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The Burden of Coming from Saudi Arabia

The nationality of people influences not only their appearance, color of skin and behavior, but also the attitude of the people. What is even more serious is the self-esteem and self-definition of a person. As a Middle Eastern man, I am stereotyped as a terrorist, uneducated, and living in the desert. It is a disturbing issue that as global communities, attitudes towards our places of origination are still harbored by others who do not care at all. Besides, it is extremely essential to develop the national feeling and pride of every citizen of any country.

Having lived in Saudi Arabia, I had been anticipating visiting Italy for a long time. I really enjoyed getting ready for the big event. I was happy to get an opportunity to represent my country at an international forum on climate change in Italy. I was informed by the school headmaster that I was going to be among the favored few representatives of Middle East and Africa at the conference. Undoubtedly, climate change and environmental issues are of vital importance for the whole globe and should be discussed without fear or favor.

When we finally landed at the airport, I could notice the tense and unwelcoming atmosphere around as if everyone in the airport turned to

look in my direction. I heard a young boy in the luggage room asking his mother why I was black. Of course, people in the room pretended they had not heard the question, but it was obvious from their reactions that they did not figure out the answer to the question from the innocent boy. It was hard time dealing with the people of Italy because of my ethnicity; however, I succeeded in changing the way people looked at me.

I remember an incident when a young boy flew out screaming at the top of his voice when we met at the door of the male washroom. Of course, I did not have a feeling of inferiority as I supposed that the young white boy felt after seeing a Saudi person. It was natural for him to get scared. But I was wrong because much more dramatic experience was awaiting me in the conference room. Professors and environmentalists were going to discuss the issue of climatic change in the world.

At the appointed time, a member of the European Commission introduced everybody to the agenda of the conference. He repeatedly thanked the people of Italy for their hospitality and wisdom. He emphasized how great it was for them to have agreed to host such a multicultural event in their beautiful city. In particular, he mentioned that Middle Eastern countries were well represented, and mentioned a good number of young Saudi men present at the conference.

The next minute the whole room turned to look in my direction in awe and surprise, and I felt a mild shiver running down my spine. There was a whole bunch of educated and mature whites turning to look at a young Saudi man who represented the continents of Africa and Asia in a high profile conference on a global issue of climate change. I could feel they were asking each other what I was doing at the conference ,and how on earth I had managed to come, taking into consideration the competition and conflicts that tear to pieces the Arabian Gulf nations. Afterwards, I realized

that the poor people from the Middle East were among whites and were being planted and nurtured by the Western media. They also made public only the bad things about Saudi Arabia. It is a common stereotype that Saudi Arabia is a rich country full of terrorists who live in the camps and ride camels. Somebody like a well-groomed intelligent young Saudi man could not appear at an international conference.

When it was time for group discussions, we were divided into groups of eight. I was the only Saudi in my group as special emphasis was laid by the moderator on building cohesion and allowing multiculturalism to thrive. Thus, it was expected that not more than one person from the same continent or region could be in the same group. In the discussion room, I was hastily given the position of the chairperson by my group members. I was the youngest in the group as most of the members were the age of my father. Many of them held leading positions in their countries. I remember there was a Professor of Environmental Studies from one of the developed countries in Europe; we also had a Minister of Environment in the group. At first, I felt uneasy after I was chosen unanimously because I knew there were more qualified people in the group to take that position. But I remembered the lecture of my school teacher that one needed to be aggressive and never miss any leadership opportunity. I readily accepted the position, although my group members looked at me with uncertainty and unease. They were not sure that I was capable of chairing such a meeting.

I took charge of the meeting immediately and called attention to all the members. I meticulously outlined how we were going to conduct the meeting, and the silence that followed could let one hear a leaf fall on water. Most of the time the group members would want me to elaborate on the ideas from the members and give my opinion on every issue. At first, I thought they waited at recognizing my inability as a Saudi young man. This was in regard to understanding the weighty matters of climate change. But

later, I discovered that they were sincerely listening attentively to everything I said. It seemed that they took it as the gospel of truth. I even felt that I was the only expert in the group as I quoted several resolutions and protocols that countries had signed or had failed to honor. I even realized that most of them did not have a hint of the content of the Kyoto Protocol. They were not aware of the way the major gas producing countries had suppressed the adaption of the protocol for their own interests.

After the meeting, all the conference participants assembled in the hall, and I was asked to present a report on group work. I could not believe my ears when each word of mine was received favorably and approved by mostly white audience. After the presentation, I was chosen again to speak to the media on the resolutions we had reached on the first day of the conference.

After the meeting, my life changed since I got a scholarship from my country to study abroad in the United States of America. A one-time international experience showed me that the origin and nationality issues are of the highest value. It is not right to be ashamed of the country one is born in. People all around the world should treat each other with tolerance and respect regardless of race, color of the skin or religion. Everybody can make a difference. The thing is not to be scared of challenges and exert every possible effort to be an established authority owing to the knowledge and the right attitude.