

“Seeing the Iraq Museum stripped bare,” says Iraqi painter Hana Mal Allah, one of the few artists to continue working in Baghdad during the occupation, “was like having my heart ripped out.”

Television viewers in the West may recall the horrific images of looting in April 2003, the early days of the invasion of Iraq, dismissed casually by Donald Rumsfeld with his infamous “Stuff happens” remark. But for Iraqis such as Mal Allah, whose beautiful, scorched canvases seem literally imprinted by the ongoing war, the destruction and looting of the Iraq Museum was not

is to be an Iraqi artist today, caught between a battle for survival and the struggle to overcome the image of Iraq—the cradle of civilization—as an empty landscape of terror.

While life under Saddam and sanctions was harsh, artists, writers, and performers found ways to survive. Despite hardships created by the embargo and the excesses of a police state, the theatre scene thrived in the 1990s, pushing the envelope politically with layered language and double meanings in ways the state-run press could not. Dozens of private art galleries opened, and the stoic Iraqi National Symphony

ART

A CULTURE IN EXILE

Baghdad's artistic exodus

by Hadani Ditmars



Al-Shahbender, Mutanabi Street's literary café, was destroyed by a car bomb in March 2007. *Photograph by Hadani Ditmars*

just a national catastrophe; it was a grim foreshadowing of the cultural destruction to follow.

“I am going to light a fire in paradise and to pour water on to Hell,” the eighth-century Iraqi woman poet, singer, and Sufi saint Rabia wrote, “so that both veils may vanish altogether.” As the fires of conflict engulf Iraq, I am reminded of this verse by Rabia. But the words of poets are cheap now, as traditional music is drowned out by the clamour of automatic weapons, bombs, and the divisive rhetoric of those who believe God is on their side. Rabia's words capture the essence of what it

Orchestra played on, albeit with frayed violin strings and cracked oboe reeds.

Now, thanks to the fatal combination of Islamist militias, criminal anarchy, and violent occupation, the culture that sustained Iraqis through hard times has broken down, perhaps irrevocably. The theatres and galleries that once helped make Baghdad a cultural and intellectual capital of the Arab world have closed. The book market on Mutanabi Street—once the centre of Iraq's literary scene and animated discussions on everyone from Mahfouz to Whitman—has been bombed, and a de facto ban on live music has meant

that even *al maqam al Iraqi* (traditional Iraqi sung love poetry) is no longer heard, not even at weddings. The national orchestra, which attempted a few furtive post-invasion concerts under armed guard, has been silenced, and many of Iraq's artists have joined the roughly 2 million other Iraqis who have fled death threats and chaos for a life in exile.

Artists in Iraq have always been a litmus test by which to measure the state of things. Even as oil companies and black marketeers prospered during the embargo years and artists were reduced to a stark choice between food and canvas, medicine and violin strings, they managed to hang on. Culture was a form of resistance—to bombings, Saddam, and sanctions, and to the harsh circumstances of life for the 95 percent of Iraqi society that was not part of the Baathist elite or the president's inner circle. Physical infrastructure can always be rebuilt, but how do you rebuild a culture and society traumatized by decades of war, sanctions, oppression, and occupation?

Indeed, what hope remains for a resurgence of Iraqi culture from the ashes of war and despair when its creative and intellectual resources have vanished? Sadly, the siege mentality that inspired Baghdadi artists in the 1990s has been replaced by fear and chaos that inspire only profit making in the booming "security" market. When I think of the state of culture in Iraq today, I think of a once-promising young cellist friend who used to dream of an international performing career. Now he is working as a mercenary.

And, most poignantly, with the voices of poets and players silenced, there is no one left to document the very death of culture in Iraq. Those who have not been killed or exiled are doomed to have their fates articulated by sound bites of televised horror. The caricatured reduction of 27 million people to mini-Saddams that once typified mainstream media portrayals of Iraqis before the invasion has been replaced by a terrible new cartoon: Iraqis as mad suicide bombers, magically transformed from secular to sectarian within a few years of occupation. The

victims of the new terror are labelled as its perpetrators.

Even before the 2003 invasion, there were disturbing signs. Due to the twin terrors of sanctions and Saddam, fundamentalism, poverty, and violent crime were on the rise, and Iraq's public education system—once the best in the Arab world—was in a shambles. A whole generation of angry, unemployed youths who could not afford to get married was seduced by Hollywood action movies and the promise of Islam. Women, who had only a decade earlier constituted half of the civil service and 40 percent of doctors, saw their role in public life eroding, a foreshadowing of their post-invasion reality that saw the constitution rewritten along sectarian lines and Iraq's secular and relatively liberal civil code substantially replaced by sharia law.

In the fall of 2003, I met up with many of my artist friends to see how they were faring. I found playwright Omram Tamimi drinking chai at the National Theatre—newly manned by grim-faced armed guards—and despairing of the new self-censorship that has followed the invasion. When I asked him why no one was writing new plays about the invasion or the occupation, he replied, "Before, we had one Saddam, and we knew who to be afraid of. Now we have dozens, and we're afraid of whom we might offend." Six months later, the National Theatre was closed and Tamimi was living in exile in Cairo, working as a stagehand on an Egyptian soap opera.

"It has never been easy for artists in Iraq," confirms Saadi Youssef, an elder statesman of Iraqi culture, man of letters, and nomadic exile in his early seventies whose calling card lists his Uxbridge, London, address and says simply, "poet." Youssef knows whereof he speaks: he was persecuted and imprisoned for his Communist Party membership in the 1960s and 1970s, when the CIA was supplying Baathists with names of Iraqi Communists, as well as for his outspoken poetry.

As Youssef points out, there was a brief golden age for the arts in Iraq, which roughly coincided with the reign of Saddam's predecessor, Ahmed

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Hassan al-Bakr. Until his demise, in 1979, newly nationalized oil revenues were funnelled into public art, literary magazines, theatres, and galleries, as well as a successful campaign to eliminate illiteracy.

Things began to change as Saddam rose to power. Hundreds of thousands of young men were sacrificed on the battlefield with Iran, and cultural resources were drained for the war chest. The thirteen years of draconian sanctions that followed Saddam's invasion of Kuwait made life miserable for Iraqi civilians while entrenching the regime's power, and posed new challenges for Iraq's artists. "But now," sighs Youssef with melancholic resignation, decrying the lack of security and the end of the once-secular state, "this is the worst it's ever been."

Adnan al-Sayegh, another Iraqi poet exiled in London, concurs. After fleeing Iraq under threat of death when one of his poems offended Saddam's regime, al-Sayegh decided to return to his homeland in the spring of 2006. At a public reading in Basra, an armed Shia militiaman walked in and threatened to cut out his tongue, calling his poem "Slightly Mischievous Verses" sacrilegious. Terrified, al-Sayegh fled back to London. "After Saddam, we thought there would be freedom," he explains from his central London flat, "but it's still dangerous to publish even now."

A friend of al-Sayegh's, a poet and journalist, wrote an article about al-Sayegh's spring reading in Basra and the incident with the militiaman but was too afraid to put his name on the article. "We are afraid now," says al-Sayegh of artists in Iraq, momentarily forgetting his own recent exile, "of including any religious element in our work. Artists cannot depict a mosque in their paintings; writers can't write anything about Islam. We are all afraid of offending the extremists." Yet the price of exile is particularly dear for writers, he suggests. While music and visual arts can transcend words, the specificity of language and place more often

than not get lost in the translation to a new life far from home.

"I have an old friend," recounts al-Sayegh, "a director of a magazine in Iraq—his name is not for publishing, please—he sent me an email last year saying now finally that Saddam is gone, please send me your poems to publish. We were friends for twenty years. He was against Saddam as well, so my father sent him the poems, and a few days later he said, 'If I publish these poems, my magazine will be burned to the ground within forty-eight hours.'"

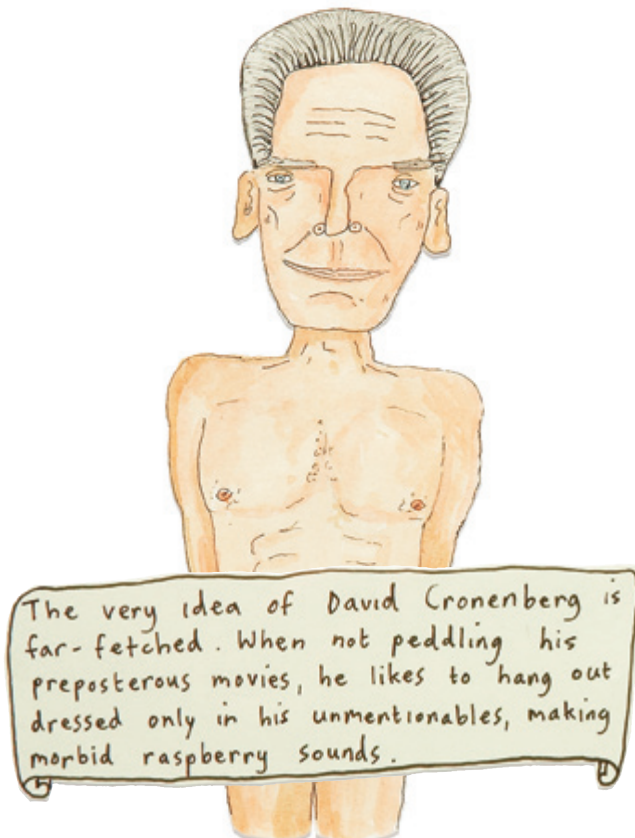
"We were waiting all this time for freedom," continues al-Sayegh, the tension rising in his voice, "and these people, these extremists, take it away from us before we can taste it. I'm afraid for the life of my friend now. When my friend sent this email, I was confused and didn't understand why he couldn't publish my poems. But after I went to Iraq in April and was threatened my-

self, I understand the situation. It's just chaos now."

When an old theatre contact of mine in Baghdad put me in touch with Muqdad Madlom, a sixty-year-old writer, photographer, director, and actor, I was glad to discover that some Iraqis have not lost their famous sense of humour.

Madlom sent me a series of screenplays he had been working on that centre on tragic tales of soldiers forced to fight in a war they don't want, and leaving behind beautiful love interests, the central theme of every *maqam* ever written. One of his screenplays, *The Bomb's Nipple*, is about a soldier pulling the clip from a grenade and flashing back to his lover's breasts.

Before the invasion, Madlom was an actor at the National Theatre, and early in the occupation he was the manager of a new television station. "Now," he



“I’m the head of the drama department at Iraqi state television, but I’m going to leave because the drama on the streets is greater.”

wrote, “I’m the head of the drama department at Iraqi state television, but I’m going to leave because the drama on the streets is greater than that on TV.” He also said that he “can’t work with religious fanatics...it’s impossible. There is nothing I can write about.” Even for a brave new broadcaster, it seems, it is year zero in Iraq.

One morning I eagerly opened another email from Madlom. He apologized for his late response to my last missive, stating matter of factly, “my son got shot in his arm today, he is a camera man. sorry, muqdad”

In his last email to me, he promised to write “within 4 days...i have to manage few things with my son...” I’m still waiting.

Baghdadi playwright and director Hamid al-Maleky, who was harassed under Saddam’s regime for having a “friend in the opposition” and later forced to write the screenplay of Saddam’s life for Iraqi state television, was recently threatened by thugs he believes were from al Qaeda. He fled to Syria for his own safety, and because a creative life had become impossible in Iraq.

“The invasion brought about the rise of radical Islam,” he tells me, railing against the new tyranny of people he calls “bowers” — in reference to the Muslim prostrations — “and these people are against art.” Of course he equally blames the appalling lack of security and stability for the demise of Iraqi culture. But the censorship of the new radical Islamists, he says, “is more terrible than that of Saddam... At least we knew what Saddam wanted, but we can’t understand what these religious types are after.”

Now, from the relative safety of Syria, he continues to write screenplays for a Cairo-based, Iraqi-run station called Al Baghdadia. A current project is about an Egyptian who goes to Iraq to fight US troops — something al-Maleky says he’d never be able to write from Baghdad. As for the arts in Iraq, they are on permanent vacation. For now, he says, the culture of death holds sway.

London-based Iraqi cultural activist and artist Rashad Selim, who helps run the International Network for Contemporary Iraqi Artists, points out that it is not merely Islamic extremism that is threatening Iraqi culture and society, but a larger political strategy, the “Salvador option,” adopted by the Americans after John Negroponte took over from Paul Bremer.

“This was a deliberate policy,” says Selim, “by which paramilitary death squads were formed to destabilize Iraq and to foment sectarianism. Anyone who was politically outspoken — be they academics, journalists, poets, or artists — became a target of these death squads. The end result was to create a



state of total chaos and terror, and the de facto destruction of any public intellectual life.”

More than 340 academics have been murdered in post-invasion Iraq, and what is truly frightening about the assassins, often hooded or masked in balaclavas, is that “we don’t know who’s doing this and why,” says Selim. What’s going on, he says, “isn’t just about the death of Iraqi culture — it’s about a larger struggle between the forces of civilization and barbarism.”

“Life is hell now in Iraq,” confirms Hana Mal Allah, as if the horror scenes on the news needed any embellishment. Nevertheless, it is intriguing to hear this from a forty-nine-year-old painter who chose to continue living there.

Although almost all of the galleries in Iraq are now closed and Mal Allah

exhibits mainly in Jordan and Europe, until recently she created most of her work from her home studio in Baghdad. She holds a Ph.D. from the Baghdad College of Fine Arts, where she has lectured for years. For Mal Allah, her artwork is an affirmation of Iraqi culture and of her own identity, in the midst of destruction. “Everything we have built has collapsed... public life is completely broken, and most of my friends have emigrated,” she says. “But there is one way to say to the new barbarian, ‘We will survive.’ That way is: we must create and produce meaningful work.”

The new series she is working on consists of distressed tableaux of green, black, and red that suggest a scorched Iraqi flag, bloodied and battered but still defiant. “Now I am painting with the tools of destruction,” she says. Her work uses old bullet casings, burned and blackened canvases, and surfaces slashed by knives in a way that is at once visceral and violent yet subtle and sensitive. Mal Allah also creates large works on wire-framed tissue that can be collapsed into a seven-centimetre cube—suitable for hasty smuggling out of war zones. “So far, my most successful work was from my exhibition in Amman in 2005,” she says. “That is the fate of the Iraqi artist—to create under the very worst circumstances.”

Mal Allah contends that, unlike the siege of Sarajevo, which inspired a virtual cultural renaissance, the current situation in Iraq is a fear-fuelled creative black hole. But ironically, the war has spawned an interest in Iraqi art and culture in the West—especially in the US and the UK, the two countries that led the invasion. Just as the best pieces looted from the Iraq Museum often ended up in private collections in the West, so are the jewels of Iraq’s living culture arriving in European and American capitals.

When I last spoke to Mal Allah, she had given up her Baghdad studio for permanent residence in the UK. Her most successful show to date, *Sophisticated Ways: Destruction of an Ancient City*, was a collaboration with Rashad Selim at the Ayagallery in London this past summer. Three of her pieces were

purchased by the British Museum.

In fact, London has developed a lively Iraqi culture in exile, with such recent productions as Hassan Abdulrazzak’s play *Baghdad Wedding*. The story of three young Iraqis caught up in a tragic post-invasion love triangle, it chronicles the demise of a culture and society by proxy.

How long will it be before the exiles can return, and with them the spirit of an ancient nation? Will they ever return? And if not, what real hope is there for reconstruction?

I think of a young composer friend who, amid the deprivation and isolation of the economic and cultural embargo in the late 1990s, produced a beautiful

symphonic poem called “Heartbeat of Baghdad.” The piece paid homage to the spirit of Baghdad and its people, a place that had survived centuries of invasions, occupations, coups, civil wars, and sieges. When I met him after the 2003 invasion, he was not in the mood for music. “The situation is too grave now,” he confided, “for me to think of anything but survival.” The last I heard, he was driving a taxi in Amman.

Perhaps the only hope for the future of Iraq is that somewhere out there he is still writing, composing, playing—imagining a new symphony for his homeland. That somewhere out there he is keeping the flame of his culture alive. ♪