasize this way. What if it was a sign? Or what if my mind was playing games with me and I wasn't able to see the signs? I was obsessing about finding a sign and now, in addition to that, I was being consumed by a dilemma.

Everyone has feelings like this based on their varying experiences and traumas, and as a result, they can adopt unusual attitudes. As long as these feelings are not permanent and don't make you lose touch with reality, they can be useful; they can awaken you and shake you up. However, if they become permanent, they can then be harmful. In my case, I wasn't in trauma—I just felt some intense emotions. I didn't lose my calm, and I was still able to analyze myself. Under the circumstances, it would have been wise to stay calm, control myself, and stay rational. I was thus able to pull away myself from creating notional thoughts and restrain from being so fanciful.

I had collected these grains in the Ka'bah, and I was trying to remain calm and think. They looked like bird or pigeon seeds, as though the birds flying above the Ka'bah had dropped them down. Did I ever interpret this routine scene as a sign, a trace, a door, or a key? I was thinking of releasing myself from my hold, but what if there really was a sign? This doubt, these questions, what if...

Before I cast off my search, I decided to walk around the porticos surrounding the Ka'bah to find similar grains and feel relief. Afterwards, I believed I could throw off all these bird seeds. While I was thoroughly circumambulating the porticos on both sides, I was picking up all the small pieces I saw and leaving them where they were if I could tell that they were just stones. So I finished scanning the ground floor and proceeded to the top. There were none on the top floor either. In addition, there were no ceiling here and birds could fly around easily. Not long before,

I had harvested these crops among millions of people; now I could not find even one in this wide area.

This tour that I took in the expectation of leaving the corn ended with all of it inside my hand again, in addition to the many questions hanging in my mind. Maybe this corn had fallen from someone's bag. Yes, that was very likely.

I had decided to search Ka'bah's yard and porticos regularly until the day we were going to leave Mecca. If I found new corn, then fine; the corn in my hand belonged to these surroundings. If I couldn't find any, which was my heart's choice, I had decided to accept the corn as some sort of a sign.

When I was back at the hotel, I had these grains in my hand and a smile on my face. I liked these little grains. They looked like corn kernels, larger than the ones we are familiar with. I realized that I had no intention of throwing them away. My research continued on the next day, but there were none. I came up empty handed; there was no harvest that day.

Pigeon feed sellers of Istanbul came to my mind. Ok—I couldn't find any more of these grains in the yard of the Ka'bah, but maybe I could find similar ones in the stores of surrounding salesmen, which quite excited me. One of the owners of those stores that I dropped by with feelings of hope and joy said:

-There are people who sell bird feed on the west side of the Ka'bah. Walk toward that way; maybe you can find what you are looking for.

I found myself in the salesmen's area, five or six counters standing side by side...But the corn on the counters didn't look like the ones I had in my hand.

The next day, I was at the Ka'bah and the porticos again. This time, I scouted around, even more carefully, but there were still none. I couldn't find any trail, so I decided to meet with the salesmen.

-There is a grain bazaar.

-It is one or two miles away; we also buy our products from there.

This description gave rise to new hope and excitement in me. The next day's goal was decided.

We had two days left to spend in Mecca, our last two days...I didn't have a second to waste to figure out where these grains had come from. I arrived at the grain bazaar toward noon. This was an outdoor bazaar that consisted of shops on both sides of a wide yard, very different from our covered and domed bazaars with the smell of history. I realized that this bazaar was a public market of 15–25 square meters surrounded by shops, a marketplace where tradesmen displayed and sold their grains and crops on the counters in front of their shops. A considerable number of these shops were either empty or closed.

Even though the tradesman didn't like it, I delved into the first counter I saw and searched for grains that were similar to the ones I had. I knew this search could drive a wedge between the tradesmen and me, but I was hopeful, so I took the grains off from my little pocket and asked one of them about them. The tradesman said:

- These are called "*zurasudan*."
- I don't get it, what you mean?
- These are "*zurasudan*," we don't have them. They haven't come here over the past few years.

He was saying that these grains in my hand were Sudan corns and had not been available in the market for the last few years. I was dazed and confused. I neither moved nor bought anything from the store.



- Let me give you from this corn, it is better quality. No one buys that corn anyway.
- No, no thank you. I want to buy this one. Where can I get it?
- I don't think that you can find it. But check out the other shops.

All the tradesmen agreed: "These are zurasudan. We don't have them. They haven't been available for a long time." I was back where I had started, stuck in disappointment without knowing a thing. I had spent my days on the track of these grains. I had turned into a lunatic. I had hunted after the secret for days. I collapsed into a corner on my weak legs with hope in my heart.

I was walking toward one of the shops and suddenly I found myself moved by the excitement of a new idea. I had a new "I wonder if...":

"I wonder if there are any millers here?"

The tradesmen gave me the addresses of two millers they knew; there weren't many millers anyway. But I believed that I could find something at the miller, either the corner some information about them. On the road, I found myself in a situation of madness again as I was thinking the pursuit I had been on for days. I was looking for an answer on the track of a handful of corn again and again and again.

I directed my attention to a medium-sized electric mill as I stepped into a shop through a narrow entrance; corn was waiting in various sacks to be ground. Flour was scattered around the floor in flakes like snow.

Bearing the traces of years of labor on his forehead, a miller older than middle age was standing before me in his apron showing how much he loved and cared for his job. Bent under the weight of sacks he carried nonstop, he worked with his thin body, which contrasted with those heavy sacks. I waited for him to finish his task. When he stopped and came closer to hear what I was going to say, I passed the corn to him under the influence of his trustworthy attitude:

- I am looking for this corn. I searched the grain bazaar, but I couldn't find any. The tradesmen told me that you might have some. Do you have any of this corn? Or have you seen them lately?

Looking at the corn carefully, the miller's eyes clearly showed his puzzlement about why this man would come here to buy this cheap corn that only animals eat rather than any of the high-quality types of corn.

- These are "zurasudan." I haven't ground this corn for a long time.

He put into words what he was questioning just before:

-Why do you want this corn?

- I have seen the other ones. I know they are good quality. But I don't want those, I said in a low voice.

-I don't have that kind of corn. But I have a few sacks left from last year. Let me check them.

There was no trace hidden in the sacks, so I thanked him and left. I was dumbfounded there empty-handed and unhappy. Going to the other miller would mean that I had reached the end of my journey of hope. I shuddered. When I arrived at the mill, I saw a miller in his forties finishing his work and preparing to leave his shop. I asked the same questions and got the same answers.

Questions and answers—I had been in this loop for a long time now. I couldn't find any trace of this corn, my way on the trail, or the answer at the end of the way. I had this corn in my pocket and questions in my mind...

What was this? From the first day I found them to my last day in Mecca. The corn that no one had seen for the last couple of years... What was this? This corn, which I thought was the key to a door, had misled me. Was this whirlpool a game for me to figure out how to exit? The answer was there, hanging in the air while my soul was withering in pain. I zoned out

during all this time: **"Zurasudan"- "SUDAN CORN."**"My Lord help me, ease my pain, and show me the way out of my questions, My Lord!" I was fluttering.

### **MY NEW GUEST!**

Right in the middle of my inattentiveness, I decided to spend the last night of my Mecca visit in the Ka'bah. Farewell, gratitude, prayer... Maybe without wanting to lay down the law, I felt the need to seclude myself in my own cave, my own Hira. My questions, seeking answers, prayers... I had to search for the answers alone, in the ONE.

My lord had opened my eyes here and I had decided to focus on the footprints here. I had been overwhelmed with many doubtful thoughts. I had never thought that the answer I sought would bring me this far as I was walking back and forth in pursuit of a trace. The possibility of avoiding what I would confront on a corn seed's trail had started to rattle me. What if this seeking never ended? What if what I thought I had found was wrong? What if I lost myself in this flawed thought?

At dawn, suddenly, something similar to a butterfly, something like a grasshopper, perched in front of me. It looked like a commando helicopter, a grasshopper soldier in a fancy dress ball—how weird was that?! Neither the grasshopper nor I was shy. I touched it and it didn't even run away. I was staring at this grasshopper that was visiting me in my own Hira.

It was a largish and strong grasshopper. It could have easily run away when I reached out to hold it by its wings, but it didn't; it was coming to the hotel room with me. Dressed up as a commando helicopter, the grasshopper, or maybe a butterfly, came to me as it was meant to. In the hotel room, I tried to feed it, but it didn't react either to water or to a piece of banana.

I was amazed by these *zuras*, with their obscure meaning, and my new grasshopper visitor ... I decided to photograph this moment. The photo I took on a towel transformed into a scene when I looked at it on the

computer. I saw small villages (*zuras*) on the land under attack from a command helicopter (grasshopper), helpless small villages being attacked by a military helicopter... I was terrified.

As I hurriedly searched for "Sudan" on the Internet, scenes of civil war, hunger, massacre, and poverty came up. The answer had been there for days, the trace was there, and this grasshopper whispered it in my ear today. My answer, my visitor, had come:

Zurasudan, visit Sudan!

## 2

### **BEING ABLE TO LEAVE! HEJIRA...**

"If the branch is swinging, it is either the wind or the monkey!."

*Darfur Proverb*

In the hope of Hajj, millions of Muslims go on a pilgrimage to Mecca, millions who dream of a Hajj with the awareness of their hejira responsibility...

You cannot be a haji without the hejira—I know that now because I witnessed the fact that neither during the pilgrimage in which Muslims of different races, colors, locations, and types set aside all their differences nor now, Muslims have been unable to grow into a community. The pain our sisters and brothers suffer from, poverty, cruelty, oppression, and war—we were far away from each other in the distant branches of life. We were good people who had high living standards and stayed on course; at least I was like that, or I thought I was. I've seen and considered myself someone who didn't cause pain to those people. As it turned out, I was only a third wheel in my Muslim brothers' lives; I understand that now. And I was beginning my hejira, being able to leave.

Millions of Muslims... We were the waves of a flow. Now, I was going to do my part by reversing the flow or at least swimming against the current in order to nurture this flood. I awoke from the sluggishness of not being the one who carried the wood to the fire that burned down the prophet Abraham. This was the time to help the ant that was carrying water to the fire.

I thought of Prophet Abraham because he was a great example for us to behave in a right manner with his sacrifices and decisions such as stoning the devil. These attitudes were far and away from just being symbols. Only when I had crossed beyond the symbols did I get my answers and begin my hejira. My direction was settled: SUDAN!

When I was back in Istanbul, I carried the costume and geography hints that indicated Africa one step further, and I came up with civil war, misery, poverty, and the loneliness of South Sudan, Darfur. I envisaged traveling the whole world in order to find my oppressed and deprived fellows even though figuring out the place I was going to visit made my work easier out of the gate. Easy! For a long period of time, this word would not come up again, but I didn't know it yet.

I made my decision—I was going to Sudan. Making this decision, whether it was wrong or not, was one of the first steps toward my hejira. I decided to hit the road from Istanbul to Sudan, almost 4000 miles by foot. I was feeling so enthusiastic for my hejira that I wanted to walk and take the journey stepbystep. Maybe in my mind I was still emulating the conditions of those feet in the yard. According to my figures, this journey would take almost a year. I had to plan very carefully around the wintertimebecause in Turkey, Syria, and Jordan, I could experience extreme winter weather conditions; it was much better to leave Turkey and even Syria before the winter.

I had to begin preparing for my walk. I was trying to suppress my anxiety, which was bubbling up right alongside my excitement.I was praying

that my good intentions would overcome the obstacles, but I was also worried about the reactions of my family and society. I decided to begin with the person I trusted most in this life, so I introduced the subject to Hatice.

- You know about my seeking during the Hajj. I think, because of my research, I will find the answers and the people I am searching for in Sudan.
- How come?! Sudan! It's a huge country. Where and how will you find these people?
- To be honest, I don't know that either. But I have made plans and I have prepared for the journey. I hope that my effort and hard work will pay off and I will find these people. Let me contribute, and we will see what happens.
- All right. What do you plan to do?
- I am planning to go to Sudan on foot, as I promised. As soon as I reach there, I will go to Darfur and search for the people in the civil war area. When I find them, I will stand by them, Inshallah.
- Will you really go walking? What about your safety, your health, your job, what about us? You can't be serious!?
- Yes, I am very serious and thoroughly determined to do this. Moreover, you know that I promised; I will do my best in whatever I need to do within my means. How can I back down from my word right now?
- I am not asking you to break your promise or reverse your decision. I am only saying that there could be other ways for you to do this.
- Of course, there could be. But I made a promise and I have made my decisions. To be honest, I am scared to go on foot, but there doesn't seem to be any other option.
- Please don't rush this. This is not an easy decision to make. When you leave, we will be left alone in this farmhouse and I will be responsible for everything. People will ask me why I didn't stop

you, where you've gone, wasn't there any other way? I will have to be the one to deal with all these issues.

- You are right; you will have to handle a huge responsibility and bear a serious burden. That is why I cannot go anywhere without first talking to you. I also cannot break my promise, so let's find plausible solutions to these problems.
- I've always respected your decisions. I have no intention of stopping you. But, as you see, this decision does not concern you alone. We have to talk and think about it more.
- Ok. Let's think and discuss. But not about me staying here. We will discuss the problems that may occur when I am gone.

My wife insisted that I go to Sudan by airplane, find the people, and help them, and she was right—it was a reasonable idea. But I had promised that I was going to walk there, and I had to keep my word. Therefore, I hired a night watchman who could help the current keeper to ensure my family's safety. The children went to school by shuttle, but we found transportation alternatives and drivers for them in case anything went wrong.

My wife was a pharmacist. She comfortably drives to her own pharmacy. She would not have much time to feel lonely considering all her work and home responsibilities.

Home issues were resolved; now I had to focus on my job. My business, which I had worked hard to institutionalize over the last couple of years, had reached a level at which it could run without me. Responsibilities were distributed, and everyone knew what they were supposed to do. Our market share had extended significantly, and we were getting continuous export orders from at least 20 countries. The corporation had developed into a solid structure that could last for at least 10 years, with its current client potential and without introducing new products, unless there were very serious mistakes or it went adrift in my absence. I met my business partner and explained the situation in general terms.

- What are you planning to do then?
- I am planning to stay away from work to achieve my goal. I am requesting you to allocate more of your time here to manage this business.

He tried to talk me out of my plan to go to Sudan, but I refused to change my plans, and when he realized this, he asked

- What if I don't accept that?
- We will look for someone who can take on the responsibility and head the company in my absence.
- Ok, we will handle it until you come back.

It was February 2015, and I had three months before I took my first step. I also had three months for all the preparations. I decided to carry only one backpack and fill it with only the most essential things required to fulfill my needs.

In Turkey, I couldn't find a light backpack, tent, mat, and a light, foldable solar panel to charge my laptop, so I bought them from abroad. I obtained a small, light laptop and solar-powered charge adaptors for my mobile phone. My bag contained the following: tent, sleeping bag, self-inflating mat, polar blanket, laptop, mobile phone, keyboard, 5GB Mp3, recorder with 30 hours of battery life, battery, solar-powered charge adaptors for my mobile phone, electronic connection devices, a brochure in three different languages, toothbrush, shaving equipment, and other items.

My journey was my hejira, my intention to prioritize "we" over "I." I had to reach "we." "We" were somewhere out there; I couldn't stay out of it.

I began constructing a website called "zurasudan" so that I could be understood by and reach out to more people. Answers to the tons of potential questions regarding this journey would be on that website. I prepared brochures in three different languages, a flag with "zurasudan" written on it, and press releases to carry with me through the journey.



I was about to begin my journey, but my parents were still unaware that I would be walking to Sudan. They assumed that I was visiting Sudan for some charity work. I didn't want to upset them with details, so I said goodbye to them and left before I had to face their reactions and sorrow in case they found out that I would be walking.

I hadn't informed anyone else about my journey, except for my wife, my partner, my family, and a few of my relatives. I was ready.

### **THE FIRST DAY IS THE HARD DAY**

I started my journey on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June 2015. I wore my ihram in the corner of Sultanahmet Mosque's middle yard after I performed my Friday prayer. I put on the "zurasudan.com" flag, loaded up my little home on my back, and started to walk.

Aljazeera TV was there to shoot a short video about me. I gave brief answers to their questions about the aim of my journey and where I was heading. The shooting didn't take too long; they left in order to send the footage to the channel. A few days later, I heard that the footage had been broadcasted.

My friends who heard about the journey had come to Sultanahmet. Some of them tried to discourage me once again, but when they understood that I was determined, they prayed for me, said goodbye, and left.

After I left Sultanahmet's yard, I started to hand out brochures to the tourists and others I came across. People glanced at me in confusion and curiosity; they couldn't make any sense out of it. A few of them wanted to know what this man in unusual clothes with his weird flag was trying to do, or at least that was how it seemed to me. Maybe they thought I was a steward promoting a product. Some of them who read the brochure accidentally came up to me and expressed their best wishes and support.

I kept my journey a secret until the last moment so that I would not get too emotional and have difficulty leaving. I also wanted to hit the road alone. I thought I had to be alone not to bring any doubts into this purely humanitarian and conscientious decision.

I walked towards the Hagia Sophia after a while. Foreign tourists were not interested in taking the brochure; they considered me either a beggar or a product promoter due to the zarasudan.com logo on the flag. Back then, few people used the Internet or mobile phones; they couldn't look at their phones right away to understand what the logo meant, so naturally, they just glanced and kept moving. On the colorful platform of the Hagia Sophia, my existence wasn't attracting any attention. I simply melted into this beautiful and colorful mosaic pattern that had been possible because of the variety of people who had come here from all around the world.

As I was walking towards Gülhane, the Hagia Sophia on my right, I wasn't feeling either the weight of my backpack or the existence of my own body. I kept going a little more, and when I got closer to Sikerçi, I started to feel the heaviness of my backpack, which weighed about 55 pounds. I bought a glass of ayran right away from a small buffet located at the left corner of the Sirkeci Station. I rested a little on a small taboret in front of the buffet and passed over the Eminönü ferry port side.

The Bosphorus divides Istanbul into two parts, one side European and the other Asian. I took off from the European side, and in order to continue my journey, I had to pass to the Asian side. There were two alternatives for that, either the Bosphorus Bridge or the port. I chose the port, so I was waiting in front of the Eminönü-Üsküdar ferry port. It wasn't easy to get onto the overcrowded boat with my backpack. Thank God I had worked out hard for three months before I hit the road. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to get onto the boat among that crowd, and I might have even had to cross by swimming 😊

After I got off the boat, I walked along the pier and then headed for Uskudar Bazaar, situated on the left side of the road a few steps ahead of me. Meanwhile, my brother-in-law called me:

- How are you brother-in-law, where have you been? We headed out, Mr. Mustafa, to see you, and we are on our way, he said.
- Thank you, brother-in-law. I am fine, everything is good, I am just making tracks, I said.
- We are coming to see you; tell me where you are so we can head there, he said.
- I am around the Uskudar Square at the moment, but I am fine, you don't need to come, I said.
- No, no, we're on our way, we are coming; we are almost at Uskudar. You tell me where to meet, he said.
- Mihrimah Sultan Mosque is close by, and you can also find it easily, so let's meet in front of the mosque, I said.
- Ok, we will be there soon, they said.

Soon after that, they arrived. After we greeted and hugged each other, my brother-in-law said:

- You did it again brother-in-law, for god's sake. Where are you going without telling anybody?

I was able to read the bewilderment of my brother-in-law's partner, Mr. Mustafa, in his eyes, and his confusion was reflected in his words as well:

- Çetin, will you really go to Sudan on foot?
- Yes, brother Mustafa. I am young, healthy, strong [I said waggishly]. I can by the grace of Allah...
- Of course, but where did this idea come from out of the blue? I was surprised.
- Don't ask, brother Mustafa; long story, maybe I will tell you later. My brother-in-law then said:
- It is ok that you didn't know, but me! I am his brother-in-law, and he put me off too.

We all laughed together. We sat in the yard and talked about the journey and the process of leaving home. My brother-in-law stayed with me until he made sure that my wife and her family were fine. Once he saw that I was cheerful and there was nothing abnormal or disturbing, he seemed relieved, so he left.

Before that, as we came to the end of our conversation, I was getting ready to depart from the yard, and just then, we accidentally caught the eyes of my niece Emine and her little son. After the first shock, she realized that it was I, and screamed out loud, "Uncle!" She ran towards me, hugged me, and started to cry. I was as surprised as she was, and I didn't know how to react.

- Emine, calm down. I am fine, don't worry. Look, Emir got scared seeing you cry, and he will start to cry as well. Calm down.
- All right, all right uncle, I am cooling down. Are you ok? When I saw you I suddenly got hysterical over it. I couldn't help it.
- See I am fine. I am smiling even when you are crying. See?.
- Oh really? When I heard about your journey, I thought, "My uncle has gone mad." I was so sad.
- Look. I am as fit as a fiddle, and my head stays right where it was.

She also relaxed a little bit and started to laugh. After we talked a little, she said

- Uncle, don't you dare to leave. I will call my mom.
- Emine, don't do that for heaven's sake. Your mom is a sensitive woman, and I don't want her to feel bad when she sees me. Don't call please.
- No, no uncle. If I told my mom that I saw my uncle in Üsküdar, she would worry herself to death, and us too. She eats her heart out if I don't tell her. I am sure she has already incubated lots of ideas in her mind. Let me call her so she can relax as well.

I said ok given that I didn't have a choice anyway. Emine called my sister Nezahat right away. Nezahat is my oldest sister; she studied to be a teacher

and taught primary school, although she is retired now. She seems tough, but she is a very sensitive woman, very meticulous and tidy as well. She cannot tolerate unfairness or nonsensical actions. If there is something she thinks is right or wrong, she is not afraid to express it; she is not embarrassed by her beliefs. Caring for four children, a husband, her home, and her work wore her out a little bit. Her house was close to Üsküdar Square, which is why she came into my sight before I knew it.

She was angry, worried and excited. She walked towards me bustlingly and expostulated with her wobbly voice. When she arrived next to me, she hugged me and started to cry.

- God forbid, we were worried to death. Where are you going leaving your family and children behind? We didn't admonish you enough when you were little, so you are acting waywardly.

She was expostulating.

- Well, you are right, but it is a little late sister, you see. It wouldn't work if you admonished me now [then I smiled at her].
- I am also angry with your wife. Why did she let you do this? I wouldn't let you go.
- She trusts me; that is why. Let's sit and chat a little, and you will allow me to go as well [and I smiled again].
- No way would I allow you to go. Everyone in the family was shocked by this decision. Mom and Dad are so worried.
- I spoke to my mom, don't worry. When she heard my voice, she calmed down and relaxed.
- She wouldn't tell you that she was not ok, and in any case, she would probably seem to relax so as not to demoralize you. I saw them, and they weren't fine or relaxed at all.
- Ok, you are right. They may not be fine. But help me then. Try to calm them down.

- Ok, ok, give me a break. Are you happy with what you are doing? You will perish on the roads. Come to your senses; go back to your home. Now that I found you, I am not letting you go.
- My dear sister, I know it is hard. We can go together if you wish.
- Ugh! Your jokes, is this the time to joke? I am serious. Now I will call Mr. Ali, and we will take you back home.
- Don't, my sister. Let's sit and talk. Look. Brother-in-law was here too, and he came to visit me.

I wanted to change the subject and distract her attention. Brother-in-law introduced his partner, and after we chatted about various subjects, we came back to the main issue. My sister immediately said:

- Tell me now, you think you are Mahdi? What are you doing dressed up weirdly like this?
- Don't say that sister. You can see I am not insane. You know I wouldn't assert such a claim. Every person can experience a period of transformation. Every person can question the life he is living, suffer, want to build a new life, or even decide to change it completely. How can you claim that someone doing those things above is insane, crack-brained? I am not claiming anything. I am just questioning my life. I decided that I am not on the right track so I am trying to build a truer life. This journey is the first step of my decision. I worked for forty years and saved enough; but I realized that in reality, I haven't invested in me. If I die right now, even though my pocket is full, maybe my saddlebag is empty. Maybe my sins are bigger than my good deeds. So? What is the point then? Why did I work so hard until today? What will I do with a life that cannot promise more than today's joy and happiness? I decided to spend the rest of my life on working for the things that I feel right for me to do.
- We don't tell you not to help people. You can take advice from the scholars; you can talk to them. Ask them what and how you have to

do it. There are a lot of ways to help people. It doesn't have to be the way you choose.

- All right my sister. I tried to explain you. I charted out a new lifestyle, a new way for myself. I would be betraying myself if I didn't do this. Tomorrow I might not have the opportunities I have today. I have to do what I need to do while it is still not that late. Otherwise, I would condemn myself for perpetuity. Then I would get sick. And then I would go mad.

We chatted a little more in this way. My sister got a little bit relaxed and settled down as I answered her questions. Eventhough she wasn't totally convinced and it was sticking in her throat, she was content not to intervene and to allow me to go on my way.

I said goodbye to my visitors and hit the road. I sat in the Üsküdar park, which was a little farther, drank a tea to let off steam, and set sail for Kadıköy. It was getting dark when I was heading for Haydarpasa. Before I arrived at the center of Haydarpasa, in front of the bazaar located on the left side of the road, a few young and middle-aged women were staring out at me from the gaps. When I toward them, I realized that they were turning their faces away, andthey seemed worried and anxious. As I realized that they were turning their faces away when I looked at them, I opened my arms and faced them. When they saw me coming with my arms wide open, they started to flutter away. When they saw me in a white ihram in the dark, they thought that I was haunting them.

I got closer to the bazaar's entrance, and the women were hiding in the corners, glancing toward the road and drawing back. Afraid yet curious and defeated by their wonder, they were trying to look at me secretly. If I had opened my arms wide and run toward them, I am sure some of them would not have been able to escape would instead have fainted. I couldn't bear the consequences of scaring them, so I lowered my arms, smiled, and

greeted them while waving my hand. When they realized that I was a normal person, they relaxed and started to laugh at themselves.

## **2<sup>ND</sup> DAY—PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE**

I spent the night in the yard of a small mosque in Fenerbahçe, got shaved early in the morning, and prepared to get back on the road. I realized that it is hard to travel with a heavy back after the first day and set aside some of my stuff to ship back home. The headlamp that could light up a distance of 60–70 meters, the solar-powered charging panel, the rechargeable batteries, and the insocks did not take up much space. The brochures I printed to hand out on the road weighed 6–8 pounds of the total weight of my backpack, which was about 44–55 pounds; even losing only a pound would make a great difference. When I sent back half of the brochures and the other equipment, my backpack got a lot lighter, and the pressure on my back and the pain in my waist and legs decreased.

I had a light breakfast and then took a painkiller. Even though I had worked out for days before hitting the road, I wasn't used to walking for 12–18 miles with a heavy bag on my back. The pain in my waist and legs had worsened the night before. Rather than bearing the pain without any help, I thought it would be better to take painkillers for 15 days until my body got used to the situation and became more dynamic. Otherwise, whenever I stopped to take a break, I wouldn't be able to get back on my feet due to the heavy pain, and I wouldn't be able to find the necessary strength to continue my journey. Therefore, it was more reasonable to take precautions at the beginning.

I was in Kadıköy, moving along and answering questions when anyone asked. Bağdat Avenue is one of the longest and busiest streets in Istanbul. Two, three, and sometimes four employees from the nearby shops rushed to their doors to see me and understand what was happening. Some of them tried to read the words on the flag, and some nodded their heads



andsneered to express that they didn't get what was happening. Some took note of the "zurasudan.com" logo right away.

I, meanwhile, was having difficulty walking on the sidewalk in many spots. The trees on the sidewalks were trimmed very low, so that it was hard for a tall person to walk straight. After a while, I would come across a trimmed tree that I couldn't pass under without bending over, and I kept getting caught in the branches because of the flag on my backpack. Because I couldn't walk on the sidewalk, I had to walk on the roadside.

I wasn't attracting much attention on the sidewalk among the pedestrians, but on the roadside, there was no one else other than me, and I directly attracted the attention of drivers. Without exception, everyone in the cars both drivers and passengers tried to study me carefully. Drivers slowed; cars at the back struggled not to hit the cars in front of them, and the traffic was streaming. The sudden braking and twists could have caused an accident. I was worried, so I immediately returned to the sidewalk. On the sidewalk at least, I was attracting fewer drivers' attention.

As I kept walking, I felt suspicious. Was the waving from people in traffic because of the way I was dressed and the flag on my backpack or was it just a coincidence? I had to understand the reason, so I returned to the roadside. When the scene repeated itself, I realized that it wasn't a coincidence; I was attracting the drivers' attention so I had to work around the difficulties of the sidewalk rather than take advantage of the comfort of the roadside.

There were many cafes, pastry shops, and restaurants on Bağdat Avenue with spacious sitting areas that faced the street. In the summer, lots of people prefer to sit in these open areas, and so did I. Whenever I was tired or I needed to eat something, I took a break in one of these places. My backpack's ventilation system was perfect, but I was still sweating while I walked, and when I sat, I preferred the secluded corners that protected me from the sun's heat.

When you are exhausted due to the heat and have no strength left, the taste of cold ice cream and the joy of eating it are indescribable, and that was exactly what I was experiencing; each time I licked the ice cream, I felt my tiredness and fever decreasing. This wasn't the first time I had eaten ice cream—I ate it often before—but I hadn't eaten ice cream that was as refreshing and delicious as this.

Just when I had recovered from the tiredness and exhaustion, Alaattin called me. I hesitated to respond. I didn't know how to answer his reproaches, and the situation was sensitive, so I answered the phone timidly.

Alaattin is the eldest in our family. After graduating from university, he entered the finance field, worked for years, and retired. He doesn't like to be idle; he established a public accountant company and had been managing it for a long time now. He is hot-blooded; just like a flash in the pan, he catches fire rapidly and flames out easily. He can't hold a grudge; he is nice to talk to, well meaning, friendly, endearing, and domestic. His family has always been his primary concern, so much as that he can even ignore himself. Sometimes, he cannot control his temper when he is under a lot of stress. Because he is sensitive and has a dominant emotional side, he reacts quickly. Considering all these factors, I didn't want to face him at that moment. But he was already angry with me because I had not informed him that I was going on this journey, and I had no choice but to answer the call. After we exchanged hellos he said

- How could you set out on your own for god's sake? Where are you going without telling anyone?
- Brother, don't ask. I am determined to do this; try to understand. I have thought about it a lot, and believe me, it would have been hard if I had told you. You know that no one would have accepted it.
- Of course we wouldn't have. This is not something that could be acceptable.

- Ok. I know you think it is not. That is why I didn't inform most of you. Otherwise, you would have stopped me from leaving. Then it would have been a lot harder for both parties. So I had to hit the road without telling anyone. I didn't want it to be this way.
- Well done! Where do you think you are going by leaving your job and family behind? Have you gone mad? They told me you planned on walking there—is that true?
- Yes, it is. I hope that we can talk more about this when we meet. Don't worry. I took precautions regarding my wife, children, and job. I am fine as well. Actually, I am a lot better than you; come see me if you don't believe it. I was just enjoying my ice cream on Bağdat Avenue. What else do you expect, brother? Come around if you like; we can have a chat.
- Fine, fine. As if eating ice cream would solve anything. Come to your senses, and go back home as soon as possible, ok? I will be there soon anyway; we will see...
- All right brother. With great pleasure, I am waiting. Ice creams and the meal are on me.

I knew that he couldn't be persuaded on the phone; he would in no way agree without talking to me face to face. So I tried not to get into details on the phone. I hoped that when we talked in depth, he would realize that this was not just a phase and that I was not doing this errantly. Even though he wouldn't accept my decision, he would at least understand that I had a reasonable aim in mind.

I was just heading to Göztepe from Suadiye when my nieces Seyma and Zeynep called me. They told me that they were on Bagdat Avenue and they wanted to see me. I described a proper spot where we could meet, and soon, they came and we hugged each other.

We chatted a little bit on the run and later decided to walk together. I wanted them to walk with me and experience what it feels

like. Hopefully, they would understand and relax a little. They witnessed people's curious eyes, the interest I generated, the questions, and my chatting with them at close range.

They observed the significant gap between the meaning of the flag I carried and the surrounding setting, and they perceptibly saw that it was important to be one of the piers of this bridge that united the yawning gap.

I was just a mediator; nothing belonged to A.Çetin Yücesoy other than the face people saw while I was walking. It wasn't even clear that it belonged to me; what people saw was only a silhouette, and it wouldn't have mattered who was behind that silhouette. The flag and the meaning my clothes conveyed were so powerful and dominant that the body in them had melted away, so to speak. If the body behind these symbols had changed every day, it would have probably gone unnoticed.

The messages on the waving flag and the values represented by the ihram left no room for words. These symbols needed a body and a heart that could carry them and keep the flag flying, but the body could be mine or someone else's. For now it was my contribution; no one can guess the future... So I felt greatly honored, rather than embarrassed, when carrying these messages. I thank my God, who was so kind to grant it to me.

I walked with my nieces for a while, and then we sat in a café and chatted. When they listened to my plans and my aim, they told me that they didn't think my effort was meaningless and they supported me wholeheartedly. We left the café and started walking again, and they walked with me happily. They even called their friends and invited them. Two of their friends joined us, and we all walked together and took photos.

At such an early age, they were very sensitive to external factors, but walking with me didn't embarrass them. On the contrary, they walked with great pride. They knew that they weren't walking with me but with the

blessed symbols and messages I carried. I represented the values they believed in and lived by.

I said goodbye to my nieces and went to a café where I could use the Internet; I entered, took out my laptop, and connected. I checked the last corrections on the "zurasudan.com" website and sent e-mails. Then, I drank a glass of orange juice, and my brother Hayrettin called me on Skype.

Brother Hayrettin settled in America a long time ago, and is now an academician. He was the most mischievous child in the family. The phrase "a grumpy bullock grows into a smart bull," suits him very much; he has grown wiser over the years, and now he is an instructor at a good university. I always value his opinion and consider his suggestions. When we talked about the journey, he expressed his ideas and advised me. He was seriously concerned about my safety and where I would stay throughout my journey. He knew I was going to stay in places like mosques or petrol stations.

- You have made your decision and you are going to do this, we get it. I also know that there is no easy way of stopping you. We are not against your journey anymore. But everyone wants to ensure your safety and health.
- I know. I don't intend to destroy or sacrifice myself for the sake of nothing; I want to do something helpful. I know that to actualize it, I have to stay alive and be healthy. So I will be very careful about my health and safety; don't worry.
- What kind of carefulness is that? How will you stay healthy by staying here and there? There will be thieves and bad people. How will you protect yourself all alone there? That is the main cause of the anxiety in the family.
- You know that I won't stay anywhere unsafe and will refrain from things that could threaten my health. That is why I am not acting randomly. I am not going forward without doing the necessary research and preparations.

- Ok, but that doesn't satisfy us. You risk your health and safety by spending the nights outside. You will understand that it is wrong when you think about it calmly. You are unaware of it now because you have taken a leap of faith, but we can see it from here, and no one feels ok. We are not interfering in your journey. Find a solution that satisfies your family, satisfies us, do something, tell us something convincing. Otherwise, by not doing so, neither you nor we will be at ease. It will affect you as well.
- I understand Brother Hayrettin, I don't intend to drag myself into an unnecessary risk or adventures, and I will think about what you have said. I will reevaluate the situation and find a solution that will set you and me at ease.

I began my evaluation after our conversation ended. In fact, I felt uncertain after the difficulties I had encountered on the first day of my accommodation. Either I couldn't admit it to myself or I had simply repressed this fact. Cleaning, shaving, changing clothes, and meeting my personal and safety needs had generated serious problems. In addition, my phone battery drained as I wrote, and I couldn't find a chance to recharge it. There was no reason to insist on staying outside.

When I had decided to sleep outside, my intention was to understand those who had to migrate during civil war, those who suffered, in order to experience what they had experienced and protest their conditions with a critical, symbolic act. However, from day one, I had experienced difficulties. I had to accept that my health and safety would be under threat if I insisted on spending the night outside throughout this journey that would take almost a year. I had decided to set out on a long journey, and I was probably going to spend the night outside most nights. But did I have to insist on doing so when I didn't need to?

I had thoughts floating in my mind that if I insisted on my decision, the messages I wanted to deliver and the things I wanted to do would be in

jeopardy. The words of Brother Hayrettin made me think through the whole issue; I had to protect my health and safety to the maximum degree possible. If I didn't, I could lose my determination and change my mind. And if I lost my health, I wouldn't be able to continue my journey. On top of that, if I didn't stay in a proper place, I wouldn't be able to charge my laptop, write, work on the media-related tasks, clean my clothes, or protect myself against any kind of burglary or attack.

I thought long enough to decide not to insist on staying outside; this was a better decision for my goal, my family, and myself. Prevention is better than cure, and I had to be cautious. After I made my decision, I called Brother Hayrettin. I told him that from this night on, I would spend my nights in hotels or pensions that I passed. I assured him that I would take the necessary precautions not to risk my safety on the road, and he was relaxed and happy.

Right after that conversation, I called my wife and informed her. When I had told her that I was thinking about going Sudan, she never said things like, "Go if you like. What will happen to us if you leave us alone? What will we do?" She told me, "I believe that you wouldn't do something wrong." Her acceptance of my decision without any hesitation, considering she was taking on even more risk and responsibility than I was, deepened my respect for and attachment to my royal-hearted and dignified wife.

When I informed my wife about my accommodation situation, she said, "I believe you and I trust you." When she said that to me, it was more difficult to be dishonest because I had to take full responsibility. Maybe she knew that I was going to do my best not to disappoint her, but from that moment on, I had to be more careful and vigilant.

After this conversation with my wife, I realized that my decision was correct. My aim was to speak out and spread a message. If I and the people I love were not at ease, I wouldn't be useful to anyone and would risk the job I intended to do. My heart was gladdened and satisfied.

In one of the cafes, after I ate my dessert and gave brochures to the people who were at the tables, one of the ladies who read the brochure got up and came to me while I was getting ready to hit the road again:

- I congratulate you. It is nice to see someone do something good. We support you.
- Thank you miss. Believe me, it is so nice to see a sensitive person.

We both smiled and I continued my walk. It got dark, and I had to decide where to stay. I found a pension on the web that was located in Fenerbahçe. I began to walk toward the pension and arrived there around 10:20 pm. I relaxed with a nice shower after I checked into my room. I was just about to settle into my room when my devoted friend Burhan called and told me that he wanted to visit me with his brother. I gave the directions to my place.

They arrived not long after the call because their house was in Uskudar. Brother Adnan brought me pastry and cake that they had made for me. I hadn't had the chance to have dinner, so pastries sounded great! We ate the delicious cake along with the tea and discussed what I wanted to do and why. Then our main subjects were general situations and family issues. One thing led to another, and it was already past midnight. I started to yawn often, which was probably caused by my exhaustion. My friend said:

- All right, you are tired. Besides, it is late, and there is no end of talking. Let's call it a night.
- No, don't mind my yawning. I am not sleepy at the moment.

But they weren't convinced, so we said goodbye. We exchanged good wishes, and I went back to my room.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> DAY—WARNING OF A FRIEND**

I had walked 12–18 miles the previous day, and I woke up in the morning with my legs and muscles swollen. I barely performed the fard of



morning prayer, took a painkiller, and went back to sleep. When I woke up at 9.30am, I felt quite good. I pulled myself together and went up to the terrace for breakfast. The menu, with its richness and variety, was quite luxurious for a pension. I put almonds, dried grapes, some oatmeal, and a packet of honey in milk and ate it. I completed my breakfast with some cheese, olive, tomatoes, two slices of bread, and a glass of fruit juice. As I write down everything I had in breakfast, you could criticize me that I was supposed to be protesting hunger and poverty☺.

Before leaving the pension, I sat down to write. As the time passed, I left the room and went down to the lobby. I tried to check the "zurasudan.com" website to revise it and send e-mails, but I couldn't connect with modem. So that I would not fall further behind, I got ready and hit the road again.

There was no pain or spasming in my legs; moving was helping. I walked towards the upper side of Kalamis and then reached the shore; walking every day became a daily routine and came to me naturally. I was going to wake up every morning and walk toward my goal. My family and my social environment accepted my journey as well. I was on a roll.

There was only one thing that concerned me: There weren't enough materials to create public opinion while I was reaching my goal. I had made some preparations before beginning my journey, but they were amateurish and insufficient. I was hoping to make up for the shortage during my walk before I left the country. While I was arriving at these ideas and in Moda, someone among a group of friends raised his hands and applauded.

- Well done, well done my brother!

I gravitated towards him:

- Thanks, young man! You are applauding, but what if I am doing something wrong?

I was joking obviously, and he said:

- Whatever it is, I think you are doing a great job.

I smiled and felt cheerful to see a typical example of young people's dynamism. I gave him a brochure and proceeded on my way. A few cars passed by and honked at me. I didn't pay much attention at the beginning, but it repeated frequently, so I began to observe. When some people honked and waved their hands out of the window, I realized that they were being supportive; I hadn't been expecting this much attention on the third day of my walk. I guess those who saw the text on the flag or on the brochure searched for it online and so they were expressing their support by honking and waving. Even though it was way too soon, my hope of creating a public opinion grew stronger.

To evaluate the last situation, I entered an Internet café in Moda. The café owner asked questions, so I gave her a brochure. After she read it, sneeringly and a little bit reactively, she asked:

- What will happen to the hungry and poor people in Turkey?

I explained to her that my journey to Africa was symbolic and that its aim was to make heard the voices of those who suffer from poverty, hunger, and oppression in the world and to show that something has to be done to change this course of events. I didn't argue with her but instead kept quiet, and she got on with her work.

I was receiving other interesting reactions during my walk:

Some tried to give me money because they thought I was a beggar, and others tried to move away from me for the same reason.

Some asked things like, "Have you ever been in the east of Turkey?" and "Why are you going to Sudan instead?!" Some asked, "Is there a Hammam opening?" and "Are you promoting a towel factory?"

Some thought I was a tourist and asked questions in English and Arabic; some spoke nonsense to me because they thought I didn't know Turkish.

Some thought I was promoting a product or a company and screamed from the other side of the road things like, "Brother, what are you selling? Bring it here, let us look at it!"

Some said, "Look at that guy. What kind of a man is this? What is he selling?" After all, I was always coming across with something cheerful...

Brother Hayrettin and my devoted friend Burhan, who would eagerly partake in every kind of charity work, called me and said the following similar sentences:

- There are countries other than Sudan having serious troubles at the moment. If you put forward the poverty and hunger in Sudan, the causes of this situation could be attributed to Sudan's ineffectualness; however, the problem was triggered by both inside and outside forces. For this reason, the discourse of your journey has the potential to be misunderstood and should be revised and directed to your main focus of world problems such as oppression, poverty, and hunger.

My friend Zülküf had called me for a similar issue at a different time. In addition to our business relationship, I had a long friendship with Zülküf, who lives in Germany. After he had found out about my journey and searched about what could be done to support or improve my project in Germany, he called me to share his thoughts. He thought of a native German academician friend who was living in Sudan, and told him that the issue was important and serious. After his friend analyzed the website he said:

- Sudan is taking action for economic growth at the moment. If there is no adjustment either in the discourse or on the website, it could offend Sudan. It could be understood as if only in Sudan is there

poverty and hunger, and that is not a good image for a country that is trying to develop economically; it could be disturbing.

After hearing this, Zülküf tried to explain to me that he thought it would be better to adjust my statements, which directly targeted Sudan.

I had already witnessed similar misunderstandings during the last two days; some people thought that I was from Sudan or I was only worrying about the poverty in Sudan.

Even though I chose Sudan as a symbolic example of poverty, my main aim was to utter a scream to eliminate the oppression and poverty in the world. The statements in the brochure and on the website should be misunderstood; otherwise, different people living in completely different countries wouldn't come to the same conclusion.

I right away edited the emphasis to be on oppression, poverty, and hunger in the world in all my written materials. I changed the target of my trek from just Sudan to Africa. If the perception didn't change in spite of my adjustments, I was even considering changing the essential domain of "zurasudan.com" to something else. I sent the drafts to Hayrettin, Burhan, Zülküf and Kerem to get their feedback, and I was saved from making a big mistake by my friends.

Carrying on with the journey under the new circumstances would mean that I was about to represent a false discourse. Therefore, I decided to stay in Kadıköy for three to five days and rebuild the whole project.

Kadıköy is a central area; access to Internet and accommodations was easy. When it got dark, I walked around to find a hotel or a pension, checking the hotels located along Rihtim Avenue. One of the hotels didn't accept me because they thought I was a beggar. I was getting tired under the weight of my backpack, so I bought some cherries from a hawker and took a break. I checked a few more places until finally I found a proper one, a place that was a mid-hotel and mid-pension, and I checked in.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> DAY–BRAINSTORMING**

I woke up feeling pain all over my body. I had walked a lot more than my normal amount the day before and had forced my muscles; I was having a hitch in my gitalong. The atmosphere in the hotel was uninviting and very gloomy; I couldn't put my finger on it, but it was weird, sort of a bachelor pension. I had to find a better place to stay for a few more days. I got ready and went outside to find a better hotel. When I was just at the door, Kerem called me and asked whereand how I was. When I told him where, he laughed andsaid he knew the hotel and that it didn't have a good reputation. I laughed as well, told him that I didn't like it, and checked out.

I was craving hot soup. I ordered Ezogelin soup in the diner right next to the hotel. Considering the exhaustion of the previous day, it felt so good that I ordered a second portion. I had gathered myself together. I wasn't carrying the symbols with me that day; I was thinking about the recent developments while drinking the soup and also while I was on the road and later on. I was ill at ease, worried that the message I wanted to deliver could be misunderstood or could take a different course. I had to edit the website and the brochures right away. Because I shouldn't have continued to carry a deficient message, it was pointless to dress up with symbols and travel;I wasn't going to dress up with the symbols until I put the website and brochures into their final form. My aim wasn't to move around in weird clothes like a dabbler—it was to carry a true, acceptable message.

I found a fine hotel within 200 meters, and theservice was quite good considering the price. I had paid 25 liras at the pension the day before, and I couldn't even take a shower;it was like a cubbyhole. This new hotel was 30 liras for a night, andconsidering the price, the hotel room was quite well equipped; it was spacious and had a phone and a clean, wide bathroom.

I went to an Internet café to check my e-mail. There were messages from Brother Hayrettin and Burhan. I spoke with Brother Hayrettin on Skype. Every conversation with him lasted at least one and a half or two

hours, so I was getting tired. I asked him where all of his energy was coming from, and he said, "I give lectures at least three to four hours a day. One or two hours is nothing."

I saw that my wife was online on Skype so I called her. She said it was not a good time because the pharmacy was super busy, so I sadly had to hang up. Just then Zülküf called me, and Brother Hayrettin (in America), Zülküf (in Germany), and I joined a three-way conference call on Skype and evaluated the recent situation.

Brother Hayrettin was interested in the subject, so he was sharing the related documents and information that would support my journey even though it was setting him back from his own book he was writing. Thanks to the information and suggestions he provided, the perspective of the course was getting wider and clearer.

Hours passed. We were going to meet at 7 pm to discuss the new strategy on communication, press, and media materials; we met on the top floor of a pudding shop on Rihtim Avenue. I realized that this journey I intended to achieve had seemed quite simple at the beginning but was now very complex and challenging. We reviewed the presentation format and discussed what to add or eliminate. We laid emphasis on misunderstandings and risks, and there also had to be video recording during the journey. We discussed the newsworthiness of the journey. It was a total brainstorming session. We were tired but it was worth it. Kerem said:

- As someone who has worked in media for three years and who still holds a position in the field, I can say that this journey, considering its aim and manner, is ten times more newsworthy than a dog biting a man's leg.

We exchanged ideas on the logistic support that would be needed after the project had been accomplished. We decided that we would keep the zarasudan domain name but change it .org. Because "zurasudan" was a symbol here, a name, a concept, it would help to present the whole project

in an easier way and strengthen the perceptions about it. Over time, "zurasudan" could appear in literature as a strong symbol of oppression, poverty, and hunger, so we decided to attach importance to the name and keep it. We also thought that we should add my background story on the website and publish the diaries I had kept.

Burhan and İbrahim left and Kerem stayed; we went to my hotel. After a while, Brother Alaattin called. He told me that he was in Fenerbahçe and wanted to see me. He parked his car on the waterfront street right in front of the electrician bazaar, and we hugged each other. I know him very well, and his facial features and expressions were very tense; he didn't even react to my jokes. My niece Gizem was also there, and she kept staring at me, befuddled. Both were surprised to see me very motivated and cheerful. Kerem had met Alaattin when he came to our farmhouse. He suggested sitting in a tea garden located on the seafront. We went there and chatted. I explained to them that I was very relaxed and cheerful. When they started to cool down and relax, one of them asked "Why are you going on foot? Wasn't there any other way to do this? You could donate money, do charity. Why bother?"

I tried as best I could to explain what I had been through and my aim and beliefs. He seemed convinced but still couldn't comprehend exactly. I left it for another time...

## **5-6<sup>th</sup> DAY- YOU GET AS MUCH AS YOU GIVE**

I had to piece together the decisions we made yesterday. I opened my laptop and wrote a short biography. I checked my e-mails and made final changes to the website content. I downloaded the useful data and documents from the web. Brother Hayrettin thought through the whole issue and sent an email containing his warnings, advice, and knowledge. Some major topics:

- Setting small goals and leaving the door open is more rational and sincere. If your call for help is going to grow, it will leave that channel open; when the time comes, you determine the course of action accordingly, but at the beginning, people need to relate your message and say "this is right, beautiful and can be done." Nevertheless, even if you are right, people may not show interest.
- Good intention is not enough because you need to take into consideration how the message has been understood. You are experienced in publishing; just because you wrote a good book doesn't mean it is going to be sold a lot. There are reasons for that, and those reasons are applicable to your journey as well. You have to take measure to sell that book, considering the content, cover, design, length, subject, reader's education level, the target audience's conditions, and current agendas.
- There is a responsibility to this as well. You will unavoidably have to use lots of people's time, money, labor, and feelings. You have to confront them all prepared. You shouldn't waste their effort or yours. If you object to those you love and trust, who arrived at a consensus on doing this in another way, it means that you will be saying your thoughts mean nothing to those people, and it wouldn't be right. After all, you are a human being and an individual. Of course, whom you encountered and how much importance you gave to this project is crucial. However, if people look at the same picture and continue to see different things, it is time for you to reevaluate your proposition and method.
- There are international aspects and domestic politics to issues such as poverty and hunger. As you know, the main cause of poverty is not lack of resources but political and ethnic conflicts. And do remember, these are not the only problems in the world; there are death and disease everywhere.



- You have to accept that this problem will not be resolved within a few days or years. Only the joint effort of civic organizations, aid agencies, and those places that need help can resolve these problems.
- People here want to do something, want to help you, so don't waste it. If it is about helping, focus on helping and respect the opinions of others so neither you nor they are disappointed. If you try to see things as they are rather than from the aspect of your feelings, you will be a lot more successful in delivering your message. You have to do this at the cost of pushing yourself and resisting your feelings. But if there is not such an issue, then this paragraph is unnecessary.

I agreed with most of his ideas. I accepted that I would have to think carefully through all the steps I would take and consider the suggestions and assessments of the ones I value. I agreed that I needed to be smart and sharp, to look at past examples and at what was currently being done, and I knew that this wasn't an easy thing to do. However, being too cautious and scholastic may constrain you from stepping forward. I believed that some things require insane courage, so I could make some mistakes, but it seemed like there was no other way. Maybe I could achieve my goal or make small progress, but maybe I would accomplish nothing and even not be able to go back home.

As the poet says, "If I don't do it and you don't do it, who will?!" How could I truly express the love and passion inside me? How could I soothe myself without tiring, bent on doing it and working hard? I was going to try and "I [would] either be existent in the universe of nothingness or nonexistent in the universe of existence!"

In the evening, I, Kerem, and Burhan planned to get together and meet with Zülküf and Hayrettin on Skype. Kerem called me and said he was on the road and had good news. When he came, he said a news agency was seriously interested in the project and willing to feature it on visual and print

media. There were some necessary conditions for that, so he asked for my opinion and approval.

Due to the sensitivity of the subject, my business and personal lives become more of an issue. "It is important what kind of person is doing the walk," he said. Is he someone vagabonding or a student or an anarchist who doesn't have any expectation from life or someone who is at peace with his job and family and has a comfortable life, a good environment, and status in the society?

All these were important factors for the project to be accepted because everyone would pay attention to them. Therefore, he wanted to know whether they could record videos at my company, my house, and my wife's pharmacy.

We gathered with friends that night. Al Jazeera Turkey correspondent Fikri, who did the video shooting on the first day, participated as well. He said:

- Sudan Consul wants to meet you around 1 pm tomorrow.
- I hope nothing is wrong. It is my pleasure, but do you know the reason?.
- I guess they are disturbed by the emphasis on Sudan in your message. I think the meeting will be related to that.
- All right. With great pleasure, let's meet.

Burhan said that humanitarian aid associations could support the aim of this journey; he was interviewing for this and would arrange a meeting in order to exchange ideas. We discussed this and similar subjects and again evaluated the actions that needed to be taken. We left before it was too late, and I went to my room.

I had to think things through attentively and explain myself very well. I was on the brink of an ocean, and everyone was filling up their vessels as

much as they could. If people were doing this, I needed to explain the reasons—that fullness and intensity—perfectly, without any hesitation.

## **7<sup>th</sup> DAY- DOING AS MUCH AS YOU CAN**

I was trying to research the global scale of hunger and poverty and what was being done about them. The issues were so deep and complicated that even those who wanted to help had been blocked; either no aid or only small amounts were reaching the hungry and poor.

Small-minded political interests, unfruitful regional benefits, ignorance, and selfishness had made people so indifferent to the deep poverty in the world; in fact, it is accepted as normal in some societies. You can fool yourself into thinking that you will always live a wealthy and comfortable life or that you will never have difficulties.

People were having difficulties understanding. Why would I walk to Africa in those clothes and leave my comfortable home and nice job? Why would someone who has a great deal of assets that lots of people would walk over another to get prefer such a demanding way? Why would someone insist on it at the cost of being criticized, despised, and accused of shameful acts? Why would someone bear so many sacrifices for the sake of others? Questions, questions, questions... It was obvious that this was not a fantasy or an adventure to me but that it was still maybe not acceptable or understandable to some.

If someone wants to help, of course he could pull money from his pocket and donate it. He could give away some or most of his wealth and possibly achieve a lot more. Why would you risk your life, leave your wife, children, job, and home and consume your available means? Rather than risking it all, it might be a lot better to just donate the amount of money that the project would cost you? Why this way, this choice?

The pilgrimage to Mecca is a this duty that pertains to wealthy people, so I never thought I would see poverty, but even in the first days, intense

poverty and misery around me attracted my attention. Why and how had these people come here? There was a tremendous crowd in a very narrow area, and the scenery was dominated by poverty, not wealth. The duty of pilgrimage and this situation were completely contradictory. How did this happen? Those who came from wealthy countries almost disappeared among the overwhelming poverty. All these people from tens of countries were intertwined as one.

People from various countries and found a way to come to Mecca and fulfill their duty of pilgrimage, and maybe they had used every means available to get there. This wasn't an act to deny for sure; it was about how you perceived it and what you expected from it. In some countries, fulfilling your duty of pilgrimage is an honor and a virtue. In some, it means you've reached full maturity. For some people, it means killing two birds with one stone, fulfilling personal duty and trading in one visit.

During the Hajj season, wealthy people often do charity work such as donating food packets; both those who are poor and those who are not benefit from these efforts.

For some reason, poor people attracted my attention a lot during the Hajj. While I was performing tawaf, those weak, shaky, cracked black feet were the ones that took hold in my heart. Feet with traces of labor and attitude... Silent feet with deep strokes stepping in deep places...

I tried to communicate with these people with black feet. Then I shifted my attention toward the Internet in order to learn more about their living conditions. What I learned was terrible. I had heard about these things before, and read about them, but the issues had never penetrated my heart. I looked at the feet, the bodies, and the behaviors once more.

I was observing as I returned to the hotel. People were turning up their nose at the hotel menus with great variety and were throwing out half of the food they had handpicked and filled their plate with. Others could

barely stand because they were hungry but were still trying to fulfill their duties, smiling at the people who despised them.

Thirteen million people per year struggle with hunger, and thousands of them are dying due to the hunger, poverty, and diseases. No one was hearing the screams of millions groaning under the oppression. We put on an ihram to pull away from our status, positions, and egos. We don't aim to hurt or condemn anyone. We consider others better than ourselves. We say not "me" but "us." This deep conflict wounded me. I could have been one of those people who are alone, homeless, and ill treated.

I was feeling that the cruelty, hunger and poverty that I perceived in my mind were floating into my heart. I couldn't turn my back and go home. I couldn't act like I saw nothing, I couldn't just sit back and watch, and I couldn't stay silent. I had to do something. I had to carry a pail, a basin, or at least a drop to this fire. I had to be a hard worker like an ant! I had to do as much as I could, be a passenger with an unknown name carrying that drop of water, like an ant.

I could have been the one in this fire. I could have been the one expecting his pain to stop somehow. I had to run. I had to run right away. I had to do something in a hurry before it was too late. I had to scream, "Fire!" It was burning, burning, burning... Hearts are burning flameless and fumeless...

## **THE FIRE**

A haircloth, a bag, and a flag

What is this man doing, I wonder.

Are you a ghost?

Why are you wandering around in those clothes?

Are you nuts?

Crazy, poor fellow.

Are you the only one left to walk away?

I don't know what this course of yours will resolve.

What's the suffering of the poor to you?

What strength do you have to relive the pain?

The world couldn't put out this fire, but maybe my heart could.

### **8<sup>TH</sup> DAY-CAMPING JOKE**

My business partner had come at 6 am, and we met at Kadıköy on Rihtim Avenue, drank soup, and made the final assessments of the work. Partnership negotiations that had been ongoing for the last one or two months were in their final phases, and verbal agreements had been reached. We bounced ideas off of each other about what would be done after the partnerships were official to increase the market's capacity, the new machines that would be produced in the factory, and the plans for the platform and settlement.

It could have been difficult to leave just then, but nothing could be achieved without me. My partner and our consultant were going to take on more responsibilities. They were aware of it and had consented during our last meeting.

When my partner left, I worked on my laptop a little bit, checking and sending e-mails. My brothers-in-law Enver and Mustafa arrived at noon, and Enver said:

- Brother-in-law, let's go eat fish today.
- That would be great, but it is on me. I am not accepting any objections.
- No way, don't insist on this. The fish are on me today.

When I realized that I wouldn't be able to persuade him, I told him, "Allright, brother-in-law, pickle juices are on you too then."

We laughed and went to one of those places where they grill the fish in the boats anchored on the coast and you eat your fish in the open air either on a stool or on foot. There were similar ones in Eminonu and Uskudar.

I have never forgotten the taste of those fish grilled on the boats anchored along the Eminönü coast within the first couple years after I came to Istanbul. Even the ones I ate in the luxurious restaurants couldn't remove the traces of their deliciousness. As we ate grilled fish fillets stuffed in half-loaves of bread and went to one of the dark-shadowed tea gardens among the trees close to the seafront, a few steps ahead of the Haldun Taner Theater, we had a heart-to-heart talk. Enver said repeatedly that I had deceived him: "When you bought your backpack, you told me, 'we can go to mountain climbing or camping.'"

- You are right. I was planning to gain experience before going out for a walk but I was so busy, I didn't have a chance, unfortunately. Sorry.
- You know that I don't mean the camping. I mean that you told me you needed a backpack for trekking and then you got away.
- I understand, but I told you about why I had to hit the road without telling anyone, so I also couldn't tell you the main reason for the backpack. However, I really was considering camping to gain more experience; I didn't lie to you on that issue, you know that. The opportunity is still there, let's do it now, I am available [again, I was smiling].

Because I was taking a long and demanding road, I had picked my backpack carefully after long research. I couldn't find a proper one in Turkey, so I called Zülküf in Berlin, gave him the number of the store that carried the backpack I wanted, and asked him to get it for me. But the bag

was out of stock there too; they needed to order it. It was going to take way too long to get that bag in Turkey.

I called my brother in America and gave him the address of the closest store, and He bought the bag. He was going to ship it to me, but the shipping would have cost 200 dollars. He told me that there was no need to pay that much because his wife, Mukadder, would be in Istanbul within 10 days and she could bring it. I said ok.

They bought the ticket but the date was uncertain. When it became clear that they wouldn't be able to come to Istanbul early due to the intensity, I requested them to ship the bag; I was short on time, so I was going to endure the cost. Later, Mukadder told me that a friend of her was coming to Istanbul and maybe she could bring the bag with her. Her friend agreed to bring the bag, and three days before I left, I got it.

My intention was to do an internship by camping for two days over a weekend. I was thinking of going with my brother-in-law, but it hadn' been confirmed. He learned that I had bought the bag for this journey two days before I hit the road,so he was teasing. We had never gone camping, but we already had a camping joke.

The news agency recorded videos at our farmhouse, my factory, and my wife's pharmacy. They came to see me around 3 pm and conducted a short interview in which I explained the aim of my journey. They also recorded me while I was on the road. I realized that I was inexperienced in expressing myself in front of the camera and I couldn't explain myself properly.

We didn't know how to give a form to the things inside us. I tried to explain, but I realized that I was falling short. I had to be prepared from then on.

Towards the ending of our shooting, Mr. Aşkın, a workmate of Kerem, took a few photos of me. When the dust settled, my brother-in-law, Mr.



Mustafa, Aşkın, and I went to a tea garden and chatted about the purpose of my journey and why I had hit the road.

### **9<sup>th</sup> Day- The State of Selfishness**

In the morning after a shower, I washed my dirty clothes, shaved, finished my job, wrote in my diary, and then went out.

As the time for prayer approached, I went to Sultan III Mustafa Mosque on Kadıköy Rıhtım Main Street. The weather was cloudy, and it was about to rain. The call to prayer was close. I was in the second row upstairs. At the front, there were places that seemed like balconies where four or five people could fit. One of the staff, observing the weather, asked if we could fill empty places and move as close to each other as possible. Everyone was content in their spots and attempted to protect them as if they planned to stay all day; except for a few people, no one moved. I stood up and tried to move to a place in a front balcony.

One of the men praying leaned against the wall of the balcony on his left leg while his right foot was sloping; he was taking up two people's places. In order not to offend him, I asked men who were near him if we could move closer because there were people outside. I thought that he might understand and open some space, but he didn't move even a little bit. Men close to him looked at me and then turned their faces as though nothing had happened, and they didn't move either. Because I was left in the middle of two rows, I sat and waited for the call to prayer. After the call, we stood, and I could enter the row; this left some space for a few more people.

I wasn't sure that a man who didn't open space for his brothers who had come together for the Friday prayer in the rain was aware of the meaning of community and praying in group. If there weren't any of your brothers to form a row, what was the difference between spreading or squashing?  
**Gosh!** Forming a row of "us" without leaving behind the "me."

After the Friday prayer, I called Kerem, and we met as we had planned at the previous day's meeting, Kerem, Ufuk, and I. They then introduced me to Mr. M. Nedim Bey, and we talked about the walk and what could be done to make the trip more efficient and productive. We talked for a long time about how we could reach the goal by thinking professionally and acting wisely and how not to make things worse. We also discussed ways to stir public opinion and contribute to fighting this issue. We agreed to meet again the following Monday and then left.

When I had left, I didn't take a change of clothes. I needed a white t-shirt and summer pants to wear at night and wherever I stayed, so I traveled to the market in Kadıköy and bought suitable pants and a white t-shirt.

### **10th Day: Hospitality of the Consul**

I had planned to complete my work in three or four days and then to continue my walk but I couldn't finish in that time; I would have to stay in Kadıköy for five or six days to correct the deficiencies before I continued. In the meantime, I would try to organize the necessary meetings in İstanbul.

I bought a digital tape recorder with 30-hour recording capacity in order to record some of my meetings as well as things that I encountered in order to create an archive. This device had good features and quality recording. I tried very hard to download the audio files into my computer but I couldn't; I did all downloads, looked up the instruction manual, and did everything again and again, but it was all in vain. Then I went to the electronic device market and visited four or five shops, but none could solve the problem.

We had decided to meet the consul of Sudan earlier, but because they had delayed, the meeting would be that day, at 18:30 in Eminönü. Therefore, I had time, so I went to Sirkeci, where I had bought the recording device at 17:00. I explained the problem to the shop, but they couldn't solve it; a

staff person sent me to another electronic shop upstairs with one of his employees.

I opened the laptop and recheck the connections. After a few tries, the employee said that it would be better if we could try it with another battery because mine was nearly burned out. We immediately tried another battery and got the message "new equipment was found," but we it did the USB download and then, we transferred the audio files. To my surprise, all the problems were related to my computer's from battery; its power had fallen to 20%-25% and it hadn't been working because it didn't have enough power. This sounded interesting to me because it was the first time I had encountered such a problem.

After solving this problem, I went to the tea garden facing the sea from a high point on the slopes of Topkapı Palace and Gühane's Sarayburnu side to meet Mr. Consul. I sat in a corner and waited, and after a while, Burhan came. He said that the consul staff had come and were sitting nearby, and he went to find them. Soon he came back after finding them, so we went over to them; we all greeted each other and introduced ourselves.

I narrated my goal and plans for my walk. Burhan felt comfortable after he had listened to us and understood our aims. He said that my explanations were completely different from what he had been told. He also added that he was of the same mind and was ready to give all the support he could. He told us that he had worked for a humanitarian relief organization for three years and thus he had more reasons to help and support us.

"We believed that you only emphasized the starvation and poverty in Sudan and therefore you planned to come to our country as a convoy with a huge crowd to carry food."

We responded that we had thought that would be difficult because of bureaucratic barriers and the size of such a convoy. We also expressed our anxieties about presenting his country as having a poverty problem and

tarnishing his country's image; specifically, we had thought that he might not wish to help after listening to us, and we assured him that we had no such intentions. Meanwhile, first Mr. Fikri and then Mr. Zeki came. Mr. Consul brought a Sudanese chemist who had graduated from Yıldız Technical University as an interpreter. We wanted from Mr. Consul some supporting documents, pictures, and information. He told us that he would try to have them ready by Monday. To exchange opinions and cooperation, we gave each other our cell and home phone numbers and e-mail addresses, and he gave us some advice. He told us that I would do better if I obtained visas from the countries I would pass through, stating that six-month or one-year visas could be acquired with appropriate references and that I needed to try this, and he promised to do whatever he could on this matter if we needed help. For us and our aims, it was beneficial to meet Mr. Consul.

Around 20:00 we said goodbye and left, and I was meeting my wife and children, so I called her. She said that she had just taken the Kadıköy ferry after leaving her car in the Eminönü car park. I told her that I was in Gülhane and would take the ferry in a little while and she should wait for me at the exit from the port side.

I was curious about my children's reaction. The ferry landed, I moved to the port, and they were waiting at the opposite side. As they saw me, they ran and hugged me, and they were quite calm and happy, not anxious or worried. They were chirping rapidly, and I was trying to listen and answer both their questions at the same time. My wife was a little tired. She hadn't been sleeping in the last few days of her workload and preparations.

We went to dinner, and children were curious about my walk and experiences. Before I was able to tell them a little bit about my trip, I saw that they had more things to talk about, such as their school reports, the end of school, the garden, what they had made and would make, etc. Then my wife and I talked about problems regarding our home and business. She

expressed that the day before, she had mentioned to her mother and father the details about my walk and that their non-negative stance had puzzled her. She was happy and relaxed by their cold-blooded attitude. She had been uneasy and uncomfortable because she had worried that they would worry. She told them in detail the house situation and the extra measures we had taken, and they were relieved.

On the morning that I started my walk, I had called my in-laws. They were living in Greece in the Gümülcine district and thus would not be able to come instantly if something bad happened. Because of the distance, their worries were much greater. My mother-in-law was on the phone, and my father-in-law, a teacher, was at work. I told her that I was to begin a journey that would take at least three or four months, adding that this had nothing to do with my business but was about a humanitarian charity. I explained that there was no need to be anxious about her daughter and grandchildren and that I had taken necessary measures.

My mother-in-law said, "Good luck, all the best!," but I couldn't tell the whole story without hiding anything. We planned to tell them things gradually so they could get accustomed to the idea because otherwise they would have been very uneasy. Because of this, my wife and I had some anxieties, so my wife told them about the walk in detail the day before and was relaxed when she saw no panic or worry in them. Meanwhile, I was spending that night with children, so I left my hotel and found a more suitable one.

### **11th day: Reminding of Patience.**

After we had our breakfast with the children, we prepared our articles and left the hotel. I moved to a more modest hotel next to that. We walked and chatted in the market and at the seaside. Around 12:00, I bid them farewell in front of the Eminönü Ferry.

After a while, Yalçın, one of our crew, called. The crew came to visit me with 12 or 13 people, and we met at a tea garden on the sea. Along with Yalçın, there were Yusuf, Metin, Zeki, Cemal, Süleyman, İhsan, Mustafa, my cousin Abdürrezzak, and a few more people.

I told them some of the events that had caused me to begin my walk. I tried to explain myself in answer to their questions, and they were a little surprised when they understood that I wasn't a daydreamer. I told them that they had to be more realistic and evaluate based on the principles of reason and logic, and I also added that my work was done in this framework.

I set forth that moral feelings were personal but they weren't the same as action and that I was aiming to plan the whole walk wisely and rationally. I wanted them to see me as a human, without any heterodox claims such as being a prophet or Mahdi, feeling in his heart oppression, pain, poverty, and misery and struggling to reduce these circumstances. I told them that with my walk, maybe I would awaken some hearts or maybe I would return home empty-handed.

After a short while, the firm's adviser, Mr. Metin, came. We talked about the walk and business issues and had our photos taken. Meanwhile, my business partner and dealer went to Ukraine. Soon, our staff bid farewell and left.

Mr. Metin, my partners Akif, and Mr. Ercan stayed. We discussed again in detail the capacity and manufacturing problems of a new formation. After 2–3 hours of negotiations, we agreed on a certain framework. We determined urgent investments and a settlement plan. We would work on this and meet again to evaluate, and at the next meeting, we would reevaluate and either continue or make changes.

In the evening, when it was almost dark, my partner left and I stayed with Mr. Metin. We spoke of the past and about the changes in recent months,

particularly how the distress, ordeal, and torment of not being understood had completely shifted to another direction in the last two months, replaced with optimism, hope, and appreciation. We shared our happiness about realizing our belief in the power of patience and determination and the positive effects that would be reflected one day.

It got dark, and people were in a hurry, running to ferries, minibuses, and autobuses; we were moving and gliding in a flood of people. Mr. Metin didn't want to take a ferry; he wanted to take a minibus to Üsküdar and then take a small ferry to Beşiktaş. He liked the absence of nostalgia, and thus, we changed direction and I bid farewell to him when he got on the minibus.

### **12<sup>th</sup> day: Mark time!**

When I met with my partner, he told me that the matter of bringing another partner into the firm had become clearer and that preparations had started. He made a comical offer that was difficult to accept. I asked him questions but didn't receive satisfactory answers, so I told him that I would think about the matter and give him my answer.

Although I had been thinking about this since the day before, I wasn't able to find acceptable logic in my partner's proposal. That day, he called me again and wanted to know my decision so he could prepare the transfer of shares. I told him that I hadn't decided yet because I was still evaluating the issue and it made me anxious. I had to seek someone's counsel at the first opportunity and provide my decision.

It was Monday, the 10<sup>th</sup> day since I had started the walk, and I was still in İstanbul. Overhauling and implementing the plan and program took longer than I had expected. In the evening, I wanted to meet with Kerem in order to make the final decision and speak about implementations, and Kerem and Ufuk came in the evening. After we sat together for some time, we moved on to a tea garden. Kerem took the responsibility of managing media and communication about the walk; from the very beginning, he had been eager

to collect the results of the walk. He was struggling to determine the right things for the walk and pegging away at the work.

Except a walk wouldn't be enough; there needed to be content; we had to implement a more effective and detailed media plan, including informing the media and various associations, foundations, and charity organizations to ensure that the aim of the walk was shared. Our amateur initiative that we had planned at the beginning hadn't produced any results, and Kerem was saying, "We have to do this job professionally with an amateur spirit."

"Mark time! Lockstep march!" I hadn't heard this command for many years, but I had to do the marching, have a lockstep plan, and move forward from mark time!

After a long discussion, we arrived at these decisions:

1. I would hire a vehicle and driver.
2. I would form a production team and ensure that they would be with me during my entire travels. The team would consist of one cameraman and a reporter; they would record all the processes of the walk and make the newsworthy events news before they pass it to the new agency.
3. We would form a logistics team in İstanbul that would constantly disclose news to and communicate with the press.

We decided to implement this plan. The next day, Kerem would arrange a meeting with the agency regarding hiring a production team or using people from the agency; if he achieved no results, he would travel to other agencies. We were also going to meet with one or two guys for the logistic support team, and I would look for a driver.

I had to make preparations because wages, accommodations, and other costs for these teams would require a serious budget. For this reason,



beginning the next day I would determine how steps to find the required financing after I checked up my own financial potential.

### **13th day: Which one?**

It was a quiet day, and I was moving without any hurry. I lacked some clothes, so I bought them: white socks, underwear, white sport pants, and a rain coat.

I was still waiting to implement the agreed-upon plan. Toward evening, I would meet with Kerem and we would meet the agency. My friends and acquaintances were calling; my solitary walk worried them. Each time, I tried to explain that I hadn't been and wouldn't be alone, I had to be alone as a matter of course, and that I appeared to be alone because the walk was extraordinary in manner and style. Chasing an ideal and working for its sake couldn't be described; I didn't know how to explain it.

It was like being a miner who found a gold mine, dug continuously, brought home what he had found, and shared with his loved ones versus a miner who turned back after finding nothing, although it wasn't exactly like this because my journey contained a bit of selfishness and ambition.

Was it like running from all loved ones to a more loved one? Yes! It was this. No, it probably wasn't this because leaving your loved ones suggests leaving them in the lurch, and I had not done that. Or was it leaving all your loved ones temporarily to put out a fire in your neighbor's house? Yes this was it, but also not exactly. The questions and comparisons that came to me weren't completely appropriate to the situation. Maybe all of them and maybe more, but which one?

### **Who is alone?**

Who says one alone cannot set off?

Is there anyone who is unguarded on the Earth?

The ones walking with me write without any errors,

Like the day I was born, alone and defenseless.

Who says one alone cannot set off?

Everyone works for himself, talks thoughtlessly.

Don't need a man's need, whiffles as though he were reckless,

Like the day I was born, alone and defenseless.

Who says one alone cannot set off?

Are we all together in this always unstable life?

Without suffering, one cannot become innocent,

Like the day I was born, alone and defenseless.

Alone,

Am I alone, or are ants helpless?

I am traveling recklessly like a bee,

In the endless ocean, shouting without any instrument,

Indeed, massive crowds are alone...

Due to a misunderstanding, our meeting with the news agency was delayed until the next day. Meanwhile, we did the necessary new arrangements, classifications, and sorting for the website. We sent text that would be translated and prepared for missing materials.

## **14<sup>th</sup> day- Not all job can be done by yourself: A life lesson.**

Around 11:00, Mr. Metin called, and we spoke about the machines that would be assembled in our factory. I called the manufacturer that would produce one and asked if I could see the machine if they had produced a similar version and assembled somewhere. He said to me that there was one at a firm located in Gebze-Dilovası and we could see it there. He gave me names and phone numbers of men in charge, and I tried to make an appointment for Mr. Metin and me to see the machine. I gave them the name of the machine manufacturer and told them that I was calling upon his request. I introduced myself and my firm, I gave my number, and I asked for their reply. Before long, the company said that they could not give permission because of the firm's privacy policy. After thanking them, we decided to search for another solution.

In the afternoon, my wife's sister's husband, Enver, called and said that he was in Kadıköy. I told him where I was, and he came. After we sat for some while, I told him I was hungry; I hadn't even had breakfast. I proposed to him that we have a snack, so we ate chicken doner sandwiches and drank ayran. After drinking a glass of tea on the seaside, I asked for his permission to leave in order to make my appointment with the agency. I took the Beşiktaş ferry and continued to Mecidiyeköy, and Kerem and I went to the Agency. We explained to them our thoughts and what we planned to do, and we listened to their ideas and advice. After listening to us, the man we spoke with requested two or three days to deliberate and said he would give us a positive or negative answer and evaluate what he could do in terms of media support.

We completed our meeting and then left the building. At the moment that we were getting into the car, Kerem approached a security guard he had known before. He described the security guard as a sincere, hearty, and honorable person. The man was on crutches, and Kerem went to him when he saw that. The guard said, "I fell, and when I fell, there occurred a

cracking in my sole. It was encased in plaster, it will be ok soon, Allah willing!”

Then he tried to get into his car while another security guard and a staff person were telling him he shouldn't be driving. They said that the staff person was a driver and could go with him. I was watching from a distance because I didn't know him. Kerem told everyone that that was not necessary because he had his car and could take the guard anywhere he needed to go. The man explained:

- I am going to airport; I have to take an entrusted medicine from a man coming from Erzurum, and I give it to an older and beloved man; he is waiting for me right now.
- My brother, let's go with my car and turn back. You won't stay there for a long time, will you?
- Thank you Kerem. I can go by myself.

And under our surprised looks, he got into the car as we were watching him like robots. He left his crutches to one side and started the car, which was parked facing the road. Because he was going to approach the road vertically, he had to turn the wheel completely to the left. We were all shocked and started to watch as though it were a film.

At the moment that he was starting the car, a car passed by the road whose driver had stepped on the gas and accelerated. When the security guard noticed the car in front of him, he tried to put on the brakes but due to his injury, he hit the gas instead. I jumped, supposing that he was going to crash into the other vehicle's driver. Thank Allah that the vehicle was moving quickly so the guard only hit its bumper. After glancing off the car, the guard crashed into to the office block's entrance, which had iron columns and a framework.

We ran over immediately, but he was okay, although the front of the car was crushed up to the engine. He got out with his crutches and was shocked and ashamed. The vehicle belonged to the manager of the firm he worked for, and for this reason he was more miserable and hurt; he also had nothing to say. He was embarrassed and merely wanted to get away as soon as possible. He requested that the other security guard tow away the car, and then he got into Kerem's car and we went to the airport. We were unsuccessful at comforting him as he said he had not wanted to be a burden to anyone and had forced himself to drive in order to not cause anyone trouble. He had been confident in part because he had been healthy until that incident. His injury shouldn't have kept him from doing his job, and moreover, there was someone waiting for him at the airport. He had finished thousands of tasks up to that day, and he had thought that he could also do this, but it happened differently...

### **15–24<sup>th</sup> day: The end of the road**

I was uneasy for days. I was thinking continuously about what advantages my partner's offer had that I couldn't understand. For three days, I sought some benefit, assuming that my partner already saw it and considered that his offer was beneficial to both of us. When he answered my questions, I saw an opposite picture, and I could in no way decide.

As I floundered in this mood, Thank Allah, Mr. Metin came to meet me that day. He, too, became suspicious about everything he had heard and observed. When he introduced the topic himself, I told him that I hadn't transferred my shares or even made a decision about it because it was impossible to accept such a situation. When I asked for his thoughts about the offer, Mr. Metin said:

- You are right; this offer is so foolish. Just don't do anything wrong. I presumed that you had signed the papers and completed the job. If you had done something like that, I would have quietly wished you good luck.

When someone else confirmed the offer's foolishness, I relaxed and made my decision; I had been looking uselessly for any logic in this offer for three days. After Mr. Metin left, I called my partner. When we met the next day, I said that I would not accept this offer. He refused to acknowledge my decision; he said that the decision had been made and it was too late to turn back now. Despite my objections, he insisted that it wouldn't be possible to back out, and he wanted me to transfer 40% of my 50% shares in the company free of charge. Half the transfer price would be collected in the short term and the rest in two years, and moreover, the total of this sum would be added to the firm's capital. I wouldn't earn even a cent from this sale.

On the one hand, I was making preparations to continue my walk, and on the other hand, I was trying to fix these business matters, which had become complicated. When I understood that I couldn't dissuade my partner, I suggested that he consult one of his merchant relatives and ask for the person's opinion. If the person he spoke to found the offer reasonable, I would accept it. I thought I would dissuade him with this, but he accepted, and we held a meeting regarding the same.

The Sultan told my partner that the offer was unacceptable and, in fact, nonsense. Although he hesitated for some time after this meeting, he didn't relent. In response, I offered him all my shares at a low price to be paid in two years, and he didn't accept this either. When he refused this offer as well, I offered all my shares at their value to people who had wanted to be partners in our firm. They told me that if they paid this capital to me, they would lose the capital they needed to run the business, and thus, they declined my proposal. No matter what I offered, they refused to pay me any price.

Even though I hadn't transferred my shares, the would-be partners started to manage the firm *de facto*. They were establishing new teams, canceling some of our deals, and declaring everywhere that they had bought the firm.

They bought a fleet of 50 vehicles for restructuring and marketing and prepared for a general meeting with the dealers to introduce the new era.

Even though I hadn't actually transferred my shares, they were acting as they wanted because of my physical absence from the firm. Before I started my walk, I authorized my partner to act as the general manager, which allowed him to make decisions.

My financial possibilities for realizing my walk and my subsequent goals were about to slip through my fingers. I couldn't undo anything I had done. If I complied with what was happening and continued my walk, I would anyway have to abandon it and turn back halfway due to a lack of finance.

Media and other preparations had reached a certain stage for the walk, and I was very close to continuing it at anytime. In such a situation, I couldn't make a final attempt at continuing my walk or end it completely. I was torn between my job and my ideals. I could neither turn back nor continue my walk.

I hadn't set off to turn back, and I wasn't thinking about turning back, but this unexpected situation had put me in a difficult position. I had been planning to solve this problem and then continue my walk before I had left İstanbul, at least, but I couldn't settle the matter even though I had been struggling for days.

Mr. Metin and Mr. Engin brought forward a proposal:

- Unless you turn back and intervene in the case, this matter can't be settled. You have to intervene as the owner.
- I am aware of this, but because I delegated my authority to my partner, he has a free hand. I have made my decision and don't intend to reverse it. I will stay here for some time and try to find a solution. I am familiar with numerous lawyers, and I hope to find a way out after I consult them.

- It will be very difficult for you to resolve this problem by legal means. By that time, the damage will be done. We are not saying that you should not finish the walk. Come back temporarily, for one week at the most. Be at the company, set things right, and then continue your walk.

Although I refused their offer initially and told them that I wasn't thinking of turning back now, when I evaluated the situation and my experiences in the last ten days, I was convinced that this was the most reasonable solution.

Yes! Turning back and setting things right was the most reasonable way. I could continue my walk easily after seven to ten days and then take radical measures to make sure nothing similar happened again. When I had made up my mind, I called them and informed them that I had decided to turn back for a short time.

### **25<sup>th</sup> day: The last resort**

In the early hours on 27 June, a Monday, I went to the factory without telling anyone, neither my partner nor my staff or my family; no one could have taken any precautions because no one had estimated my return. I immediately took the firm's documents from the accounting department and regained my general manager authority when my partner came in.

Once I was officially the general manager of the company again, I met the partner candidates, showed them the documents, and told them that I had the managing authority henceforth. I put forth that their contracts had been abolished and they had to look for another option.

### **CHAIN-BREAKING**

After I had performed the Friday prayer, I wore the ihram in the central courtyard, displayed the [zurasudan.com](http://zurasudan.com) flag on my backpack and set off with my home on my back. Due to a calculation error I had to turn back



after 24 days—while I was calculating for my project, I had forgotten a big calculation. A problem had occurred that I couldn't resolve via telephone from such a distance. The bitter experiences that had happened had betrayed my trust in my partner. During three months after my arrival, I tried to put these things in order. I was thinking of never leaving the company I had founded with great efforts. I loved my work, which I had brought up as a child.

I tried some solutions, but I saw the problems that could arise when I appointed a man I trusted. I had to find a solution, a resort. I had turned back from my journey, one that I had planned for months, to save my job and yet I had been trapped in this matter for months.

I had to be untethered. At this moment, I finally saw the reality that I had avoided facing for some time. I couldn't sacrifice my job. I couldn't renounce it. In fact, I could remember my prayers to be freed from my ego, my search for a maize kernel, the day I had planned to emigrate as clearly as if they were yesterday. Myself or my intention—it was a hard showdown.

I thought about many role models who had struggled for their beliefs and ideals—people who had pioneered change and transformation and chosen a path that was different from others' while accepting in advance that it would be hard and painful. While I was thinking about these things, I realized that *de facto* order and rules were regulating my actions. I had to envisage the cost of what I would have to give up. I had to reach the end.

Deciding was the hardest part of all—the moment of decision, beginning with pain and convulsion, continuing with confusion and amazement, then finally finishing with the joy of freedom, the moment when barriers you had exaggerated as mountains turned out to be small hills, the moment that the self-made greatness against which we had cringed with embarrassment had broken into pieces. From then on, I was ready to sacrifice my job. I hadn't forgotten my word, decision, or oath; I hadn't betrayed myself. I broke the chains of selfishness and desire, and in the end, I proceeded with

my emigration, even for a short distance. This feeling motivated me and energized me so greatly that I was ready to run.

### 3- Travels of Search

Don't cry for Lobengula, today you are Lobengula!

And Rhodes is still alive for you!

Proverb

#### **Toward Sudan**

I was finally ready in August 2006 after an extraordinarily long break and after completing the company's transfer. During this time, I had the opportunity to see the missing and unreal parts of my walk.

It was unwise to attempt to reach my goal without considering the possibilities and uncertainties. I was determined to begin from South Sudan and Darfur. If I couldn't find what I was looking for, which I thought to be an unlikely scenario, I decided to continue my search in other African countries.

I shared my intention with my friend Zülkif who lived in Germany and who had previously traveled to Sudan for some charity work with a committee, and I found myself in the office of Mr. Cemil, a lawyer in Khartoum.

Mr. Cemil was from Turkey and he sincerely answered our questions. When we told him that we wanted to travel to Darfur or South Sudan, he told us that our visa was only valid in Khartoum, not the entire country.

He showed us that at the time, a civil war and related crises were ongoing in that region and now we would have to obtain a visa-like document to travel there. Furthermore, to obtain that document, we needed to provide a valid reason acceptable under Sudan law.

In other words, we were facing "documental" torture; we would have to declare the duration of our stay and our travel route and fill out application forms at each stop. In addition, Mr. Cemil added that even if we could procure all the relevant documents, it wasn't necessary that we would obtain the required permissions.

He stated that because of the reduced security in South Sudan and Darfur, for both foreigners and locals, traveling to the region through a human aid organization would ease both the permission procedures and transportation.

Mehmet joined Mr. Cemil and spoke about how the country operated. They explained that traveling to that region for a personal reason would be futile, but I did not intend to give up. No one in Khartoum could help us solve our problem in a short time through aid organizations.

We wanted our friends to help us obtain permission to enter either South Sudan or Darfur, which was easier of the two to enter. On Monday, the week's first workday, we decided to begin the official procedures and, instead of waiting around, go to Ethiopia.

### Plans and Destiny

Ethiopia is translated as the land of the yellow-faced people in the country's official language, Amharic. The airport where we landed was larger, cleaner, and qualitatively better than the one in Khartoum.

The passengers' system, guidance, and diversity denoted its international qualification. Foreigners could apply for the entrance visa at the airport, and therefore our entrance and travel were easy and problem-free. In contrast to most African countries, Ethiopia's bureaucratic procedures were more regular and serious, and their clarity and related rules enhanced their flow.

At the time, Ethiopia was among the world's poorest countries, and 1 dollar was equal to 8.7 Birr. In Addis Ababa, the capital, poverty was clearly visible and dominant nearly everywhere. Pollution was also high; in places with high traffic density, the exhaust fumes strained our eyes and lungs. We were told that the country was home to 80 million people: 50–55% Muslims, 25–30% Christians, and 10–15% pagans; according to other sources, however, there were 50–55% Christians, 25–30% Muslims, and 10–15% pagans. I couldn't confirm either of the sources.

A worker's salary was 300–1500 Birr, and a public servant's salary was 500–1500 Birr—of course, these salaries were for people who could even find a job! Only educated or skilled people, or those with a craft could find a job; most people who didn't have such merits earned 2–3 Birr.

Addis Ababa was formerly called Jilli ("the city of the thermal spring"). The new name refers to the city's greenery and beauty: Addis ("new") and Ababa ("flower"). It was an appropriate name for the city, but one could scarcely see the green beauty due to the irregular urbanization and poverty.

The new name was also suitable because the temperature never exceeded 30 degrees and was always comfortable. In contrast to Africa's heat and drought, one could survive in Ethiopia without a stove or air conditioner.

Ethiopia has an ancient civilization. It was ruled by different kingdoms and was under a communist regime for 37 years. It has been a federal and democratic republic since the 1991 revolution. It is the only country that never fought a war of independence; it has always been independent and was never colonized.

In Turkish, Ethiopia is our "Habeşistan," the country of our first muezzin: Bilal-i Habeşi. It is also the country of coffee, spread to the world from the Kaffa region. I learned that the coffee we drank in various forms today had, for 300 years, been prepared in Ethiopia by boiling the green beans; later, people roasted, floured, and boiled the beans. A Sufi order in Yemen started this method in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and it is believed to have passed from there to Aden, Cairo, and Mecca. Through this method, coffee spread rapidly to the Arabian Peninsula.

Coffee reached Istanbul under Yavuz Sultan Selim's reign; the governor of Yemen, Özdemir Pasha, was a coffee lover, and he brought it to the capital. Eventually, the Ottomans came to like coffee very much, and they started a wave that would spread coffee around the world by opening many coffee shops.

Ethiopia retained its ancient character, which is possibly why they still use the Alexandrian calendar, which is seven years behind the rest of the world; this calendar has 13 months, and the last month is a festival month.

In addition to the calendar, the time zone is also different. All around the world, 12:00 am is accepted as midnight, whereas in Ethiopia, sunrise begins the day. That is, where most of us consider 06:00 am to be morning, the Ethiopians consider it to be 01:00 am because they count time from sunrise; the Ethiopians believe that the rest of the world starts its day six hours late.

A new experience that added to my days in Ethiopia was the sound coming from the loudspeakers around 03:30 am every night. We were surprised to learn that there was a church behind our hotel and that they were praying at night. Night prayer and church... we were bound to be surprised. We believed that night prayer only existed in our religion. When we asked about the nature of the practice, the answer we got was even more surprising: "We lost our world. We don't want to lose the afterlife!"

My search continued as I did not want to lose. I was traveling in the areas surrounding Addis Ababa with dense poor populations and talking with the local people; by traveling a 100 kilometers outside the capital, I was experiencing the general life of the people and continuing my search. Ethiopia had never seen a civil war or its related problems. Yes, there

was hard poverty, but the shadow of the commando helicopter didn't darken this place. The people I was looking for, who were waiting for me, weren't here. I had to continue.

After two hours in the flight, we returned to Khartoum, and we were unprepared for the surprise that awaited us at the passport check. The official who took Zülkif's passport said to us,-

- Wait in that corner, you can't pass.

I had a confusing conversation with the official because he couldn't speak Arabic:

- I am his friend, we are together. What is the problem?
- You give me your passport, too.
- I gave my passport.

After he examined our visas, he said,

- You can't enter with this visa. Wait here. After everyone goes, I will explain.

We waited till everyone had left, and the officer returned to us on finishing his work:

- You obtained a visa to enter Sudan. You entered Sudan and then you went to Ethiopia. Your visa is a single-entry visa, so you can't enter with this visa again. You have to obtain another one.
- But our visa is valid until a certain time, so it should still be valid, right?
- No! This visa is single entry only. You can't enter without a new one.
- Ok, alright. How can we get another visa from here?
- You can return to Ethiopia and get a new visa. Then you may come here again.
- Let us call our friends in Khartoum.

But this didn't work; we became living heroes of a joke. It was expected that a country would have rules and a security sensibility and might even distrust foreigners. It was understandable that they would worry about the presence of people belonging to different cultures, speaking different languages, and believing different values in their country, but all of these things had limitations; what we experienced that day, however, was incredible. The mentality that was protecting the country from so-called outsiders was permanently damaging it from within.

Accompanied by the airport police, we were forced to return to the airplane. This was the first time in my life that I experienced such a thing. Neither of us knew what to do; we could hardly think of what to ask the hostess after we had boarded the plane. We had this conversation:

- Our airplane will go to Cairo and then pass to Addis Ababa. You are going to get off the plane there and go to the Sudan Consulate to get a visa.
- Can't we get it in Cairo?

- No. You can't get off the plane in Cairo because you don't have a visa for Egypt. You will get it in Addis Ababa.

The desperation of being in a joke was continuing. We went to Cairo, and then to Addis Ababa. We had to wait for hours at the airport at a cost of \$3500. We decided to wait till morning; first thing, I called the Turkish embassy, and Zülkif contacted the German embassy, and we would make a decision with their guidance. With the assistance of the embassies, the costs of our vain air flights would be sufficient except for the penalty we paid at the airport. The price of a simple visa problem had cost us an extra \$2488, although we were thankful that we evaded paying \$1760.

During our time in Ethiopia, we couldn't gather any information in Khartoum about South Sudan or Darfur. We were locked into our documental torture and stranded again. In order not to waste this time, we traveled the regions of poor and immigrant populations around Khartoum and in residential areas called Mandela and Mayo. We couldn't create a foundation for our plans because of the crowd of orphans. My solution was to return again.

Two steps forward, one step back...

Just as not all who go are meant to go, not all who return were meant to return. When I stepped back, I went forward more powerfully. On my first return, I had resolved half of my migration, and I had the idea that this time, it would end the same way. With all my strength, I called aid organizations and reached out to people. Mr. Fikri at Al Jazeera gave me the opportunity to reach to a man who had directly and indirectly served millions of people: Dr. Sumait of the Direct Aid Organization. I hadn't heard it before.

Dr. Sumait, married and the father of 5 children, was born in Kuwait in 1947. He studied medicine at Bagdad University and earned postgraduate degrees in medicine in America and Canada. He worked in English and Canadian hospitals between 1974 and 1980. The idea to meet him, the organization's head of and general secretary—who had devoted his life to struggling with the poverty and starvation in Africa since 1983—gave me hope.

I was looking forward to seeing Dr. Sumait, who had accepted our request to meet with aid organizations in this country. When we met, after he had talked about his experiences for a few days, I told him about my mission and my search for a qualified region. I indicated that my real will was to go to South Sudan or Darfur:

- Don't waste your energy by going to Sudan. There are a lot of countries in a tight spot; go and work there. Why are you insisting on Sudan?
- I am looking for wise regions that are needy and in a tight spot. I am guessing that this region is in South Sudan or Darfur. When I find this region, I am planning to give them support. For this reason, I want to go to Sudan.

I didn't speak of the zurasudan.

- We built orphanages, schools, and other sorts of buildings in Sudan, but after some time, we closed our office and suspended our activities. The only country we withdrew from was Sudan.

I was thunderstruck; I wasn't expecting such an answer. Why did an organization that worked all around Africa withdraw from Sudan? Dr. Sumait continued:

- In Africa, we are serving in more than 30 countries. Indeed, having problems and facing obstacles in such international operations is routine. Even though countries are trying to ease things, their very operations were difficult. For example, in Kenya, after the 9/11 attacks, all of our teams were deported. We overcame this through dense dialogues and efforts, but in Sudan, the situation has other dimensions. Let me explain with an example without much detail. In Sudan, the press is small, and people's purchasing power is low. There is a need of copies of the holy book, Quran. We can pass without paying customs duties even in countries that follow other religions and deliver the Quran, but in Sudan, we were unable to deliver copies because of the customs barrier. Even though the authorities said they would intervene, this turned out to be unrealistic when we observed the insistent and demanding behaviors of the customs officers. We encountered similar careless attitudes in the occupation of the orphanages and hospitals we had built. We couldn't empty these buildings that military powers had moved into because they needed them. Therefore, we understood that we wouldn't be able to work in Sudan.

I didn't have enough information and experience to say anything or comment on what I heard. My dreams collapsed at that moment. How would I realize my dreams, goals, plans, and migration? I writhed with these thoughts all night. I told him that if I couldn't go to Sudan, I wanted to travel to other countries in Africa for my aim if it was possible. When I expressed that I wanted to see the works of DirectAid in the field and benefit from the organization's experience, Dr. Sumait told me some countries and he would help once I decided which ones I wanted to see.

I decided before long: Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Soon afterward, Dr. Sumait communicated to me that he had informed the managers in the central offices of the countries I wanted to visit, that I could go whenever I wanted, and that these officers would support me with all sorts of guidance and logistics. Thanks to this support, I would be able to go to unfamiliar corners and people with different languages, geography, and cultures. With Dr. Sumait's support, I had the opportunity to gain experience in one year that otherwise would have taken 10 years.

I was on a long and narrow road. The voyage that I planned with the advice of Dr. Sumait was to travel through Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Burkina Faso, and Niger. At different times, I traveled and investigated all of these countries except Tanzania. In these countries, I faced many things, some sad and some happy. I desired with my heart and soul to write down my memories and experiences on this long and narrow road that I had been traveling for more than two years day and night.

As a result, in all of these countries, I had tried to travel to each corner, but I wasn't able to find a community that satisfied me; nowhere did I find any sign of the zurasudan. I didn't give in, though; in front of me, there were a lot of African countries to be traveled and investigated.

So I made another plan and determined new countries to visit; this time I intended to go first to Chad and then to Mali or Malawi. Chad was my first choice because it was one of the poorest countries in the world and at the same time it was in a region that was having a civil war. I started my preparations to go to Chad.

Friend of the world Dr. Sumait, who I had found late but lost early, had to retire from office due to health problems and diabetes in 2008; he died in August 2013. A big man of heart and of struggle, Sumait left behind thousands of works that Africans could use: sponsorships to 9500 orphans, 200 women's education centers, 860 schools, 4 universities, 9500 water wells, 102 Islamic education centers, and 5700 mosques. May Allah bless him.

The 2007 Feast of Sacrifice was approaching. While I was preparing for Chad, when I learned of a plan to deliver animals to be sacrificed to Sudan and of a team that would go to Darfur, I warned my friends again and again not to forget me. With my breezy questions, I was preparing as well as waiting for news. Following my experience of the documental torture, I continued my preparations instead of letting the events discourageme.

While I was preparing for Chad, I rejoiced over the news that I had been accepted to the team that would go to Darfur. I was walking on air! What I had wanted was a step closer. I didn't know what I would find, but being so close, I felt strongly that I would find something. And in ten days, we got our Sudan visas. At the end, we reached Khartoum on Thursday, December 20, 2007. We were a team of seven or eight people, some of whom were going to Darfur and the other to the east of Sudan, Kefele; they said there would be three or four people in our group. I was familiar only with Turan; it was the first time that I was meeting the rest of the group.

I am going to night, all the time...

After a few days, when we took off in an old Russian plane, I didn't believe that the transactions were completed because I was looking for flight tickets. Grounded at the Nyala Airport, we were welcomed and taken to their office by the Tadamun Aid Association. These friends, who would be very useful to us, were staff of a local aid organization that had been founded in Nyala and functioned as a partner for foreign aid organizations.

Nyala was the central province, with a population of approximately 1 million, half of whom were migrants; it was surrounded by camps formed by people escaping from civil war. There was no sign in Nyala that it was a big city. There were no hotels, so we would stay in the office, and there was no electricity; a major part of the city lived under this condition because the price of small generators was high. There was also no asphalt; we saw no asphalt roads



except for a defective one along a main street. For these and similar reasons, it wasn't easy for us to feel the air of a big city.

We met with the vice president of the Tadamun Association. He would guide us in our work during our time there, and we obtained information from him about the planning.

Almost all of the 2.5 million people living in the various camps of Darfur were in need. Because so many people in the towns and villages were very poor, distinguishing the truly needy and prioritizing families were difficult. Because the meat to be delivered was far from sufficient for the need, we focused on the people who were within short distances, and no one was able to go to more distant camps or residential areas.

Kelme and Drec were the biggest of all the camps that surrounded Nyala, and we were told that there were at least 100,000 migrants in each of them. These camps, with populations the size of cities', were in situations that no one could intervene in or control. The camps were mixed, and in them, there were people who had had serious traumas including losing relatives right in front of their eyes. Randomly entering these camps and acting without knowing the internal structures could have caused unexpected problems; thus it was necessary that we establish good relations and mutual trust with the responsible tribal chiefs and prominent people. Otherwise, entering these places and even trying to aid without minding the balances could have done more harm than good.

Before the Feast of Sacrifice, Tadamun officers had met with the responsible chiefs in camps and various residential areas and told them that we were going to deliver the meat of sacrificed animals to a certain number of families, so they should determine and list the poorest families. We learned that after we had received and reviewed the lists, the officers would specify which families would receive the meat; when it was ready, the officers would call on and deliver the meat to the chosen families, accompanied by the chief. When I saw that this operation that sounded easy was actually difficult to realize and that there were sometimes serious disputes and problems, I further understood the severity of the reality.

After the salat al eid, we started preparing to deliver the meat of the sacrificed animals. Because the officers in charge were taking care of the program and delivery, I didn't have much to do; I was helping only when needed. Some of the meat would be delivered to migrant camps and the other to some residential areas around Nyala. Because it was impossible to deliver it all in one day, they agreed on two to three days. Sacrificing the animals, choosing the families, and delivering the meat weren't easy jobs. Because sometimes five to ten cows were sacrificed in the same place, butchering, classifying, and delivering the meat took quite a long time.

We spent two to three days of the Feast of Sacrifice traveling to camps and residential areas around Nyala and delivering meat. During this time, I was observing the people and environments, talking with people about various incidents and happenings and trying to

understand Darfur. I met a lot of oppressed and needy people; hundreds of thousands of displaced people no longer had cities and towns to refer to.

Built on extensive and flat areas, these camps seemed to be open-air prisons for the people sentenced to live there rather than humane living places. Was it possible that these people, under the boiling sun, in very small and shabby tents, with no fields to cultivate and no work, could be hopeful of the future? Around half of the population of Darfur was living in these camps. Hundreds of thousands of people who didn't see any justice and mercy could be dragged easily into the whirlpool of grudges, hatred, and mercilessness. The people of Darfur were well-mannered, honorable, religious, honest, and hard-working. Because the civil war had trampled all over these values, it was clearly seen that there wasn't much left of the people's early, honorable lives. Struggling for their lives in shabby tents, these people were striving to survive with the limited aid granted to them after they had begged each month. Rebellious generations with no identity were being brought up deprived of education, nutrition, and incomes; in the near future, this generation would possibly shape Darfur's destiny.

Despite all the poverty and misery that I had seen in Nyala and the surrounding areas for four days, I wasn't sure whether these were the signs and criteria that I had been looking for. Among the countries that I had visited, the people of Darfur were the most oppressed and poorest. In other countries, people were poor because of economic injustice, administrative problems, and personal reasons. Yet in Darfur (and I guessed that conditions were similar in South Sudan), people were struggling to survive in their miserable camps while they were far from their towns and villages and mourning the losses of lives and property. In front of my eyes, there were sad and deprived people in need of support and aid.

In fact, I encountered many characteristics that met my criteria. Darfur had survived a civil war, and the impact and severity of this war was still continuing. There were thousands of wronged people whose villages and towns had been burned down. The fighting groups in the region were running wild and making unsettling actions when they had the chance; it was normal to see someone traveling around the city with a heavy gun in his hands. Oppressor and oppressed, attacker and attacked, everyone resided in the same region. People were desperate and under hard conditions. Their only and primary nutritional source was zura—that is, the people here were eating zura-maize.

Millions of Muslims... For a moment, I remembered that cycle... What I saw during all this time that I had endeavored to get out of the whirlpool by swimming against the current, was my brothers' situations, each one worse than the last. While they might have wrapped the world like the sun, millions had left their brothers to the bosom of thenight. I left them, too.

When viewed from this aspect, I had doubts that this was the place I was looking for. There had to be someone like a commando grasshopper, and these armed forces had been looting people's properties, oppressing and attacking them (zura). The community for which I had

been searching had to be people who, even though they were in hard and desperate conditions, did not submit against injustice and trusted no one except Allah. There was something missing here.

My hope of finding the community in South Sudan that I hadn't found in Darfur was gaining strength, and this hope, even if just a pinch, kept me out of panic and disappointment. In one part of my heart, I was interrogating myself; I couldn't accept leaving these people in such misery and oppression. Amid these ambivalent feelings, at the end I decided not to stay here. I had a goal, and without losing any time, I had to concentrate on this goal.

Let's remember Nasreddin Hodja, the humorist of my country...

One day, he loses his donkey and starts to look for it. Hill and dale, he searches for a long time. Villagers seeing him looking for his donkey cheerfully ask him:

- Is everything ok? What kind of a donkey search is this, with singing songs and joy?
- There, that is the last place. I hope to find it behind that hill. If I can't find my donkey there, this time, hear my cry!

I was in such a situation. South Sudan was my last place; if I could not find what I wanted there, then hear my cry!

Abdülmeçit and his friends were at an ebb and were quite tired; they were sleepless because they had been getting up early and going to sleep late in order to deliver meat for their partner aid organizations. It was so bad that Abdülmeçit's eyes would close when people talked to him for a long time, and he had difficulty understanding and responding.

We had to leave in two days. We had our return flight tickets, and we started to prepare for our return. I was sad and distressed because I would come up empty-handed. I tried to remain composed, but I was forcing myself to participate in conversations.

At the end, I found its trace.

In the evening, we ate and then drank our tea. At night, around 10:00 pm, I chatted with Turan and another friend. A tall and thin man came in, the president of the Tadamun Association, Emir Hüseyin, and we started to chat with him. We asked Emir, a cheerful and merry man, why we couldn't meet that day. He said:

- As an association, we are partners with aid organizations from Turkey, Germany, and Qatar. We distributed works in order to get the programs done. I couldn't find any chance to come here because I was responsible to other organizations. I finished the delivery today, and I am able to come now.

Thus, we met Emir. We talked about ourselves and Turkey, and he told us about his past and Darfur. He started to share memories about his visit to West Darfur in 2006 to open a water

well sponsored by a Qatari businessman. He was eulogizing and appreciating that region in such a way that I started necessarily to give more attention to his sentences:

- As a man who travels and knows Darfur extensively, this was the first time I encountered such a town. I was so impressed with the morality of that town that for the first time in my life, I wrote about my voyage and the virtues of this town.
- This region affected me so deeply that I couldn't forget that journey. As you know, a lot of people had to abandon their villages and towns because of the civil war. Yet in all of Darfur, that place is the only region that was populated by local African people and resisted and that wasn't burned down and didn't migrate! Moreover, this wasn't a small residential area; it was a populous town surrounded by a lot of villages.
- That place is called Umşalaya. Among others, Chieftain Sheikh Zekeriya was the leading person in maintaining this place of annihilation. With other tribal leaders and prominent people, Sheikh Zekeriya had rescued the town by applying an interesting strategy.
- These people are peace-loving and very nice. Everyone greets each other, whether they are men, women, or children. If you do a work, they bless you and approach with love and affection. They prefer not to return evil for evil but to approach kindly.
- It is very secure and peaceful; in fact, I can say that it is the securest and most peaceful place of Darfur. The Janjaweed (armed forces), who can't mingle freely with the crowd in other places, come to market, do shopping, and leave easily. No one attacks them. It is impossible to encounter such a scene in other places. In the territories of this region, unarmed people freely travel, collect firewood, and do agriculture.

As he talked, my surprise and excitement rose. His answers to my questions were making me more curious; what he told us was really remarkable to me.

When he partly told us of Sheikh Zekeriya's struggle strategy throughout the civil war, I felt deeply that I was moving away of the darkness of the whirlpool of uncertainty. I believed that this was it! If these things were true, maybe the Sheikh was the person I was looking for! Perhaps it was the time to fly to light. I was having difficulty quieting the storms of joy inside me. As I was listening and questioning my feelings, suddenly a suspicion appeared in my mind: what if what Emir told us about the region was a *mise en scene*? With this suspicion, a black shadow fell on all my merriment and excitement again. I was aware of the fact that in Africa, there were some people who were aiming to get financial support by inventing stories and scenarios to stir up compassion. I thought it was both normal and wise to consider this scenario. I asked Emir, "If these people are alive, why don't you help them?." The following conversation ensued:

- I went there last year upon a request and recommendation of one of my friends to dig a water well. When I saw the interesting characteristics of the town, for the first time in my life, I wrote an article about that town. For everyone who might find

ithelpful, I described the town and its characteristics. But until today, no one has shown interest or wanted to help that place.

- Well, if I want to help and see that place, is this possible?
- It is far away, in West Darfur. Because of the civil war, it will take 3–5 days to reach there. Roads are not secure. Especially for foreigners, they are more dangerous. Even though UN soldiers are moving in convoys, they are not safe, and sometimes they are attacked. Without any military protection, going to the region is impossible for foreigners. For this reason, your travel to there isn't so easy.

I asked him similar questions, and he answered them in the same way; he wasn't leaning toward that idea. I wanted to believe what he was saying, but I was unable to get clear answers. Because it was late, he asked for permission and left. I was alone with my dreams and suspicions.

It was one of my longest nights in Darfur; it was like the last night I stayed at Kaaba, but this time, I was in the sill of the door that I had been looking for since that day. I would step in and see what was inside or evaluate what I was being told about the dangers and warnings and return. In the morning, I made my decision. First, I wanted to read Emir's article about the town; if he gave it to me, I would have to consider the possibility that what he said was true. In that case, I would not return with my friends and would do whatever I needed to get a conclusive result about the town. I did not want to rule out that region unless I could see and hear for myself. If what he had said wasn't true, I would be satisfied and return to continue my search; if it was true, I would be one of the happiest people in the world.

In the morning, as soon as he came, I asked Emir to show me his article; he went to the computer and showed it to me. After I copied it to my pendrive, I read it and realized that it was identical to what he had said. I couldn't be indifferent to this mounting evidence of reality, and I conveyed my decision to my team:

- My friends, I have been searching for a community for a long time. For this purpose, I have been to six countries and searched for signs of these people. Until this day, I hadn't found a strong trace of them. I have a sincere hope of finding these people there after listening to Emir. Therefore, I can't come with you; it is impossible. I have to be certain about the truth behind what he said by traveling to that region.

I wasn't expecting them to understand, what was an absurd and insane decision from their perspective, because they were unaware of my past regarding this matter. Therefore, they didn't like what I said.

- We came here together, and we have to return together. Emir has already told you that traveling there wasn't easy. After our return, Emir will search. You make the necessary arrangements and return here.
- I don't know if I will have the opportunity to return here. To go back after coming here and getting this opportunity, listening to what he said seems impossible. Will I

be able to come back if I return now? No one can guarantee that. It is more reasonable for me to stay here and keep trying to enter through here.

- Your ticket will get canceled. The allowed time to stay here will lapse. You may encounter more serious problems. That is why, we want you to return with us.

Despite their persistence, I told them that I was determined to go and that I wouldn't return unless I had verified what Emir had said. They need not worry for me. I couldn't return when the invitation from the Zurasudans was so close.

Emir and Abdülmecit were sitting in the office next to us. I went to them:

- Emir Brother, I was impressed by the town you spoke about last night. I spoke with my friends, and I don't think I will return with them. I want to stay here and go to that town with you or with someone else and meet those people.

Both of them were surprised. They stood in wonder for some time and didn't know what to say. Emir said:

- If Allah allows, we will go at a more suitable time in the future. At the moment, it is very difficult.
- I know it won't be easy. However, I wanted you to know that I am ready for everything.
- Your permission to enter Darfur is limited. I think it will end in 2–3 days and it is difficult to extend it from here. Besides, your permission isn't suitable for entering West Darfur; it is only valid for Nyala and places around it. We need specific permission for West Darfur; it is even more difficult.
- I know. It is difficult but not impossible. We can at least try to obtain permission. I request you to do whatever you can, please. If I go, I may not get an opportunity to come back here.
- Even if we obtain permission, traveling there may be impossible. West Darfur isn't safe. It is especially dangerous for foreigners. Believe me, it is very risky for a foreigner to go there in the usual ways. Even UNAMID can only travel there in crowded convoys. If no foreigner can go there without armed protection, how can we take you there?
- I want to go, no matter how risky or difficult it is. What if I give up now and never get another opportunity to come here? I can't risk that. Let's do whatever we can and take all possible measures; if we are still unable to go or we encounter problems, I will bow to the inevitable. But I can't leave without even trying.

The next day was the day of our return, and Emir hoped that perhaps I would return as well. Therefore, without much persistence, he said, "Ok, we'll see. For tomorrow, Allah is great."

The next morning, my friends prepared to return and insisted again that we do so together. Again, I told them that I wouldn't return unless I had solved this and that I was sorry about it. All of them were sad because they were leaving me behind, and with these feelings, I bade them goodbye at the airport.

When I was alone with Emir and Abdülmecit, I told them:

- They left and I stayed back. There is only one way to escape from me: take me to West Darfur as soon as possible. The sooner you take me there, the sooner you can escape from me.

I said this with a smile, and they both smiled as well. They said, "If Allah allows it, we'll see."

They were surprised, unresponsive, and uneasy because this was the first time they had encountered something like this. Who knows what they were thinking about this extraordinary situation!

I felt no fear or worry, only the desire to go to that region and learn the reality of what Emir had told me before I did anything. I didn't care about anything else.

From the airport, they left me at Nyala's house. That day, Emir didn't pace around. The next day and for a few more days after that, he repeated the same things: the dangerous road to West Darfur; the impossibility of a foreigner traveling there on a touristic voyage; the inability to travel without a military convoy. He continued to give me reasons like these, and each time, I told him that I was ready for every danger; I just asked him to do whatever was needed. I even offered to hire a helicopter in an attempt to overcome the obstacles on the road or consider other suitable ways of traveling there. I was ready in both material and nonmaterial terms.

They thought that I would eventually give up, and therefore, they didn't rush to find solutions; to deter me, they continuously pointed out the difficulties. Finally, when they realized my persistence and resolution, my desire to go, they began to look for solutions.

To be able to travel to the region, it was first necessary for us to extend the permission for our stay in Darfur and acquire permission to enter West Darfur. Competent authorities didn't want to give me permission because they believed it unwise to travel there without a security convoy due to the dangerous roads; if anything happened to me, they would also be affected in some way. Both Emir and Abdülmecit requested the authorities and involved officials whom they were counting on as intermediaries in our acquiring the necessary permission; they provided references and guarantees about me. In the beginning, they had waited for me to give up and thus dragged their feet, but now, they tried hard to obtain a solution. Around a week later, Emir gave me the good news:

- Finally, we have obtained the entry permit for West Darfur. Our transactions and documents are completed. I will go with you, if Allah allows, and we can leave anytime you want.

I was rejoicing; I had not expected them to get a result so soon. I knew the bureaucratic difficulties encountered because I had been following the daily developments. Although it

was very difficult to persuade the authorities to do something they especially didn't want to, Emir and Abdülmecit didn't give up and took efforts to overcome the bureaucratic obstacles. I expressed my thanks to Emir for their persistence and efforts. I was curious about our route. Emir answered:

- Nowadays, the route is very dangerous, as you know. It seemed impossible to go in a private vehicle. We can't go in a military convoy, unfortunately. Under these circumstances, the best choice is traveling by bus. For me, there is no problem; we can travel everywhere. But because you are a foreigner, we may face some difficulty. It'll be better if we go to West Darfur by bus. On the bus, your presence will not draw attention. During the journey, you will not get off the bus at risky places. I will be with you at all times. This way is less risky.
- You know the local circumstances; no problem for me.
- But these buses are converted from trucks to enable them to resist the harsh road conditions. Most of them are old and uncomfortable, and the trip can take 2–3 days. Can you endure traveling in such a manner?
- Ok, I will; don't worry. Behave any way you consider appropriate. Bus, truck, horse, camel, they are all the same to me just as long as we reach there as soon as possible. If you think buses are more secure, that is fine. Difficulties and troubles aren't a problem. I believe that I can bear the road conditions, Allah willing.
- Ok then, I will begin the necessary preparations.

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### **Coming to the Coast of Hope**

*There is a spring between İsfahan and Şiraz, it is an astounding art of Allah. It is known as the water of starling. It is strongly reported that if one takes a gallon of that water and brings it to a place attacked by grasshoppers eating the crops without putting the gallon down and looking back, a lot of starling come to that water and then kill the grasshoppers.*

Marifetname

Erzurumlu İbrahim Hakkı, pg. 235

### **The beginning of the voyage**

Because of the civil war, intercity travel was very dangerous. Trucks and buses that would leave Nyala gathered in a square, and they didn't move until their number reached 20–50. On each truck and bus, there were at least two guards. They moved continuously except for small breaks, reached the nearest residential place before nightfall, and waited till morning to move again.



Because generally, loaded trucks traveled from Khartoum to Darfur, the threat of being attacked was more significant. Also because of the long distance, sometimes people formed huge convoys of 300–500 trucks, with a few armed forces vehicles at the front and back and at least two guards in each vehicle. Sometimes vehicles waited in the square for this convoy for 10–15 days and they moved altogether when everybody was ready. Naturally, all of these guards and armed forces had a cost, and till the end of voyage, payments made in security points were also high. Trips of two to three days sometimes extended to a month, which was necessarily reflected in the costs of materials; a product that cost 10 sd in Khartoum could reach 20–30 sd in Darfur.

I, on the other hand, didn't care about anything except finding the place I had been looking for; I didn't mind the difficult circumstances and dangers. Years later, Emir and Abdülmecit told me that they had not wanted to take this trip but were forced to due to my persistence. I never knew that.

Before the morning sun heated, we went to the square where the buses and trucks waited. It was misty and cool. Women prepared to open the wooden stools for the teahouses that could be found on each corner and fire up their cookers. They placed jars full of tea, coffee, and local spices on their graded and crooked tables made of meter-long iron sheets. Tea glasses piled up on a big plate was being washed by two small, coal-black hands to prepare for the new day.

For people who wanted to drink milk in the morning, milk powder was melted in an aluminum pot and waiting to be put on heat. Wood coals placed on brushwood situated between stones were crackling with the joy of seeing the fire, presenting a fireworks display.

While the bitter coolness of the morning surrounded our bodies, Emir and I found ourselves rubbing our hands in front of the irresistible attraction of the fire; even the milk powder pot and big aluminum tea pot couldn't resist the hot flames. Meanwhile, we ordered tea and milk for ourselves. When the sun started to heat up, at least five teahouses started up their cookers, and people started to rush around.

A great majority of the trucks were already loaded and were waiting for the convoy to move; half-loaded and empty buses and trucks were trying to get ready in a rush of confusion. The trucks loaded as much as they could carry; to diminish the unit costs, articles were stacked as high as people. At first look, one could think that two trucks were overlapping.

Buses were also loaded to the limit with articles except passengers. Atop the buses, articles were piled up to 1–2 meters and fastened tightly in order not to lose them.

The inside of the bus was also utilized with maximum efficiency. Space was left for passengers to breathe, but the corridors, empty spaces, and the areas under the seats were filled with the passengers' belongings and cargo.

After everything was loaded, two guards were placed on each truck and bus at the front and on top. Then, elders, children, and women who didn't have the money to pay in full were placed on top of the vehicles and traveled under the burning sun, dust, and wind for days while they clung to the ropes that tied down the cargo.

Our bus was also ready to travel after it was completely filled. We moved when the sun was at a 45 degree angle in the sky. Emir read the travel prayer aloud, and then, most passengers whispered prayers against the dangers of the road and wished each other safe travel.

It was clearly seen that the passengers showed serious worry and modest fear. These people had lived through a heavy civil war, and tens of thousands of people had been killed. In the mountainous terrain and most of the rural areas, armed people hijacked vehicles, making travel unsafe. It was known that a lot of vehicles were attacked on the road and that there was loss of life and property. It was said that at times, some armed groups blocked the road for inspection and demanded 3–4 sd (1–2 USD) from each passenger, violently throwing passengers out of the vehicle if they refused to pay. In these cases, fights would erupt unavoidably; even if other passengers offered to pay the price, it wasn't accepted sometimes. Passengers, aware of this reality, were concerned about their lives and property on these open-ended trips. As Emir and Abdülmecit had said, if all went well, we would reach in 2–3 days. If a vehicle broke down or there were obstacles on the road, it might last 7-15 days. Under these circumstances, it was normal that people felt anxiety and fear.

Goodbye Nyala...

As I was leaving Nyala alone with its pains behind the clouds of dust spreading after the bus, I was proceeding to my hopes, floundering jerkily. On that bus filled with people and articles, I had difficulty breathing due to airlessness and heat. I was looking forward to a break in order to relieve my legs, which were squashed between poky seats. To stifle the carsickness, I tried not to think about it and occupied my mind with what Emir was saying.

After a while, we were stopped at the western checkpoint. Documents of passengers traveling out of Nyala were checked, and people with complete documents were allowed to exit. After this checkpoint, approximately every 5-10 kilometers, we were blocked by tree branches and old tires and couldn't pass. Our buses were obliged to stop, and after our driver visited armed groups who were waiting on the roadside, under trees, and sometimes in tents, we were able to continue. Eventually I asked Emir:

- Someone blocks the road by putting a few branches, and then the driver goes and comes back from these armed groups. After that, we can continue to go. What does this mean?
- These are various checkpoints. They control passing vehicles and take a certain fee.

Afterwards, I would learn in detail that these weren't soldiers of the state but were an armed group called the Janjaweed. These people had created a source of income for themselves in

the vacuum of authority; they took 5, 10, or 20 sd according to the size of the vehicle. Each vehicle had to pay the amount or they couldn't pass. Eventually, I would get used to this after passed at least 40–50 checkpoints during the trip.

The Janjaweed weren't attacking vehicles that Janjaweed were guarding, people made sure to have at least 2 Janjaweed guards in each vehicle; the convoys were relatively secure based on a secret agreement. Yet in the chaos of Darfur, things didn't happen as intended; bandits who didn't obey this general rule blocked the roads. See? We were taking our lives in our hands as we traveled in our poky seats.

It wasn't new for the people of Darfur to risk their lives and have to stay alert. No one felt safe because they had faced challenges such as bloodshed, death, devastation, looting, and exile for a long time. If not their families, people's neighbors were in trouble. Moreover, they told so many stories that everybody admitted they were worried. I, on the other hand, turned a deaf ear to the terrible stories and set sail on my dream sea.

The checkpoints, created with a lack of control, were uncontrolled. Some bad-tempered, aggressive, and inhumane grumps seemed to me that they wouldn't hesitate to use their heavy guns at the slightest provocation. Therefore, both driver and passengers tried to refrain from all behaviors that could have led to a dispute; they gave the guards what they wanted without objecting so that they could move along as soon as possible without any trouble.

## **YOU WILL MISS IT THE WHOLE YEAR**

After traveling on the roads, which had few trees, we reached a cool, densely wooded environment. I came around from my daydreams and was surprised. We were in a forest composed of wide-leaved trees that I remembered from my geography class. Soon, when we saw people selling citrus fruits from their stalls in the forest, the bus stopped for rest. I asked Emir about where we had arrived. Smiling, he said, "Here is Cebel Merra, the greenest region of Darfur. Then he recited a tongue twister about it: If you see Cebel Merra once, you miss it the whole year.

After seeing Nyala and the environment around it, it is impossible not to miss Cebel Merra. It is a summer holiday resort where people from all parts of Sudan used to spend summers or just take day trips. Its woody, mountainous terrain, along with the freshwater resources that make the resort cooler, made the area a land of attraction. The products of this beauty are citrus and other fruits. Thanks to the temperate climate, Cebel Merra's is a rich soil, because of the same beautiful terrain, the rebels enjoy it as an asylum. They also use the higher ground for training. Thus, most parts of it are now controlled by the rebels.

I was astonished to learn that the most delicious fruit I had eaten in recent years had been sold by the children who were waiting for the convoy. Maybe because of tiredness or thirst, the oranges and grapefruit I ate there tasted wonderful. We left after a short break; I guess our guards had warned the driver about the dangers and told him that we had to leave Cebel Merra as soon as possible.

We were losing a real oasis as soon as we found it, just like a mirage. As we were leaving Cebel Merra, the taste of the citrus fruits was on our tongues, and we were on roads that had craters like the surface of the moon. Our rest and break spots were places near settlements and were made of stalls left over from bazaars. Because it had been an extraordinary trip and road, it was not surprising to come across such resting spots; it had become routine. What gave me a big trouble was the toilet issue. It was really hard for me to use toilets surrounded by reeds that did not give much of a feeling of privacy. Having limited amounts of water in a dirty environment was also disturbing. To deal with that issue, I was eating and drinking less, hoping that I wouldn't face such trouble.

Most people who visit distant countries complain about the food, but I was comfortable. Small pitta breads were sold almost everywhere, and with the bread, I had the chance to choose—sometimes tomatoes, sometimes cheese, sometimes meat fried with onion, and sometimes horsebeans.

If I could not choose and local food was the only thing on the menu, I applied the following credo: "You can live anywhere men live." From that perspective, I was trying to eat local foods such as *asaside* and *mulah*. I was trying not to think about anything disturbing, instead trying to distract my thoughts. If I failed to overcome the disturbing situation, I ate little or nothing.

We kept on going except for a few breaks caused by suspicious situations. Emir told us that we would spend the night at Zalenci. The mangos I saw at the entrance of Zalenci were big, majestic and beautiful. Looking at their trunks, which were two to three meters wide, I could see easily that they were old trees. There used to be many more mango trees in Zalenci, but over time, they had died or been cut down. Even though there were now fewer trees, they were still fascinating.

Zalenci, a town in the interior of Darfur; it has a population of about 200,000 and is inhabited mostly by rebels. The rebels do not control the town, but some of its people support them. This being the case, the Janjaweed do not feel safe, and the rebels take no action. They assume that if they attack or harm the city, forces from different parts of the country will gather and destroy them.

When I first saw the colors and patterns on the Janjaweed uniforms, I noticed that they resembled the commando grasshopper, but I wasn't sure. And now, when I remember what I thought back then, I am still not sure what I had found.

In most parts of Africa, there are many armed men dressed in the same way. My grasshopper suggested Africa, but I'm not sure if he meant here exactly. I had been thinking about these things all morning along the bumpy roads. I had to find the exact meaning of the symbol and complete the missing piece of the puzzle; I could not base my job and decision on possibilities. Besides, what I had seen and heard could not be ignored. That's why I had to be very careful on the road and observe thoroughly.

People like to chat on journeys; maybe it is because of this that they say you can get to know people on the road, that the road reveals secrets. Being able to speak Arabic, I had the chance to chat with people, and I was taking advantage of that. An event I learned about from one of the passengers affected me deeply. The villager I was chatting with said, "They burnt our village so we escaped and settled in the camp." "Why did they burn your village? How did that happen?" I asked with curiosity.

- First they bombed our village. Those who were able to survive escaped. Then they burnt down the whole village. We couldn't take much of our stuff with us. I and my family barely escaped. I have been living in the camps for years.
- That's quite interesting. I heard that people were forced to leave their villages and settle in camps and that some villages had been burnt down and left to be destroyed. But this is the first time I've heard about your case. Why would they bomb your village? [I was suspicious.]
- The civil war harmed many of our children, towns, and villages. Some of our people went to the mountains to fight, but we did not get involved in the war; we were busy with farming and agriculture. Then the Janjaweed came. They told us that there were people supporting the rebels in our village and that we had to turn them over. They told us that they knew that some people living in our village were carrying things to the rebels and the people connected with the rebels were in our village. We told them that it was not true and that we were people minding our own business, but they were not convinced. Nobody could do anything because the rebels were armed. When the Janjaweed treated our chief and people badly, our young resisted. The disagreement turned into a fight. The Janjaweed got angry and fired their arms. Some of our people got wounded and some died. They got mad because of this incident. They told us that we were all supporting the rebels and that we wouldn't get away with this. They threatened to burn down the village unless we left it immediately. And they left.
- How can this be possible? There are the elderly, women, and children. Are these people crazy?.
- I don't know. But I guess we all are crazy. Everyone knew that they were not joking; we had no other option than leaving the village.
- Oh my God. Wasn't there anyone who could stop them or mediate between you and them?
- We have no one except our God. We did not know what to do. We had to leave the village soon; our people were planning to take the stuff they could carry with them. We looked around when we heard thunder-like sounds. Planes coming towards us

started bombing the village. Everyone escaped. We left all we had behind and left the village with our wives and children. Most people escaped like us, but many of our relatives and neighbors died. We settled in the camps. Then they burnt down our village.

Hearing what he said, I froze up; it was really hard to believe all this. I did not know this man, and I was not sure if he was telling the truth. Regardless of my beliefs though, it was evident that the man was in agony.

- You were told to leave the village and you did so. Isn't it weird that they bombed the village by planes? To tell the truth, that doesn't make sense. some of the young people resisted them and caused an argument, they got very angry. They reported that there were rebels in our village and that those rebels would escape if not bombed immediately. Trusting what they reported, they attacked our village.
- How could this be possible? [at this point, I was astonished.] How could they do that knowing many people would die?
- We don't know either. But not all of these people were normal. There were drug addicts, alcoholics, and acquisitive people among them. They can even burn down the world when they get mad. No one cares what is right or what is wrong. They may learn the truth in the future. They may say that it was a mistake. But again we will be in our same old troubles.

What I heard took me to the hotel room in Mecca, to my computer desk. The zuras were turning into African huts. The grasshopper was turning into commando planes and helicopters, and they were attacking and bombing the huts. The image portrayed what I had heard from that man a short time ago. If what he said were true, the scope of the things that had happened was much more calamitous than I had thought or knew about. In order to test the accuracy of this information, I concentrated.

On the road, I encountered people who appeared to imitate my grasshopper. I saw them with heavy weapons on the backs of horses. I saw them going in cruiser jeeps. I saw them resting by the roads. Until I saw Maara, these were just typical, although interesting, portraits of a civil war.

What I saw was the center of madness I had seen in my head, commando grasshoppers attacking zuras. My eyes were wide open. As we passed the burnt, destroyed city of Maara, the ruins were telling me a story. Even the mosque of the city had been damaged by the heavy bombardment by the Janjaweed. What the survivors left was not only the ruins but also the lives of many people. I was listening to these things as if I was repeating a story that I knew word by word. I got rid of the tension and the astonishment with a terrible headache. Despite the pain, I felt relief.

I had found the grasshoppers. I was now sure that the grasshoppers attacking the Zuras were in Darfur, and if the grasshoppers were here, the people I had been looking for must also be

here. I had to find them. I had to reach their home. If the things Emir had told me came true, I would complete the last pieces of the puzzle and step into a new life. This time I felt that I was moving in the right direction; I was much more hopeful. I was about to find those people I had been looking for.

From then on, I called the Janjaweed “grasshoppers.” This symbolic renaming would make my chats easier. When I saw a Janjaweed, I asked Emir, “Are these grasshoppers?” He did not understand. Laughing, I said, “I mean the Janjaweed. I call them grasshoppers, by the way, and Emir laughed too. “Yes they are grasshoppers,” he said. I think he also liked this nickname.

With the pleasure of finding answers to some of my questions, I withdrew to myself. I was mumbling, “Grasshopper, grasshopper, you hop once or twice. But you get caught the third time, grasshopper.” I was laughing mumbling these.

It was about to be evening when we arrived at the small town called Morni. We got off at a bus station-like place composed of sheds that were open at the front but covered with reeds at the sides and back. In front of every shed, there were stalls for preparing food and drinks, stools, small coffee tables, and mattresses made of wood and metal. This place was a hotel, cafeteria, and restaurant. Maybe the cheapest hotels and cafeterias in the world are in Darfur; you could rent a mattress for less than a dollar and stay at the hotel watching the stars.

We settled in a place Emir had known from his previous visit here. I observed during the trip that the people who ran these places were usually women; this one was run by a woman called Meryem. Although she had a little baby, she was doing her job serving the guests, taking care of her baby when she had time. I saw that the women had active social lives; they were freer and more comfortable with social communication and relations with men.

I was trying to sleep on the mattress in the open air, but December and January were winter months here. The weather was around 35–40 degrees (centigrade) during the day but only 10–15 degrees at night. Because of this extreme difference, thin summer clothes were not suitable for nighttime, but unfortunately I had no cold weather clothes. Although I covered myself with the thin scarf I had bought with Emir at Nyala—in case I needed it—I could not sleep at night because of the cold.

During this season, on overcast nights, the clouds blanketed the earth and the nights were warmer; but on that night, the sky was very clear and the weather very frosty. This biting cold was unexpected; despite going to bed late and being exhausted, I couldn’t sleep because of it. I got up reluctantly, covered myself with the scarf, and started walking back and forth along the square.

Most people had covered themselves with blankets completely, not even their noses were exposed, and they were sound asleep. Some slept on the ground near the truck while

others slept on the open-air mattress. The braying of the donkeys and the buzzing of the insects were the only sounds to be heard.

As I paced the square, I realized that with my head covered by a scarf, I resembled a ghost. Suddenly, someone touched my shoulder. I shuddered. When I turned to see who it was, I saw two red eyes penetrating through the darkness.

We were looking at each other—I was staring at him and he was staring at me. He noticed that I was unarmed and foreign. He was wearing a torn, old green coat similar to those worn by the German Gestapos. He had a G-3 rifle in his right hand, cartridges on his belt, and he wore torn combat boots on his feet; he was at least 20 centimeters taller than me. His tone of voice and manner of addressing me on realizing that I was a foreigner indicated his apprehension.

It was not typical for a foreigner with his face covered so as to be unrecognizable to walk alone at this time of night. Most Sudanese and Janjaweed believed that foreigners supported the rebels, and so they were prejudiced against them. The specter in front of me was harshly interrogating me, with a note of panic in his voice as he was unaware of what he was dealing with. Fortunately, I spoke Arabic, which was the only thing that prevented a quagmire.

To reassure the man, I told him that I had come from Nyala and that I was going to Umşalaya in the morning after spending the night here. On inspecting me and understanding that I carried no guns, he felt relieved. He asked me to follow him. We went to the office of the soldiers who were in charge of the security of the place; a few more armed soldiers were positioned there.

The office commandant asked me:

- Where are you from?
- I am from Turkey. I live in İstanbul.
- Why did you come here?
- I am going to the town called Umşalaya.
- Why do you want to go to Umşalaya?
- People from a foundation in Nyala, called Tadamun, told me about this town, and we are going there with the foundation's director, Emir Hüseyin.
- Do you have an entry permit? Where are your papers?
- My papers are with Emir, who I came with. He is sleeping over there.

The man was talking strictly, as if I was a criminal. Then the man in charge of the office told the man who brought me here, "Take another man with you. Go and check. Be careful."

We went together and woke Emir; he tried to understand the situation when he saw me with a soldier. Was he dreaming? Was it real? Still half-asleep, he heard the soldier's questions and realized that he was not dreaming. Composing himself, he showed the papers. After talking



to the soldier for some time, he said, "Wait here. I will go and talk to them and explain the situation." Emir came back 15 minutes later and told me that there were no problems and he had convinced them. I felt relieved, but I was still cautious. We were still here.

When it started to lighten, we had breakfast with tea and biscuits. Emir went to check if there was a bus leaving for Umşalaya. When he came back, he said:

- Unfortunately, none of the buses depart before afternoon. Besides, it is not confirmed whether a bus will indeed leave for Umşalaya. They may not leave if they do not have enough passengers.
- I do not want to waste another night here doing nothing. We should go as soon as possible. Is there any other way? Is there anything we can do? [I did not want to stay there after last night's events.]
- Some jeeps carry cargo and people to Umşalaya. The vehicle owners hit the road when their vehicles are full. If we agree to pay them the full price they generally get for one trip, they may take us there. But it will be expensive.
- I am OK with that. Let it be expensive. Let's make our offer and go as soon as possible.

A few minutes later, Emir came with an old, cast-off flatbed jeep. He had persuaded the driver to take us, and we would leave soon. When I asked Emir if he would hire an armed guard to travel with us, he told me that the road to Umşalaya was safe and there were no problems in the region; we wouldn't need any guards.

A person hoping to reach somewhere stays alive with that hope irrespective of the difficulties and troubles he faces. However, if he realizes that he is about to accomplish the wrong goal or reach the wrong place, he feels disappointed and hopeless. Most people cannot overcome such disappointments and cannot continue striving toward their dreams again, and I, too, had similar doubts. I couldn't help thinking what I would do if I were to face disappointment on reaching my destination. I felt worried and afraid. It would soon be the time when I would have to face reality. I was on the edge of a long search filled with hope, worry, and uncertainty. I would either fly across this brink or fall to the bottom.

### **I AM ON THE EDGE OF A CLIFF**

Five hours after leaving Morni, we entered the Umşalaya region. Singing birds were the first signs of prosperity; of course, you always see flying birds, but birds that sing while flying denote peace and security, and I was witnessing just that. I was watching the density of colors and various birds singing and flying freely.

I saw people farming and the women and children walking or riding donkeys comfortably even in places that were distant from any settlements. There were no armed men, no bandits, no chaos, and no uncertainty; everyone was dealing with his/her own life. I began to feel the confidence that I hadn't experienced so far on the trip.

As we got closer to Umşalaya, we saw more green areas and people engaging in various activities. People peacefully worked on their lands, many others were coming from or going to Umşalaya with their donkeys loaded with goods. The increasing pedestrian traffic indicated that we were very close.

As soon as we passed a wide and sandy valley, we saw Umşalaya's reed huts. Soon after we passed the second valley, we went through another one and entered Umşalaya from the west. It was almost evening by the time we reached. Passing on a road with reedy and thorny huts along the sides, we reached the town bazaar's highest point.

Our vehicle was traveling down the road, passing small shops made of bricks and roofed with corrugated sheet iron; some of the shops in the market were closed. Very few people were out on the streets, maybe because it was farming time or it was late afternoon. None of them showed any hurry or remarkable activity.

It may have been an ordinary day for them, but it was a historic one for me; I was about to arrive at a rendezvous I made long ago. I was going to the place where I would find what I had been expecting, seeking, and praying for. I guess Umşalaya was hearing the "Hello" I had been silently carrying in my heart. I didn't make you wait long, did I?

It was the land of people wearing white dresses... The land where women made patterns by covering their heads with the white dresses they wore... Ever since we had gotten off the vehicle, people had been saluting us, asking us if we were fine, and thanking God that we were safe and sound. Once more, my heart was asking, "Umşalaya, I didn't make you wait long, did I?"

We sat at a cafe near the square on low stools under a straw roof; we were resting, drinking tea, and discussing our next steps. I asked the people I met at the cafe some questions about the town; the answers I got were very similar. They told me that the town was one of the safest places in the region and that there were no conflicts or hostility amongst the people. They told me that the people were constructive rather than destructive, that they were easygoing and wellmannered, that they fought evil with wisdom, that they were patient, that they respected Sheikh Zekeriya and that because of him they no longer faced any problems. These accounts confirmed what Emir had told me before and I was relieved.

I kept my promise and came to the rendezvous point: Umşalaya. I couldn't wait to accomplish what I had been longing and praying for. I had to meet the tribal chief of Umşalaya, Zekeriya, and hear the whole story from him.

However, when Emir told me that it would be advisable for us to visit him the next day because it was almost evening, I realized that I had to be patient again.

On his previous visit, Emir had stayed at toll collector Ali el Zeka's house, so he asked the directions to it. But we learned that he was out of town. Then, Emir decided to go to Sheikh Zekeriya's house. That moment gave me the fruits of my patience.

We left the marketplace behind and walked east for a while and then to the right and south. The road that I had already traveled, which passed through different countries, seemed shorter to me at that moment. After going about 300 meters, we turned left. We were now standing in front of the fenced house at the corner, and I felt as if my heart would stop beating. Emir knocked on the door a few times, hailed the hosts loudly, and asked, "Is the Sheikh at home?" A young man opened the door and saluted back. He invited us in. He said, "My father is not at home currently. Let me call my brother." A few minutes later, Abdullatif, Sheikh Zekeriya's elder son, arrived. He saluted and welcomed us and informed us that his father was at his house at Mardukka. Emir explained the purpose of our visit after we chatted for a while.

Abdullatif said, "You must be very tired. Stay here for the night and rest. You can go tomorrow." Emir accepted the offer: "Let's rest here today. We will go tomorrow morning, if God wishes."

We were going to stay in an African hut that stood inside the yard. It had red brick walls 1.5 meters high, a roof of reeds, and a sandy floor. The hut had two iron mattresses and a small coffee table. Toothbrushes, a hand cream, and a perfume bottle were kept on the coffee table. Near the mattress, on the ground, were some notebooks, books, and an old bag. The ceiling was in the form of mid-sized tree branches arranged in a circle and tied at the center of the roof; bunches of reed were tied to these tree branches forming the roof. The reeds allowed little sunlight to come through, making the inside of the hut cooler than the outside.

That night in the hut felt longer than usual; it was as if the sun would never rise. I involuntarily thought of all my experiences since the day I found the zuras. I had set off to find some people in a remote part of the world, people whom I had never known, met, or heard of previously. But here I was, sleeping in a hut at their house. Although it seemed like a dream, I was convinced that what I was experiencing was real.

What Emir had told me had been confirmed, and I was now wondering about the answer to a question that would enable me to complete the last piece of the puzzle. I was not satisfied with what I had observed on the road and I knew that hearing the precise answer would end this waiting.

I was planning our talk in my head. When I met Sheikh Zekeriya, I would ask him what he ate. If he said "zura," I would ask him to show it to me. If the zuras he showed me were identical to the ones I had gathered at the Kaaba, it would confirm that this was the place I had been looking for: I would be satisfied. Thus, it would be the last piece of the puzzle and I would complete it and regard myself as the happiest man on earth.

If he gave me the name of some other food item, I would remain suspicious but not jump to conclusions. In that case, my uncertainty would continue because I wanted to be 100% sure.

I could not abandon a town that had many good qualities. What would I do? How would I decide? How would I be certain that my decision was correct? If I did not get the answer I wanted, if the zuras the Sheikh showed me were not like mine, I would have to continue considering Umşalaya as an option but search for what I longed for in Darfur. If after searching all of Darfur I did not find such a town, then I would have considered all the options. Only then would I decide this place was what I had been looking for. Only then could I be completely certain that I had made the right decision. The morning arrived as I was considering all these possibilities and planning my next actions.

I did not know whom or what I was going to meet. I could not predict my future course of action if I did not get what I had been looking for or the answers that I sought. After traveling over such long distances and enduring so many difficulties, how would I explain myself? Would I say, "Nice to see you, I am going back" or "Yes well, this was nice" and chase another unknown?

What if I found the answer I sought? What if I decided that I had found the place I was looking for? How would I live here? What would I do? Despite having pre-planned all of this, I knocked on Sheikh Zekeriya's door at Mardukka feeling the excitement of a child waiting for an exam. It was impossible to hear the knocking over my loudly beating heart.

A green door made of sheet iron opened, squeaking, and a young boy appeared. After saluting him, Emir said, "We are here to see Sheikh Zekeriya. Can you call him?" The young boy saluted us back and said, "Welcome" and he led us inside. We entered a clean yard covered with sand. A hut stood in the middle of the yard and other huts surrounded it. Apparently, it was the home of a large family.

As it was early in the morning, we did not encounter many people; we could only hear the voices of some children behind the reed walls. As we were surveying our surroundings, Sheikh Zekeriya came limping with his walking stick; he welcomed us warmly and sincerely. We sat in front of the hut that stood in the middle of the yard, facing the entrance door.

Emir introduced me to him; he told the Sheikh that I was from Turkey and that I had longed to visit Umşalaya. Later, when it was my turn to speak, I told him that I had heard very nice things about Umşalaya and that I had wanted to see if everything I had heard was true. I also told him that I wanted to get to know him and hear some facts from him. He briefly told me the story of Umşalaya's struggle.

- After this short introduction, I tried to suppress my excitement and all my other feelings. I said to him,
- I was wondering something.
- Let me hear it.

- What do you eat?

I felt as if the world froze at that moment:the earth was not revolving,the birds were not flying,the leaves were not shaking. Everything was stationary. It was as if the whole universe had stopped to hear the answer, not just me;every atom was witnessing that moment with me. Sheikh Zekeriya’s resonant, thunder-like voice broke the silence that resembled the universe’s eternal and formidable quietness:“We eat zuras,” he said;nothing more, nothing less—only“We eat zuras.”

One word was enough to start the world moving again:the birds began singing, flowers began blossoming, my blood began flowing, and life began existing again. With just one word: zura. I would have cried and danced if I didn’t fear embarrassment.

“May I see them?,” I asked him. He said, “Sure. They are at the back.”

We stood up and went to the place where the zuras were kept. The Sheikh opened the sack,took some out in his hands, and showed them to me. The zuras I had collected at the Kaaba—the zuras I had been looking for so desperately for such a long time—were right in front of my eyes in Sheikh Zekeriya’s hands.

When you are in a dilemma, patience is the key to salvation. God is the one who gives us both the dilemmas and the salvation. I remembered all those years and all those roads I had seen in my attempts to seek peace. I was late, but being late was better than not reaching at all. “You called me. I have been looking for you ever since I got your invitation. ‘Zurasudan. Visit Sudan.’ Here I am. Thank you, my God. Had I not seen those grains you showed me, had I not dragged myself after them, this hejira would have never begun. Thank you for opening my eyes and giving me wisdom.”

5

### The Legend of Umşalaya

If you reveal the enmity hidden in the hearts, you destroy the cities.

Darfur proverb

### **SAD, PROUD UMŞALAYA**

I could not believe when I heard of the struggles of the people of Umşalaya;it was an unexpected reality regarding this age and land. I was looking for an oppressed, desperate, moral, and honest community, and I could never have imagined that such a virtuous legend existed.

I was witnessing a community that could have been a model for humankind in a deserted, forgotten, and hated part of the world,a community that had nothing to do with the conceit and glory of material things. The people here lived in a place where there were no electricity,

communication, or roads; it did not even exist on maps. They did not have big, developed universities or volumes of books; they had built their lives using the few printed books they could find.

The people of this town had not wasted their lives sitting and talking about what they were going to do, building worlds in the morning and destroying them in the evening. They had built realistic lives and were just trying to lead them in a decent way. I witnessed this with my eyes and my heart—let me tell you how.

An old man, speaking wisely, started talking:

Once we used to live in a sub-Saharan part of Africa happily, as helpful and generous people. Our hearts were open to the divine light. Darkness was far away from our region. We used to host our guests perfectly and look after our relatives. We used to feed and respectfully see off anyone who happened to arrive in our town no matter who they were.

Every year we used to harvest various kinds of crops meticulously, load them on hundreds of beautiful camels, and send them to Hicaz for people to use, without expecting anything in return. We used to do agriculture on our own and live in prosperity and wealth thanks to the abundance of our God's blessings. Beautiful and alluring camels, cows, sheep, and goats used to feed safely and give their owners lots of milk, butter, and cream.

Thanks to our merciful God's blessings, our women used to prepare different kinds of food; nobody was hungry. Our door was open to everyone. The meal we had with three people would be enough for five if they were guests. Men used to work, women used to strive, and children used to grow up. The old used to embrace and look after the children with love.

One week before the festivals, we used to begin preparations. Fathers used to buy the best clothes for their wives and children. We used to get limestone from Hiceyr to paint the walls, clean everywhere, and prepare the best food for that peace and love day.

After all preparations were completed, children used to go to sleep early, hugging their gifts and hoping the morning would come soon. With the call for morning prayer, people used to gather at a large square, the oldest in the front row, then the men and the children, and in the back row women.

Festival prayer used to be performed under the warming and encompassing light of the sun, and everyone used to listen to the khutbah. Then everyone used to hug each other as if they hadn't seen each other for a long time. They used to celebrate each other. No enmity or hard feelings were left. The cheerful voices of children running around used to

mix with the singing of nightingales and rose to the sky. Then, the mercy of the God used to embrace us.

Then everything changed. Darkness and gloom started to descend on us slowly. Misery replaced joy, selfishness replaced sharing, greed replaced content, poverty replaced abundance, zealotry replaced tolerance, worry replaced hope, and violence replaced peace. The devil that had been waiting desperately for a long time finally found a way to spoil the peace of our land.

Those seeking rights, justice, and service were not able to find what they hoped for in 2003. Instead, of raising their voices, they raised their hands. They believed the devil that promised them eternal and absolute happiness. They heard the sound of the exploding shells before they could hear the sound of their hearts and wake up.

One who kills a man is like the man who kills all mankind. It does not matter whether it is one or a thousand. Blood was poured. Homes were destroyed. The blood was now on the teeth.

Burning villages and towns, destroyed goods, harmed women, children, and old people... What happened is not a film or story. A real tragedy. Thousands of villages and towns belonging to our people vanished. Thousands of innocent people died. Thousands of them perished on migration roads. All their belongings were plundered. Two and a half million of our people, out of six million, were forced to leave their homes.

Our people have settled in detention camps desperately. We no longer have lands to plant or livestock to feed. We no longer have schools to send our children or money or honor.

Some of our men and young went to the mountains. As men, they used their guns bravely and strongly. They were to save their land. They were to bring us felicity. But more people died, more homes were destroyed, and we became more miserable.

Months and years passed. Now it's 2008. It's been five years. Eternal and absolute felicity has yet to arrive at our country. The misery at the camps has not ended. Our people are now rootless, uneducated, unhealthy, peevish, and intolerant. They live a misery and poverty that one cannot believe unless he sees it. And those fighting in the mountains are no better than them.

The villages and towns that were burnt down and destroyed are now just an old story. The sound of jackals echoes in the pastures now. Grasshoppers are hunting zuras wildly. Wolves are howling bitterly. A life in which fear prevails exists here. No law or order. The rule of wolves is much better than ours.

“How come this happened?” I asked; I wanted to cry out the question at that moment. “How come this much beauty has gone?” One of the people sitting with us, a 30-year-old man with a university degree who worked as a teacher said:

Noone imagined that the scope of events could become so much greater when the conflicts first broke out in Darfur in 2003. It was not clear who would do what or what would happen back then. Under the dust and smoke, right and wrong, true and false all got mixed. We had never experienced such a thing before.

Some of our people demanded their share of the country’s resources for the reconstruction of Darfur and a more humane life. These were humane and legitimate demands. Demanding right was rioting. They got a harsh answer. There are foolish people everywhere. Some of our foolish did not try to solve the problems with intelligence and wisdom. Thus the evil waiting in ambush got the opportunity to do harm. Even then, there was still a way to compromise; the sword was still in its sheath. Neither of the sides did what must or could be done. They did not strive to solve the problem. Eventually the problem became a quagmire.

Some of our people, I wonder how and where, found guns and fired the first bullet. The one who fired the first bullet committed the first sin and ignited the wick. The riot was to be punished. They faced violence in return for their own violence. This time, Torabas (the rebels) resorted to more violence.

The fire grew bigger and bigger. Some uneducated and merciless migrants were given guns. The Janjaweed... The armed djinns on horses and camels... The hunters of men and loot who appear at night and vanish in the morning.

They forced the people of neighboring towns and villages to make a choice. People were puzzled and desperate. Either the government or the rebels, it was time to take a side. Those who sided with the government were oppressed by the Torabas. The Janjaweed on the other hand were tormenting the supporters of the rebels. People were between two fires.

Our people could see no solution; either way was harmful for them. Most of our people tried to get rid of the problem by escaping, taking all the stuff they could take with them. They left their abandoned, burnt, and destroyed land to the armed men on the horses and camels. Their camels and cow herds and all other belongings were plundered. They suffered a lot on the roads for days and months. Some died, others were disabled. They started miserable lives at the detention camps they arrived crawling.

I said, “Yes, you’re right. I have read about the terrible things that happened before. Nearly half of the people living in the region now have to live in detention camps. Darfur is regarded as one of the most problematic regions in the world where a humanity crisis prevails. I am sure that everyone has seen a lot of death, blood, tears, and suffering. Don’t they think it’s



time to end all this suffering? Is there no sign of hope? Those beautiful days you have told me about, won't they come?"

The old man started talking this time:

Oh my son. How can we lose our hope? It won't be easy. I may not be able to see those good old days again. But how can we fall into the devil's trap, knowing that the God has created us in a perfect way, that he has given us intelligence and made us superior to the devil? We will fight against the devil's games and eventually defeat him with God's help. These are all temporary.

My internal response was, "Hearts can only find peace with God's name" (Rad.28). Those people never forget God's existence while talking about their misery. That's it, I said to myself. They are right. Here is the place where our hope will grow again. Darfur...the land where happy and generous people once lived.

### **Mother's Bosom, Umşalaya!**

It is a very nice feeling to see valiant and wise people; it gives power and ambition and facilitates eradicating pessimism. It necessarily revives you. Believe me, not many people can see defeat as something temporary and as the start of a victory.

As I tried to recognize Umşalaya, I continued to witness its beauty. Umşalaya is home to 15,000–20,000 people in Algenaina, in southeastern Darfur. It is surrounded by approximately 20 villages, and its population increases to 40,000–50,000 when the villages are counted.

Umşalaya isn't an ancient town. It was formed by migrations, and after sometime, the population increased; there are still more than 32 tribes: Arab, Tema, Gemir, Masalit, Fur, Dacu, Mararit, Evlatcunup, Evlatcenah, Evlatercam, Evlatbenihalbe, Benihüseyin, Uturiyye, Mısıriyyecebel, etc.

The area was formerly called Vadi Duvey. Because there were a lot of different tribes in town and in the surrounding villages, as well various Bedouin residential areas, chieftains and leading elders sought to change that to a more suitable name. After long consultations and discussions, they concluded that Umşalay would fit.

When I asked its meaning, I felt like I was in dream while the old wise man told me its meaning, because he gave me an extraordinary definition. What was told to me had to be from a storybook:

"Um" means "mother" in Arabic, and "şalaya" means "to contain, to take in"; the Turkish word "şamil olmak" shares the same root. Therefore, "Umşalaya" means "mother who hosted everything." It means mother who welcomed, contained, and hosted people from

different tribes, nationalities, ideas, and religions. Umşalaya, the mother's bosom, welcoming and containing everyone.

Presumably, not many places are true to their names, but Umşalaya is one of them; it lives the meaning of the name and keeping this meaning alive. It is the only town in Darfur in which people from nearly 40 different tribes are living in peace and without quarrel. This town brings up everyone with tolerance and goodness, a peaceful town that hugs all tribes and nationalities with the affection of a mother.

Isn't this an epic meaning for you, too? Perhaps because you haven't read the epic of Umşalaya, this meaning isn't striking for you as it is for me, but I am sure you would acknowledge me to be right.

### Electing the Chief

After Umşalaya, I wanted to recognize the area's chief. I asked who was the chief of Umşalaya, and they said it was Sheikh Zekeriya again. The results of my investigation of him were as impressive as Umşalaya itself. The chief, Sheikh Zekeriya, had been a wise chieftain when the events began. Thirty years earlier, being both farmer and trader of farm products, Sheikh Zekeriya usually traveled out of town.

In 1966, long before the events started, the villagers looked for a reliable, powerful, astute, and just leader; they couldn't agree on a suitable choice even there were a few alternatives. They looked for nearly 30 qualifications in chief candidates, preferring those who had the most qualifications. When I asked them what those qualifications were, they cited the primary ones:

- 1- **He should be religious and living this religion straightly:** He had to be low-key, perform religious rites, know what is halal and what is not, always go after halal, and be religious.
- 2- **He should be a wise man:** There had to be foresight in his decisions.
- 3- **He should be just:** In inter- and intra-tribe disputes, he had to be on the side of right. He had to be just when deciding. He had to never oppress.
- 4- **He should be generous:** He had to justify his generosity and be a devoted man who cared for his people.
- 5- **He should be stoic:** He had to be patient and astute different people, characteristics, and hardships.
- 6- **He should be on the side of his people and in service to them:** He had to struggle to solve his people's problems. He had to serve his people regardless of their tribe.
- 7- **He should counsel:** On decisions regarding majority, he had to know to consult and to not make a decision before counsel.

When I heard these qualifications, I wasn't surprised that they couldn't reach a decision; it wouldn't have been easy to find someone who held even all of these, let alone the ones I didn't mention here.

The position of chief meant a lot to them; Chief was responsible for everything. Those who had troubles, complaints, and joy came to him. There wasn't any benefit in this job, and it required one to make sacrifices. Undoubtedly, it wasn't easy to desire such a duty.

Because the committee could only find these qualifications in Zekeriya, they chose him. During this time, Zekeriya, unaware of what was going on, was busy with trade. The people, because they knew he wouldn't accept this duty, decided to put pressure on him as a group.

They sent word to him that they wanted him to come to Umşalaya for an important matter. When he came, they explained that they had chosen him as the chieftain in his absence and wanted him to accept this decision. As they guessed, he didn't want to accept such moral and material responsibility. He complained that he could not do so, or be just, but he spoke in vain; they had left him no choice. In the end, he was obliged to accept the position and become the leader of Umşalaya, and from then on, he was "Sheikh Zekeriya"!

In Umşalaya, the leader accedes according to elections. When I learned this, I was embarrassed about some of my prejudices about Africa. The existence of an elected chieftain was another beautiful thing for me.

Sheikh Zekeriya, from the year he was elected as chieftain, ruled Umşalaya from 1996 to 2003 with justice and wisdom. He was a wise leader who consumed from his own property for his people, respected rights and justice, prized knowledge, and held peace and mercy as principles. People completely trusted him and his words.

He was the people's leader, working for them, not for himself!

### **Epic of Strategy: Umşalaya!**

Now, it was time to understand the city's strategy. How had they survived this fire even though everywhere was destroyed? Emir gave me a partial answer in Nyala, and then I listened to the local people in Umşalaya. But on my second visit, what the old wise man told me was magnificent.

When I visited Umşalaya in July 2008, I tried to meet a lot of people. I endeavored to learn their thoughts, cultures, pains, joys, and struggles. We were chatting with some old and young men, and the subject arose of my interest in Umşalaya and its stance as a peaceful and secure town. After some questions and answers, a tall, wise man, with a white turban, white dress, and a reserved stance that aroused respect, began to speak. I guessed he was in his seventies because of his wrinkles: "In 2003, after events started, the civil war started to spread. As we heard, Torabors came to Sheikh Zekeriya and asked him to support them and participate in resistance.

Sheikh Zekeriya objected this and said:

- I prefer to die rather than shedding my brother's blood by fighting against a Muslim.

- You have to choose your side. If not, no one can protect you from the troubles in which you and Umşalaya will get.
- My view is this. I am definitely against shedding my brothers' blood. In addition to this, I am not the only authority to decide. I will convey your message to other chieftains and then decide.

The Janjaweed were very dangerous, and everyone was abstaining from what they would normally do. But not supporting the insurgents and objecting to them was also risky, and this risk also had to be calculated.

Shortly after the eruption of events, Sheikh Zekeriya convoked all chieftains. Twenty-two tribal chiefs, including Mesalit, Zegava, Fur, Tema, and Arap, both in Umşalaya and in the 20 surrounding villages, gathered together. After a very beautiful talk, he said to them:

- Oh, my people! Everyone is more or less aware of the fire around us. Every day, we are hearing that one or a few villages are ravaged or looted or they migrate. Initially we were away from this trouble, but it comes closer day by day. At present, we are in the custody of both the Janjaweed and the Torabas. Maybe offers were made to you, too.  
Now what should we do? How should we act in the face of this new situation?

Everyone had to say his thought and opinion.

- Oh, my people! Yes, big problems occurred; a civil war has started. We have no possibility to avoid this war. This trouble came from Allah, and we have no way other than acting wisely against this. What is your view? I gathered you to think and find a solution together.

The chiefs said, "Since you gathered us and asked our view, we really don't want our motherland to be devastated. "So what is your opinion?", he asked them.

The old wise man sighed deeply and stood up. He seemed to be reliving those days. It was clear that each wrinkle on his face was kneaded with different pains and sorrows. Who knew what he had lost or lived?

I could guess that deciding on such a serious matter was very hard. A wrong decision could have endangered Umşalaya and the surrounding villages and cause 50,000 people to perish. For this reason, everyone was aware of the sensitiveness of the situation.

When the old wise man sat, the signs of tears could still be seen. Noticing his situation, the other old chief took the floor:

- At that time, we chieftains couldn't provide a healthy solution. Some of the chiefs offered to support insurgents and struggle, some to look for reconciliation with government, and the rest to migrate to big cities or places close to military regions

and to stay neutral. Then, Sheikh Zekeriya said: “Everyone turn to his tribe and counsel. We will make the final decision at the next meeting.”

The old wise man recovered himself and began again:

- After a short time, the chiefs gathered to decide. Sheikh Zekeriya wanted each of them to clearly express his view and explain the foundations of his decision. Though there wasn't a consensus, the strongest opinion appeared to be that we should leave here and go before our homes burned down and were destroyed and our children, women, and elders perished. I had the same idea at the time because if we stayed in our motherland, we would be obliged to choose one of two sides, and the other side wouldn't consent to this and would see it as betrayal. For this reason, the most rational way was to get away from here before we were obliged to make a selection. There were a lot of foundations for this opinion. A lot of towns and villages had preferred this and migrated. We all knew what had happened to the ones who didn't migrate and made the choice.

The other old chief started speaking:

- Yes... We all knew what had happened. None of us wanted to go to the mountains to fight and be an instrument that shed our brothers' blood. Our kith and kin, the people from our tribe, could blame, accuse, and even harass us because we didn't want to participate in this resistance. No other choice was left to us but migration.

The old wise man came up to speak again:

- This was our common opinion, but Sheikh Zekeriya didn't agree. Indeed, we were all surprised at his reaction. We knew that he was against shedding his brother's blood from the very beginning. So why did he object? He did not propose going to the mountains and fighting. Why did he refuse to migrate, which was our last resort? This situation was unclear to us.

The Sheikh said, “Oh, my people! Where will we migrate? We were born here, we have lived here. Our life's heart beats here. Where will we go if we leave? Even if we find a place to migrate, don't you think we would perish on the migration road with our families?”

Let us assume that we leave. Who can predict what will happen to us? How can we survive without any shelter, without our possessions and our lands? Even if we live, what kind of a life would that be? What are we afraid of? Will we go toward the unknown, leaving everything we have, so as to not be killed?

Undoubtedly, no one escapes death. Wherever we go, death will catch us sooner or later; even if we are in strongholds, we will be caught. We cannot escape death by migrating.

I was against going to the mountains and resisting from there. I never want to shed our brothers' blood. Indeed, you agreed with this opinion, too. And now, I don't think that migration will do us any good."

The chieftains at the meeting said, "None of us want to see our town destroyed. We don't have another solution. What will we do?" "Yes there is," he said, and added, "I am not afraid of losing the life given to me by Allah. But I am afraid of losing ourselves, our families, all of us, and all our possessions. I am afraid of losing our existence, humanity, and faith. However, I do not want to surrender easily to events and troubles or wait despairingly either. When Allah has bestowed reason on us and showed us the true path, why would we drift away with the tide?"

The Sheikh then said, "Oh, my people! Our Lord says, 'However much you try to escape from death, it will find you.' Thus, you cannot avoid it by escaping. Our Lord says, 'Verily, Allah will never change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves.'

First, we have to change ourselves. We envied no one. We treated no one as an enemy. We didn't create tribalism. In our city, we can continue to live in peace as our fathers did."

Sheikh Zekeriya began to explain his strategy to the chiefs who were staring at him with wondering and astonished eyes:

"Step 1: Pray until the trouble is over. Oh, my people! We have to accept this calamity, this problem as something we need to face. This community is facing a problem! But we should never forget this, Allah knows about it.

This problem has befallen us and our nation. Our Creator sees and knows this. It may be because of our past actions or because of our faults. Allah may be testing us; we can't be sure of the reason. All we can do is pray to Allah to help us overcome it. He who hears and sees everything will show us the way out. Therefore, first, our religious scholars, *hafizes*, and our devoted religious people should read the Koran and pray continuously. We will all pray similarly until we overcome this problem. Undoubtedly, it is He who hears and accepts our prayers.

Step 2: Behave wisely. Oh, my people! We will rely on and pray to Allah. Of course, praying alone will not be sufficient. We must contribute as well.

We must use the reason given by Allah, who grants 'wisdom to whoever he wills, and whoever is granted wisdom has indeed been granted much good.' Thus, we must behave wisely. By using the reason granted to us and all our other means, we must drive this trouble away. After we do this, we should trust in Allah. Allah is sufficient for us, and He is the best disposer of affairs.

Now, let's think and consider some things. Who can attack and harm us, the Torabors [insurgents] or the Janjaweed? Insurgents can't do much harm. They ask for our support and help. They know us more or less, know our feats and beliefs. They know that we will not support them, but neither will we support the other side. We had told them that bloodshed couldn't be the solution and we wouldn't support it. Now, even if they want to harm us because we are not supporting them, it will be very local and therefore limited.

As before, the main damage will be caused by the Janjaweed. Now, who are the Janjaweed? What is their problem? What do they want? What are they doing? We shall consider this. We know that they comprise nomadic tribes. The majority of them are uneducated because of their nomadic attributes. They travel together on horses or camels. They were told that "the Darfur people of African origin have rebelled; they want to create an independent state," and since they have heard this, they are not letting us live and will kill us all. Therefore, they see us as neutral allies of the insurgents because the Arab-origin people in our community are a minority.

Well, how do they act? They tried to take the towns and villages they entered by force by usurping and looting their properties. When their desires aren't satisfied, they sometimes sweep over everything while unmercifully killing masses. These people covet others' herds and properties. They act in this manner under the pretext that we will support the insurgents or rebel; in such a case, let's look at what we can do.

Oh, my people! I implore you to be prepared. Bring all your possessions here; bring your animals and herds. If the Janjaweed's concern is possessions, we will say, 'Here are all our possessions.' We will give them everything they want. Allah has given us these possessions, and He is mighty enough to give us better. By relinquishing them, we will drive away this problem.

Oh, my people! When they come, we will ask them what they want. We will say to them, 'If you want camels, here they are; if you want horses, here they are; if you want cows and herds, here they are; if you want goods, here they are.' We will give them whatever they want.

Step 3: Help your enemies. Oh, my people! I know this isn't easy. Allah says to us, 'Repel an evil deed with a good one.' We can't annihilate evil by doing evil. If someone enters your house and steals your blanket or any other belongings, do not challenge it. If he steals your possessions, request Allah to give them back. Your rights will not be ignored by Allah. He created two worlds; what you lose in this world will be present in the other.

Even when someone considers us an enemy and loots our goods, don't we, the people of Darfur, say, 'He stole your worldly goods! Allah created two worlds; Allah willing, the victimized will receive his rights soon in the next world.' And after the robbery, when someone wants to retaliate, don't we say, 'Your goods were stolen, not your mind!'

Then, Oh, my people! When they arrive to take your possessions, do not argue with them and cause unnecessary violence. In fact, help them take your goods and go. If they take your bed, say to them, 'If you need a chair, I can give you one.' If they want your pot, say, 'If you need dishes, I can give them, too.'

Do not ever oppose them, no matter what they want to take. Do not create trouble. Do not speak nastily to them. Let them take whatever they want. Help them carry your goods away, if required.

Step 4: A son's death is preferable to a town's destruction. Oh, my people! Even doing all of this will be insufficient. When they come, even our goods and whatever else we give may not be enough. They will harass us to take us out of here, they will kill some or maybe all of us. They will want to entrap us in the devil's evil trap. But we won't respond to them. Even if they kill us, we won't respond to them.

Oh, my people! Maybe they will not kill all of us, but they might murder our beloved sons before our very eyes. They will believe that we will oppose such an action. All of you can say, 'How can we accept such a thing?' When you have the right to respond, you might not approve of showing extreme patience. We shouldn't forget our proverb: 'Katlül Veled vela harab el beled (A son's death is preferable to a town's destruction).' If we seek revenge instead of making sacrifices, our city will be destroyed and our people will perish.

Oh, my people! Even in such a case, we will never respond to them, no matter how difficult it is, no matter how painful it is. We will bury our children quietly. We will not complain to anyone. All of our complaints will be to Allah only. Instead of being a killer, be a victim. Instead of being an oppressor, be the oppressed. We will not harm them in any way in this world. But the Day of Judgment will certainly arrive! Then, only then, we will confront them.

#### Step 5: Reliance and Patience

Oh, my people! Our ancestors say, 'If you release the grudge in your hearts, you destroy towns.' I, too, say that if someone harms you and if you plan to harm them in return, then you will destroy your town. I say, don't do this! Don't release the grudge in your hearts. Leave the rest to Allah. Allah rewards those who forgive and ameliorate.

Oh, my people! Those who acted in anger and released their grudges destroyed their towns today. And once more, I say to you, be patient. Leave the rest to Allah. He knows everything that happens and also what we think. We shouldn't hold grudges or harm anybody, even those who consider us their enemies. We shouldn't hate anybody. Leave the rest only to Allah! Now, if anyone doesn't agree with this, they may go. But those who agree will promise to be patient and endure. We were born here, we grew up on this land, and we will die here if required. Nothing will happen to us except what Allah has decreed for us. He is our Guardian and Helper."



I was fascinated with the old wise man's succinct and riveting telling. Oh Allah, what a perception, what a heart it had! I felt the complete honor and pleasure of being a human being. What a magnificent feeling, witnessing sacrifice, altruism, goodness, good morality, purity, belief, resolution, wisdom, reasoning, struggle, and patience!

As he had told us, after all the participants had been confirmed and registered, everyone dispersed. Soon, the chieftains took a decision. Only 4 out of the 20 villages in Umşalaya, namely, Silbo, Burtu, Burave, and Cuguma, rejected this decision and migrated instead. The remaining villages and the Umşalaya people resolved to stay back and resist. When they accepted this decision unanimously, they were ready to create the most distinguished epic of our age!

### **WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?**

Who doesn't have wise man, falls in the well.

Darfur Proverb

### **Phases**

The people of Umşalaya didn't know what would hit them or how would this end after they decided to struggle. They did what they should have. They thought they had made the right decision and believed they could get rid of the evil with kindness. Achieving this was no doubt not an easy job, and they would have to bear the unpredictable consequences. Perhaps they couldn't succeed and would end up in the same or worse situation than that of their brothers. No one except Allah may know this.

### **First Phase: Extortion**

Not long after this historical decision, rebellions increased almost all over Darfur, and the number of armed militias started to rise. On mountains and in ungovernable rural areas, all villages and towns that might possibly support rebel militias were in great danger. The Janjaweed, who were mostly immigrant tribesmen and were the biggest and best organized force against rebels, started to put pressure on villages in order to maintain control and restrict this possible support.

This pressure and control that at first started with patriotic aims and goodwill got out of control over time; goods obtained from the villages that were emptied for security caused unwanted things to happen when the aggressive and marauding Janjaweed became more active.

Some villages were being attacked in order to get more loot. Despite the fact that some Janjaweed did not consent to and even tried to stop the attacks, stopping those armed and powerful groups was not an easy task.

Most of the Arab tribes around Umşalaya were armed, but the others were not. The ones that had chosen to go went away, and the rest stayed, figuring out what to do in the future. Sheikh Zekeriya consulted with the Arab tribes and asked for their opinion. In a meeting with them, he called out,

-Civil war has broken out and soon it will reach us. Our ancestors lived in peace here; that is what we want to continue doing. Let's leave this place to our kids just like our fathers left it here for us: in a way they will live in peace and tranquility.

My brothers! Those who torture or give harm to each other will surely suffer the consequences. Those who treat fairly and behave kindly to each other will assuredly get a reward. We either follow the steps of demon or go the way of Allah. We should pore on who would land upon both feet in the end.

My brothers! White has no superiority to black, nor Arabs to Persians, nor southerners to northerners. Everybody is equal like the teeth of a comb. Allah forbids racism, nationalism, and tribalism. The ones that are preeminent in the presence of Allah are the ones with faithfulness and goodness.

Our fathers and ancestors lived here like brothers. We, too, have been living together in peace for a long time. Some ignorants among us lit the fire of sedition and set a brother against another. We should be careful and alert. We shouldn't play a role in this instigation. On the contrary, we should stop it. What I mean is that you shouldn't envy, do tribalism, or treat us as your enemies. Let's live in peace like brothers, just like our fathers did.

The Arab tribal leaders listened to the words of Sheikh Zekeriya and said, "Yes, we got armed but now that you consulted us and ask for our opinions, we won't ruin our town. We will be the guardians of it." Upon this, Sheikh Zekeriya and the other magnates of tribal leaders said, "Then we, as settled tribes here, may prepare all food you need for your protection and your horses."

The Arab tribes' declaring that they were with the native population and would take responsibility in any case of danger would provide a big advantage. Not only would this association be a deterrent factor for the Janjaweed but it would also partly eliminate ethnic discrimination against natives' as a pretext for civil war.

The strategy of Sheikh Zekeriya and the common sense and good intentions of the Arabs in the region would ensure synergy and unity, so possible attacks would be defeated much more easily. The people of Umşalaya were now expecting similar attacks to those their brothers had come under. Wealth and booty were crucial for the Janjaweed. This most sensitive spot was discovered, and Sheikh Zekeriya and Umşalaya's tribal leaders got prepared both psychologically and strategically.

Not long after they made their decision, the first Janjaweed lot entered. Sheikh Zekeriya and the Umşalaya leadership met the Janjaweed gathered at the center of the town and asked them what they wanted.

- Rebels who want to split our country and establish another state get help from you and your villages. They want to gain dominance and waged a war after they got armed. When they split the country, they will assign their tribes and destroy us. We will fight whoever supports them. You are one of them. For now, we will let you take leave of here. Go away from here before you have a big problem.

It was going to be hard to convince this big lot that was seeing red, who not only had forgotten that the group in front of them was their brothers but also was ready to attack and fight. They were in search for revenge and prepared for their enemies.

As a matter of fact, this was a harsh meeting. Umşalaya's destiny was closely tied to the result of this meeting. If they couldn't prepare for the Janjaweed, Umşalaya would be washed away with blood and tears. On the other hand, if they could, this would be the first step in a big epic.

Tribal leaders and other magnates began to speak:

- Why do you treat us like this? You know us. Even if there are ones who don't know us, you are sure to have some who know us and our people. Ask them about us. We harm neither ourselves nor others. We don't fight either with you or with others. We don't want brothers' blood to be spilled or people to be homeless far from their land. Now that we don't have a problem with you, you shouldn't have a problem with us.

We are living here with people of many different tribes, as you know. Fur, Arab, Mesalit, Zegava, Tema, we are all together and we are at one with you. We won't be on any side in this war. We are against spilling the blood of brothers. Even if you kill all of us, we won't requite.

Then Sheikh Zekeriya began to speak:

- I don't mind telling you that we won't leave our land. We were born, have been raised, and will die here. Homes, fields, families, the past, and everything of us is here. Our hearts beat here. We don't give any harm either to you or to others. Nor shall we in the future. Whatever you do to us, we won't react.

We want to live humanely and peacefully in our homeland. You see that the notables of all the tribes including the Arab ones are here. We all live here in peace, and all of us are on the same page.

We are taking no side in this war and conflict. However, if you still want camels from us, here they are. If you wish horses, just take them. If you need cattle and sheep

herds, see them right here. We can give them. Tell if you want zura, sugar, oil, or any other things, we will give them too.

The Janjaweed, bewildered at this determined and confident attitude, started to quarrel. While some were saying that agreeing with the leaders wasn't right because they were all rebels and they would cause trouble in the following days, some of the others were claiming that they shouldn't act in a hurry regarding not appearing to support any rebels. They said it was better to get their goods and leave because if anyone made a mistake, the Janjaweed would interfere. This town was under their control.

After the leaders finished quarreling and made a decision, they were told, "For now, we won't injure you. We will leave without giving any harm to you. However, be aware that if we see your smallest mistake, we won't forgive you!"

It was the first time they had come across people who gave their goods voluntarily. Moreover, they didn't face any violence or reaction. They were treated humanely and heard plausible explanations. They listened carefully to these self-confident, fearless, sensible, conscious, and influential leaders and they were impressed. In the face of this self-confident attitude, they were also shocked. The anger and enmity among the Janjaweed, who were blocked by this wise and decent attitude, diminished. In fact, now it was the Umşalaya people's turn to have psychological superiority.

Sheikh Zekeriya's strategic plan had given its first good result; he had dealt with them abruptly and made use of their weakness. He had dealt a death blow instead of getting it and he spoiled their game. The Sheikh lost no time as soon as he heard that they had made their decision. He wanted them to give their goods just as he had told the other tribal leaders and leaders of Umşalaya. He and the magnates brought horses, camels, and cattle and sacks of zura and sugar. They handed over all the goods to the Janjaweed.

The first and greatest peril had been escaped, but that didn't mean that it was over. They wouldn't know how the Janjaweed would behave after their shock was over; some of them would behave independently and would cause very much harm in the town, thinking that this toleration was wrong. For this reason, Sheikh Zekeriya and the people of Umşalaya had to be alert and careful. The attacks that started in 2003 would continue for 2 years continuously.

### **Second Phase: Harassment and Deterrence**

The Janjaweed set up a headquarters in the north of Umşalaya; sometimes thousands of them were gathered in these military quarters. Being one of the most important Janjaweed headquarters in West Darfur, it became a rather busy place; sometimes hundreds of Janjaweed were moving from the headquarters to raid, passing Umşalaya villages on their way.

The people of Umşalaya were making their living by agriculture and husbandry like most people in Darfur. After the civil war erupted, husbandry became a blight on the land rather than a means of existence. Most of the Janjaweed were migrants, and they were living on husbandry. Because that was their only way to make ends meet they had a weakness for cattle. They got quite large numbers of herds from the villages and towns that had been left or plundered. Most of the herds in Darfur were seized by Janjaweed.

Area residents started to keep away from husbandry, and the few herds left to them were in danger; it was often heard that those herds were plundered. Under those circumstances, feeding the animals was more asking for trouble than providing income.

For that reason, everyone stayed away from husbandry and did agriculture for a living, and zura was their main nourishment. Zura kernels that we would call white corn are eaten after they are milled into flour, then are mashed with water in a pot and cooked on fire. What zura is for Darfur people is what wheat means for us or what rice is for the Far East.

The main dish is cooked in another pot, and pieces of zura mash are dipped into, so they are eaten together; it is almost impossible to eat it without anything because it can only be swallowed with a stew. The name of this sticky and hard-to-swallow dough is *aside*, and the stew is called *mulah*.

Most of the people in Umşalaya harvest once a year. They start cultivating the fields after rains start in June. Some plant zura, some plant duhun (a kind of maize), and some plant peanut, and November and December are harvest time. Everyone saved the amounts they needed and sold the rest at bazaars in order to buy their needs such as sugar, oil, etc. A family of five or six can survive on approximately \$100–500; they can lead average lives with this little amount. Usually, however, this amount isn't enough; more is needed to buy dresses, slippers for feet, and furniture and even more is needed for kids who go to school. For this reason, even one corn seed is very important to them.

Hundreds of Janjaweed gathering in quarters were passing through crop fields instead of going near them in order both to be close to water sources and to feed their animals, and they were destroying hundreds of thousands of square meters of fields along the way. Since there was no authority for complaints, the people of the area endured this difficult situation in silence and tried to live off of their remaining crops, but the fields they looked forward to harvesting all year were so devastated that anyone who had no idea and had seen them would have thought they had been hit by a grasshopper plague.

Two years passed in this way for Umşalaya; the people couldn't even find *aside*, let alone *mulah*, and the *aside* was hard to swallow alone. Those who had zura gave some to those who didn't, and those who had money did the same. Pain was shared, and so was happiness, and victory was going to be shared, too. They should have been together in unity and without giving up, and that was exactly what happened.

### **Third Phase: Plunder and Rout**

When there is a civil war and security isn't ensured by state authority, preventing militia forces' torture, injustice, plunder, and routing becomes impossible; controlling hundreds or thousands of armed people is unfeasible. These armed people first use their guns for more innocent things. However, most of them forget the first aim and see themselves as absolute rulers and owners of territory, being seduced by guns and violence.

Indeed, these people took on a task in the territory, endangering their lives and comfort, and many of them died or became disabled. None of them was a machine, so they needed more money compared with settled people. Most of them had families that needed money and other people they were responsible for. Now that they had left their homes to carry out duties here, their endangered lives that they were leading far from their sweet homes and families were sure to come at a price.

They required money for food, smoking, having fun, buying gas or cars, guns, to give to their families, and for various other needs. Who would pay for all these? A little amount of money would be insufficient to fulfill these needs. In a short-term chaotic environment, these costs could be forgotten if fighters went back home before other people even realized what had happened. On the contrary, in a long-term civil war, costs and needs are of great importance. If the militias do not have a government or authority to turn to for the compensation of their efforts and risks, they are obliged to obtain it themselves. Consequently, they begin to take these methods for granted.

As soon as warriors start taking their own money, chaos increases. Responsibility replaces the tasks they once took on. When they believe that they are responsible, they start to think that they should do whatever necessary. From this breaking point, much that is haram becomes halal. When fighters consider themselves as soldiers, policemen, and civil servants, in short, as the government, they wish to be abided without being questioned just like the government. If need be, they are as despotic as a government.

In such civil war environments, area residents usually fulfill warriors' needs, and the warriors take their money for themselves; they take shares from the people's goods regardless of the fact that the people have no way to replace things. No warrior can behave reasonably at this point, but many people don't agree to share their goods easily. This will inevitably increase the number of deaths and make any knots more complex.

Owing to these reasons, the militia performed actions that went against the villagers, irrespective of the side the villagers supported. They were quarreling with each other on behalf of the villagers, while at the same time harassing the villagers who unwittingly, or maybe wittingly, paid for the civil war in both material and moral terms. This is only one of many such instances.

Some uncontrolled Janjaweed were selling vehicles and goods, which they got by forestalling the rebels (the Torabors) who were fighting in the mountains. Rebels were knowingly buying the people's plundered properties even though they were claiming that they were fighting for their salvation of them. Both plunderers and buyers had their reasonable grounds, but it was the local people who were suffering and being harmed over and over. Despite this betrayal, each warring faction will still claim to be fighting on behalf of the people.

Umşalaya faced many situations like this. Serious conflicts occurred in other residential areas where the Janjaweed attacked and the people didn't hand over their goods and herds willingly; these conflicts sometimes ended with villages destroyed. The fact they had already planned to empty these villages and towns indirectly caused these incidents to happen more frequently. The Janjaweed often entered Umşalaya and its villages randomly, leaving on their way after they got what they needed for themselves and their animals. The people were giving these armed groups what they wanted with no resistance.

At first, the Janjaweed thought this situation would be temporary; they expected that the local people wouldn't endure and would eventually react. They might have held out at first, but their destiny was to be like the others; they would eventually have to leave—the Janjaweed were almost sure of it.

Months passed, and no one had retaliated yet. Some of the attacks were getting more violent. The Janjaweed were not only trampling over fields and lands but now plundering the houses randomly. Nobody reacted much except for a few local and limited cases; as Sheikh Zekeriya had requested, the people weren't reacting when the Janjaweed were taking whatever they wanted, and some villagers were even helping them to carry their things.

#### **Fourth Phase: Killing**

None of the people of Umşalaya were killed. By that point, they had been oppressed so much; the majority of their herds were plundered, most of their wealth and goods were gone, and they grew even poorer; nevertheless, they were not obliged to live in camps and could stay in their own homes.

Among the Janjaweed, there were those who didn't like these circumstances and were angry and mad because the people wouldn't give up and just leave; they could neither object to their leaders' decisions nor accept this result. They thought that after a while, Umşalaya would be fed up with the harassment and would leave their land. Umşalaya didn't give up, though; the people were still resisting, and the Janjaweed had to find a solution. It was time they brought the people to their knees. Now that plundering their properties and harassing and terrorizing them hadn't worked, they thought they should start killing them in order to make them afraid; they thought they should attack occasionally, find pretexts, and kill some, saying, "They won't migrate unless we start killing them." The houses would be broken into both night and day, people would be provoked, and any reaction would be used as an excuse

to kill them. After some of them were murdered, people would think it was going to be their turn one day and would leave the towns.

Umşalaya was getting prepared for a new day. The rugged mother of one house, Emine, had already made a fire to cook aside. After grinding zuras she picked from the bottom of sack, pouring them into a coal-black aluminum pot and adding water, she was mixing it. She was going to make mulah in the same pot after the aside was cooked, but first she weeded out the plants she had picked from near land. While a young girl was washing clothes in a washbasin in one corner of a quad, a small child was playing in the sand. Ahmed, the father of the house, was busy feeding his horse and the two scrawny goats that remained to him. He was completely unaware of anything when he heard clops, supposing that it was young people rushing downtown and paying no attention at all. He smilingly told his wife, "These youngsters get very giddy sometimes. They don't care if there are old or sick people around. We were like them when we were young, too. We didn't think much and wanted to act according to our whims."

Emine said, "Yeah, they say youthfulness and madness are brothers. They can't even play games due to terrible news. Let it be so. They can't enjoy their youth. Also there is no one to be disturbed in our neighborhood." "You wouldn't get mad even if they ruined here. Don't be so concessive. We are going through a difficult period; no one knows what will happen tomorrow. They have to grow mature as early as possible. Otherwise they may break down if something happens to us."

Shortly after he finished his words, some Janjaweed spurred their horses and directed them to the quad, with guns in their hands. Emine knocked over the pot as she recoiled desperately. The small child ran to his mother in tears; the teenager threw the washbowl and did the same as her brother.

Ahmed approached the Janjaweed aghast. While one was pushing him, another was checking if there was anything they could get from the house. Another approached a beautiful and charming horse for which Ahmed had paid a pretty good amount that he had saved just before the civil war erupted. He did all of his tasks with his horse, both plowing the fields and going to the bazaar. When they wanted to go somewhere, he harnessed it to a cart and they went as a family. His horse was his hand, foot, lover, source of income, and everything.

Ahmed made a move on impulse when he saw a Janjaweed going toward his horse. He fell down, having been hit in the back; his wife turned toward him, but she was stopped. His children and wife looked at him fearfully, but when he fell down, the anger and tension of the first moment was eased. He remembered the decision of Sheikh Zekeriya and other magnates of the tribe. "What am I doing?," he thought. "I'm putting both my family and Umşalaya in jeopardy. I need to endure."

On the other hand, he adored his horse. He made another move and got hit on his head this time. His children and wife started crying, having seen the blood dripping from his head.



Meanwhile, a Janjaweed who couldn't unbind the horse stood up in rage and unloaded his gun into the horse, maybe because of anger or embarrassment at being incapable of untying it. Who knows why?

Ahmed couldn't believe his eyes. His beautiful horse fell to the ground with its huge body after some staggering. It felt as though it wasn't his horse that had been shot but his very own body. He tried to stand up desperately but he went weak at the knees; he wasn't himself. Through the blood that had been shed from his head and mixed with his tears, he crawled across to his horse, yelling constantly, "Why? Why did you shoot him? If you had asked me, I would have untied it and given to you. How did you kill such a beautiful horse?"

Another Janjaweed approached him coldly. Ahmed, not aware of anything, was crying. Emine realized that the Janjaweed was aiming at Ahmed and rushed out to him, but with a gunshot that rang out at the same time with thunder, he collapsed just like his horse. The Janjaweed rode their horses out of sight.

They didn't only kill the son-in-law of Sheikh Zekeriya. At different times and places, they murdered 40–50 people for different reasons, and there were never any outbursts, reprisals, or rebellions after any of these incidents. The Umşalaya residents neither chased down the murderers nor cried out for revenge; they just buried their children silently. And even though this didn't happen only once, or even a hundred times, they continued to follow the same strategy even having lost a number of their children. The Janjaweed now understood that they couldn't make the people Umşalaya afraid by killing them. They would either exterminate all of them or accept their fiasco.

### **Fifth Phase: Desperation**

From the beginning of the civil war in 2003, harassment, intimidation, bloodshed, looting continued incessantly. Despite two years of this torment, the people of Umşalaya would not leave the area; there was not even the slightest sign that they would abandon their lands. They endured everything they had undergone without responding to so much nefariousness; together they bore hunger, poverty, and all sorts of distress. Janjaweed go mad. In spite of all possible means that had been tried to daunt them, they showed no hesitation in their decisions.

Once I asked Sheikh Zekeriya, "Didn't you complain about this much persecution and torment?" "Complain to whom?" he responded. Our complaints are to Allah; we lodge complaints about them to Allah. When I said, "Was there no one who stood up? How could everybody resist this torture?" He answered, "Thank God that most of my people held out. Unless Allah tranquilized our hearts, we couldn't withstand. The people did not attempt to do any harm even when they saw their enemies, their sons' killers, at the market. Except for the ones who used their right to self-defense because of their families, no one retaliated.

Once it was determined that Umşalaya would not surrender easily, there was only one thing the Janjaweed could do: a total attack on the people! In this case, anyone who could do so

would flee, and otherwise they would be killed. But there was a problem: killing them all was almost unthinkable.

The people of the area did not consist of just one tribe; men from at least 20–30 different clans lived together there. Apart from native African tribes like the Fur, Zegava, Mesalit and Tema, Arab clans also lived in the area. In the event of a total attack, it would not be possible to differentiate the tribes, and declaring war against all of them would not be plain sailing at all. Separately, Umşalaya was a big city with 15,000–20,000 inhabitants, and with the surrounding towns, approximately 50,000 people called the city their home.

When all of the circumstances were considered, the situation was not pleasant for Janjaweed who longed for a total attack. On the other hand, as time passed, some of them started to have positive opinions about the people and were convinced that they would do no harm, and thus there arose serious discord among them: The Janjaweed, a homogeneous and solid power, had for the first time been split in two, with one group thinking that they had made enough concessions to Umşalaya and it was high time to finish this job. Although the people who shared that opinion were in the minority, their voices were swelling and they provoked everyone. In contrast, the other group felt that the people of Umşalaya had done no harm to anyone and should be left in peace. Even though the Janjaweed held all the power, they were up against the wall. The people of Umşalaya, owing to their wise strategy, had disabled their enemies softly and without using guns.

### **Sixth Phase: The Decision**

Desperate Janjaweed contemplated and discussed for days what they would do, and in the elapsed time, they did not receive any responses or experience any harm from these people. In other parts of Darfur—and the rest of Africa—if such a thing had happened, there would have been a bloodbath. But even when the residents saw their sons' killers at the market while shopping they did not interfere with, attack, or take revenge against them.

One of the tribal chieftains explained the situation in this way: “When the attackers usurp our five to ten cows we sit patiently and do not retaliate, yes! We supplicate Allah that He will augment our stolen cows' offspring, and we hope that we will find our usurped cows as a huge horde in the afterlife. Another tribal leader said, “The ones that are mistreating us do not realize that they do the greatest harm to themselves. Sooner or later we will regain what we lost. By killing us, they indeed give life to us and kill themselves. They lost forever themselves as well as their families but they do not see this reality now.” The people of Umşalaya knew that they would not settle old scores in this world if they hoped to score in eternity.

Because of the situation in Umşalaya, most of the Janjaweed started to have their actions on their consciences; the number of men who felt that they had been afflicting good and innocent people was increasing. Then again, at the marketplace in Umşalaya, they could move about freely, safely shopping, eating, and drinking; they walked between the houses with their guns at their backs though they had not experienced the merest intervention, maltreatment, or attack. In none of the surrounding regions could they shop with such convenience; on one level, destroying Umşalaya would hurt them as well. With the people who lived here, they could have dialogue like in the old days without hostility, chat in coffeehouses, and even joke

despite the past events. They would never find such good people and such a peaceful and safe environment. The Janjaweed were at the threshold of a tough decision: should they continue their oppression and persecution or give up?

### **Seventh Phase: The Victory**

The oppression, torture, looting, and killings had had no effect on the people of Umşalaya; faced with their steely nerves and determination, the opposition had tended to fall apart. And however long the cruelty continued, the result would not change. For two years, the people did not show the slightest dissolution. Accordingly, the Janjaweed would maintain the same resolution and not swerve from their dignified stance.

The people of Umşalaya trained their enemies through positive means and started to earn the Janjaweed's respect; the community was near to bringing the Janjawees to their knees. Roughly two years after the things had started, one of the regional Janjaweed leaders came to Sheik Zekeriya and said, "How strange you are!! Whatever we do, you did not migrate nor you opposed us. From now on we definitely believe that you are good people. You defeated us with your manner. You can be sure that we will no longer do harm to you. If someone from the outside wants to do harm to you, he has to pass us." On this historical day, an end was put to the fighting at Umşalaya city, and the explicit threat abated. This was a very big day. On this same day, the people who had knowingly or unknowingly tortured their brothers came to their senses and were released from the traps of evil; this was surely a big day for both sides. One party could celebrate the victory of being on the right side, and the other could experience the gratification of moving away from the wrong side.

Isn't that the biggest mission of the ones who follow the true path, to warn those who are falling off the path and lead them to ways of salvation? Isn't this the real brotherhood, striving for salvation even if people do not notice? Planting goodness, not evil?

See, the things that happened at Umşalaya are for us and perhaps many others are the realization of a dream, a utopia. This is a kind of a proof that it is possible for good to beat evil in this world. Without shedding anyone's blood, doing no harm, tolerating pain, making sacrifices, enduring, returning good for evil, praying and trusting in Allah, Umşalaya won an untold victory!

### **Liberation from the Blockade**

Having obtained a promise of peace and safety and escaped from great danger, Umşalaya gave a sigh of relief. If they had not acted wisely and persisted in their decisions, they would have experienced the disasters that had befallen other villages and towns.

Although they had passed through the greatest danger, that did not mean that the danger had passed completely; killings, looting, poverty, and distress had not finished but diminished. This was because the people ran out of resources; apart from their lands, houses, and items that were needed for survival, there was nothing left. During the civil war, the danger would continue swinging above their heads like the sword of Damocles.

Some centers that held political power and some Janjawees who worried about this outcome

again would watch for an opportunity; they could attack once more at the first opportunity. Thus, the people Umşalaya should stand on their dignity. Owing to the fact that they were conscious of the situation, later on the solidarity of both native and Arab tribes would further increase, and Umşalaya would be more prepared for new attacks.

Nomadic Arabs in the region guaranteed that there would not be any other attacks in the future and that if there were, they would defend Umşalaya against them. Thereafter, Umşalaya and the surrounding villages began to live a little more securely. With the impact of this trust, they began to work more and cultivate more of their lands; they could now farm the more distant fields that had been inaccessible because of the security issues. A tree of hope bushed out in the region and no one wanted this sprout to wither. Everyone worked heartily and struggled to survive.

The existence of the Janjaweed headquarters near Umşalaya to the north was one of the most important obstacles against that struggle; the number of Janjaweeds there at times added up to more than several thousand; Umşalaya was in one sense surrounded by the Janjaweed forces, a situation that might be called a sort of siege. When the forces deployed at the headquarters passed through Umşalaya, they still caused huge losses to the people; the crops and lands that had been cultivated with the hard labor of the people were still being continuously trod upon under the feet of hundreds of horses and camels.

Influencing these forces, who were armed and inclined to assault, was like getting blood from a stone; the people were obliged to content themselves with whatever they could save. They were on the brink of poverty, and even the wealthy lost their means during this time period. The people endured and continued struggling to survive, but the pain and distress they suffered came to a point that no one could ignore: If this situation persisted for another couple of years, the people would perish.

The tribe chieftain of the Bedouin Arabs, who had played a significant role in protecting Umşalaya, observed this situation and was convinced that this problem could not continue. He decided that it was wrong damage the town any longer, and he promised to try his best to dispatch all of the Janjaweeds at the headquarters to another region.

Making a decision and implementing it, though, among groups that could be called irregular armies is difficult; the defiant members who do not want to obey authority cause trouble. Here the same situation was also the point of the question; the chief took a risk for peace in Umşalaya by asking to replace a huge headquarters.

The chief had previously believed in Umşalaya, taken her under his wings, and established his first position by shielding himself from hundreds, maybe thousands, of Janjaweeds. He held a strong position within a crowded tribe. For this reason, no one internal could have opposed his decision, but in this case, he had difficulty; his opponents would not accept easily.

The chief met some of the commanders and told them about the damage and the unsustainable situation. They answered,

- You persuaded us that the people of Umşalaya are good. We also witnessed their good behaviors and goodness. But despite this, we are not sure that in the future, a group of

them won't give trouble, support rebels, or attack us. We did not show much opposition to your strong opinion about protecting them because there wasn't any evidence or reason to. However, now you want to change the location of the headquarters. If we leave here, how can we control these regions?

- If I had seen a situation under which these regions should be controlled or under continuous supervision, I would not have guaranteed that we would be safe or promised to protect them. Yet these people reminded us again that we are brothers and after everything still always treated us kindly. If they treated us kindly under the hardest and most troublesome situations, I don't believe they turn against us in an environment of trust.
- If we assume they won't give us trouble or cause danger, how can it be possible to transfer all of this men and equipment?
- I know this is not an easy and quick job. We can find a solution to this matter by talking it over. We first reveal our will on this issue. We can later make clear how and when we will do it.
- Before we reveal our will, everybody will want to know more or less the course of implementation. Unless we design the transfer, this uncertainty will make most of us uncomfortable.
- The job is not very complicated. Because there are no remaining security problems in the region, a more convenient location will be determined and it will be relocated there. Everybody will be free in their decisions: Who wants to go to the new headquarters will go, and who wants to return to his family can return.

With this meeting, which ended without a certain agreement, the Chieftain at least showed his desire to change the situation and at the same time gave the Janjaweed the opportunity to review the issue. After this consultation, the chief looked for more positive results, but a group of Janjaweed who had not been persuaded insisted on their old habits, and the more agreeable ones did not take an active role in eliminating the problem. Under these circumstances, no advancement could be seen on the issue of moving the headquarters and preventing the damage in Umşalaya.

At this stage, the Chieftain decided to maintain a more decisive attitude and gathered Janjaweed dignitaries. At this meeting, he declared that the safety of life and property in Umşalaya was under his protection; he wanted no one to break this protection and said they should disband in the shortest time as had been decided before.

According to Darfur's tribal traditions, damaging a protected place entailed waging war against the tribe that has given that protection; at this point, damaging Umşalaya would cause a new and bigger internal war. At this stage, it was not possible to run such a risk, so there was left only one way out: to empty the headquarters. This ultimatum from the chief meant release from the siege and, indeed, a second victory for Umşalaya.

Part 6.

### **A Journey in Shades of Gray**

Who doesn't have wise man, falls in the well.

Darfur Proverb

### **A beautiful and colorful world**

The people of Umşalaya found a third option, other than death or exile, that very few people might have imagined. Perhaps their method could lead mankind to remember that there are infinite numbers between two absolute numbers. People facing crises and conflicts can opt for a choice that best suits them and their conditions rather than two absolute choices.

Indeed, the residents illustrated that even crises have gray shades between absolute white and black, and we can choose any color from among the infinite choices. This applies to social and political issues as well.

Based on the intense crises that mankind has overcome, we have had to accept and contemplate the notion that partisanship need not be absolute; partial partisanship or partial neutrality might form an acceptable, serious, and discussible base and atmosphere and also function effectively.

Gray cannot be created if black and white insist on staying within their respective tones; it can only be created when black approaches white and white approaches black. Therefore, gray encompasses both black and white—the tone approaches the more dominant color.

In general, people tend to perceive their own stances as absolutely right and others' stances as absolutely wrong, and this perspective leads to conflict; no one wants to change their absolute stances, and thus conflict and violence have continued for millennia, causing unknowable suffering.

Yet, sooner or later, every color must accept this: black will be obliged to stay black perpetually if it effaces white and white will be condemned to be white forever if it annihilates black. Only then will either color realize the banality and simplicity of being merely a solid color and understand the need to have the beauty of gray shades and accent colors.

Besides declared and illegitimate external threats, armed men in a country should reconsider who and what they are fighting for once tens of thousands of cities have been burned down, millions of lives have been lost, and millions of families have been destroyed.

People consented to these ordeals and death to keep themselves alive, rebuild their lives, and restore law; they had to determine ways to accomplish these things—restore a civilization—in the face of perishing lives.

In cases such as these, conflicting parties can, without leaving their initial absolute points, meet on the accent colors by progressing toward meeting their opponents in the middle and choosing to offset their faults with the goal of ending people's sufferings.

This may be very difficult and tedious, but not impossible. The state is for its people, not the other way around; people who claim that they are fighting for the people—whether the state, rebels, militias, or whoever—have to take initiative and pay the price for ending civil wars that cost thousands and even millions of lives. Such an admirable proposal, which would doubtlessly save millions of innocent lives, isn't a retreat or cowardice but a heroic action that would be appreciated throughout history.

Therefore, we have to consider the struggles that appeal to life and keeping people alive rather than actions that kill or appeal to death. Everyone, at least those searching for peace, should endeavor to follow good, not evil, and help bring about peace.

### **1. Shade of Gray**

Along with an increase in rebellions, the number of armed militias also started to increase throughout Darfur. On the mountains and in the ungovernable rural areas, all the villages and towns that might have supported rebel militias were in great danger.

The Janjaweed, the most civil and the biggest and best-organized force against rebels, began pressurizing the villages to maintain control and restrict possible support to the rebels.

This pressure and control, which began as an act of patriotism and goodwill, eventually got out of control; goods obtained from the villages evacuated for security purposes caused numerous unwanted problems when the aggressive and marauding Janjaweed became more active.

Some villages were being attacked for the Janjaweed to get more loot. It was not easy to stop these armed and powerful groups, although some Janjaweed did attempt to do so.

Most of the Arab tribes around Umşalaya were armed, but some were not. Those who had chosen to leave left, and the rest stayed, trying to work out what they could do in the future. Sheikh Zekeriya consulted with the Arab tribes and asked for their opinion. In a meeting with them, he called out:

- Civil war has broken out and soon it will reach us. We have to decide our next steps before the flames of this fire reach us. Our ancestors lived in peace here with all the tribes. I believe that all men here sincerely want to continue this peace. Let's leave

this place for our children just like our fathers left it here for us: a place where they can live in peace and tranquility.

My brothers! Those who torture or harm each other will certainly suffer the consequences. Those who treat others fairly and behave kindly to each other will definitely be rewarded. We either follow the steps of the demon or go the way of Allah. We should contemplate on who would land on both feet in the end.

My brothers! White is not superior to black, nor Arabs to Persians, nor southerners to northerners. Everybody is equal like the teeth of a comb. Allah forbids racism, nationalism, and tribalism. Only the faithful and the good are preeminent in Allah's presence.

Our ancestors and fathers lived here like brothers. We, too, have been living together peacefully for a long time. Some ignorant among us has lit the fire of sedition and set one brother against another. We need to be careful and alert. We shouldn't play a role in this instigation. On the contrary, we should stop it. What I mean is that you shouldn't envy, engage in tribalism, or treat us as your enemies. Let's live peacefully like brothers, just like our fathers did.

The Arab tribal leaders listened to Sheikh Zekeriya's words and expressed their support:

- Yes, we have armed ourselves. A great majority of our people are ready to counter possible threats and attacks. Now that you have consulted us, asked for our opinions and searched for ways of living together peacefully, we won't let our town be ruined. We will apply ourselves to the utmost and be the guardians of this town.

Upon this, Sheikh Zekeriya and the other magnates and tribal leaders said:

- Your support and will to keep the peace alive is beyond all appreciation. We, as settled tribes here, will support you by preparing all the food you require for your protection and your horses.

The Arab tribes' declaration that they supported the native population and would take the responsibility of protecting them in case of any danger would provide a big advantage for the villagers. Not only would this association deter the Janjaweed but it would also eliminate ethnic discrimination between natives and Arabs as a pretext for civil war.

The people of Umşalaya didn't know what would hit them or how things would end after they decided to stay back and fight. They predicted the danger by considering possible threats and then made a choice; they believed that they had made the right decision and could thus use kindness to get rid of evil. Undoubtedly, they would have to carry a lot of water from the sea of sacrifice and endure countless pain along the corridors of toleration.



Perhaps they would be unsuccessful and end up in the same situation as their brothers, if not worse. No one except Allah could know this.

#### 1. Shade of Gray: Tribute

Wealth and plunder were crucial for the Janjaweed. Once this most sensitive spot was discovered, Umşalaya's tribal leaders prepared themselves both psychologically and strategically. Soon, the first expected Janjaweed entered. The Umşalaya leadership met the Janjaweed at the center of town and asked:

- What do you want from us?
- You and your villagers help rebels who want to split our country and establish another state. They want to gain dominance and have waged a war after arming themselves. When they divide the country, their tribes will gain power and they will destroy us. We won't let this happen. We will fight whoever supports them. You are one of them. For now, we will let you leave. Go away from here before any major problems are created.

It was going to be very difficult to convince these people who were seeing red, who had not only forgotten that the group in front of them included their brothers but were also parched with the fire of revenge and anger.

In fact, this was a crucial meeting; Umşalaya's destiny was heavily dependent on its results. If the leaders couldn't convince the Janjaweed, Umşalaya would be washed away with blood and tears, but if they could, it would be the first step in a big epic.

The tribal leaders and other magnates began to speak:

- Why do you treat us this way? You know us, you know who we are. Even if some of you don't, we are sure there are some of you who do know us and our people. Ask them about us.

We do not harm ourselves or others. Neither do we fight with anyone. We don't want to spill our brothers' blood or for people to be homeless far from their land. If we don't have a problem with you, you shouldn't have a problem with us.

As you know, we are living here with people belonging to many different tribes. Fur, Arab, Mesalit, Zegava, Tema, we are all together here and we are saying the same thing to you. We won't support any side in this war. We are against spilling our brothers' blood.

Then Sheikh Zekeriya began to speak:

- I don't mind telling you that we won't leave our land. We were born here, have been raised here, and we will die here. Our homes, fields, families, pasts, everything is

here. Our hearts beat here. We don't harm you or anyone else, nor shall we in the future.

We want to live humanely and peacefully in our homeland. You see here the magnates and leaders of all the tribes including the Arab, Fur, Zegava, Tema, and others. We all live here peacefully, and we believe the same thing.

We are supporting neither side in this war and conflict. If you want camels from us, we will give them to you as a goodwill gesture. If you want horses, you can take them. If you need cattle and sheep herds, they are right here. We can give them too. Tell us if you want zura, sugar, oil, or anything else, we will give everything to you.

The Janjaweed, bewildered at the villagers' determined and confident attitude, began quarreling. While some refused to agree with the leaders because they believed them to be rebels and were sure that they would cause trouble in the future, others claimed that they shouldn't judge immediately whether the villagers supported the rebels or not. They believed that it would be better to get their goods and leave; if anyone made a mistake, the Janjaweed would interfere. This town was under their control.

After the men finished quarreling, their leader made a decision. He said:

- For now, we will leave without harming any of you. However, beware, we will not forgive you for even a small mistake in the future!

This was the first time they had encountered villagers who voluntarily gave away their goods, without any violence or reaction. They were treated humanely and heard plausible explanations. They listened carefully to these self-confident, fearless, sensible, conscious, and influential leaders and were highly impressed by them. However, in the face of the villagers' self-confident attitude, they were also shocked. The anger and enmity among the Janjaweed, who were impeded by this wise and decent attitude, diminished. In fact, now it was the Umşalaya people's turn to have psychological superiority.

Umşalaya's strategic plan had given its first good result; they had dealt with the Janjaweed abruptly and used their weakness to their advantage. The Sheikh had dealt a death blow instead of getting it himself and had spoiled their game.

The Sheikh lost no time after he heard the Janjaweed's decision, he wanted the villagers to give away their goods just as he had discussed with the other tribal leaders and leaders of Umşalaya. He and the magnates brought horses, camels, and cattle and sacks of zura and sugar, and they handed over everything to the Janjaweed.

The first and greatest danger had been evaded, but the situation was far from safe. They didn't know how the Janjaweed would behave after they overcame their shock; some of them would behave independently and cause a lot of harm in the town, believing that this

tolerant attitude was wrong. Therefore, Sheikh Zekeriya and the people of Umşalaya had to be alert and careful. The attacks that began in 2003 would continue for two years.

## 2. Shade of Gray: Harassment and Deterrence

The Janjaweed had set up their headquarters in the north of Umşalaya. Sometimes thousands of them gathered in these military quarters. Being one of West Darfur's most important Janjaweed headquarters, it became a rather busy place; sometimes hundreds of Janjaweed moved from the headquarters to raid other villages, passing Umşalaya villages on their way.

Like most people in Darfur, the people of Umşalaya earned their living through agriculture and husbandry. After the civil war erupted, husbandry was considered a blight on the land rather than a means of existence. Most of the Janjaweed were migrants, and they also earned their living through husbandry. As that was their only way to make ends meet, they had a weakness for cattle; they took numerous herds from the villages and towns that had been left or plundered.

Villagers started to avoid husbandry, and the few herds left to them were constantly in danger; it was often heard that those herds had been plundered. Under these circumstances, feeding the cattle was seen as asking for trouble rather than providing income.

Therefore, everyone moved away from husbandry and turned to agriculture for a living. The zura was their main nourishment. Zura was for the Darfur people what wheat is for us or what rice is for the Far East.

The grain's consumption generally happens in this way: Zura kernels—which we would call white corn—are eaten after they are milled into flour and then mashed with water in a pot and cooked over fire. The main dish is cooked in another pot with meat, okra, fava bean, or various herbs depending on a family's means.

The prepared zura mash is served in a pot, and the stew is prepared in a different pot; then pieces of zura mash are dipped into the stew. The zura mash is only edible with the taste of the stew; it is almost impossible to eat it without anything else because it is so difficult to swallow otherwise: The name of this sticky and hard-to-swallow dough is *aside*, and the stew is called *mulah*.

Most of the people in Umşalaya harvest once a year. They start cultivating the fields after the rains start in June, and June, July, August, and September are the rainy season. Some villagers plant zura, some plant duhun (a kind of maize), and some plant peanut. November and December are harvest months. Everyone saves what they require and sell the rest at the bazaars to buy their needs such as sugar, oil, etc. A family of four or five can earn approximately \$100–300, but they can hardly lead average lives with this little amount;

more is needed to buy dresses, slippers, and furniture and even more is needed for kids who go to school. For this reason, even one corn kernel is very important.

Hundreds of Janjaweed who gathered at the headquarters were passing through crop fields and residential areas of Umşalaya and the villages in order to both be close to water sources and feed their animals. They were destroying hundreds of thousands of square meters of fields along the way. Because there was no authority for complaints, the people of the area endured this difficult situation in silence and tried to live off of their remaining crops.

The events didn't stop there. Cattle and sheep herds containing thousands of animals entered crop fields while they were grazing near Umşalaya and its villages, and no one could object. Shepherds, herding their animals to water resources in order to quench them, didn't pay attention to crop fields and didn't avoid destroying hundreds of thousands of additional square meters of fields in a similar way.

The only life source of Umşalaya people was often trampled by herds of horses, camels, sheep, and cattle. They looked forward to harvesting all year and were so devastated that anyone who had no idea and had seen them would have thought they had been hit by a grasshopper plague. People couldn't object, but they also could not afford to accept it. They had no other choice but to be patient and try to live off what remained in the fields and what they could save.

Two years passed in this way for Umşalaya; the people couldn't even find *aside*, let alone *mulah*, and the *aside* was hard to swallow alone. Those who had zura gave some to those who didn't, and those who had money did the same. Pain was shared, and so was happiness, and victory was going to be shared, too. They should have been together in unity, without surrendering, and that was exactly what happened.

### 3. Shade of Gray: Plunder and Rout

When there is a civil war and state authority cannot ensure security and as long as there are armed forces who are indifferent to their sides—in the Darfur case, the local militias—preventing torture, injustice, plunder, and routing becomes generally impossible. In such an authority gap, controlling thousands or even hundreds of armed people is unfeasible.

These armed people may first use their guns only for innocent things. However, most of them, having been seduced by guns and violence, eventually forget their first aim and see themselves as absolute rulers and owners of the territory.

Indeed, these armed people take on a task in the territory, endangering their lives and comfort, and many of them die or become disabled. None of them are machines, and they require more money than people who are settled in villages. Most of them have families and relatives they are responsible for and who require money. Now that they have left their

homes to perform their duties here, the lives they are leading far from their sweet homes and families are sure to come at a price.

They require money for food, smoking, having fun, buying gas or cars, guns, to provide for their families, and for various other needs. Who pays for all these? A little amount of money is insufficient to fulfill these needs. In a short-term, chaotic environment, these costs could be forgotten if the fighters returned home before anyone even realized what had happened. On the contrary, in a long-term civil war, these costs and needs are significant. If the militias cannot turn to a government or authority for the compensations due for their efforts and risks, they are obliged to obtain these compensations themselves. Consequently, they begin to take these methods for granted.

As soon as warriors start taking their own money, chaos ensues. "Responsibility" replaces the "tasks" they once took on, and when they believe they are responsible, they begin to believe that they should do whatever is necessary for completing that responsibility. From this breaking point, much that is *haram* becomes *halal*. When fighters consider themselves soldiers, policemen, and civil servants, in short, the government, they want to be followed without being questioned, just like a government. If necessary, they are as despotic as a government.

In such civil war environments, area residents usually fulfill fighters' needs, and the fighters take the people's money for themselves; they take shares from the people's goods regardless of the fact that the people have no way of replacing these things. No fighter can behave reasonably at this point, and people don't always agree to share their goods easily. This inevitably increases the number of deaths and complicates matters further.

Unfortunately, the militia in the Umşalaya region also performed actions that went against the people, irrespective of the side they supported. They were quarreling with each other on behalf of the people while at the same time harassing the people who unwittingly, or maybe wittingly, had been forced to pay for the civil war in both material and moral terms.

In one of many such instances, some uncontrolled Janjaweed were selling vehicles and goods that they had obtained by forestalling the rebel Torabors who were fighting in the mountains. Thus, the rebels were knowingly buying the people's plundered properties even though they claimed to be fighting for them. Both the plunderers and buyers had their reasonable grounds, but it was the local people who were suffering and being harmed continuously. Despite this contradiction, both sides still claimed to be fighting on the people's behalf.

Umşalaya faced many such situations. Serious conflicts occurred in other residential areas where the Janjaweed attacked and the people didn't willingly surrender their goods and herds; these conflicts sometimes ended with villages being completely destroyed. The fact that the Janjaweed had already planned to evacuate these villages and towns indirectly caused these incidents to occur more frequently.

The Janjaweed often entered Umşalaya and its villages randomly, leaving after they got what they required for themselves and their animals. The Umşalaya people were giving these armed groups what they wanted and offering no resistance. At first, the Janjaweed believed this situation to be temporary; they expected that the local people wouldn't endure their atrocities and would eventually react. They might protest first, but their destiny was exactly like the others; they would eventually have to leave—the Janjaweed were almost certain of it.

Months passed, but no one had retaliated yet. Some Janjaweed began expanding their attacks and looting. They were not only trampling over fields and lands but also entering and plundering the houses randomly. However, none of the villagers reacted much, except for a few local and limited cases. The people obeyed the unanimous decision of the tribes' chiefs, and they refused to react when the Janjaweed took whatever they wanted; some of them even helped them carry the loot.

#### **4. Shade of Gray: Killing**

None of the people of Umşalaya were killed.

By that point, they had been oppressed a lot; the majority of their herds had been plundered, most of their wealth and goods were gone, and they grew even poorer; nevertheless, they were not obliged to live in camps and could stay in their own homes. In addition, no loss of life occurred in any of the houses. The people lived in very hard conditions, but they at least were not exiled, and they cherished hope for the future.

Among the Janjaweed, there were those who didn't like these circumstances and were angry because the people wouldn't give up and just leave; they could neither object to their leaders' decisions nor accept this result. They thought that, after a while, the people of Umşalaya would be fed up with the harassment, plunder, route and deterrence and would leave their land. Umşalaya didn't give up, though; the people were still resisting, and the Janjaweed had to find a solution. It was time they brought the people to their knees.

Now that plundering local properties and harassing and terrorizing them hadn't worked, the Janjaweed thought they should start killing the area's residents to make them afraid; they thought they should attack occasionally, find pretexts, and kill some of the people, saying, "They won't migrate unless we start killing them."

Umşalaya was getting prepared for a new day. The rugged mother of one house, Emine, had already made a fire to cook *aside*. After grinding the zuras she had picked from the bottom of the sack, pouring them into a coal-black aluminum pot, and adding water, she was mixing it. She was going to make *mulah* in the same pot after the *aside* was cooked, but first she weeded out the plants she had picked from the nearby land. While a young girl was washing clothes in a wash basin in one corner of a quad, a small child was playing in the sand.

Ahmed, the father of the house, was busy feeding his horse and the two scrawny goats that remained to him. He was completely unaware of anything when he heard clops, but supposing that it was young people rushing downtown he paid no attention to them. Ahmed smiled at his wife as he said:

- These youngsters get very giddy sometimes. They don't care if there are old or sick people around. We were like them when we were young, too. We didn't think much and wanted to act according to our whims.
- Yeah, they say youthfulness and madness are brothers. They can't even play games due to the terrible news. Let it be. They can't enjoy their youth. Anyway, there is no one to be disturbed in our neighborhood.
- You wouldn't get mad even if they ruined everything here. Don't be so concessive. We are going through a difficult period; no one knows what will happen tomorrow. They have to grow mature as early as possible. Otherwise they may break down if something happens to us.

Shortly after Ahmed gently reproached his wife, some Janjaweed spurred their horses and directed them to the quad, with guns in their hands. Emine knocked over the pot as she recoiled desperately. The small child ran to his mother in tears; the teenager threw the wash bowl and did the same as her brother.

Ahmed approached the Janjaweed aghast. While one was pushing him, another was checking if there was anything they could get from the house. Another approached a beautiful and charming horse for which Ahmed had paid a goodly amount that he had saved just before the civil war erupted. He did all of his tasks with his horse, both plowing the fields and going to the bazaar. When they wanted to go somewhere, he harnessed it to a cart and they went as a family. His horse was his hand, foot, lover, source of income, and everything.

Ahmed made a move on impulse when he saw a Janjaweed going toward his horse. He fell down, having been hit in the back; his wife turned toward him, but she was stopped. His children and wife looked at him fearfully, but when he fell down, the anger and tension of the first moment was eased. He remembered the decision of Sheikh Zekeriya and other magnates of the tribe.

- What am I doing? I'm putting both my family and Umşalaya in jeopardy. I need to endure, he thought.

On the other hand, he adored his horse. He made another move and got hit on his head this time. His children and wife started crying, having seen the blood dripping from his head. Meanwhile, a Janjaweed who couldn't unbind the horse stood up in rage and unloaded his gun into the horse, maybe because of anger or embarrassment at being incapable of untying it.

Ahmed's beautiful horse fell to the ground with its huge body after some staggering. It felt as though it wasn't his horse that had been shot but his very own body. He tried to stand up desperately but he went weak at the knees; he wasn't himself. Through the blood that had been shed from his head and mixed with his tears, he crawled across to his horse, yelling constantly:

- Why? Why did you shoot him? If you had asked me, I would have untied it and given to you. How did you kill such a beautiful horse?

Another Janjaweed approached him coldly. Ahmed, not aware of anything, was crying. Emine realized that the Janjaweed was aiming at Ahmed and rushed out to him, but with a gunshot that rang out at the same time with thunder, he collapsed just like his horse. The Janjaweed rode their horses out of sight.

They didn't only kill the son-in-law of Sheikh Zekeriya. At different times and places, they murdered more than 40–50 people for different reasons, and there were never any outbursts, reprisals, or rebellions after any of these incidents. The Umşalaya residents neither chased down the murderers nor cried out for revenge; they just buried their children silently.

And even though this didn't happen only once, or even a hundred times, they continued to follow the same strategy even after having lost a number of their children. The Janjaweed now understood that they couldn't make the people of Umşalaya afraid by killing them. They would either exterminate all of them or accept their fiasco.

## **5. Shade of Gray: Desperation**

From the beginning of the civil war in 2003, harassment, intimidation, bloodshed, and looting continued incessantly. Despite suffering for two years, the people of Umşalaya refused to leave the area; they did not display the slightest sign of abandoning their lands. They endured everything they had undergone without responding to the Janjaweed's nefariousness. They bore hunger, poverty, and all sorts of distress. The Janjaweed inevitably went mad. In spite of all possible means they used to daunt the area's residents, the villagers showed no hesitation in their decisions.

Once I asked Sheikh Zekeriya:

- Didn't you complain about all the persecution and torment?
- Complain to whom? Our complaints are only to Allah; we lodge our complaints about them to Allah.
- Was there no one who stood up against them? How could everybody resist this torture?
- Thank God that most of my people resisted. Unless Allah tranquilized our hearts, we couldn't withstand the torture inflicted on us. The people did not attempt to harm



their enemies, their sons' killers, even when they saw them in the market. Except for the ones who used their right to self-defense because of their families, no one retaliated.

Once they realized that Umşalaya would not surrender easily, the Janjaweed could do only one thing: a complete attack on the Umşalaya people! If they attacked thus, anyone who could do so would flee and the rest would be killed. But there was one problem: killing everyone was almost unthinkable.

The people of the area did not belong to only one tribe; men from at least 20–30 different clans lived together. Besides native African tribes like the Fur, Zegava, Mesalit, and Tema, Arab clans also lived in the area. In the event of a total attack, it would not be possible to differentiate between the tribes, and declaring war against all of them would not be plain sailing at all. Moreover, Umşalaya was a big city with 15,000–20,000 inhabitants, and with the surrounding towns, approximately 50,000 people called the city their home.

When all these circumstances were considered, the Janjaweed found the situation to be extremely unpleasant. In addition, some of them eventually began to harbor positive opinions about the people and were convinced that they would not harm anyone; thus, serious discord arose amongst the Janjaweed.

The Janjaweed, a homogeneous and solid power, had been split in two for the first time. One group thought that they had given enough concessions to Umşalaya and it was high time for them to finish this job. Although the people sharing this opinion were in the minority, their voices were swelling and they provoked everyone. In contrast, the other group thought that the people of Umşalaya had not harmed anyone and should be left in peace. Thus, even though the Janjaweed held all the power in the area, they were up against the wall.

Owing to the wise strategy of the people of Umşalaya, their enemies had been disabled softly and without guns.

## **6. Shade of Gray: Decision**

The Janjaweed desperately contemplated and discussed their next steps for days, and in the elapsed time, the people of Umşalaya did not respond to them or harm them. If such a thing had happened in other parts of Darfur—and the rest of Africa, there would have been a bloodbath. But even when the residents saw their sons' killers at the market while shopping, they did not interfere with, attack, or take revenge against them.

One of the tribal chiefs explained the situation thus:

- When the attackers usurp our cows, we sit patiently and do not retaliate, yes! We supplicate Allah that He will augment our stolen cows' offspring, and we hope that we will find our usurped cows as a huge horde in the afterlife.

Another tribal leader said:

- The ones that are mistreating us do not realize that they are harming themselves the most. Sooner or later, we will regain what we have lost. By killing us, they give us life

and kill themselves instead. They have lost themselves and their families forever, but they do not realize this reality now.

The people of Umşalaya knew that they could not settle old scores in this world if they hoped to score in eternity.

Because of Umşalaya's reaction to their actions, most of the Janjaweed began to have those actions on their consciences; there was an increasing number of men who felt that they had been troubling good and innocent people. In addition, at the marketplace in Umşalaya, the Janjaweed could move about freely, and shop, eat, and drink safely; they walked among the houses with their guns even though they had not experienced the merest intervention, maltreatment, or attack. None of the surrounding regions provided such convenience for shopping; thus, on one level, destroying Umşalaya would hurt them as well. They could converse with the people in Umşalaya without hostility like in the old days, chat in coffeehouses, and even joke despite past events. They were sure that they would never find such good people and such a peaceful and safe environment.

The Janjaweed were at the threshold of a difficult decision: should they continue their oppression and persecution or give up?

### **7. Shade of Gray: Nor Black, Nor White**

The oppression, torture, looting, and killings had not affected the people of Umşalaya; faced with their steely nerves and determination, the opposition had fallen apart.

However long their cruelty continued, the result would not alter. For two years, the people of Umşalaya did not show the slightest dissolution. They maintained the same resolution and did not swerve from their dignified stance. The people of Umşalaya trained their enemies using positive methods and began to earn the Janjaweed's respect; the community had almost brought the Janjaweed to their knees.

Nearly two years after these events began, one of the regional Janjaweed leaders came to Sheikh Zekeriya and conveyed their decision:

- How strange you are!! Even after everything we did, you neither migrated nor opposed us. Now, we sincerely believe that you are good people. You have defeated us with your behavior. We assure you that we will not harm you any longer. If an outsider attempts to harm you, he will have to go through us first.

On this historical day, the fighting at Umşalaya city ended, and the explicit threat was abated. It was really a very significant day.

On the same day, the people who had knowingly or unknowingly tortured their brothers came to their senses and were released from the clutches of evil; this was certainly a big day for both sides. While one side could celebrate their being right, the other could experience the gratification of moving away from the wrong side.

Isn't this the biggest mission of the ones who follow the path of truth, to warn those who are deviating off the path and lead them to ways of salvation? Isn't this belonging to the real brotherhood, one that strives for people's salvation even if the people are not aware of it by planting goodness, not evil?

See, these events at Umşalaya are for us, and perhaps for many others, the realization of a dream, a utopia; they are a kind of proof that evil can be beaten by good. The Umşalaya experiment shows us that this is possible: Without shedding anyone's blood or harming anyone, tolerating pain, making sacrifices, enduring, returning good for evil, praying to and trusting in Allah, Umşalaya won an untold victory!

### **Liberation from the Blockade**

Having obtained the promise of peace and safety and escaped from grave danger, Umşalaya heaved a sigh of relief. If the people of Umşalaya had not acted wisely and persisted in their decisions, they would have experienced the same disasters that befell other villages and towns.

Although they had overcome the greatest danger, the danger had still not been overcome completely; killings, looting, poverty, and distress had not been eliminated but only diminished. The people had run out of resources. Besides their lands, houses, and certain items required for survival, they had nothing left. During the civil war, they would continue to face danger and it would be like the sword of Damocles swinging above their heads.

Some centers that held political power and some Janjaweed who worried about seeing this outcome again would keep watch for a suitable opportunity; they could attack once more at the first chance. Thus, the people of Umşalaya had to maintain their dignity. As they were conscious of the existing situation, the solidarity of both native and Arab tribes would develop further, and Umşalaya would be more prepared for new attacks.

Nomadic Arabs in the region had assured the villagers that there would not be any other attacks in the future; in case there were, they would defend Umşalaya against them. Thereafter, Umşalaya and the surrounding villages began to live a more secure life. Owing to the influence of this trust, people began to work more, they cultivated more of their lands; they could now farm the more distant fields that had been previously inaccessible due to security issues. A tree of hope has taken root in the region and no one wanted it to wither. Everyone worked heartily and struggled to survive.

The presence of the Janjaweed headquarters near Umşalaya to the north was one of the most important obstacles for this struggle; at times, more than several thousand Janjaweed were deployed there. Thus, in a way, Umşalaya was surrounded by Janjaweed forces, a situation that might be called a sort of siege.

When these forces passed through Umşalaya, they still caused huge losses to the people. The

crops and lands that the people had cultivated through their hard labor were still being continuously trod upon under the feet of hundreds of horses and camels.

Influencing these forces, who were armed and inclined to assault, was similar to getting blood from a stone. The people were forced to content themselves with whatever they could save from their crop. They were on the brink of poverty, with the wealthy also losing their means in this period. Although the people endured and continued their struggle for survival, the pain and distress reached a level that nobody could ignore. If this situation persisted for a couple of years more, the people would face serious starvation.

The Bedouin Arabs' tribe chief, who had played a significant role in protecting Umşalaya, observed this situation and was convinced that this problem could not be allowed to continue. He decided that it was wrong to damage the town any longer, and he promised to try his best to dispatch all the Janjaweed at the headquarters to another region.

However, making a decision and implementing it among groups that could be termed irregular armies is difficult; defiant members who do not want to obey authority cause trouble. Here as well, the same situation was observed; the chief had taken a substantial risk for peace in Umşalaya by asking the Janjaweed headquarters to be relocated.

The chief had previously believed in Umşalaya, taken her and her people under his wings, and established his first position by shielding them from hundreds, maybe thousands, of Janjaweed. He held a strong position within a crowded tribe. Thus, no one could oppose his decision, but now, he faced some difficulty; his opponents would not accept his new decision easily. The chief gathered some of the commanders and told them about the damage and the village's unsustainable situation. They answered with doubts:

- You convinced us that the people of Umşalaya were good. We also witnessed their good behavior and kindness. Nonetheless, we cannot be certain that a group of them won't trouble, support rebels, or attack us in the future. We did not strongly oppose your decision to protect them because there we did not see any evidence or reason to do so. However, now you want to change the location of our headquarters. If we leave, how will we control these regions?
- If I had seen a situation that warranted further control of the region or its continuous supervision, I would not have guaranteed the people their safety or promised to protect them. Yet these people have again reminded us that we are brothers; after everything they still treat us kindly. If they have treated us kindly under the hardest and most troublesome of situations, I don't think that they will turn against us in an environment of trust.
- Even if we assume that the people won't trouble or harm us, how will we transfer all of these men and equipment to a new place?
- I know this will not be an easy or quick job. We can discuss this matter and find a solution. But first we need to decide what we are going to do about this matter. How and when we will do it can be determined later.

- Before we decide our future steps, we want to know our approximate course of implementation. Unless we design the transfer, the uncertainty surrounding it will make most of us uncomfortable.
- The job is not very complicated. As no security problems remain in the region, we can determine a more convenient location and relocate there. [The chief finally answered] Everybody will be free to decide for themselves: those who want to go to the new headquarters will go, and those who want to return to their families will return.

Through this meeting, which ended without a certain agreement being reached, the chief demonstrated his desire to change the situation and simultaneously gave the Janjaweed the opportunity to review the matter. After this consultation, the chief hoped for more positive results. Although certain Janjaweed agreed to the chief's proposition, they did not actively participate in eliminating the problem, and a group of Janjaweed who had not been convinced insisted on following their old habits. Under such circumstances, no progress could be made about moving the headquarters and preventing the damage in Umşalaya.

At this stage, the chief decided to maintain a more decisive attitude and called another meeting of the Janjaweed dignitaries. At this meeting, he declared that the life and property in Umşalaya was under his protection and he wanted no one to break this protection. He said that they should disband as soon as possible as had been previously decided.

According to Darfur's tribal traditions, damaging a protected place entailed waging war against the tribe that provides that protection; therefore, damaging Umşalaya could result in a new and bigger internal war. At this stage, such a risk could not be taken. The only option left to the Janjaweed was to empty their headquarters.

Thus, the chief's ultimatum meant that Umşalaya could be released from the siege. Indeed, this was the second victory for Umşalaya.