

Phantasmagorical Meeting in Iraq

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Iraq: A Long Phantasmagorical Dream (when it is not part of the new capitalism or the retired communism)

The Image

At first the image came out unclear, a little foggy and incomprehensible: in the space of one week a conference for Iraqi intellectuals, both those returning from overseas and others residing in Iraq, was scheduled for the coming Spring in Iraqi Kurdistan. This was the press release circulated in the newspapers, literary magazines, television screens and the Arabic internet cites: *Six hundred Iraqi intellectuals will meet in Irbil under the sponsorship of the Institute of Culture.*

Poets, journalists, novelists, critics, painters, actors, cinema directors, philosophers, politicians, thinkers will all attend their first conference this coming Spring in Irbil. The image became clearer as we moved closer to the warmth of spring: *Four hundred Iraqi intellectuals will leave the capital Baghdad to meet two hundred of their overseas counterparts for the first time in Irbil under the banner of "Conference of Iraqi Intellectuals."*

The image gets clearer still: *Three generations of exiled intellectuals and others from within Iraq will meet for the first time in one place. Three generations separated by exile, migration and ideology will introduce themselves not through books and articles, but through personal face to face contact. The itinerary was more revealing: two hundred Iraqi intellectuals from the United States and Europe meet in the Sand Rock Hotel in Amman. At dawn a special Iraqi plane will take them to Irbil to attend the conference on Iraqi intellectuals where they will meet four hundred other intellectuals coming from the capital Baghdad and the other Iraqi provinces.*

The Return of the Citizen

A gust of air cooled a spring evening in April and carrying a small leather bag on my shoulder I headed to the Sand Rock Hotel. A yellow taxi drove me to an exclusive hotel in the western part of the Jordanian capital built by the Hashemite during the twenties of the past century. Suddenly I became one of the overseas intellectuals, I, who had been one

of the "inside intellectuals" almost two years ago to this day became embroiled within a game of place, no more than that- a place that would marginalize an "other" and temporarily dislodge it. Thus, I owe to the war my endless cynicism, curing me from blind faith and giving me a passion for clarity in a world of illogical wars, chaos and ambiguity.

I got off the taxi and I headed to the glass door of the hotel. The porter jumped up to carry my belongings on a cart to find me holding a small book and a digital camera in my hand. He backs his cart with a resigning air ahead of him while I followed him to the center of the vestibule. It was opulent and empty with the exception of the staff, bartenders in uniform, the smiling faces of Egyptian waiters and the elegant receptionists at the desk. Apart from me the place was relatively empty so I figured the conference would not take place as scheduled due to the absence of the attendees. I went up to my room and threw myself on the bed falling asleep in my clothes. Several times during the night the shouts of men and women in the corridors would wake me up, Iraqi accents mixed with good English, the sounds of carts moving luggage and keys opening doors. The attendees must be arriving at night from all over the world. When I woke up, this is exactly what had happened.

In the morning, the breakfast room was packed. I could not find an empty table or chair so I stood in the corner watching the scene. There were others like me standing, talking amongst each other, some exchanging greetings, laughing, guffawing and smiling. I recognized some from the photos in the newspapers and television. We must have been the last generation of Iraqi intellectuals who did not meet any of the first wave, having themselves left Iraq after the massacres committed by Saddam Hussein against the communists in 1979. They called themselves the sixties generation and probably this was the first opportunity to see and meet them after I had known them for almost twenty years as ink on paper. I used to read about them as a teenager but have since become a known writer attacking their writing and making fun of them in all my works. In defending themselves, they too attacked me. We were on two different tracks. They were believers and I was not.

I focused on the paradox of life, the anxiety that gnaws me from within towards everything. My hatred towards all regimes that lead to violence, despotic chaos and the worship of power was clear.

The Wrong Signifier

In the restaurant I was quietly bemused by the mass of sartorial styles, hairstyles, beards, perfumes, decorum, and exaggerated rhetoric. The faces looked healthy, the bodies were fit, these are the bodies of the exiled. Exile as a signifier has somehow lost its modality and has taken another meaning, that of homeland. Conversely, an exiled person lives exceedingly well in these countries of exile in spite of the negative connotations implied in the term. This type of exile appears to offer money, beautiful clothes, peace, health. The homeland does not offer any of that and here I spotted the strength of the mis-identified signifier which dragged along this long phantasmagorical dream, where one cannot condense and shorthand "exile" into one meaning, in the same way that homeland cannot be condensed in one term. All these terms carry many shades and meanings, exile here is homeland and homeland there is exile.

Retired Communism and the new Capitalism

Watching these faces from the corner of the restaurant, I could make out that most of those coming from Europe were the supporters of the disposed old Communism and that some had fought in the tribal warfares up in the mountains of the north and in the Ahwar swamps of the south. These followers of Guevara, Ho Chi Min and Trotsky and are today the adherents of Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington. The image is not exactly a blueprint yet you can still reel out some of the original.

The worshiped revolutionary Guevara still towers behind the transparent capitalism. The sprouting beard and the long hair beneath the latest fashion in cosmetics. This is how retired communism, transposed by the features of the new capitalism, looks like today. Some retained the Ho Chi Min beard, its pointed tip and the shining baldness which the assaulting scents of perfume have somewhat softened; they wear elegant clothes and expensive capitalist shoes. Trotsky was also re-created; the round specs, the soft hair brushed to the back, the recognizable frown, the strong sharp hands. But today it is a different Trotsky, the neo-Trotsky has exchanged the international revolution for the scientific, economic and industrial revolution; he no longer fears currency exchange, export/import business or drinking French wine.

Everything shone like porcelain plates washed with shampoo, in an array of expensive shoes, elegant suits, many different scents, watches, rings, silk ties and ironed shirts. These old fighters did not forget their

days of leftist and communist struggles against the former regime so accents of their former sartorial past were still visible: khaki pants with side pockets, khaki collarless shirts, the grey hair with a typically uncombed appearance - all a consciously elegant fashion statement. They have exchanged their weapons and tactics from the old firearms used in trench warfare, the guerilla tactics of the mountains, the continuous uprisings in the southern Ahwar that began with Aziz al-Hajj, or hiding in the many attics of Baghdad, to the modern digital cameras and advanced cam-corders. In the corridors their elegant leather luggage replaced the brown duffel bags they lugged around during the guerilla wars.

Women Too

Women's faces changed. Faces of actresses, radio presenters, poetesses who thirty years ago painted the newspapers or television screens also attended the conference, images we remembered as children when watching a strikingly youthful celebrity like Paula Tagh. Sexy bodies, all arms, legs and shaved armpits - hallmarks of the seventies. They remained somewhat the same, these beautiful faces in familiar hairstyles. The skin had aged, come to think of it so had the dye, (but I still recognize the heroines of my youth and still their attitude is as bold as it always has been).

Cultural Continuity and Conspiracies

The airport trip was fast! From the vestibule to the buses standing outside the hotel, all kinds of noise, voices interrupting each other and me watching and recognizing many in silence. Truncated sentences reached me in different rhythms, the ubiquitous accented tone of the intelligentsia:

"Please my friend.... let me pass... Oh you are the one who wrote the book on revolution and analyzed the ideas of Marcuse... I know you from your picture, you're the director!... Your film on the cruelty of the regime was marvelous ... yes, yes, I know him, we fought together, we spent four years in guerilla warfare....Do you remember the writer whom Saddam Hussein executed, the one I wrote about in my second novel?... Trotsky focuses on that matter from different angles... You cannot overlook Hadi al-Alawi's position especially his methodology... What? What did you say? ... I said that too... Do you remember and I said that Marxism as interpreted by Kasturiadis made Marxists

unrecognizable... no....no...I think they are not exactly Marxists... they never were Marxists."

Between the "exactly"s and the "ever"s the vestibule was forcing the air, the words, the perfume out of its doors. All were walking briskly toward the buses, everyone arguing, introducing one another, exchanging courtesies and smiles.

Old Airplanes and new Situations

The plane on the tarmac complimented the phantasmagorical dream. In the eighties this was the latest model in the entire Middle East when Baghdad focused on flying the most advanced airplanes in the world. The authoritarian regime regarded the symbolic spectacle as an expression of its power and modernity. Iraqi airlines had the most beautiful stewardesses and the best service. Things changed in the nineties, the strong and rich state suffered the repeated blows of the Allied Forces and this one plane was reserved throughout the UN embargo and the no-fly zone regulations imposed on Baghdad. It sat on the tarmac of Amman airport for more than fifteen years as pigeons made their nests in its propellers. After the fall of the authoritarian regime, it got a quick repair, had some parts exchanged but the old frame remained with its discarded look becoming another symbolic image of a poor, old, exhausted nation state.

The stewardesses reflected that as well, what with all their long, black hair and seductive killer eyes- well that was twenty years ago. They still have the spark but are all mothers and great aunts now breathlessly pushing carts up the aisle. Makeup is unable to conceal their tired faces and the wrinkles and their sagging bodies crouch creakingly under more conservative uniforms, with hands that reflect twenty years of wars, fires and smoke. They are here just as they were twenty years ago and still capture that hidden tenacity of fear and terror even while their seductiveness is enveloped under a sad, nostalgic wisdom.

The pilot was a jet fighter, a hero of the old wars who became a commercial pilot unable to forget his military training, unaccustomed to quiet civil aviation. A strong turn was taken, heightening the terror of the passengers, the plane appeared as if it was taking a dive and visible signs of fear could be seen on everyone's faces. Then everything seemed normal again. To a question put by one of the passengers the fat stewardess laughed and replied, "A military pilot... he's brilliant but not used to navigating a commercial craft." Landing was a different matter.

With military dexterity the plane touched down on the tarmac in a brilliant virtuoso to which everyone clapped, "Irbil, yes, it is Irbil!," screamed one of the old fighters while quite satisfyingly smoothing his white beard.

A crowded and strange place

The reception was overwhelming at the airport, the organizers happily welcoming us as we entered the buses. Two hundred people were chartered to the most luxurious hotel in the city, the Sheraton, the only five-star hotel built after Kurdistan separated from the central government after the second Gulf war. This new modern architecture has nothing to do with the old city alienating it from its environment, a European building in a city of small one-story houses. The vista had American reflective glass and aluminum and the vestibule was divided into four large halls across two levels with circular banisters and a fountain in the center. The internal world of hotels is always a different world from anything surrounding it, a world of wealth and unlimited food and drink with an array of European and local dishes washed down with smooth alcoholic drinks offered in the small bar up front. A developed world among a tribal region governed in medieval fashion. This tribal heritage mixed with all that is religious, sacred and primitive. A quiet predictable life like bagpipe music that harrowingly repeats itself as militias transformed themselves into a police force and a regular army.

Peace and Intellectuals

Kurdistan is the only region that enjoys peace in Iraq. A peace that rests on a barrel of gunpowder. The struggles and paradoxes are many, external threats are serious and real. Everything is imposed and forced in an odd fusion. Peace amid an exploding region, a large hotel amid a traditional and backward area, classical music amid largely illiterate people, strong seductive clothes amid a tribal world. One simple mistake can unravel this artificial and paradoxical image.

No doubt, it is a great democracy. It exhibits all the drawbacks of a Middle East government, the one party rule that will be repeatedly voted in until the end of time and a mindless oppression that takes the guise of the law. (An article written by the Kurdish thinker, Ahmad Sayyid Qadir, placed him in prison for twenty years after a judicial session that lasted two hours)*.

Rebellion is an effective protest against injustice, despair and despotism, and yet the revolutionary repeatedly applied the blunt instruments of those in power. Protest becomes a revolution that turns to violence, to wars and to blood- all elements together make rebellion totter precariously towards a summary annihilation. Revolutions will find excuses for sporadic, untamed, yet smooth killings, the way active protest becomes a dictatorship in its own right and the principles of freedom and justice will have their throats cut under the lethal sheen of the police state, all before the revolutionary even makes it to the traitor's gate.

Coffee-house, Bedouins and jackals:

Walking into the Kurdish coffee house for intellectuals I remembered the title of one of Kafka's stories "Bedouins and Jackals". Yes, zealous nationalism among the Kurdish intellectuals was expressed through their boycotting the conference and objecting to the proceedings of an Arab conference held amid Kurdish culture. The Kurdish intellectual has ultimate faith, yet he also has ultimate doubt and no gnawing anxieties. Because of the difficulty in mimicry, Kurdish culture lacks the imitators, the internal rebels, the grand destroyers. Frankly one can find fault with the idea of a strong nationalism in every text one picks up; they endorse ethnic nationalism after the world had long abandoned the age of nationalism and searched for the state in an age of falling states.

The Kurdish people have earned their dues at last, they have sacrificed a lot in their offerings to the dead and the martyrs by becoming themselves victims to violence. Maybe later they will realise like all other fighting nations in the world that the victories are never proportionate to the sacrifices- *all large, grandiose sacrifices provide the sumptuousness of pitiful pickings*. Everyone emerges as a loser from the ubiquitous game of nationalism, yet everyone holds on to their little morsel of flesh. It's an atmosphere certainly worth the wait, what with all is mixture of bewilderment and naive glee following the war and an indifference to annihilation quite breathtaking. We had reached an inexcusable level of realism and as for that rhetoric regarding hegemony of justice - it did not trickle down into society except in very small measures.

The arrival of the Four Hundred

The halls were beautiful with modern rooms and wide spacious beds and the swimming pool with its accompanying sauna would make any 'intellectual' feel right at home. Certainly for those coming from abroad,

the Sheraton offered an image of life that was not much different from the one they left behind. The television gave a cozy, local feel to the wider despair out there. It's drone of sad music, the cold voice of the announcer, death scenes everywhere, voices of fear, anarchy, screaming men and women, terrifying sounds of explosions, trench warfare, kidnappings, slayings, body parts and internal organs flying everywhere, and the killing of tens of thousands (more than one hundred and seventy intellectuals and journalists) made us feel helpless- us- that wonderfully meritorious think tank. One can only stare with a cold gaze at the scenes of violence on the screen, rushing ambulances transporting bloodied bodies. Body parts wrapped in blankets and dirty torn towels as all are thrown in pickup trucks.

Good. Four hundred intellectuals are coming out of this hell and yet they arrived quite fashionably late. The Sheraton can only hold those coming from overseas and as for the others coming from the south, they are to be distributed among other hotels in Irbil.

Three penny justice

I don't know why I was humming the "Three-Penny Opera" replacing the word justice for Opera any time I would hear the phrase "*Irbil isn't qualified to receive six hundred Iraqi intellectuals*". Sheraton Irbil, this five-star hotel opened its doors to the beautifully clean heroes of guerilla warfare and the former political prisoners, whereas the lot of those coming from within Iraq- from the hell of Iraq- is to be placed in other hotels in Irbil. The "other" here has great significance of course. These are the modest, local Irbil accommodations built in Ottoman style and badly kept, the result of an authoritarian regime that keeps the best to the capital and let's the fringes rot. The intellectuals who temporarily escaped from their internal hell were put in filthy hotels that housed at one time soldiers from other wars. I resided in one of them - as a soldier - at the end of the eighties. I can recognize its fetid odour, its dirty blankets that covered hundreds of others before me. Here are those who had escaped for a while from a dark recess, to find themselves wrapped in blankets of the "green soldiers" and living the comedy of Irbil hotels with all its other features; flooding toilets, filth amid cracked, uneven tiles, smell of rot, bad service and the searing heat with no water some of the time, and no electricity many other times. This is justice...Three-Penny Justice.

A screaming paradox

And yet to witness those from Europe arriving in their bold and colorful clothes made the muted tones of the intellectuals from within Iraq, seem really quite appealing. That blunt and expressive contrast in its décor of sad faces, unshaven beards (but not of course in the same style as the retired communists), made my job of nitpicking quite easy really. The clothes were unkept, the dialogues rushed, conversations short, everything documented- serenely cryptic. All this lulling into a repetition of thoughts and truisms that appeared weak and haphazard, it made the habit of generalization by an intellectual a silent dialogue with his overseas counterpart, as saying almost nothing at all. Arriving at a definitive and decisive conclusion goes against those overseas intellectuals whose provocative conversations can be intriguing and refreshing at the same time. Events appeared distant to one group while the other experienced increasing anxiety and danger every day and every minute.

Are cultures good predictors for disasters? Being 'cultured' certainly conceals a deep yawning sorrow perhaps. Culture is no longer about who say's it the best, ascending the ladder of excellence, elevating people above the ordinary hum-drum of life, culture has no longer the function of washing off the crude instincts of humans. All of them - Iraqi intellectuals from overseas and from within - reacted awkwardly to the scenes displaying the 'free for all killings' and realized the impotence of that thing called culture.

The Image of the Intellectual in his Youth

The 'local' Iraqi intellectual appears in three forms:

The first is the Islamic intellectual, the sample that hails from Tehran as the modern cultural metropolis. His hair would be parted on the side, with a neat black beard, black specs, a wide cloaked jacket, the comfortable trousers and the tie-less shirt that is buttoned all the way to the top. It is the re-cycled image of the fighting communist of the seventies that had completely disappeared from the cultural life in Iraq. So, it seems Lenin and Marx have been substituted for images of Ali Shariati and Abd al-Karim Surush.**

Our second runner-up is the former nationalist intellectual - he's the one with that combed thick, moustache skirting across the top of his lips, black dyed hair combed back, fat cheeks and rugged spectacles. This is

the Arab version of the overwhelming nationalist male except that today he has an exhausted look. Unable to keep the prowess of nationalism like he once did in the past, he exhibits all the signs, a wide chest caving over a pot-belly and the moustache somewhat less pronounced as well as the hawkish eyes that have lost their gleam and cruelty.

The third is the eternal bohemian in Iraqi culture. The marginal writer, ostracized, downtrodden, an Arthur Rimbaud transposed on Arab culture complete with his share of lice and filth, dirty cloths consistent drunkenness, bad not-so-white teeth, an antinomian hostile to authority, outside any law, even the laws of culture.

Between these three distinct images there are many other contrasting ones: young intellectuals brimming with enthusiasm and extremism, new intellectuals in jeans, tight shirts, colorful T-shirts, worried about their long hair and sideburns. But there are the religious militias and the traditional youth whose old fashioned clothes resemble that of the old teachers contrasted against their youthful faces. The common denominator between all those coming from within Iraq was that aged look on their faces, the sun had furrowed its marks deep into their skin.

Neo-conservatives and Utopians:

The war is not over yet. The killing, the barbarity and the destruction. Culture takes the form of the impossible. The local neo-conservatives stand strong in their faith in new illusions; these are the students of Bernard Lewis, Kanan Makiyya, and Fuad Ajami. Then there are the religious utopians promising people with the future blessings of God as well as the executioners of the past regime who are now the heroes of the gangs, they are the killers and the exterminators. Everyone wanted the world to save them, those who had faith in the perfectionism of the West from Erasmus to Habermas, but to be truthful, it was all heading towards a shattering myth. Reality is not great, contrary to what Trotsky used to scream out and the non-reality has not been created yet. So we can now believe in the myths of the Islamists. Everything points toward a terrible defeat. Everyone gave up their dreams while Iraqi culture caved under the weight of an unsolvable paradox and the many ideological blows meted out on its face. As for the religionists they alone have kept a monopoly on power and influence.

The destruction of war is clear: Baghdad is destroyed, the south and the north which fell to ethnic cleansing are breaking away from the

influence of the center. Those coming with the Americans are proselytizing secularism and a sweeping capitalism. The Islamists, on the other hand, are proselytizing a frightening Khomeini or Bin Laden style despotism. As destruction looms, it never ceases to amaze me, how the intellectual class gains strength through its ideology with every passing day.

The Conference of the Internal and External Intellectual

The television and print media covers the conference: forums, meetings, planning, discussions, the formation of a High Committee for Intellectuals planning for a cultural city- ambitions, hopes and the sudden disappearance of all violent images being replaced by hope in another life. Conflicts and doubts are exposed. The forums began with neutral questions, *"Local literature, overseas literature ... how do we understand these two conflicting trends?"* or, *"Does one cancel the other out?"*

The accusations began soon after, *"We wrote a true literature uninfluenced by any authoritarian ideology."* That comment was made by a rosy faced and long haired man before adding, "You caved in to an authority that curtailed the role of the intellectual by dragging him towards his sphere of influence", and yet, "We wrote honestly and carefully facing those in power with courage." He then mentioned the stories and novels that escaped the pen of the censor.

Another got up from beside him and said, *"Can we all help bridge the gap between the intellectuals in the name of the national spirit in order to move beyond this biased view? Any binary approach has, no doubt, a negative effect on true literature."* He then went on to describe the perilous escape of intellectuals from death during the past regime across desert tracks.

"You're elitist and disgustingly arrogant, you cannot see yourself as above a literature that has made you who you are today." He got up as if he was talking about a culture of two warring countries, "We demand that the literature within Iraq not be confused with the literature outside Iraq. We should work towards a cultural exchange between both and overlook the way some writers are attacking others on the basis of writing for or against or outside the regime. I suggest that we take practical steps and set up intense forums between the two groups."

"You obliterate the mind and that is an escape strategy for the defeated. The internal literature is the only true one; as for those living overseas, these are the cowards, we have lived through hell for many years."
"You lived under a dictatorship, the authority had destroyed your perspective making you incapable of producing a true and humanistic literature because there can never be any escape from the censor."

Long Phantasmagorical dream

The sense of loss and defeat was communal. Staying alive appeared more urgent in its immediacy. Everything became chaotic, strangling abstractions, rotten and passive utterances. Such real chaos was a ripe fertile ground for insurgents and the breeding ground for civil war. The Islamists want to make beauty an antithesis to thought, the local neo-conservatives are awaiting the companies and a ferocious secularism to organize our world and ameliorate its deformed image. Independent intellectuals are looking for rational solutions that would offer happiness without despair, without proof. Where is the proof? Culture never opposed idealistic day dreams and maybe this is where the danger resides. This is because there is no place for criticism because it was never accepted as a premise. Revolutionaries depended on blotting the mind and changing its nature, the Islamists do not have the vision due to their lack of vision and their inability to critique thought. This is how culture can come to an end moving from the cheapening of political ideology and its exposure, to participation in its making. This is the post-war reality, the reality of despair that makes many, including the populace, aware that the only reality is that of the human looking at his end, the force of circumstance, and time. This is the painful bitterness of a paradox. I have no sympathy for the rhetoric of the intellectuals who have not flinched amid an obscene cultural dialogue to excuse the mistakes and the cruelties of the past regime or the errors and cunning of the occupation.

Everything came to an end, quickly and sharply clashing. This is Iraq—that long phantasmagorical dream what woke up its intellectuals on the tenth day of their journey, some to return to their homeland as if in exile and the others to return to their exile as if it were indeed their homeland.

* Sayyid Qadir was released after many Arab intellectuals protest the sentence.

**Two Iranian Shi'ite intellectuals who support the modernization of the sharia, the

first sought to subject Shi'ite thought to rational epistemology and the second encouraged a new reading in law (fiqh). Both are rejected by the official authorities in Iran.