

Reporter's notebook: Trying to get into Bahrain

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Feb. 22, 2012 NCR Today

On a Saturday morning in late January, I received a phone call from Kathy Kelly, coordinator for Voices for Creative Nonviolence, inviting me to join a human rights delegation to Bahrain. The need was immediate, she said. Nabeel Rajab, president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, was requesting international observers to arrive before Feb. 14 -- the one-year anniversary of the country's anti-government protest.

Until three weeks ago, I knew nothing about the tiny island kingdom or the government crackdown on its Arab Spring revolution. The title of the one of the latest human rights reports on the country sounded ominous: "Bahrain: A Gathering Storm."

For more than a week, I deliberated the invitation. At 52, my wanderlust persists, but I am not brave by nature and I make decisions slowly. I understood Mr. Najab's request in principle: Bringing international observers to conflict zones is a basic technique of nonviolent intervention, and I had been a part of such initiatives in the past. The trip's costs in time and money were manageable and my husband wholeheartedly supported the mission. But its hastiness and many unknowns worried me, and I remained conflicted and afraid. *What good could a handful of Americans do in Bahrain?*

"You need to live more from your heart -- your deepest self -- than your head," Sr. Irma had been telling me. In this instance, I did not know what my "deepest self" was saying. Then during my morning quiet time, I read a passage in a book on prayer that described loving neighbors as the way to know the love of God.

"[A]nybody in the world may one day actually become my neighbor and ask from me in the name of God my personal love and service," the author wrote.

Days earlier, I had watched a YouTube interview with Dr. Fareeda al-Dallal, wife of orthopedic surgeon Dr. Al Ekri, one of a number of Bahraini doctors given a 15-year prison sentence after he criticized the government's excessive use of force in last year's protest. Like her husband, Dr. al-Dallal had been beaten and detained and was now speaking out about her treatment in police custody, demanding a fair trial for the imprisoned doctors. Of course she was afraid, she told the interviewer. But if she didn't speak out, who would?

"The international community is not with us," she said. "We have only God."

Late one Sunday night, I decided the signs were clear enough. I would go. Nabeel and Dr. al-Dallal were my "neighbors" in the world asking for help.

Preparations for the trip were easy and cheap. The cost of my ticket was covered and an email appeal to friends produced enough funds for my in-country expenses. I had been advised to dress up. The well-coifed traveler in coordinated attire might stand a better chance of getting through Bahrain International Airport than a shabby-looking peace activist. So I had my hair trimmed, purchased sunglasses and dress boots at a local thrift store and donned creased trousers on the day of departure.

At Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, a transfer point on my journey, I attended Mass, where a devout Polish woman named Maria gave me a rosary for my expedition and promised her prayers. As the plane flew over the Syrian city of Aleppo, I continued to read from a country profile of Bahrain in preparation for the many interviews to come.

But I never got into Bahrain. My request for a tourist visa was denied at the airport. A dour-faced immigration and customs officer noticed that I had not listed a local phone number on my disembarkation card and became suspicious. (I had forgotten to record the number in the United States and a printout of my e-reservation for my hotel only provided an address.) He whisked off with my passport into a small office, where another duty officer -- there were many milling about that night -- Googled my name and discovered that I am a contributor to the *National Catholic Reporter*. Damning evidence, apparently.

The tired-looking officer who grilled me was gentle but persistent. Why had I come to Bahrain? Who had invited me? What did I plan to do while I was here? I was told that since I was a writer, I would have to apply for a visa from the Ministry of Information. I knew this meant certain refusal. For the past several months, Bahrain's Ministry of Information has been denying visas to human rights organizations and major news outlets, including *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *The Christian Science Monitor* and Al Jazeera. Mr. Rajab's request for help from Kathy was an attempt to penetrate this government-imposed ban on foreign observers.

If I could provide the name of a local NGO (nongovernmental organization) that invited me, my questioner said, perhaps I could stay. In my backpack were the phone numbers of several Bahraini activists, but I would not divulge these. My visa was denied, and I had a 20-hour wait for the next KLM flight back to Boston.

I did not take my rejection personally. On the night I arrived, there were others, including a reporter from The Associated Press and another member from our team of human rights monitors, who never got past the customs and immigration booth. The following morning, while sitting outside the immigration office, I saw passports of varying hues getting whisked away. Among those scrutinized was a young British consultant for an oil company who frequently comes to Bahrain.

"It's never been like this," he fumed.

Through the large windows of the airport's departure lounge, I could see the skyline of the capital, Manama, in the distance, looking especially alluring in the morning sun. I thought of all the migrants who make it to the U.S. border only to be booted out.

"You should not have been asked to leave," said the Bahraini ticket agent as he booked my seat on a KLM flight back to Amsterdam.

"Well, apparently your country doesn't want writers visiting right now," I said.

Since it was the eve of the Feb. 14 protest, I asked him what he thought would happen tomorrow.

"Nothing, I hope," he said.

Then, looking over his shoulder to see if his colleagues were watching, he murmured, "I can't really talk about the situation here." This furtive exchange was my only interview in Bahrain.

I arrived home on Valentine's Day, the very day I expected to be monitoring a mass demonstration in Manama. My Bahrain odyssey had taken a grand total of 72 hours.

Although it was maddening to be denied entry, I do not regret making the trip. My husband, Scott, said that in

war, if 10 people rush the ramparts and only six succeed, the campaign is not dismissed as a failure. Out of the 14 Americans who tried to enter Bahrain as human rights observers, three were denied entry and eight were arrested and deported, but only after they had spent several days in the country [witnessing and reporting on the government crackdown of the predominantly Shiite rebellion](#) [1]. You can read their reports on the newly created website [witnessbahrain.org](#) [2].

While in Bahrain, the Americans connected with some extraordinarily brave pro-democracy activists, including the widely admired Rajab. These connections have enriched all involved and provide yet another example -- I have seen so many -- of how human beings breach the walls separating them from their neighbor. To observe, even from afar, how a handful of ordinary Americans were able to cast a bit of light on the situation in Bahrain was inspiring, and I am grateful for the privilege.

Moreover, my aborted trip unexpectedly took me to parts unknown. The journey provided an occasion to live by faith rather than analysis. Preparing for it required abandoning my usual preoccupation with outcome and following the clues of the moment. And that is new territory for me.

More:

- [Six American activists arrested in, deported from Bahrain](#) [1]
- [Anticlimactic arrest, hospitable detention after days of demonstration](#) [3]

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