

Diminishing Returns: An Anthropological Study of Iraqis in the UK

Zainab Saleh

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation is an ethnographic study of the Iraqi diasporic community in the UK. It is based on two years of fieldwork research I conducted there between 2006-2008. I approach the formation of the diasporic community in light of utopian visions of a past colored by colonial struggle and high national aspirations, and in light of subsequent political developments that resulted in oppression, exile, and even occupation after 2003. I read the displacement of Iraqis as an example of the failure of the postcolonial state, represented by the emergence of the Baath regime in the 1960s and Saddam Hussein's rise to power in 1979. Throughout, I examine the heightened salience of sectarianism among Iraqis in exile and in Iraq since the 1990s. Instead of understanding sectarianism as a return to traditional loyalties, I argue that it is deeply linked to the issue of power and identity politics, which the Iraqi opposition to Saddam Hussein's regime in the UK employed while in exile and institutionalized after the fall of the regime in 2003 with the support of the US Administration.

This dissertation is, also, an ethnographic study of Iraq, and aims to make up for the dearth in anthropological studies on Iraq during the last four decades. In addition to questions related to exile and life in the UK, I seek to tease out accounts about Iraq, and about life in Iraq under Saddam Hussein's regime. The great majority of Iraqis fled Iraq because of Saddam Hussein's brutal oppression, and they all had family members who

were killed, tortured or disappeared. With their hopes of return to Iraq shattered after the 2003 US occupation, these Iraqis have been reliving these tragedies every single day in the UK. This is the reality that travels with, and defines, them. Through the use of life history methodologies with Iraqi exiles from different socioeconomic backgrounds, I document the different social and political scenes prior to and after the late 1970s; the persecution suffered under Saddam Hussein's regime since the late 1970s; the journey to and life in exile in London; relationships among members of the diasporic Iraqi community therein; and the ways in which those in exile reconfigure the past in relation to the present developments.

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Prologue

The Fall of Saddam Hussein: Images, Media and Diaspora

I. The Fall of the Statue

I vividly remember April 9th, 2003 – the day Saddam Hussein’s statue was brought down by the American army, who had just entered Baghdad. I was in the library, trying to work. It was hard to for me to focus with the war going on. I kept returning to the computer terminals to check the news. During one of many visits to these terminals, there was breaking news about the fall of the regime – footage of Saddam’s statue in the Firdous Square wrapped by the American flag and by the Iraqi flag after a short while, and brought down by American soldiers while Iraqis looked on aired time and again. I watched the fall of the statue ten minutes after the actual event took place. I gazed at the screen, trying to absorb the idea that this act indicated the end of Saddam’s regime as the news flash kept reminding me. Was Saddam’s removal that straightforward and obvious? It took the fall of *one* of his statues, which filled the streets of Iraq, to end his regime? What about Saddam himself, who was still on the run?

The news flash was inviting me to rejoice in the fall of the regime, but I did not feel joyful. If anything, I felt sadness and a sense of belatedness – what if this had happened in the 1980s, after the Gulf War in 1991 or later in the 1990s? Things would have been very different personally and nationally. I would not have lost my mother and

sister, and Iraqis would not have lived through more oppression and the blockade, whose devastating impacts do not seem to be appreciated by people outside Iraq. I could not bring myself to study anymore, so I packed my books and went back to my apartment. When I got home, I found a message from my aunt who lives in London. She was telling me that she had just seen the fall of the statue live and asked if I watched it. Her voice was beaming with happiness. I called her back, and she asked me if I watched the event live. I told her I watched it after a short while. She replied,

“How can you miss this historical moment! I watched it as it happened. I witnessed the fall of the regime as it was taking place. I can’t believe you missed it. It is different to watch a re-run of it. You missed the historical moment. It happens only once. We’ve been waiting for this moment for twenty-five years.”

My aunt was unusually brief because she wanted to watch the news and to keep trying calling her brother-in-law. Given her excitement, I decided to see the fall of the statue online again, hoping to “contract” the joy. This time, I listened to the comments made by the broadcasters, who all agreed that the fall of the statue was symbolic and ushered in a post-Saddam era. The streets around the Firdous Square were almost empty except for US tanks and a few hundred Iraqis standing within the confines of the square. The US soldier who climbed the statue and put ropes around its head before covering its face with the US flag seemed to set up an execution scene: the ropes became a noose and the US flag was the hood covering the head of the victim at the moment of execution. For a short while, the Iraqi flag replaced the US flag before the head was bare again, with the noose around the neck. The statue had to witness its demolition/execution foreshadowing the execution of Saddam himself who, three and a half years later, refused to have his

head covered with a hood at his execution. An American tank tied to the statue pulled back slowly. In a few seconds, the statue/Saddam was toppled. The Iraqi onlookers began cheering and stepping on the statue.

If Saddam's obsession with self-representation – as his pictures, murals and statues filled the public space in Iraq and appeared on monetary notes, the first pages of all newspapers and school books – was meant to convey his might (as any act of defacement was a grave crime), it was the fall of a representation of his that heralded the end of his rule. *The statue* – as it came to be known among Iraqis – in the Firdous Square became the representation of Saddam par excellence because its fall announced his fall. Defacements of his images and statues immediately followed in the rest of Iraq, and were carried out by Iraqis themselves this time, without the intervention of US soldiers. This could happen only after the fall of *the statue*. As such, defacement – including people slapping and hitting his pictures – became a means for Iraqis to express their feelings towards the leader. Not only was Saddam's person reduced to a monument,¹ his countless representations provided a venue for people to show their pain and anger. As Michael Taussig reminds us, “We access the intangibility of spirit through the solidity of the monument.”²

II. Another Episode of Tyrannicide: Saddam Hussein's Execution in 2006

It was December 29th, 2006. I had been staying with my aunt for a while to help her take care of her husband who underwent by-pass surgery a few weeks earlier. I had been telling myself that farther down the line I could compensate for getting away from my

¹ See Taussig (1997), p. 94.

² Ibid., p. 134.

fieldwork. Anyway, people were busy with the festive season, namely Christmas, the New Year, and the Big Eid. That night, announcements and speculation around Saddam Hussein's execution dominated the news. Conflicting statements about the date of execution were issued by Iraqi authorities. The news of Saddam's imminent death disturbed me deeply. I felt like I had received a blow to the head. Since watching the evening news, I had been haunted by the idea that in just a few hours he would no longer exist. He was such a dominating force in my (and many Iraqi's) life that I simply could not imagine life without him. I wondered what he was feeling and thinking. Was he thinking of the images that would circulate after death? Was he thinking that his corpse might be dragged in the streets of Baghdad, a fate faced by some Iraqi statesmen? Was he scared? Was he thinking of the people who perished brutally under his rule? Did he identify with them? Or was he, as he emphasized during his trial, really convinced that he was the legitimate president of Iraq who has committed neither atrocities nor crimes?

The idea of his execution would not sink in. Given Saddam's long rule, the idea of his death seemed far-fetched. Also, he was the first Iraqi leader brought to trial, and knew he was going to die as a punishment for his crimes. All Iraqi presidents except for one had a sudden unnatural death. When I went to bed, I wondered if I was going to hear the news of his death when I woke, and the thought made me sleepless. I tumbled in my bed until three a.m. I resisted the temptation to check the news on my laptop. I had to wake up early. My aunt was going to me wake me up around eight no matter what, so I needed to sleep.

At 8:30, my aunt's high-pitched voice woke me up. I heard her telling her husband that Saddam was hanged. I jumped from bed, and went to her adjacent room to

watch the news. The BBC had a breaking news alert that Saddam Hussein had been executed. No images were available yet. I sat at the tip of my aunt's bed, listening to the news.

“What is the matter? Why do you look so horrified? Nightmares?” My aunt asked.

“No. It is just the news. I don't think he should have been executed ...”

“To hell with him. What has he done to us for two years! I wish your mother were alive. She should have seen this. It is good he is dead. This era should come to an end. As long as he was alive, this chapter would never close! His supporters wouldn't have given up. They would always hope he came to power again. Come on. Get ready. It'll be nine before you have breakfast.”

During breakfast, my aunt's brother-in-law called from Baghdad to ask after his brother and to wish them Happy Eid. That caught me off guard. According to the news yesterday, Saddam was to be hanged before the start of the Eid, which was supposed to fall tomorrow. It turned out that today was the first day of the Eid in Iraq, and the timing of the execution was chosen intentionally. The Iraqi authority decided to hang him on the first day of the Eid, just as he did to prisoners. I had thought the Shia authorities in Iraq would announce tomorrow as the beginning of the Eid since it became almost a tradition that the Shia celebrate the Eid one day after the Sunnis, but they did not do so this time.

After the phone call, my aunt's husband commented, “When I was in prison, the executioners came to chat with us on the eve of the Eid one year. They told us they got tired of executing people. One hundred and eighty Dawa Party³ members were executed that night. When their families came to visit the next day – the first day of Eid – they were handed their corpses. Instead of celebrating Eid with their imprisoned relatives and

³ It is an Iraqi Shia party.

children, they had to mourn the deaths of their loved ones. That was regular practice under Saddam's regime. We often heard about such executions on the eves or days of holidays.”

My aunt’s husband was arrested in 1978 on a charge of dealing with foreign companies. For a few months, no one knew anything. When Saddam became the official president in 1979, he had a summary trial and was sentenced for twenty years. He served two years of this sentence in Abu Ghraib Prison. We used to visit him on Fridays, the weekend in Iraq. He was released by a personal order from Saddam in 1980. The latter commissioned him to undertake the project of re-building Baghdad for a Non-Aligned Countries Conference. My aunt and her husband left Iraq by the end of 1982 and never returned. Like the majority of Iraqis, they always thought that once Saddam was toppled, it would be possible for them to “go home.” And like the majority of Iraqis, this dream was shattered in the aftermath of the invasion in 2003. They were left to wonder how things could deteriorate to such an extent. To Iraqis, Saddam represented the barrier to the physical return to the Iraq they knew, or imagined to be exact. While the fall of the statue on April 9th, 2003, was a symbolic removal of Saddam, his death that day constituted his physical elimination, and hence the impossibility of him returning to power. “An end to an era,” my aunt said.

My aunt’s husband’s comment indicated that what Saddam did to his people his people did to him. And it is true: his execution is an act of revenge par excellence, whether with regard to the charge or the timing of his hanging. He was executed for the death of 148 Shia Iraqis in the town of Djuail after nineteen residents, who belonged to the Shia Dawa Party, carried out an unsuccessful attempt on his life in 1982. This is why

the news of his death on the first day of the Eid caught me off-guard. The people in power in Iraq now – in particular the Dawa Party members – were driven by a petty desire for revenge. Their mentality was just like Saddam's, and this was (and is) awfully scary to me. Yes, Saddam was a dictator. Yes, I lost my family because of him. Yes, I had a fearful and insecure life under his rule. But I wished he were tried for all the crimes he committed against his people and neighbors – as opposed to *148 Shias who belonged to the Dawa Party* – and sentenced to life in prison. Not only did his trial and execution for this particular crime disregard the fact that he was a dictator who did not spare anyone who was a suspect, it let off the hook the international players who were complicit in his crimes, namely the European and American governments.

After breakfast, I went to watch the BBC again. By then, silent footage of Saddam's execution, taken from al-Iraqiya TV station, was circulating. The footage showed Saddam in a room with five hooded men, collected and showing no emotion. The image stopped with the noose around his neck. Then an image of him dead. Again, death was a spectacle. Rather than the staging of a public execution to be witnessed by onlookers and the media, photographs and a piece of footage became the medium through which death became an image available to the public at large – Iraqis, the media, people all over world saw the end of the dictator. The scene of the execution chamber and the picture of Saddam dead evoked images of the first Iraqi president's dead face in 1963, the hanging of the regent and the prime minister after the fall of the monarchy in 1958 before their corpses were dragged through the streets, and the memories of public executions. However, it was under Saddam Hussein's reign that death and its image became part of everyday life. Death – regardless of whether it was brought about by wars or the regime,

and whether its target was the “enemy” within or outside the state – became a spectacle through the dissemination of photographs, images and footage.⁴

During the Iran-Iraq War, a program titled “Pictures from the Battlefield” was often aired. It showed pictures of dead Iranian soldiers, pictures of wounded, dead and decomposing bodies. We used to turn off the TV the second the foreboding music of the program started to play. At times, when there was a fierce battle, the program would go on and on and on. Occasionally even the newspapers published pictures of dead soldiers. After the fall of Saddam in 2003, death became even more public. Bodies or remains of bodies became an everyday reality to endure. With this development, there has been a flood of images of death, whether of civilians who were victims of sectarian violence or air strikes or suicide-bombing, fallen soldiers, or hostages whose slaying is usually filmed. Saddam’s execution was just the latest addition to these images.

Two hours later, a friend came to visit my aunt and her husband, to wish us a Happy Eid and a Happy New Year. She mentioned that Iraqi and Arab websites and TVs were broadcasting a full and audible version of the execution, shot from the mobile phone of a guard. She said that Iraqis in the UK were getting this version on their mobile phones from relatives and friends who live in Iraq, and that her brother sent the whole clip to her. When I first arrived in the UK to do my fieldwork, I was asked by many Iraqis if I’d like to have copies of DVDs that contain torture sessions and executions under Saddam’s regime. These DVDs, along with the ones that show Saddam’s and his family’s lavish parties, have become very popular, whether in Iraq or abroad. My refusal to see these DVDs did not spare graphic accounts of what goes on in them.

⁴ For the question of war as an image and photographs of dead soldiers, see Sontag (2003), pp. 59-67.

One day, however, I was forced to see part of such a DVD. I attended a conference on mass graves in Iraq. During the lunch break, which went on for two hours because of lack organization, footage of an execution was shown through a projector. The first scene was of a young man in a desert-like open space. The young man was smiling to the camera. A state agent, wearing a kaki uniform, puts a band around his eyes. He then puts something in the pocket of the shirt, and pushes the man to a mound behind him. The guy goes there, and in few seconds, there is an explosion. You just see a cloud of dust bursting up in the air. The same scenario happens again to two other young men. I guess these men were unaware of their fate given their relaxed smiles. Did they think, or were they told, that they would be released? The image of these three smiling men, who must have been in their twenties, is stamped on my memory. The footage, repeated time and again during the lunch break, was heartbreaking. I felt my heart racing with each replay of these three instances of death. These three young men, as Susan Sontag put it in her description of the Cambodian men and women who were photographed before execution, are “forever looking at death, forever about to be murdered, forever wronged. And the viewer is in the same position...”⁵ The three men’s unsuspecting smiles to the camera and the ensuing clouds of dust cast their death anew with each re-playing of the DVD.

After the friend left, I watched the news again. By then, more details about the execution began to emerge. It turned out the guards – supporters of the young Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr – taunted Saddam during his last minutes, and there was an uproar. A transcript of the exchange goes:

[Saddam] Oh God.

⁵ Sontag (2003), p. 61.

[Voices] May God's blessings be upon Muhammad and his household.
 [Voices] And may God hasten their appearance and curse their enemies.
 [Voices] Muqtada [Al-Sadr]...Muqtada...Muqtada.
 [Saddam] Do you consider this bravery?
 [Voice] Long live Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr.
 [Voice] To hell.
 [Voice] Please do not. The man is being executed. Please no, I beg you to stop.
 [Saddam] There is no God but Allah and I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God. There is no God but Allah and I testify that Muhammad...

The term Muhammad's household – Muhammad's descendants and family – refers to the twelve imams venerated by the Shia. One of the differences between Sunni and the Shia practices is the addition of "household" when blessing Muhammad. To chant the Shia version of the blessing and to call the name of Muqtada al-Sadr was to rejoice at Saddam's death in front of him. It was like dancing around the grave of a dying man. The execution was an act of revenge carried out by the Sadr's militia with the approval of other Iraqi politicians and statesmen who never tire of talking about justice and democracy. So instead of stopping this farce, these politicians who lived in the UK after fleeing Iraq watched on. One of them gave interviews to TV stations immediately after the execution – before the circulation of the mobile version and the exchange. He described Saddam's final moments and his impression of Saddam's behavior. He spoke in a matter-of-fact way and callously, as if he were talking about a mundane event.

That night, I received two emails from Rana, who is affiliated with a leftist Iraqi organization in London that provides services for Iraqis in the UK. One email has personal statement as its subject while the other one is called an official statement. The personal email was sent by Rana and husband while the other was issued by the organization. The official one deplored the fact that Saddam was not tried for all of his crimes, and hinted that revenge cannot result in forgiveness or in revealing the truth. It

also applauded that Saddam appeared in court and was charged, a fate his victims did not have. The statement was ambivalent in its view of the execution. Though there was an insinuation of condemnation, the conclusion was to emphasize that the removal of Saddam was good. The personal statement, on the other hand, wished the recipients “A Happy New Year and a Happy Iraq without Saddam: 2007.” Could Iraqis not comprehend that Saddam was no longer the ruler of Iraq? That Iraq had been Saddam-less for more three years and a half. Only an act of tyrannicide could convince us of the end of his reign.

It seemed Saddam was, and is, still omnipresent in the psyche of the Iraqis. I guess this is why we tend to use his first name solely. Iraqis usually refer to Saddam Hussein as Saddam. I myself often write Saddam instead of Saddam Hussein in my chapters. When my friends add Hussein, I find it strange. Isn't “Saddam” alone enough, just like “Muhammad,” “Moses,” or “Napoleon”? Or like Simon Bolivar, who is simply referred to as the Liberator, and who is described in an article on the occasion of the publication of two books on his life in 1987 as “a universal man, an extraordinary man, and for this he lives on”?⁶

Indeed, Saddam does have an overpowering presence. He is a figure who changed Iraq drastically. I grew up in Iraq listening to my parents and their friends share stories about how Iraq used to be different. I used to feel very unfortunate to be born under Saddam's regime. Older people now refer to the time of the monarchy as the golden age. Not only does oppression from that period appear limited and more benign in comparison to Saddam's rule, political and social life was vibrant and bustling. What particularly used to make me feel unlucky was the paralyzing terror I felt all the time. My parents'

⁶ Quoted in Taussig (1997), p. 107.

stories showed ambition, optimism and peace of mind. They did not have to learn to censor what they said when they were just five years old. They did not have to fear for their parents or listen to stories of people disappearing or live through wars. All of this changed with the rise of “Saddam Hussein”. Life in Iraq changed beyond recognition. Fear, death, wars and torture replaced the days of political activity, high hopes and possibilities to pursue one’s ambitions. These stories used to make me wonder if my parents’ generation and my generation shared the same place.

Introduction

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of the Iraqi diasporic community in the United Kingdom, whose emergence and consolidation since the late 1970s is deeply connected to Saddam Hussein's rise to power in 1979. The progressive social and political aspirations on the rise in Iraq since the 1930s and the anticolonial struggle that brought about the end of British control over Iraqi affairs and the monarchy in 1958 suffered a setback at the hands of successive postcolonial regimes in general, and following the rule of Saddam Hussein in particular. My research approaches the formation of the Iraqi community in the UK in the light of the utopian visions of the past and their translation into exile and tragedies in the present by focusing on the life stories of five Iraqis living in the UK. These stories deal with the social and political transformations in Iraq and in diaspora, the meaning of living in the UK in the aftermath of the 2003 war, the different understandings of "home," and the reconfiguration of the past vis-à-vis the present.

In the wake of the regime change in 2003, not only did Iraqis in the UK lose the long nurtured hope of return, they saw their homeland being destroyed. Sectarian and ethnic violence, displacement, deterioration in security and occupation wreaked havoc on Iraq. For the Iraqi community in the UK, these unforeseen developments were apocalyptic. Unlike other established diasporic communities, most exiled Iraqis could not maintain direct contact with or visit, Iraq. Moreover, this denial was aggravated by the loss of family members or close friends who stayed and by the tragedies visited upon

Iraq. Since Saddam Hussein emerged as invincible dictator in 1979,¹ anticipation of his removal acquired a redemptive sense. High expectations and hopes had been hung on this moment. But when it finally happened, what followed were shock, disbelief and loss of hope; rather than salvation, more tragedies and destruction ensued.

When I arrived in the UK in 2006, the deteriorating situation and human losses were at their peak in Iraq. Stories of relatives and/or friends displaced, killed or kidnapped dominated conversation among Iraqis in the UK. The persecution endured under Saddam Hussein's regime was exacerbated by further calamities after the American invasion in 2003. Against this backdrop, I found the concept of trauma – in which I was initially interested – to be limiting, since Iraqis' understandings of past events and the present had been colored by recent developments. Focusing on traumas suffered under Saddam Hussein appeared to freeze the lens on specific tragic experiences that befell the individual, to miss the aftermath of the 2003 war, to exclude people who were not directly traumatized or affected, and to define tragedies too narrowly. As such, the concept of catastrophe became more relevant. My understanding of catastrophe is informed by Walter Benjamin's notion of history. In "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin analyzes the concept of history in relation to the rise of Fascism.² Demystifying the notion of historical progress, he refutes the idea that the progress of humanity is the ultimate trajectory of history. For him, the state of emergency – the massacres, destructions, defeats, wars and ruins – is the rule, rather than the exception. The developments after regime change in 2003 in Iraq assume a different significance in the light of Benjamin's argument. This long anticipated moment had been imagined to be

¹ Though Saddam Hussein became the president officially in 1979, he enjoyed immense power since the early 1970s, as a vice-president.

² Benjamin (1968), pp. 253-64.

one of happiness; however, the event was followed by shock and disillusion, and the state of emergency resumed. The instantaneous looting and the destruction of state buildings immediately shattered the flitting joy and heralded the worsening of the situation.

When I started my fieldwork, I was struck by the abundance of narratives and heated discussions among Iraqis. These untiring reminiscences on the past and analyses of the present reflected an urge to make sense of the political present, a present that had seen a total obliteration of the object of nostalgia and, hence, a reconfiguration of consciousness – neither was return feasible nor would the new Iraq be the way it had been imagined. Hence, Benjamin’s concept of catastrophe provides a venue to approach the personal and the political, namely the individual who inhabits the political present, in that it allows for the consideration of the broader picture. The utopian past imagined by Iraqis engaged in struggles for justice and independence under the monarchical rule gave way to military coups, oppression and, later on, exile. The hope that this state of affairs was an exception, that “the good old days” would return once Saddam Hussein fell, proved unfounded. What ensued were more catastrophes affecting nearly everyone (even those who escaped Saddam Hussein’s regime unscathed), whether at the emotional level (the realization that exile had become permanent) or at a more tangible level (the loss and displacement of relatives and friends.)

In this respect, the Iraqi political present echoes the experiences of other countries in the Third World. As David Scott maintains, anti-colonial struggles and revolutionary ideals have been translated into corruption, nepotism, dictatorship, oppression and political unrest in the postcolonial present.³ Movements on a massive scale for political

³ Scott (2004), pp. 1-2.

and social reasons provided an escape from the postcolonial quagmire.⁴ My approach to the displacement of Iraqis in terms of a failed postcolonial present aims to emphasize the commonality of the Iraqi case with those of other Third World countries, and to offer a historical – rather than essentialist – reading of political events.

In the months leading to the 2003 US invasion, Iraq was depicted as a place consisting of three antagonistic groups, namely Sunnis, Shi`as and Kurds. This understanding neglects the social and political transformations that took place under different regimes, the struggles for power and the impacts of the 1991 US invasion of Iraq.⁵ Moreover, it disregards the interventions of the Western governments and the different US administrations in Iraqi affairs, which characterizes the situation of many countries in the Third World.⁶

⁴ See, for instance, Kay (1987), Malkki (1995), Al-Ali and Koser (2002).

⁵ For the complexity and multidimensionality of identity in the Iraqi society after the rise of the modern state of Iraq, see Zubaida (1991). For an account on the common intellectual space in Iraq under the monarchy, see Bashkin (2009).

⁶ Even the literature that offers a nuanced account of Iraqi history does not refer the US role in the coups in Iraq during the Cold War, and the Western and US backing of Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War. In a recent study on the Eisenhower Administration and its efforts to topple Abdul Karim Qasim's regime in the late 1950s, Kenneth Osgood emphasizes the difficulties of studying the roles the US governments played in regime changes in Iraq since most of the documents are either still classified, or blacked out to a great extent when declassified (2009), pp. 4-35. As Osgood shows, the Eisenhower Administration feared that Iraq could fall to the communists, and decided to back other players – such as the Arab nationalists and the Baathists – to prevent such a possibility. For the impact of the Cold World on Iraq, the relations between the Baath Regime and the US in general, and the support of Saddam during the Iraq-Iran War, see Khalidi (2009), pp. 150-158 and p. 199; Weiner (2007), p. 425 and pp. 576-77. For the role of the CIA in different countries in the Middle East, Latin America and Asia since the end of World War II, see Weiner (2007).

Research and Writing Methodologies

“**Act One:** Anthropology graduate student finishes two years of field work and returns home with a computer full of notes and a trunk full of notebooks. Job now is to convert that into a 300 page piece of writing. No one has told her or him (a) how to do fieldwork or (b) that writing is usually the hardest part of the deal. Could these omissions be linked.”

Michael Taussig, “The Corn Wolf”⁷

Fieldwork

This dissertation is based on my fieldwork in London, conducted for almost two years from 2006 to 2008. My main concern upon arrival in London in 2006 was to establish contacts with Iraqis as I “had not been to the field” and had no contacts whatsoever. It is true that I went to London every summer since 2002, but these visits were personal and I spent my time with my two maternal aunts who live there. Until deciding not to go to Iran to conduct my fieldwork near the end of 2005, I never related to London as a research location. The fact that I have two aunts living there did not mean that I would have access to the Iraqi community. One aunt is married to an English man and has a few Iraqi friends. The social circle of the other aunt and her Iraqi husband, on the other hand, is limited to elite Iraqis who belong to the ruling and/or well-to-do classes of the monarchic era and who arrived in the early 1980s at the latest. This circle is totally cut off from the large Iraqi community and has been tightening with the deaths of many of its members.⁸

Through an e-mail exchange with an Iraqi man who lived in the UK before moving to the US, whose contact information I obtained from an Iranian-American friend, I had the names of a few Iraqi Shia institutions. Only the phone number of one

⁷ This section is indebted to Michael Taussig’s “The Wolf Corn: Writing Apotropaic Texts,” which will be published in the Fall edition, 2010, of *Critical Inquiry*. Professor Taussig has kindly provided me with a copy of the article.

⁸ My aunts were born in the early 1930s, and the Iraqi husband of my aunt was born in the mid 1920s.

institution worked, and I paid a visit shortly after arriving in London. One man I met at this institution, Abu Warda, proved vital as he put me in touch with Iraqis and told me of religious and political events – such as talks and conferences on Iraq, and religious gatherings in different Shia Iraqi institutions.⁹ I also found out about the only secular Iraqi institution in London, which provided legal help for Iraqi refugees and held cultural and political events. I did what I thought an anthropologist should do. I attended and recorded the different events, I paid close attention to details and clues (such as the nature of the audience, the seating arrangements in the meeting halls, the interaction between the audience and the speakers, etc.), and I wrote down notes on what I noticed. Bit by bit, I met more Iraqis and knew about more events, and doors began to open.

Despite establishing considerable contacts within a relatively short time, I was hesitant to start conducting interviews. There was the issue of gaining the confidence of Iraqis and of finding people willing to talk about their lives. Since Saddam's intelligence agents were active and powerful before 1990, Iraqis in London still show suspicion of an outsider who is looking for information. While I managed to get around this problem by finding people who were keen to share their life stories or through personal recommendation, the main obstacle was my own perception of how an interview should be conducted. I believed that an interview could be conducted only after establishing close rapport with people and after living with them for a long time, as had been set by the "fathers" of anthropology. For me, this was the "real" anthropological way of interviewing. I kept delaying until one day a friend who himself was in the field told me to start interviewing and to stop worrying if I knew the interviewees closely or not. And

⁹ In the following chapters, I will talk about Abu Warda and his help.

this is how I began interviewing. Over the months, I interviewed people who I had come to know closely and those who were merely acquaintances.

I interviewed around sixty-seven Iraqis from different ages, classes and backgrounds (whether ethnic, religious, or political), who arrived in the UK at different times (from the 1950s to 2004). The duration of the interviews ranged from one to ten hours; the average was usually four to five hours. Unless the interviews lasted for an hour or two, I met with people more than once to continue our interviews. This enabled me to listen to the interviews again when I went home and to write down more detailed questions about specific issues for the next meeting. The Iraqis I interviewed were willing to talk about their lives and to dwell upon issues related to Iraq. Finding Iraqi women willing to be interviewed was difficult. Many times, women asked me to interview their brothers or husbands instead. It was only towards the end of my stay that I managed to interview more women.

While I sometimes went to people's houses to interview them, I usually met them in cafes or at their places of work. It was the interviewees who chose these public venues. There were different explanations for why people preferred such locations (maybe they did not want their families to know they gave interviews, or they were not inclined to allow me in their private life), but the recurring reason, especially for those who had arrived after 1990, was that they felt uncomfortable inviting me to their council houses or to the flats that the British government gave them as part of the social benefits granted to refugees. Some apologized, complaining that their council accommodations were too small. Only one woman invited me to her council flat and apologized profusely for her "inadequate" place. Her flat had two bedrooms, a medium size kitchen and living room.

The flat was small, especially in comparison to the average houses people lived in back in Iraq, which typically consist of four big bedrooms, two living rooms, a big kitchen, a garden and a garage. As such, one's residence in London became associated with the loss of status many Iraqi refugees experienced upon arrival in the UK, and indicated the lack of the financial resources to afford a spacious house in a nice area.

All the Iraqis I interviewed did not mind sharing their stories and opinions. The dominance of the subject of Iraq in their daily lives meant the interviews were an extension of their daily conversations and even concerns. Needless to say, most of the stories I heard were sad. Even the happy tales of pre-Saddam times were tinged with sadness. This haunted reality cannot be limited to Saddam Hussein's rule – it enfolds the present as well. I heard many stories: about the disappearance and death of family members and friends under Saddam's regime in the late 1970s and 1980s, about hopes that the disappeared would still be alive, about mourning sessions held for them after 2003 upon discovering they had been buried in mass graves, about unanswered questions on the way they were killed, about fortunate families who were able to bury their loved ones and grieve. The stories on post-Saddam times were about kidnapping, methods of murder, ransoms, flight, etc. Ironically, people usually asked me if I could bear listening to their stories before they went on with their accounts. I say "ironically" because it took a long time and many revisions for me to secure the approval of the Institutional Review Board; the personnel at the IRB had been concerned that my questions would trigger traumatic memories, and I had to argue that I would not ask any questions that go beyond people's daily talk.

With the exception of two women who preferred that I not, I recorded the interviews. In one case, a young woman, whose father was part of Saddam's regime but had fled Iraq in 1983 for fear that his only son would be sent to the front during the Iran-Iraq war, asked me to turn off the recorder when she talked about her father. My interviewees provided detailed accounts in reply to my questions. On the other hand, there were questions I wished I could ask but did not because of their sensitivity. These questions were often related to family relations and status issues, such as jobs taken by the interviewees or their parents, or the social benefits granted to the refugees. I would ask general questions about difficulties or hardships faced in the UK and would follow up on it depending on the answer. Generally speaking, people did not like to talk about downward social mobility.¹⁰ Given how gracious my interviewees have been, I felt I had no right to impinge upon their privacy for research reasons.

Writing

This dissertation consists of five life history chapters, based on long interviews with five Iraqis living in the UK.¹¹

After finishing my fieldwork in 2008, the pitfalls of writing became a challenging task. I was at a loss for how to write an ethnography that would convey the richness of the lives and stories of Iraqis in the UK without reducing these accounts to sweeping categories and themes. I realized the way I wrote about the material could unwittingly lead me to use the same general classifications I was desperate to avoid. For instance,

¹⁰ For the issue of downward social mobility, see the background chapter on the Iraqi community. For instance, during one interview, a young man told me that his father was an engineer in Iraq but became a taxi driver (for Arab tourists from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries) when they arrived in London in the 1990s. Another man spoke about his bitterness that after providing a comfortable life for his family in Iraq, they had to live on social benefits in the UK to make ends meet. One needs to keep in mind that most Iraqis who arrived as refugees had nothing to rely on.

¹¹ For background information on the Iraqi community in London, see Chapter I.

how could I write about Hazar's life (Chapter Three) without reducing it to the categories of "Iraqis of Iranian origin" or "Shia Kurds" only? How could I relate her struggles with her family when she lived in Iran and then in the UK, her struggles with being defined in terms of one category by people around her, and her struggles as a young Iraqi woman who adheres to Shia Islam? How could I convey other aspects of her life that I would have missed if I emphasized the issues of "Iraqis of Iranian origins" and state-formation, such as the bombing during the Iran-Iraq War? These concerns were intensified by ethnographic studies on refugees and displaced/exiled people, which have long warned against the portrayal of refugees as an undifferentiated mass.¹² In *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said laments the prevalence of such abstractions as opposed to the subjectivity of individuals in the representation of exiles.¹³ These issues, combined with hours and hours of recordings and tons of notes, publications and papers, made me drift towards the archival material I collected at the British Library and the National Archives in London. Archival documents seemed more orderly and contained, and they provided a legitimate escape from the maze of my ethnographic material ...

... until a suggestion was made that I should consider writing life history chapters based on the stories of certain individuals. At first, I was doubtful and apprehensive about this method. After all, it requires creative writing and poses challenges to the use of theory. How could I write a lively account of one person? How would I tackle theoretical questions? The first step was to start reading ethnographies and literary works based on life history.¹⁴ I read and re-read works by Victor Turner, Kenneth E. Read, John Berger

¹² See Malkki (1995), pp. 10-12.

¹³ See Said (2000), pp. 174-176

¹⁴ For ethnographies that make use life history (or social biography as it is sometimes called) and storytelling, see Crapanzano (1980), Shostak (1983), Eickelman (1985), Abu-Lughod (1993), Waterston

and James Agee and Walker Evans. I also began writing an ethnographic chapter, but it was hard for me to find my way. Finally, I sat down and read carefully the chapter on Asemo in Read's *The High Valley*, and drew a diagram of how the author wrote about the life of Asemo. And I began again. It took me almost four months, and many trials, to write the first chapter (Chapter Two). Life history became a venue to approach my ethnographic material, to guard against the loss of individual voices and stories and to emphasize complexity. With time, writing this way became less difficult. However, doubts and concerns raised their heads with each new life history. How could I avoid repeating the same patterns and structures so as to not bore the readers? How could I use different techniques? In other words, this dissertation became an experiment in ethnographic writing as well.

It was only when the issue of penning an ethnography out of the fieldwork material became an endeavor in its own right (rather than a means) that I began to think about the question of writing in anthropology. On the one hand, I was trying to find out about different approaches and methods of writing. On the other, I felt the need to justify my choice of life history and the predominance of narrative in my chapters. This involved re-reading the literature that has been essential to the critique of anthropology as a discipline and ethnographic writing.¹⁵ I turned my attention to works that came out in the wake of this earlier critique, looking at the close relationship between anthropology and

(2005), Fassin and Le Marcis and Lethata (2008) and Waterston and Vesperi (2009). Most of the theoretical literature on life history focuses on psychological studies.

¹⁵ Clifford (1988), Clifford and Marcus (1986) and Marcus and Fischer (1986). For instance, *In the Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford emphasizes that ethnography is embedded in writing, and that ethnographic writing "enacts a specific strategy of authority." See Clifford (1988), p. 25. He discusses the different strategies and methods used by anthropologists – in the wake of works by Edward Said and Michel Foucault – to avoid the pitfalls of writing about the other, to highlight the dynamic of interaction between the anthropologists and their subjects/informants and to emphasize the presence of various voices in a text. See *Ibid.* pp. 51-52.

literature with respect to stylistic influence, intellectual questions, insights about man and society and readership.¹⁶ This recent literature combined with the earlier discussions of the ethnographic writing underlined the literary aspect of ethnographic writing.

It was Michael Taussig's thoughts on ethnographic writing – or what he calls “writingwork” – that made me pay attention to the aesthetic dimension of writing, and re-read the critique of anthropology and ethnographic writing in a different light.¹⁷ In *Walter Benjamin's Grave*, Taussig asserts anthropology “is blind to how much its practice relies on the art of telling other people's stories – badly. What happens is that those stories are elaborated as scientific observations gleaned not from storytellers but from ‘informants.’”¹⁸ For Taussig, the art of storytelling has been stifled by the dominant approach to academic writing and its emphasis on explanation,¹⁹ and by the anthropologist's perception of the people s/he works with as informants, rather than storytellers. The idea that anthropology is embedded in storytelling, and that the challenge is how to render these stories, has been crucial to my use of life history. Rather than approaching Iraqis in the UK as a source of ethnographic material to be analyzed, I came to see the telling of Iraqis' stories as providing a space to keep the individual voices and to deal with the variety of issues that appeared as a result. Besides, life history has allowed me to elaborate on my position in the field and interaction with Iraqis, in

¹⁶ See De Angelis (2002), Ashley (1990) and Daniel and Peck (1996).

¹⁷ In the earlier reading of this literature, I was interested in the history of anthropology.

¹⁸ Taussig (2006), p. 62. See also Taussig (2004), pp. 313-14.

¹⁹ In the article I quote at the opening of this section, Taussig attempts to unsettle the approach to academic writing (or what he calls agribusiness writing) as a transparent enterprise, and to question the business of explanation involved in this type of writing. He goes on to remark that “Agribusiness writing is a mode of production (see Marx) that conceals the means of production, assuming writing as information to be set aside from writing that has poetry, humor, luck, sarcasm, leg pulling, the art of storytelling and subject becoming object. It assumes writing to be a communicative means, not a source of experience for reader and writer alike.” In this scheme, writing (and explanation) itself is magical and needs to be counter-balanced with apotropaic writing. See Taussig (2010).

particular the constraints and advantages I had, the ways I presented myself, and the ways Iraqis related to me and I related to them. All of these factors shaped my access to people and my relationship with them.

The process of writing itself enabled me to define and delimit my dissertation project. At first, the chapters were vaguely connected, and I focused on issues of state formation, nationalism and identity. With time, questions of diaspora/exile, remembering the past and reconfiguration of consciousness after 2003 became more relevant in terms of my fieldwork material. Moreover, writing – and thinking about the use of life history method and storytelling – led me to focus on Saddam Hussein’s rule, as his assumption of the presidency in 1979 and his reign witnessed the formation and consolidation of Iraqi diasporic communities, constituted the final blow to the anti-colonial aspirations and to political vibrancy, and announced the ultimate bankruptcy of the post-colonial state in Iraq.

Theoretical Questions

Having said that, this ethnography relies on different theories. Though I do not make a direct reference to theories in the chapters, my writing has been guided by certain theoretical concerns.

Diaspora and Exile

In *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said describes exile as a separation from one’s native land, past, language and roots. Asserting that exile is “a discontinuous state of being,” he asks, “Is it not true that the views of exile in literature and, moreover, in religion obscure what is truly horrendous: that exile is irremediably secular and unbearably historical; that it is produced by human beings for other human beings; that, like death but without

death's ultimate mercy, it has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography?"²⁰ Exile for Said is, first and foremost, a state of loss because "homelessness" can only be a tragic condition. Moreover, exile is a state of pathos in that it can lead to estrangement and hatred of outsiders despite the fact that it can consolidate group solidarity and advance cultural sensibility and creativity.

In *Lost in Translation*, Eva Hoffman titles her chapter on life in Poland as Paradise and on life in Canada as Exile even though she lived in fear and insecurity in Poland. What seems to make Poland a paradise is that fact that Hoffman felt at home there. Canada, on the other hand, resulted in alienation and "loss of a living connection."²¹ Life had to be lived and expressed in a different language. Like Said, Hoffman laments the loss of the comfort of continuity, and stresses that the upheaval of displacement "can sometimes produce some rather more conservative impulses of self-defense and self preservation."²²

The literature on exile, as exemplified by Said's and Hoffman's writings, tends to approach exile mainly in terms of loss and trauma. The very choice of language to define one's status as an exile – as opposed to migrant, displaced or refugees – is telling. Said recognizes this choice of words when he differentiates between refugees, emigres, exiles and expatriates. He remarks that exile "originated in the age-old practice of banishment. Once banished, the exile lives an anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider."²³ This description calls to the mind Oedipus' self-inflicted banishment from

²⁰ Said (2000), p. 174.

²¹ Hoffman (1989), p. 107.

²² Hoffman (1989), p. 160, and (1999), p. 54.

²³ Said (2000), p. 181. Said maintains refugee is a term that came in use in the twentieth century with the massive displacement of people. An expatriate, on the other hand, is someone who willingly chooses to live a broad, and there is no force or loss involved. An emigre is someone who migrates to a new country.

Thebes after blinding himself as the ultimate form of punishment. Banishment has been used against political opponents in particular throughout history. However, the term “exile” seems to have lost its immediate political leaning with the increased currency of the terms “refugee” and “political asylum” in the twentieth century. Commenting on the meaning of the term, Said maintains that exile has “a touch of solitude and spirituality.”²⁴ Exile seems to indicate loftiness and nobility, which distinguishes the individual from the masses of migrants and helpless refugees who rely on charity, and which still implies political injustices and oppression.

Given its emphasis on trauma, loss and discontinuity, this literature advances a simplified notion of home as an object of yearning. Since trauma and the sense of loss of home are at the center, tension and ambivalence about home are overlooked; instead, alienation in the new environment predominates. This literature partakes of the earlier studies of diaspora, which consider the Jewish experience of exile as the archetype. Diaspora is defined in terms of exile from the homeland, trauma, a sense of loss, hope to return, estrangement within the host country and cultural and economic achievements.²⁵ This model has been applied to other diasporic experiences (such as African, Armenian, Lebanese, Greek, etc.) This focus on homeland and its idealization leaves out the host country, the networks built with the homeland in diaspora, the effects of the changes that take place in the homeland and issues of identification that are not shaped by one factor only.

This conceptualization of diaspora has been critiqued for its use of diaspora as a merely descriptive tool that focuses on home and origins, and that fails to account for

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See Cohen (1997).

“the ongoing political, economic, social and cultural ties between multiple institutionalized spaces that characterize diaspora.”²⁶ Moreover, this descriptive model is essentialist in that it builds upon an unproblematic view of ethnicity, race and nationalism. The studies that diverge from this conventional approach, on the other hand, see diaspora as a process involving hybridity, complex identities and multi-locality.²⁷ The idea of home is problematized here as authors argue that there is no one understanding or imagination of “home;” rather, one can think of homes (and “abroads” when looking at the host countries).²⁸ Moreover, this critique does not see diaspora as defined mainly by loss and suffering; rather, enriching complexity is emphasized.

Works by Paul Gilroy, James Clifford and Stuart Hall have introduced new ways of approaching diaspora, with emphasis on difference, hybridity, complex identification and roots and routes. These authors break away from the notion of homogeneity, as well as the ethnic, racial and national absolutism dominant in studies on diaspora and identity. Arguing Englishness and blackness are not mutually exclusive identities as is suggested in cultural studies, Gilroy finds the image of the ships adequate to making his point. He remarks “I have settled on the image of ship in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organizing symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point. The image of the ship – a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion – is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons ...”²⁹ Diaspora here does not only imply intermixture, double consciousness and hybridity, but it also constitutes a counterculture of modernity and its essentialist views of the other as

²⁶ See Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk (2005), p. 3.

²⁷ See Gilroy (1993), Clifford (1994) and Stuart Hall (1990,1993 a & b).

²⁸ See Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk (2005), p. 18.

²⁹ Gilroy (1993), p. 4.

well as its progressive and rationalist premises.³⁰ In the same vein, Stuart Hall contends, “The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.”³¹ Hall rejects the conventional view of diaspora and the emphasis on return as colonial, “backward-looking,” and resulting in displacement, as the case of the Palestinians shows. Inspired by Paul Gilroy to a great extent, James Clifford argues that, “Diaspora consciousness is entirely a product of cultures and histories in collision and dialogue.”³² The collision and dialogue refer to the negative as well as positive forces that shape diasporic sensitivity since exclusion and discrimination as well as transnational and intercultural identifications are part and parcel of a diasporic experience.³³ Moreover, they draw the attention to the tensions among and between communities, and guard against an idealization of a diasporic identity.³⁴

These writings on exile and diaspora have been instrumental to my study of the Iraqi community, especially in understanding the different perceptions and experiences of the young generation vis-à-vis the older generation. Generally speaking, the literature on exile by Said and Hoffman is particularly relevant to the older generation, who grew up and established themselves in Iraq but had to flee and live in exile. Exile here is experienced as a loss and discontinuity, even if one has been able to make a comfortable

³⁰ Ibid., p. 19 and pp. 37-9.

³¹ Hall (1990), p. 235. Emphasis in original.

³² Clifford (1994), p. 319.

³³ Ibid., pp. 311-12.

³⁴ Avtar Brah warns that “diasporic or border positionality does not *in itself* assure a vantage point of privileged insight into and understanding of relations of power, although it does create a space of in which experiential mediations may intersect in ways that render such understandings more readily accessible. It is essentially a question of politics.” See Brah in Rossington and Whitehead (2007), p. 289.

life and achieve success in the UK. Indeed, Clifford argues, “People whose sense of identity is centrally defined by collective histories of displacement and violent loss cannot be ‘cured’ by merging into a new national community.”³⁵ Even though older Iraqis in the UK realized that return is no longer possible – not only because the security situation does not allow it but also because of the drastic changes in Iraqi since the late 1970s – they still see themselves as foreigners and exiles. One can even say that if they go back home/back to Iraq, they may feel they are strangers in their own countries; however, despite the feeling of being an exile at home (Iraq), it does not necessarily follow that the adopted residence (UK) would be related to as home in its place.

This state of being neither here nor there brings to mind the notion of exile as a liminal state. Exile has been described as a liminal state, given the discontinuity in normal life brought about by living away from one’s homeland and the inability to feel at home in the host country. Liisa Malkki’s study on Hutu refugees in Tanzania draws on the concept of liminality as introduced by Arnold van Gennep and developed by Victor Turner, especially in his famous “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*.” In the initiation rituals, the initiated are separated from the rest of the community and occupy a liminal status until they are reincorporated. Liminality is the intriguing stage for Victor Tuner, and he defines it as a state of structural invisibility of the initiated, since they “are at once no longer classified and not yet classified.”³⁶ As such, liminality is a state of limbo whereby normal life is suspended. For Iraqis in the UK who firmly believed they would return to Iraq once Saddam had been toppled, exile has been a similar state of limbo: they cannot be part of the British society and they are

³⁵ Clifford (1994), p. 307.

³⁶ Quoted in Malkki (1995), p. 7.

separated from their homeland. However, unlike the temporary nature of liminality in a rite of passage, the state of limbo experienced by displaced and exiled people can be permanent when separation lasts years and decades, when return is no longer possible. It is in this sense that I argue that the Iraqi community in the UK turned from an exilic to a diasporic community. The fact that Iraqis have been living in the UK for one or two decades at least, and the fact that a younger generation has grown up there means the Iraqi community has become diasporic, de facto. However, this did not entail a change in perception towards this supposedly temporary stay in the UK or towards return to Iraq. It was only after the fall of Saddam that there was a shift in this perception. Return is no longer an option and the UK is the permanent place of residence.

Another issue regarding self-perception is the choice of words. The great majority of Iraqis who arrived in the UK in the 1990s were granted a refugee status. However, they usually avoid using the term “refugee” to describe themselves even though there were designated as refugees legally and enjoy social and state benefits accordingly. Those who were willing to talk about this issue spoke about how bitter they felt when the British government considered them “humanitarian refugees” since the cause of their asylum is political. Rather than referring to themselves as refugees, they define themselves as exiles or foreigners. In their views, the term “refugee” indicates stigma, humiliation and deprivation. Even in the rare cases when a person managed to get political asylum – a status that entails more benefits and better housing than the category of humanitarian asylum – s/he still uses the terms exile or a foreigner. As Said comments, exile has a touch of nobility about it.

The literature on diaspora is more relevant than that of exile when one encounters young Iraqis in the UK. Young Iraqis who were born or arrived in the UK at a young age often identify themselves as British-Iraqis and use terms like “home,” and “hyphenated identities.” Their use of the term “British” is not simply an indication that they identify with the British society; rather, they use it critically in an attempt to expand its scope so that Britishness can also indicate a person as an Arab, Muslim, Iraqi, Kurd, Christian, or Mandaean, etc. Their very understanding of “the British society” is diverse and multi-layered. While they may disapprove of drinking or pre-marital sex, they also stress that the British society or culture means respect for law, tolerance and equal opportunities, etc. To some of them, Britishness opens up a space for them to discover their Iraqi identity or to uphold an ideal view of Iraq.

Unlike their parents, young Iraqis are always concerned about their sense of belonging. Questions like “What is home?” and “What does it mean to be an Iraqi?” are often raised by them. Anxiety over whether one is an Iraqi or whether being an Iraqi-British detracts from one’s Iraqiness is sensed when one hears young people talk. The older generations, on the other hand, have a clear and straightforward notion of homeland and identity. Iraqis who were raised and lived in Iraq always identify themselves as Iraqis and identify Iraq as their homeland, even though they could have spent half of their lives in the UK by now. Indeed, whereas young Iraqis seem ambivalent and concerned about questions of identity and home, older Iraqis are consumed by the past and memory. The very vocabulary used by young Iraqis – such as home, culture and hyphenated-identities in particular – reflect different sensitivities from those of their parents, as well as their identification with issues discussed in the British society at large (whether in the media or

at schools), such as multiculturalism. Their parents, on the other hand, do not doubt that they are Iraqis or that they need to discover their identity. The younger generations' anxiety about belonging sheds light on the ongoing process of situating and identifying oneself vis-à-vis the family and the society. While this delicate process opens a space for complex identification of oneself, it can lead to alienation when family members and/or peers do not approve of one's acts or sense of belonging, as the chapters on Ali and Hazar show.

On the other hand, diaspora and exile have been transformed with the spread of mass media. In *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai speaks of diasporic public spheres, which are created by mass movement (due to migration, travel, or displacement) and mass media in the last quarter of the twentieth century. What matters to Appadurai is the impact of these two phenomena on self-imagination as a daily social practice, and on undermining the monopoly by the nation-state on actions and discourses. Appadurai remarks, "the consumption of the mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity and, in general, agency. ... It is the imagination ... that creates ideas of neighborhood and nationhood, of moral economies and unjust rule ... The imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape."³⁷ The networks enabled by mass media in a diasporic context have opened up different options of imagination and relations. The life of Iraqis in the UK has changed to a great extent with the spread of satellites. Because Arabic channels have almost entirely eliminated their dependence on British TV stations for news, they allow for a different experience of following the news. The fall of Saddam's statue in 2003 was a pivotal moment for Iraqis in the UK not only because it indicated the fall of the regime, but also they felt that by

³⁷ Appadurai (1996), p. 7.

witnessing this moment live on TV, they were part of it, as they told me. As I mentioned in the Prologue, watching it live took on certain significance – they felt as though they were in Iraq living this historical moment. As such, the media and live coverage of the news from Iraq resulted in a different imagination, that living abroad did not deprive a person from witnessing this event immediately.

Memory and Narrative

The literature on diaspora and exile brings up the issues of memory, narrative and identification. These three questions are interrelated and central to the lives of people living in exile or diaspora. Reminiscence about the past and reflections on the present are hinged on narratives and storytelling. On the other hand, how the past is remembered is connected to the person's sense of belonging³⁸ and historically situated. As I mentioned earlier, the turn of events after the fall of Saddam Hussein resulted in shock and disbelief among Iraqis in the UK, intensifying the dwelling upon the past and its reconfiguration vis-à-vis the present. My approach to memory is informed by studies that problematize remembering. Recollection of the past is no longer seen a straightforward process but is, as Ian Hacking puts in *Rewriting the Soul*, “a way of explaining oneself, not by recovering the past, but by redescribing it, rethinking it, refeeling it ... The past becomes rewritten in memory, with new kinds of descriptions, new works, new ways of feeling ... [Re]descriptions of the past are caused by the present.”³⁹ In this study of multiple personality and the prominence of memory, Hacking argues that the past remembered assumes new meanings, new events, new intentions and new interpretations in the light of

³⁸ See Linda Anderson in Rossington and Whitehead (2007), p. 273-75.

³⁹ Hacking (1995), p. 94.

the present.⁴⁰ The past invoked by Iraqis living in the UK does not only reflect nostalgia for “the old good days,” it acquires new significance and implication. When asked about social and political life in Iraq, the older generation emphasized the respectful treatment of political opponents and prisoners received under the monarchy, or the secular atmosphere that existed and the unimportance of ethnic, religious and sectarian differences. Such perceptions need to be understood in terms of the situation under Saddam’s regime and later on. When one reads newspapers issued at that time, the monarchy is condemned as being oppressive, corrupt and serving British interests. Decades later, the monarchy is remembered with fondness.

This perspective on memory, which situates the act of remembering in the contingent present, brings up issues of recollection, forgetting and suppression that accompany any reworking of memory. Silences have certain implications and can come to light through alternative accounts. In their introduction to a volume titled “Memory and Counter-Memory” in *Representations*, Natalie Zemon Davis and Starn argue that it “follows if memory is indeed polymorphic and historically situated that it will be called continually into question. The ‘counter-memory’ of our title is meant to suggest that memory operates under the pressure of challenges and alternatives ... [What is] important to us here [is] the working principle that whenever memory is invoked we should be asking ourselves: by whom, where, in which context, against what?”⁴¹ According to this critical view, memory has political bearing, and any memory can be challenged by a

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

⁴¹ Zemon Davis and Starn (1989), p. 3.

counter-memory.⁴² The heated discussions among Iraqis about the present and past events reflect the contested space of memory as well as the different interpretations advocated depending on the person's political convictions, class, gender, family background, education and experience under different political regimes.

In addition to the close interrelation between the past and the present, the collective aspect of memory has been emphasized. Memory is not longer seen as a solitary act of an individual. Michael Halbwachs, in *Collective Memory*, argues against authors who saw memory to be individualistic and stresses the social dimension of memory. That memory is social and is embedded in social practices of remembering allowed for studying the transmission of memory from one generation to another, whether directly or indirectly. For instance, David Scott examines the impact of the past remembered by the older generations on the younger generations.⁴³ Scott is interested in understanding how the younger Caribbean generation who had no immediate memory of colonialism and anti-colonial struggle were shaped by the past and the experiences of the generations who lived during those days. This attention to the relationships between the memories of the older generations and those of the younger ones is relevant to understanding how young Iraqis imagine Iraq, which is the product of their parents' memories. While this indicates that memory allows for the perpetuation of certain perceptions of Iraq through familial stories and past, it provides an insight into the diversity of these views given the differences in relating to the past and in remembering.

⁴² See Scott (2008) and Hirsch and Smith (2002). The space opened up by this critique enabled feminist and post-colonial theorists to lay bare issues of hegemony and power in any official memory, and issues of exclusion of marginalized groups – such as women, the poor, black people, etc.

⁴³ Scott (2008), p. xiv.

Remembrance is intertwined with narrative and storytelling.⁴⁴ Like memory, narrative is no longer seen as an unequivocal account or as “a straightforward representation.”⁴⁵ Rather, it is contingent, contested and fragmented and can serve as a counter-narrative to other narratives and meta-narratives.⁴⁶ In *Lords of the Lebanese Marches*, Michael Gilsenan remarks, “Narratives are always the product of debate, revision and reflexive interaction conditioned by time, the evolution of events, the number of repetitions of the narrative and the character of the various tellers and the audience ... Which narratives became privileged ... would be a matter of shifting political and social conjunctures at a given time, and might change as new events occurred.”⁴⁷ In this light, any account can never be a master-narrative not only because of the presence of other alternative accounts that may undermine its authority, but also because the same story narrated by a person can change over time depending on many factors. Any narrative here becomes a point of view that may change or be challenged.⁴⁸ Walter Benjamin captured the interrelation between remembering and narration beautifully in his description of Proust’s work. He states, “For the important thing for the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of recollection. Or should one call it, rather, a Penelope work of forgetting? ... For an experienced event is finite ... a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it.”⁴⁹ Given an event is remembered differently depending on the psychological mood and political

⁴⁴ I focus here on memory as remembered narratives. For studies that focus on monuments and commemorations, see Yoneyama (1999) and Sherman (1999).

⁴⁵ Daniel (1996), p. 120.

⁴⁶ See Daniel (1996), Stewart (1996) and Gilsenan (1996).

⁴⁷ Gilsenan (1996), p. 164.

⁴⁸ Stewart (1996), p. 38.

⁴⁹ Benjamin (1968), p. 202.

backdrop against which recollection takes place, recollection can generate different stories and narratives. Reading between the lines in the accounts given by Iraqis in the chapters, one can see how a certain narrative changed over time because of political events, such as the question of Palestine or the issue of sectarianism.

As the theoretical questions I discuss in this section show, diaspora, memory and storytelling are connected to self-identification.⁵⁰ As Hacking's argument on memory indicates, remembrance involves not only different understanding of the past, but also different explanations of oneself. Linda Anderson comments, "Why we remember a place and how become therefore important questions for how we construct the places themselves and ourselves as subjects."⁵¹ Hence, the way people narrate or remember the past is rooted in their self-perception and vice versa. In addition, living in exile or being part of a diasporic community shapes one's self-understanding and remembrance of the past.⁵² The stories of the five Iraqis in this ethnography provide insight into the people's complex and multifaceted sense of belonging, and into the different shades of meanings and implications any category – such as Iraqi, Shia, or communist – can assume depending on how the person relates to, or understand, it at a particular historical moment.

⁵⁰ Though I use the term "identity" sometimes, I prefer the terms identification or sense of belonging since they imply flexibility, situatedness, as well as particularistic understanding of the self. See Brubaker and Cooper (2000). I use the term identity in conformity with Iraqis' or authors' use of it.

⁵¹ See Linda Anderson in Rossington and Whitehead (2007), p. 273-75.

⁵² The concepts of identity and subject-formation has been exhaustively theorized and commented upon. See Hall (1990), (1992), (1993) and (1996); Appiah (2005); Chatterjee (1993); Dirks (2001); Povinelli (2002); Mahmood (2005); Abu El-Haj (2001); Gilroy (1993); Asad (2003); Silverstein (2004); Cavarero (2000).

Final Notes

Though the majority of Iraqis who arrived in the UK since 1990s were granted refugee status, I employ the term “exile” used by the Iraqis with whom I spoke, or “Iraqis in the UK.” I shun the term “refugee” because I did not approach the topic as one focused on refugees per se. People who are “immigrants,” “refugees,” and “exiles” share many struggles, such as difficulties in adapting to a new environment or in communicating in foreign languages, despite the differences in their legal status upon arrival in a host country. Hence, the boundaries between these terms are not clear-cut. On the other hand, though the majority of these people get naturalized,⁵³ the differences in their experiences in their homeland (such as the reason for leaving their countries, and the connections they could or could not maintain with their homelands) can shape their sensitivities to a great extent, as the case of Iraqis in the UK show. Given that the majority of Iraqis in the UK acquired British citizenship (or will do so at some point if they are still refugees), and that I approach the Iraqi community as a diasporic one, I found the term used by Iraqis in speaking about themselves (exile) or the more general one (Iraqis in the UK) to be more pertinent.

The question of translation is a critical one. All Iraqis who came to the UK as adults used Arabic during the interviews. Young Iraqis, who were born in the UK or arrived there at an early age, preferred to speak in English even though they could speak the Iraqi dialect well. For instance, Ali (Chapter Five) preferred to use English during the interviews though his Arabic was excellent, while Hazar (Chapter Four) switched between English and Arabic constantly. In the chapters, I rendered the interviews in

⁵³ I’m thinking here of countries that grant refugees citizenship.

English with no reliance on transliteration,⁵⁴ which I thought would be more cumbersome for the reader and would serve no purpose unless the reader knew the Iraqi dialect. Needless to say, translating these interviews – which I transcribed word for word – and attempting to capture the nuanced meanings or irony was no easy task, especially when it involved Iraqi idioms. For example, when Hanan (Chapter Three) referred to Prophet Muhammad, she said “Muhammad Effendi.” The word “effendi” is used in the Iraqi dialect to express annoyance at a person. To keep “Muhammad Effendi” in the text would have missed Hanan’s ironical use. The closest translation I found suitable was “His Highness Muhammad.”

With respect to the five Iraqis whose stories are told, I made this choice on the basis of their candid views on different matters and open accounts about their lives. Understandably, Iraqis did not like to say they lived in poverty and hardship, or had family tensions, since they are concerned about their social image and are reluctant to allude to the loss of status. In fact, I was surprised when Hazar and Rasha talked about their financial difficulties even briefly, when Hanan spoke about her husband breaking down under torture during the 1963 coup and revealing the names of his comrades, or when Ali criticized the Shia religious establishment. Most of the Iraqis I met and/or interviewed did not like to talk about difficult times or strained relations within the family because of generational gaps or other reasons. Indeed, the stories of most of the people I interviewed can be a basis for a chapter; however, the interviews I selected were particularly relevant to me because of the interviewees’ outspoken accounts in that they could shed light on the different aspects of their lives, as well as on the social and political life in Iraq before and after the rise of Saddam Hussein.

⁵⁴ The only exception is the word ‘habibti,’ which means darling and is familiar to non-Arabic speakers.

Another question is related to the reading of the chapters. As I stated earlier, I wrote the chapters with specific theoretical issues in mind, even though I do not make explicit reference to theories. Chapter One provides an overview of the Iraqi community in London. Chapter Two is about an ex-communist man, who was part of the opposition to Saddam Hussein's regime in the UK and is still involved in Iraqi politics, though to a more limited extent. Chapter Three focuses on a staunch communist woman who played a big role in pushing for women's rights in Iraq in the 1950s. The life stories of Khalil and Hanan are about a past (or the anti-colonial present they inhabited in the 1940s and 1950s)⁵⁵ that perceived a utopian future when the British colonial rule of Iraq and the pro-British corrupt monarchy would be replaced by a regime that would advance social justice and different forms of freedom, and by political and intellectual vibrancy. That future – the postcolonial present – resulted in exile, wars and tyranny. As such, the stories and narratives in these chapters show the different social and political life in Iraq before the rise of Saddam Hussein to power, the way the past came to be remembered vis-à-vis the present, the changes in the relations among Iraqis in the UK due to the dominance of sectarianism and identity politics, and the perception of exile in particular after the fall of Saddam. Indeed, these chapters are best read along each other as they cover the same issues but reveal how the same event is interpreted differently depending on the person's political views and background.

The other three chapters are about young Iraqis who have only known the post-colonial present and heard about a different Iraq from their parents. They also shed light on the diasporic sensitivities they developed, the impact of family memories and stories on their self-understanding, and their existence in a place where concepts of "home" and

⁵⁵ Scott (2004), pp. 1-2, 190 and 207.

“hyphenated identities” are often raised. Chapter Four is about Hazar whose life story focuses on the situation of the so-called Iraqis of Iranian origin, who were deported to Iran on the eve of the Iraq-Iran War. Hazar’s story resonates with the accounts given by Said and Hoffman with respect to usage of different languages, family memories and expectations, names,⁵⁶ and alienation. On the other hand, while the fact that Hazar has been living in the UK since she was seventeen meant more anxiety about her sense of her belonging and more conflicts with her family, it eventually gave her an opportunity to develop a more complex identity and to combine different elements in her background, which has been an ongoing process for her.

Ali’s account, Chapter Five, is similar to that of Hazar’s in certain aspects, in particular his family’s stories about Iraq, their pressure to live according to specific norms, and his struggle with his family and the community. Unlike Hazar, Ali is very critical of the Iraqi community in the UK and of the Shia religious institutions in general, and is bitter about the turn of events in Iraq. Indeed, Ali’s narrative reflects the alienation one feels from one’s community, which undermines the essentialist view of diasporic communities as consisting of homogenous groups who endorse the same views and beliefs. Though both of Ali and Hazar are young observant Muslims who grew up in the UK, they did not mention any difficulties they have encountered. When I asked any question about being a Muslim in the UK, they both briefly mentioned that the British people are respectful, and went on to talk about difficulties they have had with their families or the Iraqi community. The silence on – and the little reference to – this issue attests to what matters to them most. The last chapter is on a young Iraqi woman who left

⁵⁶ When her Polish name “Ewa” was changed into “Eva” at school, Eva Hoffman remarks “Our Polish names didn’t refer to us; they were as surely us as our eyes and hands. These new appellations ... are not us. They are identification tags” See Hoffman (1989), p. 105.

Iraq in 2004 and lived through all the wars (the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War of 1991 and the US invasion of Iraq), the blockade and Saddam's tyranny. As such, she lived under the failed post-colonial state and witnessed the destruction of Iraq firsthand. Her story – and her later identification of the UK as home – shows that home can “be a place of terror,”⁵⁷ and that “home” can be related to differently depending on the circumstances.

As I stated earlier, I do not discuss theoretical questions explicitly in the chapters. A careful reading of the chapters will reveal that theoretical questions (such as how the past is remembered, or the impact of family memories on one's self-perception, etc.) are embedded in the text. Since I approach this ethnography as an experiment in writing and as couched in storytelling, I find any attempt to provide explanations would break the flow of the narrative. In addition, the reader can interpret the text to his/her own liking, and can take things of interest to him/her. On the other hand, the Iraqis I interviewed are themselves aware of the implications of their perspectives and answers. One way of emphasizing people's interpretations and views has been to quote at length. These long quotes show the intricacies of people's thoughts and the impact of their parents' narratives. Another technique was to translate key expressions in a way to convey the irony or the meaning.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Rossington and Whitehead (2007), p. 289. Also, see Hutnyk (2005), p. 18.

Chapter One

The Iraqi Community in the UK: An Overview

The formation of an Iraqi community in the UK is a relatively recent phenomenon deeply related to the history of flight from Iraq and the subsequent formation of other Iraqi communities in Iran, and Arab and East European countries since the late 1970s. The Iraqi community is new in comparison to other Arab communities in the UK. For example, the Yemenis, men in particular, began to arrive in the UK in the nineteenth century as seafarers.¹ Coming to the UK as refugees or exiles – the result of political oppression, wars and sectarian violence (after 2003) – rather than arriving as economic migrants, Iraqis have dealt with a uniquely complex set of cultural, social, religious and financial issues.

I. A Historical Background

The exodus of Iraqis has hinged on political developments in Iraq after the Baath coup in 1968 and the rise of Saddam Hussein to power in 1979. With the exceptions of the Jewish exodus in 1950 and 1951 and the migration of some Assyrians to the UK in the 1950s due to their work in the British levies, a limited number of Iraqis (mostly elite families associated with the monarchy) left Iraq until the late 1970s. In an article published in

¹ Halliday (1992).

1992,² Madawi al-Rasheed, a professor of anthropology at Kings College in London, proposed four waves of flight from Iraq prior to the 1991 Gulf War: the 1958 fall of monarchy, the 1963 first Baath coup, the 1968 second Baath coup and the Iraq-Iran War in 1980. One can argue that there have been two extended waves since the date of that article: the blockade years (1991 to 2003) and the 2003 fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. In short, massive flight resulting in the formation of Iraqi exiled communities did not begin until the late 1970s.

al-Rasheed remarked that it was only after the fall of the monarchy that Arab Iraqis began to settle in the UK, while the earlier migration was limited to Christian minorities and ethnic communities.³ Those who arrived in the 1960s and 1970s belonged to the professional middle classes, and they managed to work and settle in the UK.⁴ With the liquidation of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) in the late 1970s, the deportation of the so-called Iraqis of Iranian origin in the early 1980s, the persecution of the Shia Dawa Party, the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980 and increased oppression, more and more Iraqis began to arrive in the UK. While some of them came to the UK directly, the majority spent time in Arab countries and Iran before coming to the UK. In the meantime, most of the Iraqi students in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s decided to stay in the UK as the situation in Iraq deteriorated. Iraqis who began arriving in the late 1970s and early 1980s included people from different socio-economic backgrounds, such as professionals, semi-skilled workers and merchants. Many of these immigrants lost much of their capital to confiscation upon deportation to Iran by Saddam Hussein's regime.⁵

² al-Rasheed (1992).

³ al-Rasheed (2005), p. 317.

⁴ al-Rasheed (1992), p. 539.

⁵ Ibid.

Their success in adapting and starting a new life varied greatly and depended on many factors, such as education, age, presence of relatives in the UK, having money in British banks, knowledge of English, etc.

The late 1980s, however, did not witness a massive flight from Iraq because of a ban on travel imposed by Saddam Hussein's regime from 1983 to 1990. The only way to leave Iraq during this period was through smuggling, a dangerous undertaking.

In the 1990s, particularly after the Gulf War in 1991 and the failure of the uprisings in northern and southern Iraq, there was an influx of Iraqi refugees into the UK. Statistics from the UK's Home Office show (see Section II, Statistics and Numbers, below) 42,450 asylum applications from Iraqis (excluding dependents)⁶ were received between 1990 and 2003. While some arrived directly from Iraq, a good number arrived from Eastern Europe after of the collapse of the Soviet Union and from Arab countries as hopes of returning to Iraq dwindled when Saddam Hussein remained in power after the war in 1991.⁷ The majority of these Iraqis applied for asylum and relied on social and housing benefits provided by the British government. Those awarded asylum had difficulty finding employment due to reasons such as age, language barriers, limited resources and skills due to years of exile and persecution and difficulties having their qualifications and skills recognized by the British system.⁸

⁶ A dependent is defined by the Home Office as "someone who depends on you financially, such as a husband, wife, partner, or child." See <http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/asylum/rights/>

⁷ The source of this information is my observations while I was doing fieldwork.

⁸ For instance, Iraqi doctors who had not done their medical degrees in the UK had to take British qualification exams and to start from the bottom of the ladder as registrars. Most of these doctors, who had years of experience and had worked as consultants in Iraq and other Arab countries, ended up unemployed or taking non-medical jobs. The younger doctors were more willing to study for the exams and to patiently climb the medical profession ladder.

II. Statistics and Numbers

No reliable estimates of the number of Iraqis in the UK exist. *The Economist* put the number of Iraqis in the UK in 1988 at 100,000.⁹ While I was in the UK in 2007, the Iraqi ambassador remarked that there were 400,000 Iraqis in the UK but did not name his source. A publication by Alphascript Publishing in 2009 put the number at 450,000; however, in the two quoted sources in this publication, there was no reference whatsoever to the number of the community.¹⁰ In her entry on Iraqi Diaspora, al-Rasheed asserts that there are around 300,000 Iraqis living in the UK,¹¹ while the Iraqi Association claims there are more than 250,000 Iraqis in the UK at the present time.¹²

The Home Office provided the following figures on Iraqi asylum applications (excluding dependents) from 1990 until the present.¹³ Though these numbers are not exact, they indicate the increase in the number of Iraqis applying for asylum. The Home Office received 985 applications in 1990 and 915 in 1991. This number dropped to 700 in 1992; 495 in 1993; 550 in 1994; shot up into the 900s in 1995 and 1996; 1,077 in 1997; 1,295 in 1998; 1,800 in 1999; 7,475 in 2000; 6,680 in 2001 and 14,570 in 2002. The number dropped to 4,015 applications in 2003; 1,695 in 2004 and 1,415 in 2005. In short, between 1990 and 2005, the UK received 45,560 asylum applications from Iraqis. Out of those, 23,850 were either granted refugee status, exceptional leave to remain (ELR),

⁹ Cited in Al-Rasheed (1991), p. 13.

¹⁰ The authors reference two websites: <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/18/world/africa/18iht-expats.html?scp=1&sq=iraqis%20far%20from%20home%20sign%20up%20to%20vote&st=cse> and <http://www.buzzmachine.com/2005/07/31/you-expected-maybe-the-donald-rumsfeld-fan-club/>. The Mapping Exercise: Iraq, which is published by International Organization for Migration quotes the Iraqi Embassy in the UK as well. The number is between 350,000 and 450,000.

¹¹ Al-Rasheed (2005), p. 318.

¹² <http://www.iraqiassociation.org/arabic.html>.

¹³ For figures from 1990 to 2005, I rely on Statistical Snapshots Series: Iraqi Asylum Applications to the UK 1990-2005, published in 2006 by Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees, whose source is Asylum Statistics: United Kingdom. The other source is information on Iraqi asylum seekers emailed to me by the Home Office in the UK upon my request.

humanitarian protection (HP), or discretionary leave (DL); refugee status was granted to 5,450, while ELR, HP and DL were granted to 18,400. The denial of 22,950 applications does not reveal much, as it does not account for Iraqis who appealed the decision on their asylum or remained in the UK illegally.

It is worth noting that, though the number of applications decreased from 2003 through 2005, the number of refusals increased. In 2003, 2,225 out of 4,015 applications were approved, while 4,580¹⁴ were rejected; in 2004, 195 applications out of 1,695 received positive decisions while 4,615 were rejected; and in 2005, 160 out of 1,415 were approved but 1,675 were denied asylum. These figures refer to the number of appeals and cases awaiting decisions.

These figures only provide the beginning of an estimation for the size of the Iraqi community in the UK. If we take the figure of 45,560 (i.e., number of asylum applications between 1990 and 2005) at face value, and if we consider each application to consist of the principal applicant plus at least 3 or 4 dependents, that means around 182,000 to 228,000 Iraqis arrived in the UK during that time. Indeed, Home Office statistics show the number of dependents for each asylum application ranges between 1 and 8, meaning the average number of dependents is 4.5, in addition to the applicants. If we apply this average to Iraqi asylum seekers, it means that around 250,000 Iraqis arrived in the UK between 1990 and 2005. From the figure in *The Economist* and the above-mentioned estimates based on statistics from the Home Office, one can conclude the number of Iraqis in the UK as of 2005 ranged between 282,000 and 350,000.

¹⁴ This number includes pending applications from the previous years.

In 2006 and 2007, the UK received 945 and 1,825 asylum applications respectively; the total refusals were 650 in 2006 and 1,090 in 2007.¹⁵ Post-2003, it became harder for Iraqi asylum seekers to get asylum in the UK (and elsewhere as a matter of fact), as the statistics from 2003 to 2005 mentioned above indicate, since the British and other governments have deemed post-Saddam Iraq safe and stable. After forcibly returning 85 Iraqis to northern Iraq, it was revealed in a leaked document that the British government dictated in March 2008 that the 1,400 Iraqi asylum seekers should go back to Iraq.¹⁶ The Home Office statistics for 2008 do not provide any figures of asylum applications by country of nationality, but report a total of 25,930 asylum applications (excluding dependents) received and 13,505 rejected.¹⁷ Interestingly, this omission seems to be due to the inclusion of the bulletin “Asylum Statistics United Kingdom” under “Control of Immigration: Statistics United Kingdom,” where the asylum section is covered in 7 pages in this 122-page bulletin. Statistics on 2009 have not yet been published.

The British census is also not particularly helpful in this regard. The British censuses of 1981 and 1991 do not include questions on ethnic origin or nationality. Though they have tables on countries of birth, Iraq is not included among these countries.¹⁸ The census of 2001 offers little information as well. Data on ethnic origin are restricted for certain groups.¹⁹ The table on country of birth by sex and age does not

¹⁵ See Asylum Statistics United Kingdom 2006: (<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs07/hosb1407.pdf>) and Asylum Statistics United Kingdom 2007 (<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs08/hosb1108.pdf>).

¹⁶ Sassoon (2009), p. 107.

¹⁷ See Control of Immigration: Statistics United Kingdom 2008: (<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs09/hosb1409.pdf>).

¹⁸ al-Rasheed (1991) and (1996).

¹⁹ The ethnic groups are classified as: White: British, White: Irish, White: Other White, Mixed: White and Black Caribbean, Mixed: White and Black African, Mixed: White and Asian, Mixed: Other Mixed, Asian

cover Iraq.²⁰ However, the table on country of birth includes 30,815 Iraq-born residents.²¹ This table on country of birth is limited in use since many young Iraqis were born in the UK or in the countries where their parents took refuge first before arriving in the UK, such as Iran, Arab and Eastern countries, etc. The 2011 census will include a question on national identity for the first time; however, it will not provide insight into Iraqis or other groups as question seems to be directed to British people and the way they identify themselves (namely Welsh, Scottish, British, English, Northern Irish, etc.)²²

III. Literature on the Iraqi community

The Iraqi community in London has been at the center of Iraqi intellectual and political activities since the 1980s; however, it has been under-researched. The first academic study on the community was carried out in the early 1990s by al-Rasheed. al-Rasheed focused mainly on the Iraqi Assyrian community in London. In *Iraqi Assyrian Christians in London: The Construction of Ethnicity*, published in 1998, al-Rasheed examines the development of an Assyrian ethnic identity, and traces the shift in self-identification among these Assyrians, from being a religious minority to being a national group.²³ According to al-Rasheed, this shift is deeply linked to the history of the Assyrians under the Ottomans and under the Iraqi state later on. Discarding the term “Nestorians” and

or Asian British: Indian, Asian or Asian British: Bangladeshi, Asian or Other Asian British: Other Asian, Black or Black British: Black Caribbean, Black or Black British: Black African, Black or Black British: Other Black, Chinese or Other Ethnic Group: Chinese, Chinese or Other Ethnic Group: Other Ethnic Group. See, for instance, Table S102:

(<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/SearchRes.asp?term=S102&x=0&y=0>).

²⁰ See Table S015 (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/SearchRes.asp?term=S015&x=13&y=16>).

²¹ See table VU08 :

(<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/ssdataset.asp?vlnk=7548&Pos=&ColRank=2&Rank=272>).

²² See. pp. 50 -51 in “Helping to shape tomorrow: The 2011 Census of Population and Housing in England and Wales,” available on the website of Office for National Statistics: (<http://www.ons.gov.uk/census/2011-census/2011-census-questionnaire-content/index.html>).

²³ al-Rasheed (1998), p. xx.

assuming of the term “Assyrian” in the early 20th century, after coming in touch with missionaries and colonial officials, indicates a shift in self-understanding as a national group and an aim at establishing continuity with the ancient Assyrians. The establishment of the modern state of Iraq as an Arab nation, and the massacre of the Assyrians in 1933 in the aftermath of a failed attempt to realize national independence, consolidated this trend of national identification among the Assyrians. In the UK, the Iraqi Assyrians, influenced by the discourses in the British society regarding ethnic groups, further maintained the term Assyrian in order not to be lumped with Arab Iraqis.²⁴

al-Rasheed also wrote a few articles on the non-Assyrian Iraqis in London and the issues they faced in their daily lives, such as the meaning of marriage for women in exile and the myth of return to Iraq.²⁵ In “Political migration and downward socio-economic mobility: The Iraqi community in London,” al-Rasheed examines the trend of downward mobility among middle class and professional Iraqis. al-Rasheed noted that the reason for this downward mobility was the difficulty of finding employment equivalent in status to the one held in Iraq, which arose from both internal and external factors. The internal constraint related to the status of most Iraqis as political migrants who perceived their stay in the UK as temporary and whose professional qualifications were not recognized in the UK. Most Iraqis found it difficult to settle for manual or semi-skilled jobs. The external factor concerned an inability to work because many received refugee-related social benefits from the British government, as well as discrimination in the British labor market for those who did look for work. Though this article was published in 1992, it still reflects the current conditions of Iraqis in the UK. Alternately, al-Rasheed showed that

²⁴ al-Rasheed (1998), pp. 205-206.

²⁵ al-Rasheed (1992), (1993), (1994), and (2005).

Iraqis who arrived before 1980 were better prepared to settle as they were either established professionals and merchants or part of the landed class. Those who arrived after 1980 came as refugees and asylum seekers, and generally from the other end of the socio-economic spectrum.

In 2007, Nadjie Al-Ali's *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present* was published. A year after the war in 2003, Al-Ali, an anthropologist at the Centre for Gender Studies at School of Oriental and African Studies, conducted a study on Iraqi women in London, Amman, Detroit and San Diego. In this multi-sited study, Al-Ali showed Iraqi women's different and diverse stories and experiences over the past sixty years. While Al-Ali aimed to stress that difference cannot be understood in religious and ethnic terms, her main intent was to critique the dominant view of Iraqi women as powerless and lacking in agency. She argued that, despite wars and political instability, "the women I talked to are not mere passive victims of circumstance: they have been resourcefully, creatively and actively trying to adapt to rapidly changing situations; they have resisted political oppression; and they have been trying to keep together and sustain their families and society despite the deterioration of infrastructures, lack of security and harsh everyday living conditions."²⁶ Each chapter in the book covers a specific regime through the stories and memories of different women. While Al-Ali provided a different view of developments in Iraq through the eyes of these women by emphasizing these women's different – and sometimes contradictory – interpretations and views, she shows that there are different truths to the same political events and that these different views are colored by class, education, political and religious convictions. Indeed, Al-Ali

²⁶ Al-Ali (2007), p. 1.

provided a chronological account of events in Iraq and women's perspectives on them, starting with the demonstrations in 1948 and ending in 2006.²⁷

In 2005 and 2006, Omar Dewachi carried out his fieldwork among Iraqi doctors in London. This research project became the basis of a dissertation entitled "The Professionalization of Iraqi Medical Doctor in Britain: Medicine, Citizenship, Sovereignty and Empire," which Dewachi defended at Harvard University in 2008. As the title suggests, this project examined the establishment of the medical profession in Iraq by the British in the 1920s and 1930s, and the influx of foreign doctors (including Iraqis) to the British National Health Service in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of the shortages in doctors in the UK. Dewachi's aim was to critique the binary of the center and the periphery by showing the complexity of colonialism, empire, migration and conditions in the host ex-colonial country. Dewachi's dissertation focused on the medical professions in both Iraq and the UK and their interrelationships and, to a great extent, did not comment on the broader Iraqi community.

Aside from these three academic authors, the only study of the Iraqi community in the UK consists of two publications based on surveys carried out by the Iraqi Community Association in London. The first publication, "Now We Are Here: A Survey of the Profile, Structure, Needs, Hopes and Aspirations of the Iraqi Community in Britain 1995-1996," provided a background on the Iraqi community in the UK. Given that the study was done in 1996, before the most recent influx of Iraqi refugees, and is based on a 20.63% return of applications (911 out of 4,415 applications), it is outdated and provisional. Still, some data reflect the conditions of the community. For instance, 51.6% of the respondents received housing benefits, 49.9% received income support and 39.3%

²⁷ Al-Ali interviewed women still in living in Iraq while they were on visits in Jordan or the UK.

received child benefits.²⁸ Interestingly, the question on employment only received a 56% response rate. Of this 56%, 30% of respondents were employed, 32% unemployed and 4% retired or unable to work.²⁹ The high percentage of people not answering this question (in comparison to other questions) reminds us of al-Rasheed's article on downward mobility among Iraqis and the embarrassment associated with it.

The other publication is "Health Needs Assessment Study of the Iraqi Community in London 1998-1999." Based on 23% of return of questionnaires, the study offers statistics on the medical needs of Iraqis, types of ailments and access to medical care. The figures of this study show that 96% of the respondents were registered with a general practitioner, and that 50% were elderly or disabled. The common illnesses Iraqis in London had were: mental health (53%) in particular anxiety, stress, depression and Trauma Related Psychological Problems; stomach ulcers and digestive disorders (50%); heart diseases (49%); respiratory problems (36%); cancer (24%); blood disorders (21%); and nervous system disorders (16%).³⁰ The statistics on employment show a high percentage of unemployment: while 45% of the men were employed, only 24% of the women were employed; unemployment was 39% for men and 28% for women, in addition to the 29% who answered as housewives (putting the unemployment rate for women at 57%); 13% of the men were students, while 14% of the female respondents were students; 3% of the men were retired, while 5% of the women were retired. This publication did not report any blank answers.

²⁸ See "Now We Are Here," p 91.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 56.

³⁰ See "Health Needs Assessment Study of the Iraqi Community in London," p. 30.

IV. Political Life

London emerged as a center for the Iraqi opposition to Saddam Hussein's regime during the early 1980s. However, the opposition was often weak because Iraqi exiles in the UK feared the regime's intelligence agents, who were active in the UK until 1990. Assassinations and threats targeting outspoken opponents were not unheard of. More commonly, people feared for families – should their political action become known, family members still in Iraq might suffer the repercussions.

With the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the fall-out between Saddam Hussein and the Western governments that supported him, the regime's power abroad dwindled significantly. This turn of events enabled Iraqis in London to be more open about their political activity. Simultaneously, the American and British governments began to provide support to the opposition and adopted the rhetoric of regime change in Iraq.

Indeed, a good number of Iraqis who later assumed important positions in post-Saddam government were exiles in the UK. Eight out of the twenty-five members of the Iraqi Interim Council, established by US-led Coalition Provisional Authority, were exiles in the UK.³¹

The enmity between Ahmad Chalabi and Iyad Allawi, the two most influential figures in the London-based opposition, and the different plans of regime change they proposed were reflected the different views adopted by the CIA and the State Department on the one hand, and the Pentagon on the other in the run-up to the beginning of the war in 2003. Shortly before the outbreak of the Gulf War in 1991, Allawi founded the Iraqi National Accord in the UK with the help of Saudi intelligence and the British MI6, and

³¹ These eight members are: Ahmad Chalabi, Iyad Allawi, Majeed Mousa, Sayyid Muhammad Bahr Al-Uloum, Irahim al-Jaafari, Samir al-Sumaidaie, Mahmood Othman, and Mowaffaq al-Rubai'd.

he began to set up contacts with the CIA as well. Allawi, who hails from a prominent upper middle-class Shia family, joined the Baath Party at an early age, fearing the popularity of the ICP. After a falling out with the Baath Party in the 1970s, he fled to the UK, where he openly opposed the regime. Endorsing Arab nationalist ideology, Allawi worked with military personnel and other Baathists who had fled Iraq and avoided cooperation with Islamist or Iran-based parties. In addition, Allawi envisioned regime change in Iraq through a coup backed by the US government.³²

Ahmad Chalabi, on the other hand, established links with Washington. In 1992, supported by the US government, he held an opposition conference in Salahuddin in Kurdistan in northern Iraq. Attended by two major Shia groups – the Iran-based Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and the Dawa Party –this conference announced the birth of the Iraq National Congress, headed by Chalabi himself. This conference, which Allawi boycotted, was a landmark in the politics of the opposition in general, and particularly for politics in post-Saddam Iraq. Ali Allawi, whose discussion of the Iraqi opposition abroad is the only existing literature on the topic, stated:

“The conference hammered out a structure of leadership and responsibilities that persisted throughout the decade. It also established the principles of a future Iraq as being democratic, plural and federal. The Iraq National Congress (INC), that emerged out of these conferences, developed an explicit formula whereby seats on the various executive bodies were allocated according to sectarian, ethnic and ideological affinities. This formula proved very controversial, as it seemed to enshrine the divisions of society according to communal and ethnic considerations. The INC had a leadership council, comprising a Shi’a, a Kurd and a Sunni. The executive council was also divided proportionately, according to sectarian and ethnic compositions.”³³

Chalabi’s ambiguous relationship with Washington was aggravated in 1996 when a plan to launch an offensive on Saddam’s regime through Kurdistan failed. Attentive to the

³² See Allawi (2007), p. 51.

³³ Ibid., pp. 65-68.

shift of power in Washington DC in the mid-1990s with the rise of neo-conservatives and the hawkish Republicans, who called for regime change in Iraq as a necessity for Israel's security, Ahmad Chalabi began to establish alliances with the neo-conservative think tanks and the Department of Defense. These efforts culminated in the issuance the Iraq Liberation Act, signed by Bill Clinton on October 31st, 1998, which called for regime change in Iraq.³⁴

Aside from Allawi and Chalabi, whose power and contacts were considerable, other factions and groups were active in the opposition. In addition to Shia figures and parties – such as the Dawa Party, Muhammad Bahir al-Uloum and Sayyid Majeed Al-Khoie – there were representatives of the two Kurdish parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Despite the dominance of ethnic and sectarian parties and groups, there were secular parties and groups, such as the ICP, which consisted of Iraqi communists who fled Iraq, and the Union of Iraqi Democrats, whose members are mainly (ex-)communists advocating democracy and secular government. These two secular bodies had limited means and influence, since they did not have institutional or governmental funding, and relied on individual donations made by a well-off member or sympathizer.

On the eve of the war in 2003, the opposition in London played another significant role through the London Conference, which was held in December 2002.³⁵ Attended by around three hundred fifty Iraqi exiles and by representatives from the governments of Iran, Turkey, the UK, the US and the EU, the conference was plagued by conflict, anxiety over US intentions and plans, diverse perceptions of post-Saddam Iraq

³⁴ Ibid., p. 67.

³⁵ For a description of the general atmosphere at the conference, see Cockburn (2006), pp. 26-32. Regarding the different agendas and views by the participants, see Allawi (2007), pp. 84-87.

and struggles over power and position. Despite the fanfare for the conference, the main and controversial issues regarding Iraq remained untackled. Ali Allawi, in his brief and diplomatic depiction of the conference, remarked:

“As it was, the conference recognised that, irrespective of US intentions, it was necessary to come up with a committee of sorts that would place a mantle of legitimacy on the opposition and meet one of the conditions for possible participation in a post-Saddam administration. ... [T]he conference nevertheless ended on a high note and appeared to have succeeded in preparing for an eventual role for the exiles in the post-Saddam order. But a serious discussion of a number of vital issues had been avoided. The possible overhaul of a Sunni-dominated system; federalism as a halfway house to Kurdish separatism; the role of religion in Iraq’s public life; the extent of Iranian influence in a post-Ba’ath order; the scope of de-Ba’athification – these were all issues that were kept firmly off the conference’s agenda.”³⁶

Most of the participants assumed important positions after the war and became prime ministers, members of the Iraqi Governing Council, ministers, deputies or senior officials. What Ali Allawi, who was part of the opposition and became a minister at different times after the fall of Saddam Hussein, did not mention was that the London Conference adopted a sectarian quota system. As such, the politics of Iraqi exiles in London had a far-reaching impact on the situation in Iraq through the institutionalization of the sectarian and ethnic divisions. Not only has the reconfiguration of ethnic and religious identities constituted a break with the secular ideologies in pre-Saddam Iraq, it intensified the exclusion and demonization of Sunni Iraqis who came to be associated with Saddam Hussein’s regime.

The fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the return of some Iraqis to Iraq did not mean the end of political activity for Iraqis in the UK. The politicians who returned to Iraq still maintained the UK as their base. Iraq became the temporary home as their families remained in the UK, and they kept their ties with Iraqis in the UK by holding

³⁶ Allawi (2007), p.86.

meetings and giving talks about solutions for the dire and complicated situation in Iraq. Simultaneously, Iraqis in the UK paid close attention to developments in Iraq, met for discussions, sent their protests and recommendations to the Iraqi governments regarding certain issues, such as the Constitution, the Personal Status Law, election laws, etc.

Just as London emerged as the center for the opposition of Saddam Hussein's regime, it now harbors a nascent movement that opposes the US occupation of Iraq. These voices are not yet powerful or mainstream and are spearheaded mainly by women. Nadjie Al-Ali, along with other professional Iraqi and non-Iraqi women, founded Act Together³⁷ in 2000 to agitate against the sanctions. Since 2003, Act Together has focused on the US occupation and on supporting women's issues in Iraq. Haifa Zangana, a novelist and a journalist who was jailed and tortured in the 1970s, also formed a group called Women Solidarity for an Independent and Unified Iraq³⁸ with Iraqi women from different backgrounds who live in the UK. Both Al-Ali and Zangana have written books dealing with the plight of Iraqi women under occupation.³⁹ However, their groups have not been very effective as they lack institutional support and membership.

V. Social and Cultural Aspects

The Iraqi community in the UK is not concentrated in only one area of London. Rather, Iraqis inhabit different areas, with a great number living in West London and the boroughs of Ealing, Camden and Brent. This diffusion is due to differences in socio-economic backgrounds and the time of arrival. As I mentioned earlier, Iraqis who arrived in the late 1970s and early 1980s managed to find jobs and settle down. Those who

³⁷ <http://www.acttogether.org/>.

³⁸ <http://solidarityiraq.blogspot.com/>.

³⁹ Zangana (2009), and Al-Ali and Pratt (2010).

arrived during this period were also better positioned to own property before the drastic increase of real-estate prices in London since the late 1980s. The majority of those who arrived as refugees post-1990 had to rely on social benefits. They were assigned council housing mainly in these three boroughs in West London. Arriving in the UK with no documents and with no sought-after professional qualifications made it harder for them to find jobs and to maintain the status they had enjoyed in Iraq.

The Iraqi refugees who arrived between 1990 and 2003 changed the constitution of the community, in that the majority of them were either Kurds or Shia. In the wake of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, a change in Western rhetoric emphasizing Saddam's brutality and oppression facilitated the approval for granting asylum to more Shia and Kurds in the 1990s. The increasing presence of Shia and Kurds resulted in the formation of organizations dedicated to these two groups. Kurdish cultural centers and Shia meeting places – *husseiniyya* – were formed. The majority of these cultural and religious centers catered specifically to their Kurdish or Shia audiences. While Shia Iraqis visit the *husseiniyya* when there is a religious event or a talk by a political figure on Iraq, the Kurds socialize in their centers.⁴⁰ In addition to these centers, the important political parties, such as the Shia Dawa Party, the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, have offices in London. Interestingly, Sunni centers do not exist, partly because Sunni Iraqis do not defer to a religious authority and because there are no external sources of funding available to them, unlike the Kurds and the Shia. The only

⁴⁰ Some of the Kurdish centers are: Kurdish Association of West London, Kurdish Cultural Centre and Kurdish Information Centre. There are three important Shia centers, namely The Khoie Foundation (which recognizes and follows the religious authority of Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoie), Dar al-Islam (follows Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and is the headquarter of the Dawa Party), and Hussainiat al-Rasool al-Adham (follows the Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Husseini al-Shirazi). See: <http://www.alkhoei.org/>, <http://www.karbala-london.com/>, <http://www.daralislam.org/>.

Iraqi Sunni party is the Islamic Party, whose headquarters consist of a tiny room run by the representative of the party in the UK. For religious functions, practicing Sunni Iraqis go to mosques attended by Muslims from different countries, particularly Regent's Park Mosque.

The only Iraqi cultural organization that held activities was the Kufa Gallery, founded in 1986 and funded by Muhammad Makiya. Makiya – the father of Kanan Makiya, author of *Republic of Fear* – is a well-known Iraqi architect who has lived in the UK since the 1970s. For twenty years, the gallery hosted weekly lectures dealing with literary, cultural and political issues related to Iraq and the Middle East. It also held special events, such as fundraising and conferences. The Kufa Gallery, which was housed in a historical building in the center of London owned by Makiya, was the only institution that did not subscribe to religious, sectarian or ethnic categories, with guests as well as the mostly Iraqi audience members coming from many different backgrounds. The success of the Gallery in providing a common space for Iraqis for twenty years stemmed from the fact that it was funded by Makiya. The Gallery, which opened daily even when there were no events, also served as a meeting place for Iraqis who gathered to drink tea and exchange news about Iraq. As such, its closure in 2006 caused sadness and loss of an important common space. As one person told me, “We became orphans after the closure of the Kufa Gallery. We are scattered now.”

The Iraqi Community Association is also a key association providing legal advice, temporary housing and translation services for newly arrived Iraqi refugees. Given that it is a registered community organization, its funding comes from the UK government. The association, founded and run by Iraqi communists, provides help for all Iraqis who come

to its office, regardless of religious, ethnic and political affiliation. Even though some Iraqis – namely the Shia – openly disagree with the association’s political line, they seek its services given its connections with the UK government. The Iraqi Community Association holds cultural events – poetry readings, celebrations of the anniversary of the 1958 Revolution, talks about Iraq – as well; however, these events are not held on a regular basis, as was the case with the Kufa Gallery, due to lack of sufficient funding.

The Assyrian Community Club is another social center serving as a meeting center for its Assyrian members during the weekends and religious and social events.⁴¹ The Iraqi Welfare Association is an Iraqi organization in the UK that provides legal services to Shia Iraqis, but the scope of its services is limited in comparison to that of the Iraqi Community Association, mentioned above.

Aside from these institutions housed in buildings, there are other organizations, such as the Kindi Society for Engineers (dominated by young Shia Iraqis), Iraqi Medical Association (also dominated by young Shia doctors), Mandaean Association, Kurdish Faili Association, Iraqi Women’s League (part of the ICP) and the Association of Iraqi Academics in the UK, etc. All these associations have no centers and their activities – usually held in the halls of cultural centers, hospitals or hotels – take place only once or twice a year. The few individuals in charge usually communicate with the members via email. Except for the Iraqi Community Association, Iraqi Women’s League and the Association of Iraqi Academics, all the Iraqi organizations in London are defined by ethnic and sectarian affiliations.

Foundations for young Iraqis are still limited in number. The same line of segregation is dominant here also. Most of the Shia mosques have programs and activities

⁴¹ See al-Rasheed (1998).

for the youth. Some even have organizations for the young. For instance, the Khoie Foundation established the Noor Youth for Shia Iraqi young men, and Banat al-Mustaqbal for young women. Given that there exists now a young generation that is not comfortable with Arabic, some of the Shia organizations began to hold services in English and Arabic as a way to attract and include the younger generation. There are two groups for young Iraqis that are not defined by religion or ethnicity to some extent. The Iraqi Youth Foundation, established around 2006, occasionally holds lectures on Iraq and annually organizes *iftar* dinners during Ramadan. However, its members, young professionals raised in the UK, identify themselves as Shia. Iraq in Common, formed in 2006, is the only organization that includes young Iraqis from diverse backgrounds, including people with Iraqi Jewish ancestry. However, Iraq in Common has very limited membership and has not hosted any activities during the last two years.

London now harbors some of the Iraqi intelligentsia. The most internationally renowned Iraqi figure living in the UK is the architect Zaha Hadid, whose post-modern designs and buildings decorate European capitals. Another two architects whose works are considered monumental in Iraq and other Arab countries are Muhammad Makiyya and Rifat Chadirji. Influential poets, such as Saadi Yousif and the late Buland al-Haidari, have also sought refuge in the UK. Iraqi historians, namely Ghassan al-Attiyya and Abbas al-Kelidar, also live in London – all of these among many other prominent figures of Iraqi culture who have taken residence in the UK. Again, no studies have been done on this aspect of the community.

A final note on the social life of Iraqis is related to the dominance of the satellites and the access to different Arabic channels in the 1990s. With the fall of Saddam, Iraqi

channels have multiplied and, with satellite transmission, can now be watched in the UK. Most Iraqis (of the older generation, in particular) watch these channels almost exclusively. I was told by many of them that the availability of Arabic channels severed their only contact with British society – following the news on BBC and Channel 4. Iraqis now switch from one Iraqi channel to another whenever there is news on Iraq, hoping to learn more details. With respect to young Iraqis, social networks like Facebook are providing a venue for expressing their affiliations and interests. While interest groups⁴² dedicated to certain Iraqi religious clerics, political and literary figures are constantly being created on this website, other groups are being created to salvage “the Iraqi heritage,” such as Iraqi proverbs, Iraqi lullabies, Iraqi words (i.e., in the Iraqi dialects), etc. The venue, along with the material posted, provides insight into the way young Iraqis (or British-Iraqis to be more accurate) understand and imagine Iraq and themselves.

⁴² This is a function on Facebook.

Chapter Two

Khalil

I am seeing Khalil again after twenty-seven years. I was six years old when I last saw him. Khalil was my father's best friend. Like my father, he was a communist but he fled Iraq in 1979. I am standing at the entrance of Acton Town underground station in London, waiting for Khalil to come and pick me up, looking at the faces of men approaching the station on foot and in cars. I am trying to guess who Khalil is when he comes. A car pulls in and I think it can be him, but I am wrong as the driver picks up a woman who just came out of the station. I am standing alone now. My heart is pounding, and I try to contain myself. I smile to myself, remembering that back in Iraq I was still punishing him by refusing to open my eyes whenever he was around. He was a dentist and I could not forgive him for pulling out three of my teeth when I was five years old. He always visited us, and our families were close, but after he left, all contact was cut.

I feel as if I were a ghost coming from the past. After all these years, here I am, a grown-up woman who is doing her Ph.D. in a major university in the US. This in itself was a big statement, that after all what happened to my family, I survived and succeeded, and vindicated my parents' upbringing. All this is going through my mind when I see a Mercedes pulling in. A man who looks Iraqi or Middle Eastern gets off. I smile and ask: "Uncle Khalil?"

“Yes.”

“How are you?” We shake hands, and I get into the car. Khalil is in his mid to late 60s. He is tall with a belly. He has gray hair, which is getting thinner especially in the middle of his head. His pale green suit reminds me of the suits worn by Iraqi men: its cut is basic, its finishes are minimal, and the fabric looks old. Given that Iraqi men seem to prefer wide suits that are usually either brown or light grey, one gets the impression these suits were bought in the early 1980s even though they are new. An Iraqi friend and I always have bets when we come across some man in the streets of London wearing such a suit that he is Iraqi. Most of the time, we are right.

I start some small talk about the neighborhood. The ride was very short and we got to the house quickly. His wife, Mary, meets me with a big smile and hug, unlike the formal handshake with Khalil. She is a small woman with short black hair. She is energetic and warm and looks younger than her age. My eyes fall on a glass cupboard, which is full of tiny glass art-works. The living room looks very Middle Eastern. There are white drapes, many paintings of landscapes of Iraq on the walls. There is a Persian carpet on the floor, a cupboard full of chinaware. There are plants of different sizes on the widow sills, floor and fireplace. I notice a cross dangling from a big jar in front of the fireplace. There are many big jars on the shelf of the fireplace. The TV, next to the fireplace, is tuned to an Iraqi network but is silent. Mary asks me if I'd like to have tea. She comes back with a nice silver tray with fine cups and dishes. She also brings three dishes full of pastries she made. Khalil has allergy to milk and their son has allergy to wheat, so she always bakes at home.

“I love making things at home, and it is also a way to pass time.” She said.

“Are you retired now?” I asked.

“No. I did not work when we came to the UK in 1979 ...”

“Mary had to sacrifice her medical career for the sake of our children. It is difficult to raise children here, and Mary had to pay the price,” Khalil said.

“By the time, they grew up, it was too late for me to go back to work. It was time to retire in fact,” she laughed.

Mary excused herself and said she had to go to a nearby shop. Khalil suggested she go to the Turkish store since the item she wanted is better there. She told him that she would not help a Turk profit. Her answer reminded me that Mary is an Armenian and this fact explains her reaction.

“I was shocked when Abu Warda told me about you on the phone. When he told me that the daughter of Muhammad Semaisim wants to talk to you, I couldn’t believe it. It was such a surprise.” Khalil said.

“I know. I myself was surprised that he knew you. It never occurred to me I’d come across you.”

Abu Warda, a Shia Iraqi who works in an important Shia organization in London and who became an important contact in my research, dropped by my place one morning. While we were talking, he received a phone call. I heard him say that he would call Dr. Khalil R. about a meeting. I asked him about Khalil, and I told him that he was my father’s best friend. He called him immediately, and talked to him about the meeting. After that, he said: “I have a surprise for you. Do you remember your friend Muhammad Semaisim? Well, his daughter is here, and she’d like to talk to you.” I took the phone, and talked to Khalil. I was pacing the floor and I could hear my voice rising and my heart

pounding. I remember telling him that I was in London doing research for my Ph.D. and that I'd like to see him. I found out that both Abu Warda and Khalil are members of The Coalition for Democracy in Iraq, which is a political group established in 2004 by Iraqi exiles who advocate secular rule and democracy in Iraq. Given the social and political polarization of the Iraqi community in London, it was strange for me to find an organization that includes an Islamist, Abu Warda, and a liberal like Khalil.

Khalil and his wife's warmth made me feel comfortable and happy to see them again, but the poignancy of the fact that I was the only one to meet my parents' best friends after these years could not escape me or Khalil, as I gathered from his remark. Had my parents left Iraq early like Khalil, my family would have been in the same situation as Khalil's. I tried to banish these thoughts, and to focus on getting to know Khalil and his wife. I felt I know him but also I do not, and I imagine they felt the same. Given that our families were friends, I'm here not the Zainab Saleh I am when I'm in the US or even Lebanon, but as Zainab Muhammad Semaism.¹ Since my arrival in the UK in 2006, the latter has been used in identifying and introducing me. While the former makes me groundless and rootless, the latter name deeply roots me in Iraq and delineates my position within the Iraqi community. In fact, I always introduced myself as Zainab Saleh in London. I thought that it would be better to efface myself when dealing with Iraqis, in order to avoid questions about my background and family. However, after three weeks of meeting Abu Warda, he asked me if I'm the daughter of Hayat Sharara and Muhammad Semaism. My heart sank upon hearing this question. I could not imagine the magnitude

¹ Under Saddam Hussein's rule, last names were no longer used. Instead, a person's grandfather's name became his/her last name. Since the majority of state officials came from Saddam Hussein's family, Tikriti, surnames would have reflected this fact blatantly. In my case, my grandfather's name, Mehdi, should have been my last name but there was confusion due to my father's compound name, Muhammad Saleh. Saleh became my grandfather's name and, hence, my last name.

of gossip and inquiry that took place. Naively, I've assumed Iraqis will be disinterested in my person and background, and will interact with me solely on the basis of my research. In addition, it became clear to me that Iraqis still showed suspicion and fear of "outsiders" who are thought to have ulterior motives. While Saddam was in power, this suspicion was warranted given that his agents had a tangible impact in the UK particularly prior to 1991. Stories of relatives in Iraq killed or imprisoned because of a person's involvement in the opposition abroad and/or his/her criticism of the regime were abundant. Hence, a new face is a threat. Though the presence of Saddam's agents dwindled after 1991 with the imposition of the sanctions, people could not just discard suspicion. Many times, Iraqis said jokingly to me that I should admit that I work for the CIA under the pretext of doing my doctoral research.

Not only has my identification on the basis of my father's last name (and also my mother's name) alleviated the fear, it became crucial to my access to people. Given the dominance of sectarianism among the Iraqi community, my father's last name, which indicated he was from Najaf,² proved essential to my interaction with Shia Iraqis and to my visits to Shia organizations in London. Here, people identified me as a Shia and as "one of us." Moreover, the loss of my family was interpreted as another example of Saddam Hussein's – and hence Sunnis' – persecution of the Shia. My objections to this interpretation and argument that the cause of harassment was my parents' ideological and political positions were dismissed on the ground that I "bought into the Sunnis' talk." Though the Shia Iraqis in London have not been pleased with my lack of display of any

² Najaf is an important Shia shrine city in the south of Iraq.

signs of religiosity,³ they often told me that they would help in my research “because I’m their daughter.” On the other hand, Iraqi communists became welcoming and open when they realized that parents were communists. When I first met some communists in a conference, I was received coldly. Later I was told that they thought I were a Shia Islamist because they saw me greeting, and talking to, a Shia Iraqi man. Once the link was established with my parents, I began to be introduced as “the daughter of our comrades.” These instances of my categorization, by different people, made me aware of “the symbolic capital” I have. The very thing I have been suppressing in London, namely my history and background, facilitated my fieldwork and provided me with different angles on the Iraqi community. Now, I began to efface myself in a different way, in that I remained silent when I was introduced as “the daughter of our comrades” and “you’re are one of us.” I kept to myself that Shiism and religion play no role my life, and that I am not a sympathizer of the Iraqi Communist Party.

My meeting with Khalil and his wife today is different though. Not only are they my parents’ friends, Khalil and my father were members of the same communist cell back in the 1950s, and shared similar views regarding the conduct of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) later on. I’m not here as a category, but as someone with a relevant and personal background. Though we do not know each other at one level, we share a common ground.

Khalil lit a cigarette, and offered me one. I told him I did not smoke, and he commented that he began to smoke only in 1963 when he went into hiding during the

³ I am using the term ‘Shia Iraqis’ here to refer to people who identify themselves first and foremost as Shia. There are other Iraqis who are Shia but they do not identify themselves as Shia. Their Shi’ism indicates a family background, rather an identity. Regarding the issue of religiosity, the fact that I am not veiled, do not fast, and do not pray was strange to religious Shia Iraqis.

Baath coup in 1963. His mother brought cigarettes to kill time, as he could not listen to the radio for fear the neighbors might suspect someone was hiding. This remark led to a conversation on Khalil's relationship with the ICP. I thought Khalil was still a communist, but he mentioned he resigned from the party in 1977. Like my father, he was against the National Front with the Baathists,

“Your father shared my views, but he did not quit. I came to your house after I resigned. Muhammad was against my resignation. Your mom was critical of the party long ago, and she to Muhammad: ‘This is the difference between a courageous and non-courageous person.’ I corrected her and said ‘Muhammad’s views of the party are like the views held by the nuns towards God. The party is sacred to Muhammad.’ We laughed at that.”

Khalil asked me when I left Iraq, and Mary joined us after a short while. The three of us talked a little bit about what I'm doing and how I managed to go to Columbia. I stayed around an hour. When I was leaving, I asked Khalil if I could interview him for my research. His critique of the communist party as well as his political activity in the Coalition intrigued me. He agreed. Mary and Khalil asked me to keep visiting them.

“This shouldn't be your only visit. You can drop by whenever you want, even when we finish the interview.” Khalil said.

“I will.” I smiled.

“Shall I give you a lift to the underground station?”

“No, thanks. It is very easy to get there.”

When I walked to the station, I had conflicting emotions. I was excited but felt tired and emotionally drained. I was glad to meet Khalil and Mary. This connection to my

parents' past, which I knew of but did not experience, was bitter sweet. I was also pleasantly surprised to fall upon a person whose experience is relevant to my research. All of the communists I met glorified the communist party while the ex-communists trashed it because of personal fallout; hence, to hear Khalil's comments on the politics of the party reflected a different perspective. It suddenly struck me how my sense of smelling a potential interviewee has become so powerful since I started my fieldwork, that even during such a charged meeting, I could not help but seize the opportunity to ask Khalil for an interview. I often visited Khalil and Mary after the interviews, which took place over months since Khalil was busy preparing for a conference held by the Coalition in Iraq. They always invited me when they had people over. I never met their children. Their daughter is married and lives in Glasgow, and their son lives in London but is always traveling because of his job.

* * *

Khalil grew up at a time when political life and activism in Iraq were on the rise. Ideological parties, dating back to the 1930s, began to be a factor in the political scene since 1940s. These parties were the spearhead of opposition to the Iraqi state and the British presence in Iraq,⁴ and played a major role in leading demonstrations against the government and different treaties with the British. Three parties became prominent, namely the Istiqlal Party (Independence Party), the National Democratic Party (NDP), and the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP). The Istiqlal Party's dissent was due to its Arab nationalistic aspiration, and its belief that the British influence in region, which was not

⁴ The three of provinces of Iraq – Mosul, Baghdad and Basra – were under Ottoman rule for four centuries. After World War I, Iraq came under British mandate, and the modern state of Iraq was established in 1921. Though Iraq became independent of the British formally in 1932, the British maintained a powerful presence and influence. Most of Iraqi governments formed under the monarchy (1921-1958) had to adopt a policy in line with British interests and policies in Iraq.

curbed by the Iraqi state, was detrimental to achieving Arab unity. The NDP and ICP, on the other hand, advocated internal social and political reform, and harbored no Arab nationalistic views. They also posed a serious challenge to the state because of their criticism and mobilization of people. Their members, particularly the ICP, were often subject to arrest, persecution and interrogation. The ICP had to go underground when the Iraqi government banned it, and its charismatic secretary-general was executed in public in 1949. Unlike the Istiqlal Party and NDP, which were linked to the government and/or the old established families, the ICP appealed to the disaffected classes, such as workers, salaried employees, and urban intelligentsia as well as the youth who all aspired after change in the status quo.⁵ In the early 1950s, the Arab Socialist Baath Party, advocating a combination of socialism and revival of Arab glory based on Islam, established a branch in Iraq and started to gain followers among students and young people.⁶

This political vibrancy was accompanied by political unrest and stormy political events in Iraq. Under the monarchy, political life was orchestrated by coups d'état. In 1941, there was a major coup, which aimed to replace the monarchy altogether.⁷ The year of 1948 was tumultuous in Iraq. The Iraqi government signed the Portsmouth Treaty with Great Britain in January of that year. This treaty entailed the continuation of British influence for another twenty-five years. Demonstrations and protests broke into the streets and continued for months. The protest became a forum to condemn the monarchy and the deteriorating economic condition. In response, the government declared martial law. The students, whether in schools or universities, had an important role in the demonstrations.

⁵ Tripp (2007), pp. 111-112.

⁶ Batatu (1978), pp. 741-42.

⁷ Most of the coups resulted in the replacement of prime ministers, and did not pose a threat to monarchy.

Khalil's exposure to politics had started at an early stage. His maternal uncles were leftist and progressive though they never joined the Iraqi Communist Party. One day, the police came to arrest one of them on the charge that he distributed communist pamphlets. Khalil went with his aunt to the jail to visit this uncle. He asked her about the reason of the arrest, and she told him that they were people who were against poverty and inequality. Also, his mother used to send him to the public library in Mosul to get her *al-Hilal* Magazine, and books by Taha Hussayn and Jurji Zayda.⁸

It was when the family moved to Baghdad in 1950 that Khalil became familiarized with the political movements in the country, namely Arab nationalisms and communism. Unlike vibrant and open Baghdad, Mosul was a conservative city, where the established families lived in well-delineated neighborhoods, and where class distinction was evident and strict. In Bagdad, Khalil went to a public school, which was attended by students from different social, religious and political backgrounds. There, he made friends with both Baathist and communist students, and he found himself attracted to communism. This attraction was due to his readings and his first hand experience. In addition to reading the books he brought for his mother, he began to read Steinbeck's translated novels, different leftist literary stories, and the confessions of Iraqi communists that were published by the Iraqi Security Department. His encounter with destitute Iraqis made the issue of poverty pressing,

⁸ Jurji Zaydan was a Lebanese author and the founder of *al-Hilal* magazine. He is well known for his historical novels, which dealt with the glorious Arab past. See Hourani (1962), p. 246 and p. 277. Taha Hussayn is an Egyptian intellectual and author. He was an influential figure in a political and literary movement, whose members advocated the creation of a modern and liberal political system in Egypt. See *Ibid.*, pp. 324-340. *Al-Hilal* magazine appeared in 1892 first in Beirut and then Cairo. It dealt with issues related to ethics, sociology, politics, (Arab) history, and literature. It also circulated ideas about love of country and patriotism.

“The economic situation for the majority of Iraqis was bad. We lived in Karrada, and my family was well off. I used to see the big houses, including ours, which had three living rooms on the first floor, and six bedrooms on the second floor with bathrooms. However, mud shanties inhabited by poor people surrounded us. I used to wonder why the government didn’t improve their situation. I also used to come across the shanties of the poor in Sadat al-Sharqiyya and Tel Muhammad. The water there was dirty. Trash was everywhere, and people and animals occupied the same living space. On the other hand, I heard about feudal lords who owned half of cities, such the city of Amara, and who had their own prisons. The cruel treatment meted out by the government to those who demanded changing these conditions disgusted me. There were no effective and vital parties, and I didn’t like the premises of the Baath party, so I found myself closer to the communist party. We also need to take into consideration that the Iraqi communist party wasn’t ideologically driven⁹ like the majority of the communist parties. The situation in Iraq, and the aspiration to improve the situation there, were the dominant concerns of the ICP. There was no slogan to overthrow the monarchy for instance, and this issue did not come up until the early 1958.”

Due to the persecution the communists suffered at the hand of the state security apparatus, the ICP could not operate openly nor incorporate people easily. It had a mass base of sympathizers who received the party’s pamphlets but who were not affiliated with the party directly. Khalil had a short period of contact with one party member in high school in 1955. This contact was severed when that member was arrested and had to recant. Khalil did not become a member in the ICP until 1956 when he joined the College of Dental Medicine. The ICP got in touch with him again for his role in the 1956

⁹ He means the ICP was concerned more with the status quo than with ideological visions.

Uprising. The events of 1956 unfolded with the attack on Egypt by Britain, France and Israel.¹⁰ Given the close association of the Iraqi government with Great Britain, through the Baghdad Pact,¹¹ small-scale demonstrations, instigated by teachers and students, erupted in Baghdad and other cities. The powerful Prime Minister, Nuri Said, closed the schools and universities, a measure that ended the demonstrations. Khalil remembers,

“I was not in contact with the ICP, but I participated in the demonstration. The police fired at us, and we [students from the College of Dental Medicine] captured the Mental Hospital. From there, we began to skirmish with the police. The guards of the nearby central prison began to fire at us, so we had to take refuge in the Faculty of Medicine. Our action attracted the attention of the communist students in the Faculty of Medicine. They got in touch with me and asked me to restore my contact with the ICP. I became a member in the party in 1957, a year before the fall of the monarchy.”

Though Khalil became a member in the communist party, he maintained his friendship with the Baathists, who kept passing on their pamphlets to him. In the annual elections for the Student Union in college, Khalil always won and was elected by both Baathists and communists. The question of his political orientation and religion were not an issue during the election. Khalil’s remark about the irrelevance of his religious background was striking to me. I wondered whether he would have thought this at that time, and whether this remark reflects more his dwelling over that past in terms of the present, when religion decides a person’s political chances. A year after Khalil joined the

¹⁰ This refers to the Suez Crisis, and the attack on Egypt by Britain, France and Israel in 1956 upon the nationalization of the Suez Canal by the Egyptian President, Abd al-Nasser.

¹¹ In 1955, Nuri Said signed an agreement, which came to be known as Baghdad Pact, with Turkey to cooperate in case of a military aggression in the region. Later on, Great Britain, Iran, and Pakistan joined the pact. After the rise of Abd al-Nasser in Egypt, Nuri Said began to see Nasser as a threat, and considered the pact as counterbalancing Nasser’s unitary plans in the region. See Tripp (2007), pp. 134-138.

ICP, the monarchy was thrown through a coup d'état carried by the Free Officers. The Free Officers was a group independent of political parties. The events in Egypt in 1956 drew more Iraqi officers to this group. These officers had no political purpose in common other than their censure of the situation in Iraq and hostility to imperialism. Though the government was aware of this organization, no serious measures were taken. In July 1958, Nuri Said decided to send army units to the Jordanian borders because of the crisis in Lebanon.¹² These units had to go through Baghdad. The officers saw in this dispatch an opportunity to act, and they commanded their units into Baghdad and occupied the critical buildings. At the Royal Palace, the royal family was killed instantly. The fall of the monarchy ended one phase in the Iraqi political scene, which was dominated by the British, the monarchy, and the old established classes of ex-Ottoman officials, officers and landowners. There was euphoria in the streets in Iraq, as people could not believe the end of a regime that cared about its privileges and used force to eliminate opposition. Like thousands of Iraqis, Khalil joined the enormous demonstrations. However, he did not feel euphoric,

“The atmosphere was strange. I took to the street. I felt there was no political slogan. I didn't find any slogan I can shout. People were shouting: ‘Arabs and Kurds are brethren,’ and ‘Down with Monarchy. Long live the Republic.’ There was no clarity. There was an absence of a political slogan on July 14th. The demonstrations were enormous. They were incredible. I couldn't continue to the royal palace, Rehab Palace. I

¹² Lebanon was on the verge of a civil war in 1958 because the Lebanese President, Camille Chamoun did not support the Egyptian president, Abd al-Nasser, during the Suez Crisis, and was more drawn towards the Baghdad Pact. The tension during that time prompted Nuri Said to send forces to Jordan for fear of an attack by the United Arab Republic, namely Syria and Egypt, which were united in 1958.

crossed the bridge and saw the corpse of the regent Abd al-Ilah dangling. I felt revolted and went back home.”

After the fall of the monarchy, the Iraqi Communist Party went public, and had the freedom to publish and organize. During this time, Khalil assumed many responsibilities. He was the vice president of two committees, the Committee of the Eradication of Illiteracy and the Committee of Universities, became the party representative for the Medical Faculty, and was elected as the vice president of the Students’ Union in Iraq. One day, Khalil laughed to himself when he realized that he had eight meetings in one week, in addition to his study at the university. In Khalil’s view, the fuss in the ICP was over popular activism and meetings, with little attention paid to the educational part. Prior to the fall of the monarchy, the party meetings discussed the party’s politics, literature, and activities. Intellectual issues on Marxism or Leninism were not raised since these meetings had to be short for security reasons. After July 14th, 1958, meetings began to deal with education. Part of the meetings discussed the party’s agenda and its internal system. Sometimes, Marxist concepts –such as surplus, accumulation of capital and its relation to power struggle between the laborers and capitalists, the dialectic – were discussed. The main focus, though, remained on political organization and mobilization. Khalil’s narration of the priorities of the party was meant as criticism of it and of the behavior of some of its members in the context of later developments. Still, Khalil cherished these days, “Despite all these duties, you could feel the atmosphere of comradeship, and that mattered to us to a great extent.”

The turn of events under the first Iraqi President, Abd al-Karim Qasim, who was the officer who carried out the coup d’état, did not bode well. Internal and regional

tension, in addition to Qasim's emergence as the "Sole Leader" resulted in political instability. Since the early days of the revolution, conflict erupted between the two main officers of the coup, Brigadier Abd al-Karim Qasim and Colonel Abd al-Salam Arif who believed he was the leader of the revolution even though he was inferior to Qasim in rank.¹³ This personal struggle over power was embedded in the issue of Iraq's position within the Arab world, and the two major ideological trends in Iraqi politics, namely Arab nationalism and Iraqist nationalism. Arif was an Arab nationalist and an admirer of Gamal Abd al-Nasser. Within days after the coup, he began to champion the slogan of Arab Unity, and visited Damascus and met with the Baath ideologue, Michel Aflaq. Qasim, on the other hand, came to adopt Iraqist nationalism or particularism shortly after the coup. He was more concerned with social reform, and supported by those who were wary of Abd Nasser and Arab nationalism, particularly the Kurds, the ICP and the NDP. Arif's threat to Qasim came to an end when he was arrested and removed from his jobs in 1958.¹⁴ The blow to Arif meant the defeat of the Arab nationalists in Iraq for a while.

The reign of Qasim, lasting until 1963, was characterized by a bitter conflict between the Arab nationalists and the communists who were seen by Qasim as a counterbalance to the power of the nationalists.¹⁵ For its part, the ICP throw its support behind Qasim and adopted the cry of "Sole Leader,"¹⁶ but the latter came to fear their power and kept an ambiguous relationship with the party. This entangled state of affair reached a climax in March 1959, when a conspiracy against Qasim by some Arab nationalist army officers in Mosul, aided by Abd al-Nasser and some land owners who

¹³ Tripp (2007), p. 147. For a detailed analysis of these events, see Batatu (1978), pp. 808-837.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 831.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 847.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 851 and 808.

were disaffected by Qasim's land form, was brought to the attention of Qasim by the communists.¹⁷ To undermine the plot, the ICP decided to hold "a Peace Partisans' rally" in Mosul, with the approval of Qasim.¹⁸ Tens of thousands of communists descended upon Mosul, and demonstrations filled the streets of Baghdad and other cities.¹⁹ A clash took place between the communists and the nationalists (army officers and landowners) for three days. The conspiracy failed, and the major plotters "were strung on lampposts or their bodies dragged about in the streets."²⁰ The Massacre of Mosul, as known among Iraqis, became a controversial issue as the communists denied they and Qasim had any responsibility while the nationalists and non-communist sympathizers believed otherwise.

A few of the (ex-)communists I met in London believe that the ICP had a role in what happened. Khalil is one of them. Moreover, his views do not aim to bad-mouth the party, but to analyze the actions of some its members. During the events of Mosul, Khalil received orders from the party to go there with other communists. Given his knowledge of the society in Mosul, he felt uncomfortable about the whole venture and refused to go,

"I was the vice president of the Student Union in 1958 and 1959. I was told that there is an order from the party to go to Mosul. I told them 'I'm not going to Mosul. This festival [Peace Partisans' rally] will cause trouble. There is no need for trouble. Let's keep away from trouble.' I was fearful of the situation. I know the society in Mosul is conservative and won't stomach the turn of events, so I refused to comply with the party's order to go. In fact, the party's position was good. They didn't punish me. I was told it is a voluntary matter. So I didn't go. And the events of Mosul took place...

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 874.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 879.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 880 and 883.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 886. Batatu remarks there is no accurate estimate of the number of victims. He puts the number of the killed at 110, and the wounded at 300. See, pp. 888-889.

Shawwaf [leader of the plot] arrested all the democrats who were in Mosul His conspiracy was stopped. There followed leftist extremism in Mosul. The communists had poor understanding [of events/affairs]. They would read a book on revolutionary courts, and decide to apply it in Mosul. So they held revolutionary courts there, and executed 8 to 9 people. These people could really have been conspiring, but this is not the way to deal with it. Then Abd Karim Qasim dealt with the events in Mosul in a very bad way. Those who put down the conspiracy were hailed as heroes when they returned to Bagdad. After two months, he considered them criminals and arrested them.”

Khalil began to see that the ICP had no clear vision of its trajectory, and its leadership was busy fighting over positions within the party,

“The party’s leaders had troubles among themselves, and this situation reflected badly on the party’s politics and popularity. These disputes were over personal, rather than political, issues. ... The conflicts were over the leadership of the party ... The Soviet Party had an impact. ... I think the Soviets themselves did not agree upon a clear position [regarding Qasim]. ... For instance the party raised the slogan ‘The Communist Party in power is a grand demand’! What are you after! In the summer of 1959, the Bagdad Bureau of the ICP decided to bring down Abd Karim Qasim. ... Abd Karim Qasim received reports that the communists were taking to the street. ... At the end, they decided against overthrowing him ... I was one of the people in the streets in Baghdad till 12:30, when we got orders to withdraw. ... This misjudgment, as well as the impulsive and immature decisions, led to the deterioration of the situation. Abd Karim Qasim wouldn’t have taken an antagonistic attitude towards the party if it were not for the party’s political conduct. The communists didn’t know what they wanted. If you want to

topple Abdul Karim, this is not the way to go about it. If you want to work them, then work with him. If you wanted to work with the other parties, then break with him ... The ICP didn't have a policy. It had enthusiasm, loyalty, enormous resources, but no policy.”

Given Khalil's position –as vice president – in the student union, he met with Abd Karim Qasim many times as a representative of the student body. One of these times was when there was an attempt on Qasim's life by the Baathists.²¹ Khalil went with a few communist students to the hospital to visit him. He found him lying on a plain iron bed, chitchatting with two Mandaean sheikhs²² about people from their city whom he knew. After these visitors left, they had a short conversation with him. Qasim praised the students as the “torch of the republic.” At other times, Khalil had to be the go-between when the relationship between the ICP and Qasim was bad. One day, Khalil received a phone call from the party. He was told that the party found weapons in a house and was asked to convey this information to Qasim who cut contact with the party,²³

“I made an appointment and went to see him:

I said: ‘Your Leadership,²⁴ the students told us there are weapons in such and such house.’

Qasim replied: ‘This is not your business. This is the business of the security. You're students. Your business is to study and learn.’

I said: ‘Your Leadership, these students are concerned about the republic. This is why they told us this piece of news. I'm afraid the security doesn't have an idea about this issue, so I came to let you know.’

He said: ‘Anyway, don't make this [finding out information] your business. Tell them to focus on their study.’

So he rebuked me, and I left. At that time, I was only 20.”

The reign of Qasim came to end in 1963 when the Baathist army officers, in coordination with Arab nationalist officers – in particular Abd Salam Arif, staged a coup.

²¹ One of these Baathists was Saddam Hussein. See Tripp (2007), p. 153

²² The Mandaens are a religious minority group; the majority of them have lived in the south of Iraq.

²³ Khalil and Iraqis in general tend to narrate a conversation directly.

²⁴ Qasim was given the title of “leader,” and he was called “Your Leadership” like in “Your Excellency”.

On February 8th, the units moved towards Baghdad. The communists took to the streets and gathered near the Ministry of Defense, Qasim's headquarters. They requested to be armed. Qasim, who could not trust giving them weapons and hoped his forces would end the coup, refused. The Baathists mobilized their members who took to the streets also. On February 9th, the rebel units managed to put out the civilian resistance. Qasim was captured and killed instantly. A picture of him dead was aired on TV. Arif, the Arab nationalist officer who was instrumental in the 1958 coup along with Qasim, became president even though he was not a Baathist. Khalil went to the Ministry of Defense, and saw thousands of people gathering there. Realizing there was no use of his being there, he headed home,

“I went to the Tahrir Square, and saw the tanks of the rebels heading in the direction of the Ministry of Defense. I realized it was over. I feared tremendously for my life, for the Iraqi communists, and for the fate of Iraq. The fall of Abd Karim Qasim meant the turn of the situation upside-down. I knew of the brutality of the rebels. I heard Proclamation No. 13, calling for the murder of communists. I decided I was absolutely not staying in the house.”²⁵

Khalil went into hiding for four months, and this was when he took to smoking. Within the next few days, a brutal campaign against the communists and their supporters

²⁵ Proclamation No. 13 read: “In view of the desperate attempts of the agent-Communists –the partners in crime of the enemy of God Qasim – to sow confusion in the ranks of people and their disregard to official orders and instructions, the commanders of the military units, the police, and the Nationalist Guard are authorized to annihilate anyone that disturbs peace. The loyal sons of the people are called upon to cooperate with the authorities by informing against these criminals and exterminating them.” Cited in Batatu, p. 982. For more details and statistics on the campaign against the ICP in 1963, see Batatu (1978), pp. 988-990.

was waged. After the fall of the Baath in November 1963,²⁶ Khalil left Iraq and went to Beirut, and then to Braque, where the ICP put him in charge of the Iraqi student organizations abroad. In 1968, Khalil went to the UK and he became the head of the ICP branch in Great Britain. He also began to study in order to become a fellow in the British Dental Association. He had to begin from zero given that he did not practice since 1962,

“I had to teach myself to sit for hours in order to study. I had to re-learn the spelling of basic words, such as ‘muscle.’ At that time, I received orders from the ICP to give up my study and return to Iraq. I refused to do so. I knew if I dedicated myself to the party, I wouldn’t be able to be critical or to resign since my livelihood would be dependent on the party. In fact, an old friend in Baghdad, who is a dentist and a leftist, advised against carrying out the party’s order. So I was demoted to a member in cell and the responsibility of the party’s branch in the UK was taken from me. I no longer had any political activity. My only contribution was to the Iraqi Student Association in the UK.”

By 1973, Khalil passed all the required exams and became a fellow in the British Dental Association. He decided to go back to Iraq, leaving behind his family in the UK so that Mary could finish her specialization in gynecology and obstetrics. During the interviews, I tried to ask Khalil about his life during these ten years, in particular his life in Prague and his marriage. Each time I raised questions, he talked in details about how he had to start from the lowest rank in the Dental Hospitals in the UK, and about his preparations to be a fellow. He even once commented that we already talked about this period in a previous interview. At first, I was frustrated with what seemed to me Khalil’s lack of interest in talking about these issues. It then dawned on me that I needed to

²⁶ Struggle over power soon broke out between the Baathist and Arab nationalist officers. After nine months of this coup, Arif managed to eliminate the control of the Baathists. The Baath Party staged another coup in 1968 and took power. See Tripp (2007), pp. 164-69.

unravel both my anxiety about getting “all” of Khalil’s story, as well as Khalil’s focus on career. My own anxiety was linked to my conviction that for me to be a good anthropologist, I should not miss anything. Khalil’s undivided attention to his efforts to build his career, in my opinion, makes sense vis-à-vis the experiences of Iraqi doctors who studied in Iraq but could not practice when they came to the UK. The main reason for this failure was their inability to study to be fellows in British medical associations, and to agree to accept lower positions than the ones they had in Iraq. Most of them became bitter about the loss of their career (and, hence, status), and lived on social benefits. Khalil’s perseverance spared him such a fate, and I think the fate of other Iraqi doctors was on his mind when talking about his career in the UK.

Returning to Iraq in 1973 ended the first experience of exile, which lasted ten years. Khalil went back to Iraq and gave up his good position in the College of Dental Medicine in Liverpool to the disappointment of his supervisor,

“As a person, I’m more in my element in the Iraqi society than in the British society. Second, as a politician, I have a role to play in Iraq. Then I have my family there. It is true that my income was higher in the UK, but in Iraq I’m well to do, so that doesn’t matter. There was a financial loss to me, but it wasn’t a great one. This is why I decided to go back.”

Upon his arrival at the Iraqi borders, trouble was awaiting. Khalil found there was a warrant for his arrest. The military officer told that him he could go to Baghdad in his brother’s car accompanied by a policeman, that he should give the latter five dinars²⁷ when they get to Ramadi and let him go, and that he should forget about going to the security to hand himself in. Indeed, Khalil did not encounter any harassment in 1973, and

²⁷ At that time, 5 dinars equaled \$ 15.

the arrest warrant never became an issue. However, when he inquired about the possibility of an appointment in the College of Dental Medicine, the Baathists sent him a note to the effect that he would never be appointed in that college,

“I didn’t know what to do. Should I leave Iraq and return to the UK? Or should I stay? I was worried about this. There was the problem of political commitments. I was still a member of the ICP, and I had a strong position on the party forming a national front with the Baathists. I decided to stay and to work on changing the politics of the party if I could.”

In 1972, the ICP joined the National Front with the Baath,²⁸ because of the pressure exerted by the USSR. While the Baath regime’s aimed to buttress its relationship with the USSR by ‘sharing’ power with the ICP,²⁹ it wanted to cause a split in the communist party, and to have access to its data and organization. Within the first few months of signing the National Front, harassment of the communists come to an end. It was at this time that Khalil managed to return to Iraq in 1973, with the hope of changing the ICP’s policies. In Khalil’s views, the Baathists were not serious about the national front with the communists; rather their aim was to contain the ICP. Khalil thought there were two directions in front the ICP. The first option was to reject the national front and to go clandestine again. This would entail reducing its membership but maintaining the reputation of the party. Or, they would agree to the national front, and they become an organization that follows the course of the Baath Party,

²⁸ The Baathist army officers managed to stage a coup in 1968 after winning the hearts of important non-Baathist officers, and to install the Baath regime.

²⁹ Because of the National Front, two communists became ministers in the government. However, this assumption of power was nominal.

“For the party’s leadership to think they can be in a national front with the Baathists on equal terms was shortsighted and unrealistic. When the convention of the ICP was held, I, your father and another three members formed our own list vis-à-vis the party’s list for the election of Baghdad’s leadership. We criticized the party’s policy. Of course, we didn’t win. As a result, I was stripped of my responsibilities³⁰ and demoted to a member in a cell.”

In 1977, Khalil resigned from the party. The final straw was his argument in a party meeting with the head of the Baghdad Committee of the Intelligentsia,

“In a meeting one day, this person said that the government in Iraq at the present time [1977] was a national democratic one, in accordance with the Declaration of the Communist Parties of 1960. I told him his statement was wrong. The national democratic government is the one that gives the working class complete freedom to organize and negotiate, etc. In Iraq, the working class was deprived of its right to unionize, to negotiate, to go on strikes. As for democracy and the government, there was no freedom of the press, and there were another 4 or 5 conditions for democracy that didn’t exist in Iraq. I told the lecturing comrade that his statement was 100% wrong. We were ten in the meeting, and none of these comrades said anything. One of them said that both the lecturing comrade and I overdid it. ... I told them I was ready to bring the Declaration and read it for them. After I left the meeting, I thought to myself: ‘are we here in a communist party? No!’ Not only was the lecturing comrade wrong, the others had no understanding of what a communist party is, nor of the theories of communist parties. They just follow the party’s orders, so I submitted my resignation from the party. Then I went to your house and had that discussion with your parents.”

³⁰ Khalil was the head of the cell that included members from the Medical Faculty.

Khalil's resignation was not merely over an intellectual quarrel with another comrade; it was about the position of the ICP leadership towards acts carried out by the Baath regime against communists. In 1976, the government began to persecute the communists when it no longer had to depend mainly on the USSR for arms and industries. It was very painful for Khalil to know that some of his comrades toasted the Baath Party in a party attended by Baathists on the very same day when important communists were executed,

“I felt disgust and pain. I raised this issue with the party the next day [of the party]. I was told those who were executed were not longer communists, since they left the party! Imagine! They were executed for political reasons! I was told also ‘We submitted a protest.’ A protest! The same day, you were toasting the Baathists and the Baath leadership that was ruling Iraq. Where is the revolutionary feeling! Where is the revolutionary solidarity! Where is the independent stand! I couldn't shut up, so they began to circulate rumors that I resigned for the sake of my clinic. One of them told me one day that I resigned because I feared for my personal interests. I told him: ‘I wouldn't follow a stupid policy, and what is going on [rumors] is defamation. At least, I'm not a mercenary, and I don't take any salary from anybody. I work and sustain myself. There are others who used their political positions to profit and benefit.’”

Khalil's resignation was a final and formal cut of his relationship with the ICP. He never had any formal contact with the party. Still, he maintained his friendship with a few communist friends who shared his views and position towards the ICP. In 1979, Khalil was arrested for a few hours. In the meantime, Saddam Hussein became the president and ushered in an unprecedented reign of terror.

This reign of terror had its beginning in 1968 when the Baathist army officers took over power. The Baath rule was marked by drastic changes in the political structures of the country. The new ruling class consisted mainly of Baathist army officers, who hailed from certain clans and families from the north-west area of Iraq. Ahmad Hasan Al-Baker, one of the main officers carrying out the coup in 1968, became as the president of Iraq, the prime minister, the chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council and the secretary-general of the Baath party. Shortly after assuming all these positions, he began to eliminate his allies in the coup and rivals in general, and to promote his kinsmen, the most notable one was Saddam Hussein. As a result of this change, the Baath party itself was transformed in that it became a means to wield power, and in that “the role of the Sunnis has risen sharply, while that of the Shiites had decisively declined.”³¹ On the other hand, the army came to be dominated by Takriti army officers.³² Political rivals and dissidents – whether Arab nationalists, Nasserites, Baathists, communists, influential figures – were subject to arrest and containment. This political change was accompanied by an increasing fear, and persecution, of the Shia and the Kurds. In 1979, the all-powerful Saddam Hussein seized power and became the president of Iraq. His reign started with a coldblooded purging of the Baath Party,³³ of the liquidation of the ICP, of persecuting the Shia opposition (members of the Dawa Party and important religious figures), of putting down the Kurdish movements, and of eliminating anyone who was a suspect or presented a threat.

It was at this point that Khalil decided to return to the UK. Indeed, Khalil was among thousands of Iraqis who began to flee or leave Iraq, for fear for their lives and for

³¹ Batatu (1978), p. 1078.

³² Takrit is a city in the north west of Iraq. Baker and Saddam Hussein were from there.

³³ He made colleagues in the Baath Party shoot each other.

their refusal to cooperate with the regime. While some faced immediate threats to their lives, such as some political and religious dissidents, others – like Khalil – foresaw that things would go from bad to worse. This period – 1979 until the early 1983³⁴ – witnessed the first considerable exodus of Iraqis,³⁵ and the formation of diasporic Iraqi communities. The UK emerged as one of the popular destination for Iraqi exiles, and as a major center for the Iraqi opposition to Saddam’s regime, in addition to Iran.

* * *

I’m on my way to Khalil’s house to resume my interviews with him. I have not seen him for a while, as he was busy preparing for a conference in Kurdistan. I was eager to hear his impressions of Iraq and the conference. In 2007, the Coalition for Democracy in Iraq (CSD) decided to hold a conference in Kurdistan, sponsored by the Iraqi President, Jalal Talabani. The CSD, or to be exact its mother organization, the Iraqi Democrats (ID), was Khalil’s re-entry into Iraqi politics. In 1989, after 10 years of being in the UK and of remaining aloof from direct involvement in politics, Khalil founded the ID with some friends who shared his views on democracy and human rights. An incident pushed these friends to turn their social gatherings into organized political meetings. There was an Arabic journal, published in Paris, called *The Seventh Day*. It published the minutes of the Baath Regional Command on democracy in Iraq, which outraged Khalil,

“Taha Yasim Ramadan³⁶ said ‘In Iraq, we have a democracy unprecedented in the whole world. We have three million Baathists. Each one has parents and a wife, so 3 x 3 = 9. That means we have 9 million people who support us, and this number represents a majority, and hence the Iraqi Baath Party’s is based on democracy.’”

³⁴ In 1983, Saddam Huseein put a ban on traveling abroad because of the Iraq-Iran War.

³⁵ According to Charles Tripp, half a million Iraqis left Iraq by the mid of the 1980s.

³⁶ Ramadan is one of Saddam’s close associates and held important positions.

What disturbed Khalil was that no one refuted this nonsense. He and his friends thought this was unacceptable and a body should be formed to advance democratic concepts. A preliminary committee was formed with the aim to hold a conference. When Saddam invaded Kuwait 1990, the conference was held, and the Iraqi Democrats was launched. This group began to hold annual meetings that were not limited to its members, but were attended by different parties and figures – such as the Dawa Party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), Sayyid Bahr il-Ulum,³⁷ ICP, and Kurdish parties. Khalil rented a flat above his clinic, where meetings were held. The ID also issued a journal called *The Democrat*, and it was funded by its own members, and did not have any external support.

Not only did the foundation of the ID entail Khalil's involvement in Iraqi politics again, it also brought him into contact with the opposition to Saddam's regime in exile. In the 1980s, London, along with Damascus and Tehran, became centers for the opposition. The opposition groups were disorganized and distrustful of each other. The invasion of Kuwait, the imposition of sanctions on Iraq, the failure of the 1991 Uprising, and the rise of Ahmad Chalabi resuscitated the opposition.³⁸ Chalabi became an influential figure in London through establishing close contact with the American administration in the 1990s, drawing attention to the opposition, and pushing for the idea of a democratic Iraq

³⁷ The Dawa Party is a Shia religious party that was formed in the 1950s. By the end of 1970s, it became the main opposition party inside Iraq. Many of its members were persecuted, and were killed or had to flee Iraq. SCIRI was formed in Iran in the early 1980s by Shia religious clerics. Its members included Iraqis who were deported by Saddam under the pretext of being of Iranian origin. Bahr il-Ulum is an important Shia cleric who fled to the UK. Many of his family members were killed because of his opposition to Saddam.

³⁸ Chalabi was the main figure of the Iraqi Opposition, and the man that the American government relied on for its information on weapons of mass destructions. After the war in 2003, he fell out with the American administration.

in the Western media.³⁹ From its outset in the early 1990s, the opposition was characterized by the dominance of sectarian and ethnic politics. Khalil remarks,

“The opposition in the 1990s did not have any clear agenda. It had a thumbnail sketch. The Salahuddin Conference in 1992 ushered in a sectarian and ethnic quota system: Sunni, Shia and Kurds. The discussion was based on sectarianism, and it continued to be so since then.”

As such, Khalil stepped into a scene different from the one he experienced in Iraq, whereby political parties and activities were ideologically based to a great extent. The members of the ICP included Jews, Christians, Sunnis, Shia, Kurds, who were all motivated by concepts of reform, equality and justice. The Baath party, on the other hand, has many Shias in its membership and leadership until 1968. While Arab nationalist parties did not appeal to the Kurds and minorities, they were popular among Shia and Christian Iraqis. The emergence of the one-party regime under Saddam’s rule, and the atrocities committed on the Kurds and the Shias since the 1980s led to the rise of ethnically and religiously oriented parties, whether abroad or inside Iraq.⁴⁰ The Iraqi exiles and refugees who arrived in the UK in the 1990s adopted a sectarian and/or ethnic discourse, which became a blueprint for the major political parties.

The Iraqi Democrats joined the opposition despite their disagreement with sectarian politics. Though members of the ID attended meetings and conferences held by the opposition and the American Administration, and put forward their suggestions and opinions, they remained on the margins. With the outbreak of the war in 2003, the

³⁹ Ibid., p. 42.

⁴⁰ Inside Iraq, the Kurds were always a source of threat to the Iraqi state, and had the resources to carry out offensives on the state. After 1991, they became virtually separate from the Iraqi state. As for the Shia, Saddam eliminated important religious clerics. The Dawa Party was banned, and its members, and their families, were either killed or imprisoned.

ethnically and religiously based political participation became deeply felt when all the positions in the state were distributed according to a sectarian and ethnic quota system. Members of the ID and ICP who joined the government were incorporated on the basis of their sect, ethnicity or religion. Khalil refused to assume any position on this ground when the issue was raised with an old friend who was a communist, on his first visit to Baghdad in 2004,

“When I visited Baghdad in 2004, I met with Dr. Tariq Mustafa.⁴¹
 He said: ‘Why didn’t you come to Iraq earlier! We could have put you in the first elected parliament, or we could have given you a position.’
 I asked: ‘On which ticket, would you have given me this position?’
 He said: ‘We needed Christians.’
 I replied: ‘I was never involved in politics on a Christian ticket. I get involved as an Iraqi.’
 He laughed and said: ‘I know.’”

What increased Khalil’s anguish was that his identification as a Christian was not limited to conversations over the possibility of a job or post in Iraq, but it began to be the main feature to define him. On the same visit in 2004, he went to see the deputy of the Ministry of Health, who was a member of the Dawa Party, to ask him about his pension. Khalil knew this deputy very well because of their work in the opposition prior to 2003. After waiting for him for three hours, Khalil left. In an event in the Iraqi Embassy in the UK later on, Khalil saw an old friend of his, who was a Communist and whose sons were members of the Dawa Party. Khalil told him about what happened with the deputy,

“My friend said: ‘Do you expect they would care about a Christian!’ So instead of sympathizing with me, and telling me that he would tell his sons about this incident, he said: ‘Do you expect they would care about a Christian!’ All my life, I never cared if a person is a Christian or a Muslim, and now this person, who is a Marxist or leftist, tells

⁴¹ This figure assumed an important post that was assigned to the Kurds because he is Kurdish.

me: ‘Do you expect they would care about a Christian! I didn’t hear such comments before. Maybe, people said them among themselves, but not to my face.’”

Khalil was born in Mosul to a Christian family, which lived in a Christian neighborhood that borders the Muslim neighborhood. Next to the family house was a mosque that marked the end of the Muslim neighborhood. Unlike the majority of the well-to-do Christian families in the city of Mosul, his mother, who had nine children, had a Muslim nanny. Khalil’s father was a successful merchant, both in Mosul, and later on in Baghdad. The fact that he was a Christian never affected his profession and friendships, according to Khalil. Khalil heard a story from his father,

“My father was the agent for a big Muslim merchant in Mosul. One day this merchant sent for my father. When my father got there, he found three merchants he knew. The merchant told my father: ‘These three men are asking me why I have a Christian as my agent, and not one of them. I asked them to sit until I call upon this Christian so that I tell the three of them: the shoes of this Christian are an honor to you, so get out!’”

Khalil intended for the story to show the absence of religious and sectarian prejudices. To him, the reaction of the big merchant indicates loyalty and respect. The conduct of the other merchants did not strike Khalil as being of any relevance or significance. In fact, this story is typical of many stories narrated by Iraqis in London to assert or deny the presence of sectarianism in the past. While these stories reflect the different interpretations of certain events by different narrators, they bring to light the weight of the present in understanding the past, in that they told in relation to the outbreak of sectarian and ethnic violence in post-Saddam Iraq.

When Khalil's family moved to the more diverse and mixed Baghdad in 1950, Khalil never felt any prejudice against him because of his religion. Rather, students in the secondary school made fun of him because of his Malawi dialect. Bit by bit, he began to mix with the students and made life-long friendships. The students used to go on trips to different places in Iraq. Once they went to Samarra, a holy city for Iraqi Shia that has some Abbasid landmarks in addition to the Shia shrines. He visited the holy places with them. It was not a problem for anyone, whether Khalil or the students, that he is a Christian.

Khalil's narrative about the current situation and his identification as a Christian, particularly among the Iraqi community, was punctuated by stories about the past regarding his family and his friends. Just as religion did not matter to his family, it was not a big issue among his friends as well. Again, while Khalil meant to emphasize the absence of sectarianism among people, his accounts implied the existence of sectarian identification among people, as the above-mentioned story of his father with the merchants indicates. However, it seems that to speak in sectarian terms at that time was something inappropriate.

As I was approaching the house, I saw Khalil walking in my direction.

"I was going to buy cigarettes. I ran out of them." He said.

"I can walk with your to the shop."

"Don't worry about it. I'll be forced to smoke less." He replied.

Khalil let me in the house.

Mary came to say hello. She asked if we'd like to drink anything. When I said I was OK, she replied that she would finish cooking while Khalil and I continued the

interview. Hardly did Mary sit with us during the interviews. Sometimes, she would sit and chat when I first get to their place. Though she was never involved in Iraqi politics, it was clear that she followed the news closely, knew about Khalil's activity, and had her opinions about Iraqi politicians and politics. Mary was quiet in social gatherings. During a dinner at an Iraqi friend's house, Mary did not participate much in the conversation, which, of course, revolved around Iraq. When the conversation drifted towards religion and the corruption of religious establishments, whether Muslim or Christian, Mary expressed her disagreement that the Church was corrupt. She and Khalil got into a discussion about the topic. While Khalil was against the Church, Mary defended it and Christianity as a religion.

“So how was the visit to Iraq? How is the situation there?” I asked.

“The situation now is worse than it was when I first visited Iraq in 2004. People had hope back then. Now, they no longer have any hope. When you hear people talk, all that you hear is a conversation over how to leave the country. In 2004, people were happy that there was an increase in the salaries, and things were available. There was no electricity but it is OK with people. They thought this problem would be solved. This is all over. Now, the costs of living are ridiculously high. The situation right now is pathetic, depressing, tragic and disastrous. You can call it all these names, and there is no prospect. In the past, you could think of a coup. Who would carry out a coup now! There is no way but dividing Iraq. And division will make things worse. This is why Iraq is a paralyzed state, heading towards collapse. The way out for paralyzed states is either outside intervention or internal forces supported by external powers. In Iraq, there are no capable internal forces. External intervention failed, so there is no way out for Iraq but

collapse. This is my opinion. I hope to be wrong. Whenever I dwell upon it... The Iraqi army is divided on a sectarian basis. There isn't a national army. There are Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish units. ... The militias are proliferating. Arms are distributed in the streets and by the government."

"How did you feel when you visited Baghdad after the fall of Saddam?" I inquired.

"I didn't feel happy. I felt depressed. ...I didn't recognize Baghdad. ... I went around. I went to the Rashid Street and found it in depressing condition. I went to Al-Mutanabi Street, and bought books. I could not go to the shops in Jadiriya because Abdul Aziz al-Hakim and Jalal Talabani live there now, so the roads are blocked."

"What about the conference? How did it go?" I asked.

"It went well. People in Iraq were very enthusiastic and supportive of the Coalition's work.⁴² I'm very happy with the conference, and with what we've done. ... However, the problem is that some people don't differentiate between the main and secondary issues. ... For instance, one person refused to attend the conference because he knew the issue of Kirkuk would be raised somehow. ... To me, the issue of Kirkuk is secondary. The real issue is whether there will be an Iraq or not! The talk about federalism is bogus. The politicians now are laying the basis for the division of Iraq under the name of federalism."

"How did the Iraqis inside Iraq relate to you? I heard many stories from Iraqis who went back, that people were hostile to them because they came from abroad? It

⁴² In 2004 after a period of inactivity, due to the fact that a good number of the ID either went back to Iraq after 2003 or died, the ID assumed the name the Coalition of Democracy in Iraq. It was agreed that the membership was not based on party representation, but rather on a personal basis.

seems now this [the issue of exiles vs. people inside] is another source of conflict among Iraqis, in addition to the sectarian one.” I asked again.

“That is true, but we didn’t have any problems with the Iraqis inside Iraq. I didn’t experience any hostility. ... I apologized to them that an initiative [about buttressing democracy in Iraq] is coming from abroad. ... Those who participated in the conference didn’t have any problem with us. No one said that you’re coming from abroad. We had heated political discussions, which were very productive. ... You know, we didn’t go with the occupation forces to work as consultants and tell people what they should do. People look differently at those who came with the Americans. Our position among people was based on a common political project, unlike those exiles whose dealings with Iraq were through bureaucratic jobs. ... I sent a memorandum to the State Department, before the war in 2003, in which I warned the US Administration against the Iraqi exiles in reconstructing Iraq.”

“Why is that?” I asked.

“I’ve seen the conduct of these exiles here. For instance, there is someone who lived in the US since he was five. He even doesn’t know Arabic well, and he holds grudges against Iraq. ... These exiles are not there to build the country. They can help but they shouldn’t be given the important and vital positions. There are Iraqis inside Iraq who were arrested, imprisoned and humiliated by Saddam’s regime. These people can mobilize. I think that most of the political organizations abroad are funded either by the US or Iran. There has been even selling and buying of persons: I give you \$2000 and you come with me; I’ll give you \$3000 and you come with me. When the situation is like that,

you can't rely on such people nor put the fate, and billions, of the Iraqi people in their hands.”

“What was the position of the ID towards the American Administration? That was another controversial issue. Did you think you should cooperate with it?” I said.

“The US was a vital force in the game. It is not merely a player. It was the only effective force, which had a clear attitude towards Saddam's regime. ... The only two Iraqi parties who were against the US were the ICP and the Dawa Party. When they sensed the regime would be toppled, they hurried to the US to have positions in the new government. The ICP members were incorporated according to their sect and ethnicity!” He replied.

“So were you for or against the war in 2003? I remarked. I was anxious about asking this question, which became by 2006 a very sensitive question among Iraqis.

“Good question. I was with the war on the grounds that a transitional government would be formed immediately after the war. The day the US forces marched into Baghdad, a friend called at five a.m. and woke me up:

He said: ‘Khalil?’

I replied: ‘What is the matter?’

He answered: ‘The US forces entered [Baghdad]. Do you consider them to be liberation or occupation forces?’

I said while still half asleep: ‘It depends on how it is going to behave.’

Now, the UN and the American government said it is occupation. If you ask me about my stand now, I'll tell you: the war, if conducted in a correct way, would have been good. But the Americans didn't show willingness. Rumsfeld and his clique didn't show willingness. The State Department was willing!”

“How did you feel when you heard the news of the fall of Saddam's regime?”

“We didn’t celebrate. We didn’t feel happy. I didn’t know what was going to happen. I was happy that Saddam’s regime was gone. When we used to think about this moment, we used to say we would throw a big party. Do you know that we didn’t have a party. Nothing!” He said.

“You mentioned Iraqi exiles earlier. Do you feel you’re an exile? How do you relate to the UK?” I inquired.

“The UK is not a place of exile to me. Exile is something compulsory. I could have gone somewhere else. I had the opportunity to go to Abu Dhabi in 1978, but I didn’t like the idea. I feel a foreigner here, but not an exile. I always feel I’m a foreigner even though I never had any trouble here and never talked to a policeman. ... Despite all my adaption to the British society, I’m still a foreigner. When I go to Baghdad, I feel I’m in my country. I never felt the UK is my country. I love and respect the British people, but deep inside, I feel more for Iraq. I think this depends on the person’s upbringing ... There is another matter ... It could be related to pride ... It really has nothing to do with pride ... I don’t know what it is. ... In Iraq, I’m a somebody. Here, I’m one among 50,000 persons. When I went back to Baghdad [in 1973], I could call a Baathist deputy of the Ministry of Health and tell him what I wanted. Here, who are you! In Baghdad, when I go to the butcher, he would come out of his way, etc. Then the garden has an influence. I love the garden, and to garden. I love the palm tree. ... When I came back here in 1979, I had a good position in North Wales. But we were alone. There were no Iraqis. So I left and came to London. As we say in Arabic, Heaven without people is undesirable.”

This was not the first time that I hear Iraqis comment on the fact that they never had any problems with authorities in the UK, and that they were always treated with

respect. This recurring comment reflects their experiences with Iraqi authorities, under the Baath regime and under Saddam Hussein's rule in particular. On the other hand, Khalil's comment brings up an issue that is hardly expressed by the Iraqis I met in the UK, namely the question of status. Khalil refers to his loss of status in the UK despite his successful career and his maintenance of a comfortable life. The loss of status manifests itself in little things, such as a butcher going out of his way to greet him and Khalil's ability to meet with a deputy minister easily. In Iraq, and with Iraqis, Khalil is someone as he says: he comes from a respectable family, and has a long (and well-known) political history. Iraqis can recognize him easily for his social position. In the UK, he is recognized for his professional skills among his patients only.

I looked at the living room, and the silent TV tuned to an Iraqi station. Khalil and Mary's attempt to make this home have the feeling of "home" cannot be lost.

I heard Khalil's voice.

"I have a question. Would you like to join the Coalition? We need young people. As you saw in our conference back in November, you were the only young person in the audience. What do you think of that?" He asked.

"I don't know. I'm here temporarily. I'll go back to the US. I don't see the point of joining it." I replied.

"Well, you can continue in the US. You can work with other young Iraqis there." He suggested.

"You know, I'm not politically oriented. I prefer to stay away from politics. It has bad association in my mind because of my experience in Iraq. What about young Iraqis in the UK? The community is huge here!"

“Well, young Iraqis who are interested in politics don’t come to us. They join the Shia and Kurdish parties, and attend events organized by Shia and Kurdish institutions.”

He replied.

“I know. It is sad. I noticed that during the lectures organized by the ICP, there are hardly any young people.” I commented.

“Lunch is ready if you’re ready.” Mary announced.

We went to the kitchen and sat at the table there. Mary made an elaborate Iraqi dish, called Kibbit hamud. We ate and chatted away.

Chapter Three

Hanan

“Those who cannot [bring themselves to go to the US] will remain and live out their time, fragments of a beautiful dream with which humanity lulled itself to sleep. They have lived too much by fantasy and by ideas to enter into the rational American age.”

Alexander Herzen in E.H. Carr's *Romantic Exiles*

This statement by Herzen on the Russian exiled revolutionaries living in Europe in 1840s is true of Hanan if we replace “to enter the rational American age” with “to accept the disenchanting turns of events.” Hanan is a few years senior to Khalil but, unlike him, she is still a staunch communist and has idealistic views of the ICP and of the decades prior to the rise of the Baath regime. Hanan, in her seventies, lives alone now in a nice house in West London. My several visits lasted many hours as she went into details in her recollection of the past and evaluation of events. The TV was always on and tuned to an Iraqi channel. Pictures of her children and grandchildren were on the shelves and tables in the living room. Among these pictures is a photograph of the first Iraqi president, who carried out the coup d'état in 1958 against the monarchy, Abdul Karim Qasim. Hanan left Iraq in 1978 with her family and has been living in London since then. Her ex-husband's business success in London provided a comfortable life for her. Though Hanan did not

have to work, she played a big role in consolidating the Iraqi Community Association in London.

To my generation, who lived under the Baath regime, Hanan belonged to a generation whose life and experience came to represent the old good days and the beautiful past that the majority of Iraqis romanticize and yearn for. Indeed, the life experience of Hanan's generation (and the next generation) shaped the memory of an ideal Iraq that existed before the rise of the Baath to power in 1968. The stories of, and by, this generation produced a certain imagination of pre-Baath Iraq: "the real Iraq," as opposed to the Iraq that was dominated by "the Baath's thugs," existed then. As such, the disappointment of this generation at the turn of events after 2003 has been tremendous. Many Iraqis thought once Saddam Hussein was toppled, they would go back to "the Iraq they knew." Little did they suspect that the Iraq they knew had changed drastically after decades of wars, persecution and sanctions.

Hanan lived at a time when the ICP enjoyed considerable popularity and membership. This state of affair stands in stark contrast with the situation of the ICP in the UK – where there is a big presence of Iraqi (ex-)communists, especially after the arrival of those who lived in Eastern European countries since 1990. The majority of the party members right now are people in their 60s and 70s. Hanan, who is tall and still robust, spoke in a passionate way on political events in Iraq. She expressed her anger and disappointment vehemently. Combined with her strong character, this demeanor leaves an impression on the listener. Hanan's accounts of the past are closely tied to the present. Whenever I asked her a question about the past, she ended up talking about the present and its difference from the past. Sometimes, she would immediately reflect on the present

instead of engaging my inquiries on the past. Hanan employs the past and her generation's political and social life to make a statement on the current political development in Iraq as well as the Iraqi community in the UK, particularly the rise of religiosity and sectarian identifications.

* * *

Hanan was born in the early 1930s, when Iraqi girls and young women were beginning to go to schools, join universities and work. The movement of women's liberation was gaining momentum in Iraq in the 1930s and 1940s. The education of women and the agitation for women's adoption of modern dress code became the arenas of conflict between the modernists and the conservatives in Iraq. Hanan grew up during this time. Her earliest memory was of her parents' arguments over the mother's dress code, which consisted of an *aba* and *poushi*¹ worn over the clothes by all women at that time. Taking them off became a symbol of emancipation of women and modernization. Stories of fathers and husbands encouraging their daughters, sisters or wives to take off the *aba* in the 1930s and 1940s, or of women defying the social norms by taking them off are often told by Hanan's generation. Hanan's father wanted his wife to stop wearing these garments,

“My father exerted pressure on my mother to take off the *aba* and the *poushi*. We lived near a mosque that housed the tomb of an important religious figure. My mother's answer was that we lived next to the mosque, and people knew her well, so she didn't want to stand out. She didn't like wearing the *aba* but she always said to him she couldn't be the odd one out. Then we moved to another neighborhood. On the first day after the

¹ *Aba* is a black gown still worn by women in Iraq. It is worn on the head and it reaches the feet. *Poushi* is a white piece of cloth that was worn down the eyes, and it went below the neck.

move, he asked her to take off this black rag saying: ‘Don’t tell me there is a mosque here!’”

Hanan was raised in a progressive house. Her father encouraged his daughters to mix with their brothers’ friends, and insisted that his sons take their sisters with them to the cinema once Hanan turned thirteen. Hanan spent her free time reading and listening to music. Given that most families had modest means, Hanan and her friends used to share books. Though she was exposed to political ideas through these readings, it was the eldest brother’s return from Lebanon in 1944 that was crucial as he brought many books with him and encouraged his sisters to read. After World War II, progressive political thoughts, such as colonial struggle and self-determination, began to be popular in Iraq. The British control of Iraq, represented in the British Mandate, furthered people’s political consciousness and involvement in politics. Hanan’s first taste of political involvement was her participation in the demonstrations that broke out in 1948 to protest the renewal the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930, known as the Portsmouth Agreement.

“I was in high school when the demonstrations broke out in 1948. My siblings and I all participated in them. All the students in my school would march from Adhamiyya to Bab al-Mu’ddam. We would pass by the Law school, and continue marching with the Law students. Then we would reach the Medical School, where we all gathered and protested. We used to run away from school in order to take part in these demonstrations. I was 15 years old so I could only join the Students Union, whose main responsibility was to mobilize students to go on demonstration and to protest. In 1948, the street was divided into two camps. You had the Arab nationalists who raised banners calling for Arab Unity and other chauvinist Arab nationalistic slogans. Then you had the

democrats, in particular the Communist Party, who called for the end of injustices. However, all these parties and factions were against the British rule of Iraq.”

These stories about the 1948 demonstrations loom large in Hanan’s generation’s memory, especially that the Iraqi government had to give in to the popular protest and to annul the treaty and that women took part in them in great numbers, marking an increase of women’s involvement in politics. These stories are usually narrated in the context of the triumph of people’s will, as well as of the different political scene when protests and demonstrations could impact the government’s decision as opposed to the one-party dictatorship under Saddam Hussein. The rest of 1948 was as eventful as the days of protesting the treaty in January. More protests broke out when the state of Israel was established in May, and the general secretary of the ICP Comrade Fahd, who had an influential role in expanding the party, was arrested and executed in 1949. These demonstrations, condemning the Iraqi government’s close relations with the British and failure to effectively intervene to defend Palestine, were put to an end through the placement of curfews under the pretext that the Iraqi government was in a state of war with Israel. Hanan was silent on these issues. Upon my questions, she answered tersely and angrily.

“The Palestinian question is the cause of our ruin. Nouri Al-Said [the Iraqi Prime-Minister] used it as a pretext to place a curfew, and to arrest the communists and to execute Fahd! We participated in many demonstrations to show our support for the Palestinians, etc., etc. But the Palestinians proved to be ungrateful. Wherever they went, they made trouble. They ruined Lebanon. They ruined Tunisia. They did the same thing in Kuwait. I lived in Kuwait. The Kuwaitis were number one, and the Palestinians were

number two, and the rest of us came after that. Then Saddam invades Kuwait, and they adopt this disgraceful position [of supporting Saddam].”

Not only does Hanan’s answer call the attention to the negative attitudes held by a good number of Iraqis in the UK towards Palestinians right now, it shows how past events are recast in light of the present. The omission of Palestine in Hanan’s recollections of the year 1948 was striking at two levels. First, Hanan herself took part in demonstration in support of Palestine and against the position of the Iraqi government; therefore, her silence omits part of her political involvement. Second, it omits an event that had deep repercussions for the ICP since the curfew imposed enabled the government to execute the charismatic leader of the ICP, as I mentioned earlier. Since Hanan is such a staunch supporter of the ICP, this silence becomes stark. Had this interview happened prior to 1990, Hanan’s reaction towards the question of Palestine would have been totally different.

In 1951, Hanan joined the University of Commerce, and also worked in a bank in order to support her family. Hanan was the first female employee in the Central Bank at that time. While at university, Hanan’s political activity was confined to the Students Union. A visit to the woman doctor and political activist Dr. Naziha Dulaymi because of a medical condition was a turning point in Hanan’s political life. A few days after the visit, Dr. Dulaymi sent after Hanan and told her about a plan to found a women’s organization. Iraqi women’s secular organizations began to appear since the 1920s. Examples include Women’s Awakening Club (1923), Red Crescent Society (1933), Women’s Temperance and Social Welfare Society (1937), Women’s Union Society

(1939), the Houses of the People Society (1944), and the Arab Home Society (1948).²

These organizations called for the education of women and focused on charity work, such as providing help for the orphans and the poor. Their members were educated women from the upper and middle classes who did not advocate political agendas. Given that women's organizations had to obtain permission from the Ministry of Interior for their establishment, politically oriented organizations could not secure licenses.³

In 1943, the first political women's organization, the Women's League Against Nazism and Fascism, was formed. Aiming to fight the spread of Nazi ideology in Iraq and to promote democratic views, Afifa Rauf, wife of an important member in the National Democratic Party, founded this organization. Communist women joined this organization. After the defeat of Nazism in World War II, this organization focused on fighting illiteracy and on improving women's position in society. The organization, whose name changed to the Iraqi Women's League in 1944, opened summer and night centers to educate women. Besides, the organization published two issues of a magazine called Women's Liberation before it was suspended for not sticking to social and literary affairs. The organization itself was dissolved when the government cracked down on progressive parties that year.⁴ In 1952, the underground Iraqi Women's League (IWL),⁵ which was part of the Communist Party, was founded thanks to the effort of Dr. Naziha al-Dulaymi. Hanan became one of the founders of IWL. The aim of the IWL was to reach out to women from different backgrounds, to improve the conditions of women, and to

² See Efrati (2004).

³ Ibid., p. 170.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 168-169.

⁵ The original name of the IWL is The League for the Defense of Women's Rights. On March 7th, 1960, the shorter Iraq Women's League was adopted. For simplicity, I will stick to the IWL. See Batatu (1978), p. 946.

demand more rights. The IWL became popular and women from different backgrounds joined.

“Our meetings were, of course, held in secret. Our plan was to find out about women’s concerns. Our most important slogans were the improvement of women’s social, educational and political lives, education and the eradication of illiteracy. Our first pamphlet was titled ‘The Woman Solves Her Own Problems,’ in which we discussed the problems faced by women peasants, women students and women workers. We used to go to the shanties and talk to the women. These women were simple and nice, and were very appreciative. We began classes to teach them how to write and read. We had women volunteers who went to different areas. We also opened small infirmaries with the help of women doctors. Of course, the government kept an eye on us, but arrest was out of the question. It was difficult for the government to arrest a woman who taught a class. There was still morality. The government might arrest women when they participated in demonstrations but not for teaching a class.”

Hanan’s remark about the existence of morality under the monarchy needs to be understood in terms of the political developments during the 1960s and onward. Iraqis living under the monarchy believed that the state was oppressive and ruthless towards opponents of the regime. It was only after the first Baath coup in 1963 and the horrendous treatment meted out to political opponents and their families that the monarchy came to be seen as a time when people were treated with respect and repression was limited in scale. To arrest a woman at that time for political reason was considered as a huge issue though most often the woman would be released within hours. When the police opened fire on protesters (and seven people died), the government had to

resign. These occurrences came to indicate morality and respect in comparison to what happened under the Baath regime in general and Saddam Hussein's rule in particular.

In 1955, Hanan became a member of the ICP; nevertheless, her main activity remained within the IWL. This situation continued until 1958, when a coup d'état brought down the monarchy.

“In the morning of July 14th, we were sleeping on the roof. My five-month old son woke up early, and I took him down into the house. I began to hear the sound of cannons, and the house was shaking. Everyone came down from the roof, and we had to leave the house after a shell fell in the garden. I took my son to my mom and then went out. What an indescribable day! Indescribable! Everyone was in the street cheering the revolution. Some disgusting things took place, like the dragging of corpses. However, in the midst of such events, we didn't pay attention to condemn them. The people were angry. The riffraff carried out these things. What can you do! Would you go and grip those who dragged the corpses and tell them not to do so! You cannot.”

Hanan's recollection of July 14th, 1958, stands in contrast to that of Khalil's. While Khalil felt disgust by the sights of hanging corpses, and thought there were no visions for the future, Hanan was elated. To Hanan, the big transformations that took place during the presidency of Qasim – reflected in the improvement of the situation of the poor people who constituted the majority of the population at that time – were brought about through the efforts of the dedicated people, in particular the communists. Unlike the current situation, during those days people were driven by notions of the public good and social justice, in her view.

“We were optimistic and we thought we could steer the situation in the direction we wanted. This is what we did in the 1950s. We weren’t driven by personal interests. We were serving our country. We, members of the middle class, sacrificed. We didn’t have to. We had a comfortable life. We could have said to hell with the people, but our patriot feelings predominated over personal interests. Now, it is the opposite. During a short time, the revolution achieved a lot, such as the Law of Reform in Agriculture and the Law of Dismantling Tribes. Tribes had their own prisons and laws. The British relied on them in order to guarantee the subjection of the peasants. The peasants lived in miserable conditions. Their feet were rotten because of planting rice [in water]. They were always in debt. Suddenly, they found someone who cared about them ... Abdul Karim Qasim delimited a piece of land in Baghdad⁶ and built houses for people who were living in shanties. Shantytowns disappeared. Within a short time, Baghdad’s population reached 5 million after it was only half a million. But the revolution was short-lived. If it were destined to live on, Iraq would have become a paradise. Everyone was working for the common good. There were jumps, like the eradication of illiteracy, the increase in the number of schools. People were deprived of medical care and education before that.”

As I listened to Hanan, I could not but notice her use of “we” in the narrative. She believes that the revolution belonged to the people and that her – and her comrades’ – genuine dedication brought about the social achievements at that time. She sees herself as a vital player in a world characterized by altruism and progress. It is this vision that makes the present unbearable for her.

⁶ This area is now known as Sadr City. Its first name was Thawra City. Under Saddam Hussein’s rule, it became known as Saddam City in addition to the widely used Thawra City.

Between 1958 and 1963, the membership of IWL increased.⁷ Dr. Naziha al-Dulaimi was appointed as Minister of Municipalities, and became the first women minister in Iraq (and in the Arab world). The activity of the IWL, as a result, intensified and culminated in a landmark reformation, namely the Law of Personal Status, which granted women more rights and equality with men.

“We formed a committee of women lawyers to come up with a new and reformed personal status law. After a long deliberation, we had a draft. Dr. Naziha submitted it to the Cabinet. Abdul Karim Qasim championed women’s rights. The progressive ministers endorsed the draft. The Cabinet formed another committee, which included both Sunni and Shia religious clerics. This is why in the preamble of the law recognizes Islamic teachings because we expected we would face pressures from the Sunni and Shia religious establishments. There were open-minded religious clerics who supported this law, and it passed. This law unified family as well as women’s legal matters. It tackled different family aspects, such as marriage, divorce, custody, etc. The issue over which we challenged the clerics was inheritance.”

Before 1959, personal status affairs were in the hands of religious clerics, who adopted different rulings on the basis of the sect and the religious school they followed. Though efforts to draft a civil law were made, they were resisted by the clerics who feared for their status and income.⁸ The Personal Status Law No. 188 put an end to this state of affairs. Judges trained and appointed by the state replaced clerics. Not only did this curb on religious clerics’ authority, it resulted in the adoption of unified rulings for both Sunnis and Shia. Moreover, the law allowed for further reforms and emendations in

⁷ According to reported obtained by Batatu, membership in the ILW ranged between 25,000-40,000. See Batatu (1978), p. 897.

⁸ See Efrati (2005).

the future. This law dictated the necessity of consent to marriage and outlawed forced marriage, specified marriage age (to be at least 18, and 16 in certain cases), put restrictions on polygamy and divorce, gave rights for women to request divorce and gave preference to maternal custody. In addition, the Law considered a woman's testimony as equal to a man's testimony (as opposed to the religious dictums that the testimony of two women equals the testimony of one man). Though these articles provided more security and rights for women, they did not meet the high expectations of women activists given that finding a middle ground was necessary. For instance, women involved in drafting Law No. 188 aimed at banning polygamy, but could not do so in order not to alienate certain groups and the religious clerics.⁹

The area where the Personal Status Law posed a serious challenge to Islamic practices was inheritance by doing away with the Quranic prescription that a male inherits twice the share of the female. The new law relied on an Ottoman Law on *miri* land.¹⁰ According to this Ottoman Law, females had equal shares as males in the rights to the use of *miri* land. Law No. 188 stipulated that this Ottoman Law would be the standard in all inheritance transactions. Not only did this law entail that females would inherit equal shares as males, it made daughters the sole heirs to their fathers' property when there were no male heirs, to the exclusion of distant male relatives. Again, a compromise had to be reached. The Iraqi Status Law did not do away totally with the Sunni practice of excluding daughters from inheritance when there were no male heirs.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *Miri* land was government land disturbed by the Ottoman government to state officials or people who provided service. This land could be used, but not sold. The person's children had rights to use the land after the person's death.

Hanan is very proud of this Law since it achieved a major victory for women and since it was the product of the efforts made by women who belonged to IWL. In the aftermath of the 1963 coup, this law was abolished but was re-instated later on. Under the Baath regime, it was still employed with various emendations depending on changes in state policies.¹¹ As such, the Law became the cornerstone for later legislation, whether these legislations enhanced or undermined women's rights and equality with men. One can imagine the shock felt by Hanan when on December 29th, 2003, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, the head of the US-appointed Interim Governing Council, announced the abolition of the Personal Status Law.

The success the ILW achieved with the Personal Status Law coincided with political unrest. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the reign of Qasim was dominated by a conflict between the communists and the Arab nationalists, and by an equivocal relationship between Qasim and the ICP. Hanan did not mention the Massacre of Mosul or the schisms within the ICP. I asked her about the events in Mosul and whether the communists committed atrocities.

“The IWL was holding its first conference on March 8th, 1959. Qasim opened the conference. There were international delegates. Before the end of the conference, Qasim's assistant came and whispered in his ear. What composure he had! He stayed till the end of the conference and left after he greeted everyone. We went out, and we heard there was a conspiracy in Mosul. The conspiracy in Mosul was totally a conspiracy by Jamal Abdul Nassir to overthrow Qasim. The Peace Partisans and other communists went from Baghdad to Mosul [to show support to Qasim] and the Arab nationalists attacked

¹¹ Efrati (2005) examines the different debates that took place in the 1960s and 1970s under the Baath regime.

them. It was the Arab nationalists who committed atrocities. Hafsa al-Umari had a rifle and was shooting. She was shot, and her corpse was hung in public. What could they do otherwise! When a person is attacked, he has to defend himself. That massacres in Mosul and Basra happened is fabrication. The footage on TV wasn't from Iraq. It was brought from Korea or some other place. I can't say that no transgressions were committed [on the part of the communists]. But [Arab nationalists] started the aggression, and the initiator shall bear the brunt of blame.”¹²

Hanan's unfavorable views of the Iraqis who adopted Arab nationalism came up many times. When I asked her about the tension between the communists and the Arab nationalists, she told me she would show me the difference between the two camps through her story with an Iraqi woman who was a staunch Arab nationalist called Wafa. Hanan's account of the story sounded more like a parable in that Wafa was the bad fellow who was aggressive towards Hanan, and Hanan was the good fellow who did her best to help Wafa out despite their political differences. The story spans over four years, 1959-1963. As such, the narrative contains crucial events that changed Hanan's life, namely the 1963 coup. The story goes as follows. Qasim fell out with the communists for fear that they were planning to seize power in particular after the events in Mosul. In the campaign against them, Hanan was arrested in 1959 on the suspicion that she took part in a demonstration against Qasim. The story of the arrest is worth mentioning, as it is another example of why these years emerged as the old good days.

“The receptionist at the bank called and told me policemen had come to arrest me ... I called my husband, and he came to the bank immediately. He told the policemen that

¹² This phrase refers to the sentence: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and the initiator [of aggression] shall bear the brunt of blame.

I wouldn't ride with them in the police car. He would take me and they would follow us. They agreed. We went to the main police station, which was in the city hall. I stayed there for three days. On the fourth day, I was taken to the women's prison which was housed in a regular house because the prison was being renovated."

In the women's prison, there was Wafa who was the only political prisoner. Wafa was rude despite Hanan's attempt to explain that political disagreement does not mean the elimination of the other.

"I talked to Wafa. I asked her why she has this aggressive position especially that we lived in the same area. I told her there is no need for tension. She said 'If it were up to me, I would drink your blood! We [Arab nationalists] hate you all [communists]."

Hanan took it upon herself to teach Wafa, who was in her final year at university. Wafa was not a brilliant student but had to pass the exams in order to get her BA. During her stay in jail, Hanan taught Wafa everyday after the latter's mother brought the books. Hanan was questioned once about her role in the demonstration. Though she proved she was at work because employees signed in and out every day, she stayed in the prison for fifty days. She was released from jail when Qasim granted amnesty to some of the prisoners on the eve of Eid. Wafa sat for the final exams, and was released after a month or two. Hanan went to Wafa's house to congratulate her on her release and graduation. Then the 1963 coup took place, and Hanan and her husband – who occupied a high position in the Communist Party – had to go into hiding. Hanan left her children with her mother, whose house was across from a house belonged to one of Wafa's relatives. One day, Wafa was visiting the relative and dropped by Hanan's mother.

“My mother was dazed. She didn’t know the fate of her daughter. She said: ‘I saw a woman coming through the gate of the house. It was Wafa. I thought she came to console me. She asked about you, and I said that I didn’t know anything about you and that you might be arrested. Wafa said: “No. She is not arrested yet. I went to every prison in Baghdad and couldn’t find her. Tell her to hand in herself. She’ll be arrested sooner or later.” I asked her to leave and said: “Are you here to gloat over my misfortune!”’” This is how these people act! I wanted to show you the difference between our [communists’] behavior and their [Arab nationalists’] behavior. Wafa didn’t remember it was because of me that she got her BA. I always used to tell her that this violent attitude is wrong. This is the way they treated us. They had complete lists of us. After the 1963 coup, they went after each one of us.”

Hanan’s life turned upside down with the first Baath coup in 1963. Along with the majority of communists – whether men or women – both Hanan and her husband had to hide because of the brutal campaign against the communists. With the help of information provided by the CIA, the Baathists managed to arrest and eliminate thousands of communists in 1963.¹³ Like Khalil, Hanan went to the house of a friend whose family did not know of her presence in the house. She had no idea about her husband’s hiding place.

“I was running from one house to another. Then I got the news, that my husband was arrested with other big figures in the Communist Party. And torture began. And my husband broke down. He confessed on TV. He gave names. I had a big conflict at that time. How could this happen! How could this happen! At the end of the day, we are all humans, and he is my husband and the father of my children. Then he is not the only who

¹³ For the role of the CIA in Iraq in 1963, see Khalidi (2009), p. 151, and Weiner (2007), pp. 140-141.

confessed. As he told me ‘don’t believe anyone survived and was released without confessing.’ Those who did not confess were killed except for a few people.”

This incident marked the end of Hanan’s political activity. Hanan had either to leave her husband if she decided to keep up her political activity, or to give up politics. She chose the latter for the sake of her children. The ICP got in touch with her and asked her to resume her activity but she apologized. The IWL suffered a big setback in 1963 as well, and its activity came to an end. As such, the coup in 1963 was a blow both at the personal and political levels. Hanan believes the superpowers at the time were behind this turn of events. To her, Iraq was caught in the intricate power balance that the Soviet Union and the US governments attempted to maintain. In a compromise between these powers, Iraq was not to be ruled by a communist party. Hanan blames the Soviet Union for what happened, and regards its policies, which also dictated the policies of the ICP, harmed both Iraq and the ICP.

“Between us, the control of the Soviet Communist Party over all the communist parties was obvious. This is a historical fact. Once, I went to East Germany to represent Iraq in a peace conference, and I was shocked at the petty fights between the Russian and the Chinese delegates. After I went back to Iraq, I went to see Dr. Naziha and told her about what I saw. She said, ‘You say this to me only. You won’t repeat what you’ve just said to anyone else. We know about this situation.’ This was the style at that time: we had to be with the Soviets. The ICP had to show support to the Soviet Communist Party. No discussions were accepted. Our reference was the Soviet Union. I haven’t forgotten this encounter [with Dr. Naziha], but it didn’t surprise me at the time. I took what she said as normal. Everything depends on what a person is used to. We were used to the great

Soviet Union. We also were kind of brainwashed. We were communists, and we loved the Communist Party, and who was protecting communism other than the Soviet Union. We were not aware of what was going on. We were in the heart of events and activities, and we took things for granted. That was the dominant style. There was kind of centrality and no disagreements were to be expressed. That was wrong. There should have been open discussions. Now, after all these years, we can reflect on these issues, but we were acting with good intentions at that time. Everyone is responsible. Everyone has taken part in this blind obedience.”

Life carried on. Hanan hardly talked about the rest of the 1960s even though the second Baath coup took place in 1968, heralding the beginning of the one-party regime. The ICP was already weakened in 1963, and the important members either died or lived in exile, like Khalil. Hanan had to live through the days of the National Front between the Baathists and the Communist Party in the 1970s. Like Khalil, she opposed this political alliance, which, she believed, was backed by the Soviets. To Hanan, the Central Committee of the ICP suffered a blow in 1963. The members who survived happened to be in the Soviet Union. When they went back to Iraq in order to re-build the party, they had instructions from the Soviets to cooperate with the Baath regime. Hanan’s brother was arrested in the 1970s, and Hanan went to see the Secretary General of the party so that he could intervene on her brother’s behalf.

“I met with the Secretary General, who received me warmly and admonished me for not re-joining the party. I told him: ‘Enough is enough. I wanted to break the TV

when I saw you kissing Michel Aflaq.¹⁴ The blood of our martyrs [in 1963] hasn't dried up yet, and you hug Michel Aflaq and form a national front with him!”

It was this same perspective – that one concession would lead to more concessions – which made Hanan apply for an early retirement in 1976.

“I applied for retirement when I was only 43 years old. In 1976, there was a celebration related to the Baath Party. Three people in the bank went from one room to another, distributing chocolate. What can you do? I had to accept the chocolate offered. I put it in the drawer. After they left, I took a sheet and a pen, and applied for retirement. My superior was my friend. After he read the request, he came to me and asked what I was doing. I said, ‘Do you want the truth? Today, I had to accept chocolate. Tomorrow, I will have to do more. I don't have to.’ This is the way things work. Bit by bit, you'll find yourself in confrontation with these people. What do you do! You either concede or commit suicide!”

After two years, Hanan went to London on vacation. Bad news from Iraq began to reach her in the UK. There was an onset of arrests and more oppression. In addition to the fear of persecution, Hanan feared for her children, in particular one of them who spoke his mind in school and refused to join the Baath Party. Once he hit a student who was a Baath member and had the task of recruiting other students to the party. The news from Iraq convinced Hanan that they had to stay in the UK, given that she would at least have peace of mind there. As she said, “in the UK, no one will tell me you're an ex-communist.” Under the Baath regime, a person came to be haunted by his/her political history even if that history came to an end before the Baath Party became the sole ruling

¹⁴ The founder of the Baath Party.

party in 1968. As such, Hanan's political past would always be used against her as a way of pressure.

In the UK, Hanan did not get involved with the IWL or the ICP, which consisted of communist Iraqi exiles. Women from the IWL were in touch with her, but she did not think they had a clear program or even enthusiasm. In 1991, Hanan and a few women friends organized a charity event for Iraq, which was a success. People from the Iraqi Community Association got in touch with her and asked her to join. The Association, which was established by Iraqi communist exiles in 1987, provided services for Iraqi refugees from different backgrounds. When Hanan joined the Association, it was located in a dangerous neighborhood far from the center of London. Through her and some other member's efforts, Hanan managed to find a location near the center of London that is accessible to most Iraqis. The fact that the British Government began to grant asylum to Iraqis in the 1990s meant that the Iraqi Association was overwhelmed with work, from providing interpreters at any time, to finding suitable lodging, to filing asylum paperwork given that most of those Iraqis did not know English, and to familiarizing Iraqis with the British systems (such as schooling, health care, social and housing benefits). In addition, the Association held cultural events, such lectures on the political situation in Iraq, poetry readings and art exhibitions. The Association even carried two fieldwork studies in order to assess the needs of the Iraqi community in the UK. Hanan played a big role along with other dedicated members to juggle all these tasks.

Through her work in the Iraqi Association and her social life in the 1990s, Hanan to began to notice the dominance of religiosity among the community. This change was surprising to her, and she had a hard time stomaching this phenomenon.

“Iraqis are known for their lack of religiosity. Some peoples are religious by nature, like the Egyptians, the Yemenis or the Sudanese. What is happening right now is strange. All political parties were secular parties in Iraq. Religious parties didn’t exist. There was a woman I knew. She and another friend of mine always tried to raise religious issues. I told them, ‘Look, don’t bring up these issues in front of me please. I respect everyone whether they are religious or not. However, I don’t accept that you come here and impose these discussion upon me.’ One day, a woman said to me, ‘Why don’t we get veiled?’ I told her, ‘Go ahead with it. As for me, this is impossible.’”

The issue of religion has been a source of further split among Iraqis in the UK. While observant Iraqis perceive communists as atheists, Iraqi communists have little patience for any expression of religiosity. I raised the issue of the ICP’s attitude towards religion since its heyday in Iraq with Hanan.

“The issue of a person’s view towards religion was never raised in the ICP because it is a matter of freedom. There were religious people in the ICP. However, as a friend once told me, ‘If you want to put a person’s communism to the test, look at his attitudes towards women and religion.’ Also, Marxism-Leninism is based on dialecticism. Since I was twelve, before I became a communist, I read science books and studied chemistry and physics at school. I became convinced god doesn’t exist. The world came to exist, and that is it. I found an explanation about how the world came to be. The monotheistic religions say the history of humanity is three thousand years old, while humanity existed for millions of years. Where did these millions of years go! It is a matter of dialectic. Also, how can you justify God is the source of good and evil! The Quranic verses are full contradictions. His highness Muhammad comes up with verses

depending on his mood, like the ones on alcohol. How can you prohibit alcohol and then say I promise you alcohol and women and eunuchs in Heaven! Why do you prohibit things here and allow them in there [the Afterlife]. But these [religious] people are so narrow minded that they can't hear any criticism. We used to argue about these things.”

Hanan's comment is interesting in that even though she tried to express respect for religious people at the beginning, she ended up disparaging them. While her contradictory comment reflects her awareness that she should accept people's beliefs, it also reveals her inability to do so at the emotional level. Hanan began by speaking calmly about religion, but she could not help but express her true opinion by the end. The reader should keep in mind that this attitude stems from great political disappointment at the rise of religious discourses in different aspects of life and at the weakening of secular ideologies. For someone like Hanan, who was part of a secular political and social life, the rise of religiosity indicates the end of what she believed in. In fact, Hanan's disappointment was deepened when the younger generation of communist parents became practicing Muslims.

“My grandchildren were born here. They lived in the Gulf countries for a while and came back to the UK as young people. Their parents don't fast or pray. They began fasting when they were four or five. They went to American schools there, so there isn't a religious atmosphere at home or school. Maybe it is the influence of friends. One of my sons is very upset because of this. I advised not to argue with his children. I said, 'This is just a phase. They'll outgrow it. If you argue, things will get complicated.' Where did these strange contrivances come from? I have no clue. I guess it is a matter of proving their identity even though they're born here. They want to prove something. Also, the son

of a communist friend of mine is very religious. He made his wife wear the veil, and he began to pray and fast. We had high hopes for him because he is such a smart man. We had hopes in the younger generation. We thought they would take over after us, but!”

As I mentioned earlier, to understand Hanan’s anger, one needs to look at the historical context in which Hanan grew up. In Iraq, just like in other Arab and Middle Eastern countries, the religious establishment came to be seen as traditional and backward, while the nascent modern state came to be associated with modernity and progress.¹⁵ This change of attitude reached even the Islamic seminaries in Najaf when some students of religion expressed their critique of the religious institution and gave up their religious vocation and became communists later on.¹⁶ The discomfort Hanan feels towards religion stems from that perception. On the other hand, modernity and the West served as models of progress and enlightenment.

“For my generation, we had high respect for the West. We differentiated between the governments in Europe, which dictate policies, and the West as a civilization, culture, art, music, ideas. We need ages to catch up with the West. We didn’t feel hostile towards Western peoples. The young generation is brainwashed. In the 1990s, we began to see educated young Iraqi women getting religious! Where is this bigotry coming from? The situation is worsening. Saddam’s oppression gave rise to unexpected practices as reactions. We thought once he was toppled, people would celebrate, just like what happened in 1958 when we cheered the revolution. This didn’t happen. Look, we are not disconnected from Iraq. We followed the news hour by hour. We had friends and relatives there [who kept us updated on the situation], and we have been aware of the

¹⁵ See Messick (1993), p. 99, and Abdul-Jabar (2003), p. 155.

¹⁶ See Sharara (1998)

changes taking place among Iraqis here, but we never imagine things would be like that. Things have changed. Before, if we saw someone praying, we would laugh at him/her. Everyone advocated progress and emancipatory thoughts after World War II. People were busy with music, arts and social life. No one cared about religion. But things changed. When I look at the younger generation, I get very upset and mad. I'm very disappointed."

This disappointment indicates a deeper sense of disenchantment that Hanan's generation, who was engaged in anti-colonial struggle all over the Third World, felt when the post-colonial state was based on oppression and corruption. As Hanan emphasized, her generation were optimistic and believed firmly in a bright future for Iraq, where a government concerned about its people would rule and where the public good would be the goal. That future turned out to be dominated by wars, death and oppression. Moreover, the fall of Saddam took place through the occupation of Iraq. Hanan was against the war. To her, there were other means to remove Saddam, and a war meant more sufferings for Iraqis. She participated in the demonstrations against the war along with members of the ICP, which was one of a few groups in opposition to Saddam who also opposed the war. The turn of events in 2003 was unexpected.

"I never thought things would get worse after the fall of Saddam. We couldn't even be happy for half an hour. When the statue fell, phones began to ring and we're congratulating each other. I went with some friends to the Iraqi Embassy to express our joy. We found some people had already made it there, and they broke the glass and turn on the water. Why do you do that! The embassy belongs to the Iraqi people. There were 30 or 40 of us. We clapped and cheered. Then we went back home to find the news of

looting. I thought to myself, 'What is this! What is going on!' The Iraqis have become looters. The Iraqis have become Ali Baba! ... We got rid of Saddam, but things are going from bad to worse. Hundreds of victims die everyday. Iraqis are dying like flies or ants. Those who are still alive are virtually dead. Can you call the life of an Iraqi a life! We are one or two centuries behind while Iraq could have been a torch in the region. This is why it was destroyed. People will say this is a conspiracy theory, but it is not. They came to destroy Iraq and take its resources. Who can ask where the money is going? The Shia parties that usurped power are concerned only about stealing and fleecing. They don't give a damn about religion ... They are the enemy of education. This is why professors are killed right now. The plan is to empty Iraq of anything that relates to knowledge."

The participation of the ICP in the Iraqi government after the fall of Saddam has been a source of conflict for Hanan. Though the ICP was against the war, it agreed to be part of the government. Ironically, the ICP members who joined the government did so on the basis of their ethnic and sectarian affiliations. This irony is not lost upon Hanan who was silent on this issue. Hanan is not happy about the fact that the Iraqi communists are part of the government; however, she believes there are no other alternatives. As she put it, "In my time, there used to be black and white, i.e. those who are for or against the British. Now, it is a rainbow. There is no clarity any more. Everything is mixed up. Things are complicated right now." To Hanan, it is necessary for the communists to join the government because they are the only ones who are honest, not beholden to outside interests and concerned about the Iraqi people, unlike the other groups in the government who are corrupt and are after personal gains.

Not only have the drastic changes in Iraq since Hanan left meant that return to Iraq was no longer feasible, Iraq became a place where a person feels she is a stranger. One could even say that Iraq would be the place of exile.

“Even if things were good, I wouldn’t live in Iraq on a permanent basis. I have no one left there except for a cousin. Everyone either died or fled. My children and grandchildren are here. When Saddam fell, I wanted to visit, but my children thought I should wait until things improve. My friends are all abroad right now. If I go to Baghdad, I will be a stranger. Even if I go, where shall I stay? A hotel? A woman can no longer go there alone or stay in a hotel on her own. I’ll need a male companion ... Iraq may recover one day but not in our lifetime. Iraq, not the UK, is the place of expatriation right now. When I look at the riffraff who hold seats in the Parliament right now, I think where did this riffraff come from! Is this the Iraqi people! Is this possible! We radiated with joy and hope ... Sometimes, I get mad at the Iraqi people: how can you elect such riffraff! Is it possible that we have a Speaker of the Parliament who says ‘any law that is incompatible with Islam, I will hit it with a shoe?’”¹⁷

Despite this change in the attitude towards the UK and Iraq, Hanan still feels she is an Iraqi in the first place. During our long interviews, Hanan never mentioned she was a Kurd. If it were not for her last name, I would not have thought she was a Kurd. When I asked her how she relates to the fact that she is a Kurd, she elaborated:

“I’m an Iraqi in the first place. I can’t claim I’m British. How can I be British! I’m grateful to this country. I have a nice life, I’m respected, and I have good free

¹⁷ <http://www.ankawa.com/forum/index.php?action=printpage;topic=213962.0>

This incident happened in the Iraqi Parliament when a few MPs left the session in protest over a law that would deepen sectarianism and undermine women’s rights. When they MPs were walking out, the Speaker of the Parliament made this remark.

medical services. I can't ask for more. However, I don't feel I'm British. But if you ask if I'm a Kurd-Iraqi or Iraqi-Kurd, I'll tell you I'm an Iraqi-Kurd. I'm an Iraqi first and foremost. This is how I think. I didn't live in Kurdistan. I lived in Baghdad most of the time. We used to visit Kurdistan every now and then. I don't even speak any Kurdish dialect. However, if someone pushes me to my edge, my Kurdish sentiments surface. As for Sunni or Shia, I don't give a damn about these matters. I consider whatever is linked to these matters as backward. I don't hold this view because I'm a communist. This is the product of readings on science and genetics ... Iraq is always on my mind and in my thoughts. Some people blame me for listening to the news a lot. As soon as I wake up, I tune to the Iraqi channels and then the British ones. Iraq comes first. My heart is there. I don't have any other concern in life. Luckily, I'm well off. My bother was admitted to the hospital and then discharged. Such things concern me, but the biggest concern is Iraq. During the sanctions, I used to cry when I took a shower. I would think, people in Iraq didn't have hot water, and I'm taking a shower! I felt guilty. Now, there is no family there that hasn't lost someone ... Sometimes, I get disappointed with the Iraqi people. But then I remember what happened in Europe in the Middle Ages. We'll need ages for these things to change."

* * *

After the interviews, I ran into Hanan at events on Iraq, particularly talks on the draft of a new problematic Iraqi Constitution. This constitution has been opposed by different groups in Iraq and abroad because of four controversial issues, namely federalism, oil, the city of Kirkuk due to its diverse population and the role of religion in governing the state. Hanan sometimes took part in these talks. She focused on Iraqi

women's aspiration and political and social achievements in the 1950s and the early 1960s, and on the first Iraqi Personal Status. The limited audience – which consisted of less than twenty older Iraqi women who had been involved in the Iraqi Women's League since its early days – makes a person wonder about the futility of the events, and reflects a stark contrast with the past these women talked about and experienced. Compared to the large and youthful audience of Iraqi religious institutions, one cannot but think that the heyday of Iraqi leftist political activity in general is long gone. Those Iraqi communists are left to live the fragments of a beautiful memory, as Herzen puts it.

Chapter Four

Hazar

Hazar occupies a special place in my heart, and not merely because she was my first interviewee when I started my fieldwork in the summer of 2006. Rather her open and honest account is remarkable, and her life story has resonance with my experience as a child growing up in Iraq during the time of the Iraq-Iran War and the rise of Saddam to power in 1979. Hazar was born in Iraq, and was deported to Iran in 1980 with her family because her father was *taba'iya*, an Iraqi of “Iranian origin.” The massive expulsion of the *taba'iya* in the early 1980s, which followed two waves of deportation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was accompanied by brutality that held families in prisons and prison camps for months before abandoning them on the borders with Iran, confiscated their property and documents, and subjected them to other horrific experiences (such as rape, torture, detention of young men between 18 and 30, many of whom were eliminated later on).

One of my vivid childhood recollections was the disappearance of our neighbors in 1981. Unlike the disappearance of my parents’ friends following their arrests, the absence of our neighbors, particularly the two daughters who went to school with my sister and me, was immediately felt. I still remember my mother’s disbelief that these Iraqis, who have been living in Iraq for generations and identified themselves as Iraqis, were designated as Iranians by the regime and deported. Our neighbors re-appeared after

a few weeks. My mother warned us that we should not ask the girls any questions, and that we should behave as if nothing happened. Moreover, we were made to understand that the mother of the two girls was forced to collaborate with the regime and to write reports on the neighbors. While we went on playing with the girls, and pretended that everything was normal, we exercised caution and self-censorship, a habit we had already developed when we began going to school. At that time, I felt it was pure luck that saved me from such a fate, since my parents were non-*taba'iya* Iraqis. However, these feelings of temporary escape never conferred reassurance. I sensed that tyranny could change my life. Even though my parents tried to hide things in order to spare us fear and anxiety, and to make sure we would not say anything at school, I was fully aware that it could be my “turn” at any second.

It did not take long for misfortune to befall and change Hazar's life. At the age of six, not only was she snatched from her home and forced to live in an unwelcoming country, she experienced the horrors of the Iraq-Iran War closely because her family had to reside in a border city bombed heavily by Iraq. Hazar managed to leave Iran and come to the UK with her family when she was seventeen. She specialized in psychology and counseling. When I met her, she was in charge of one of the National Health Service centers, which provided psychological services for refugees and victims of torture from the Middle East.

I met Hazar through Abu Warda when I first visited him in his office at an Iraqi Shia organization. I mentioned to him that part of my project focused on the *taba'iya*. He told me one of his daughter's best friends is *taba'iya* and she works in a nearby NHS office. Obtaining Hazar's phone number from his daughter, Abu Warda called Hazar and

told her about my research. She told him she could see me during her lunch break that day. When I got to the Lebanese restaurant, I saw a veiled slim woman in her early thirties having her lunch outdoors. Hazar was wearing light make-up, and a long skirt and a long sleeve shirt. Despite the heat on that day in London, I wore a long skirt and a cotton cardigan since I was visiting a religious institution. When I sat with Hazar, I was hesitant for a while, whether I should take off the cardigan since I had only a spaghetti-strap tank top underneath. I was concerned I would rub her the wrong way. Finally, I took it off and put it loosely around my shoulders.

Hazar was cordial and welcoming, but she came across as a stern and distant person. Her immaculate British accent was tinted with Iraqi expressions and words. She and I chatted for a while. She talked about the deportation, life in Iran and the bombing of her school during the Iraq-Iran War. She also inquired about me and about my family. I answered generally that I lost my immediate family because of Saddam's persecution. She sighed, "So you had your own share [of suffering], and this is why you're doing this research." I asked if I could interview her, and she accepted promptly. I do not know whether Hazar agreed to give an interview with no hesitation because she really did not mind or because of some rapport she felt owing to the persecution of my family. Many Iraqis I met and/or interviewed opened up to me after they asked about my family. While they expressed sympathy, they were quick to emphasize that my hardships pale in comparison to theirs. Since the rise of Saddam to power, Iraqis began to consider people who managed to bury and mourn family members who died because of persecution fortunate, given that many people went missing and most likely ended up in mass graves.

Hazar and I agreed to meet the week after in her office. Though we ran into each other infrequently after the interviews – during social gatherings organized by a group of young Iraqis in the UK – we maintained a special rapport.

A fearful childhood: Growing up under a one-party regime

Hazar grew up at a time when parents were scared of criticizing the regime in front of their children, lest the latter would repeat what they heard at school. Stories of people ending up in prisons because their children, when asked by teachers, mentioned that their parents cursed Saddam, were often heard. Like many children, Hazar was surrounded by whispers. Her early memories of Iraq are hushed words and sudden silence.

“I remember my folks didn’t talk about politics in front of us. Yet at times, you feel there is something not right. The minute we walk in, they stop talking. When we go out, [we overhear them] say they can’t speak in front of the children. Then they go on to speak about and curse Saddam ... So I noticed this, and I remember I used to say to mom, ‘Why are you treating me like a kid! I’m not a kid! I know I shouldn’t say things outside.’ She used to get mad at me and say, ‘Who told you this! There is nothing wrong! We love the President, and his picture is hanging on the wall.’”

One day, the family’s caution in front of Hazar was discarded openly and unexpectedly. Saddam paid a visit to Hazar’s school. He talked to Hazar and asked her if she recognized him.

“I remember I had to be quiet in order to say the right thing. I remember I was thinking, I must say the right thing, so I went on saying, ‘Of course I know you. We have your picture on the wall in the house.’ When I said that, I had a flashback of finding my

brother-in-law spitting on the picture one day but pretending to be cleaning it when he saw me. I remember I also said, 'My brother has your picture in his wallet.' He said, 'Well done. Good girl.' I remember the teachers were looking at me anxiously."

Hazar ran home to tell her mother that Saddam visited the school. When she got there, she found her mother with her maternal uncle anxiety-ridden. The headmistress had already called her mother and told her that Hazar talked to Saddam. Her uncle held her and kissed her head, saying, "For love's sake, hope you didn't say anything wrong." Later on that day, Hazar received an invitation from Saddam to attend his birthday party. Her mother, who bought her a new dress for the occasion, warned her not to say much during the party. Hazar went to the birthday along with other children. Putting her on his lap and giving her gifts, Hazar found Saddam to be "such a nice guy," so much so that she could not accept that this same guy was the cause of her suffering when her life turned upside down shortly afterwards.

One day, Hazar's father went missing. He had gone to a meeting at the Chamber of Commerce and did not come back. No one knew where he was. Hazar's mother and sisters were crying all the time and extremely distressed. Visits and phone calls from relatives were only followed by more crying. Suitcases were packed. At the age of six, Hazar could not understand what was going on, but the sense of waiting in the house was too foreboding to be missed. Now, Hazar could see that her family feared deportation, that the visits and calls announced the expulsion of friends and other *taba'iya* families. Then came a call from her father.

"My sisters began to scream and yell. My mom grabbed the phone. She began to beat her head and scream: 'Iran! Who took you to Iran!'"

What happened to Hazar's father is known among Iraqis as the deportation of the merchants, which signaled the start of the expulsion of *taba'iyā*, which targeted Shia Iraqis, both Arabs and Kurds. On April 7th, 1980, influential and wealthy Shia merchants in Baghdad (around 800) were summoned to a meeting at the Chamber of Commerce. The reason for the meeting was to provide these merchants with new licenses. The merchants were requested to bring all the documents they had for this purpose. Upon arriving at the Chamber of Commerce, they were ordered to hand in all their documents and to proceed to the buses parked outside the building, which drove them to the borders with Iran. There, they were told to walk to the Iranian borders. The families of these merchants, like Hazar's, waited anxiously for them. Bit by bit, news of what happened began to reach home. It did not take long for their families to face the same fate.

The expulsion campaign that followed targeted Shia Iraqis who came to be seen as a threat by the government, especially after the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the rise of Shia ulema-led religious opposition in Iraq by the end of 1970s. An attempt on the life of Tariq Aziz, who has been a close associate of Saddam, was used as a pretext to expel "the Iranians" from Iraq. At that time, Saddam Hussein openly said,

"Take your belongings and leave. You have come to us bare-foot, and now that the country had educated you into a civilized human being, you are seeking [to rejoin] your paternal uncles [the Iranians]. Go back to them then. This is what we have done in Iraq ... There are some Iraqis who have come 50 years ago or their seventh grandfather was non-Iraqi. But once they misbehave, they will remind us

of their past affiliation. Then we will tell them: You have remembered your background. Leave in a hurry.”¹

Unlike the exclusion suffered by Shia Iraqis under former regimes, such as underrepresentation in the government positions and individual cases of expulsion, the nature of deportation in the early 1980s indicated an open and blatant persecution. This discrimination, however, represented a continuation of the past, drawing on discriminatory laws and practices executed since the early days of the modern state of Iraq, in particular the first Iraqi Nationality Law of 1924. Under the Ottomans, the inhabitants of Iraq were either Ottoman or Persian subjects. A good number of the Shia at the time opted for the Persian nationality in order to avoid military service in the Ottoman army and to be exempted from taxes. The first Iraqi Nationality Law, passed by the British in 1924, conferred the Iraqi nationality on the basis of a person’s nationality under the Ottomans. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and the establishment of the modern state of Iraq in 1921, the inhabitants of Iraq became citizens of the Iraqi state in accordance with the Lausanne Accord. In August 1924, the first Iraqi Nationality Law was passed by the British, and approved by the Iraqi government. The Iraqi nationality was granted on two specific criteria: 1. Ottoman nationality and residence in Iraq since August 23rd, 1921 (Article 8 (a)), or 2. A person’s birth in Iraq as well as his/her father’s birth and residence in Iraq (Article 8 (b)).²

¹ Quoted in Ali Babakhan, in Jabar (2002). Babakhan’s chapter is the only thorough and academic study on the subject in English. There is no exact statistics of the number of people who were deported. The estimate ranges between 40,000 and 250,000. In addition, many Iraqis fled Iraq before they were deported. See Babakhan (2002), pp. 197-199, and Tripp (2007), p. 221.

² CO 813/1, p. 5. Article 8 specifies that “The following persons shall be deemed to be Iraq nationals: (a) Any person wherever born, whose father was at the time of that person’s birth an Iraq national, and was either born in Iraq or obtained his Iraq nationality by naturalization or by virtue of Articles 3 [namely the father was resident on August 23rd, 1921]... (b) Any person born in Iraq who has attained his majority and whose father was born in Iraq and was at the time of that person’s birth ordinarily resident in Iraq.”

Though this law appears to consider all the inhabitants as Iraqi nationals (whether Ottomans or residents), it undermines the notion of equal citizenship. Inhabitants holding the Ottoman nationality were granted the Iraqi nationality automatically. Inhabitants who held the Persian nationality but were natives of Iraq were excluded from this Article. This is where Article 8 (b) becomes interesting – since it confers citizenship on the basis of the person's birth and residence and his or her father's birth and residence, it is not enough for the person to have been born and to reside in Iraq, since the father's birth and residence in Iraq is a requirement. A person's father who was not born in Iraq was not eligible for citizenship. This article became the basis of exclusion, particularly of the Shias – whether Arabs or Kurds. Given the close networks and the back and forth movement between the holy cities in Iraq and Iran (Najaf, Kerbela and Qum), a great number of Shias were born in Iran. When the British made this law, they had excluding the ulema from citizenship in mind. The British came to see them as a threat because of their role in 1920 Revolt and their anti-British agitation, and decided to curb their influence.

In an amendment to the Nationality Law in 1927, two forms for applying to the Iraqi nationality were enclosed: one for the Ottoman subjects born in Iraq, and another for the aliens born in Iraq.³ A person had also to apply for Certificate of Iraqi Nationality, which is a form of identification card [Iraqis always held 2 types of identities]. The first item on this form specifies the article in the Iraqi Nationality Law through which the person acquired the Iraqi nationality, namely if the person was an Ottoman subject and resident in Iraq (Article 8 (a)), or an alien who was born in Iraq and whose father was born and lived in Iraq (Article 8 (b)). Another item is about the nationality of the person,

³ IOR/L/E/7/1201 (File 379ii).

his/her father, and his/her mother before the Iraqi Nationality Law of 1924. In addition, a person inherited his/her father's type of nationality. A person whose father had nationality B would hold nationality B and would pass it to his/her children, and this explains the reference to the seventh grandfather in Saddam Hussein's comment above.

Shortly after the deportation of her father, Hazar's family was also expelled. By then, they realized they could be deported at any time since families of these merchants were being denaturalized and deported. A few days after the father's phone calls, state agents came to the house.

"All I remember is that there were army officers in the house. It was probably early in the morning. There was screaming and shouting ... There were what seemed like millions of people in the street. Some were clapping. Some were crying. Again, it is a vague memory. It was very confusing ... All I remember is that I was crying because my best friend was crying that I was leaving ... We sat in a mini-bus. I remember we were allowed to take four or five suitcases ... My elder sister was not allowed to come with us. She was told to stay because she was married to my cousin and he wasn't going to be deported. I remember her totally. I remember she sat on the ground, crying and screaming and beating herself and throwing earth on her head. I remember that because I loved her pink trousers, and they got all muddy. I remember I sat at the back of the car, seeing from a distance that our house was disappearing. And that is the last I remember."

Hazar recalls bits and pieces of those days. She woke up in the middle of the night and heard her mother asking the driver to continue driving and to forget about the suitcase that fell from the ceiling of the car. The mother feared for her daughters since stories of rape of deported women were rampant. Hazar's family was taken to a prison

camp, which consisted of a huge room. The room was covered by square rugs, and each family was assigned a square, which indicated the family's territory. Hazar's mother began to talk to the other families and learned that some families have been there for months.⁴ In addition to the fear and uncertainty, these families had to live in deplorable conditions.

"I still remember the toilet. It was the worst toilet I've seen in my life. Shit was everywhere, on the floor. It was wet. I remember my sisters crying and my mom telling them you have to go to the toilet."

Luckily for Hazar's family, their stay in that prison camp did not exceed a week. She has no memories of how they got to the Iranian borders as deportees had to walk from the Iraqi borders to the Iranian ones. These walks could extend over a long distance, and they were fatal in areas that were planted minefields. Hazar recalls sitting in the cab of a pickup truck with her mother along with the driver, with her sisters and two brothers sitting in the back.

"I remember being in the middle of a desert, in the pickup.... There was a big sign indicating the borders ... I remember I could see my dad from a distance. My father used to dress in the traditional Arab clothes and kept a dagger in his belt ... I always used to look at my dad, thinking he was the most handsome man. He was tall and beautiful and strong. And I remember seeing him there. He was wearing only the *dishdasha*,⁵ and the thing on his head was untidy. He had a beard and I felt he was dirty. My dad was crying. My sisters were crying, everyone was crying. Even an Iranian border guard began to cry

⁴ I met many families in the UK who spent months in these prison houses/camps. One woman told me that she gave birth to her son in such a place. She was taken to the hospital in chains, and her hands were chained to the bed during childbirth.

⁵ *Dishdasha* is a plain white gown worn by men.

... I remember when we got to dad, it was fantastic ... My dad hugged my mom and began to cry. My mom said to him, 'Hajji, be strong. Don't cry. You're a merchant, and you'll make it all over again.' And she kissed his forehead. As a child, I'd never seen my mom kiss my dad. So now, I saw her hugging him, and crying, and kissing him."

The years in Iran: hardships and exclusion

Unlike many Iraqi deportees who ended up in camps in Iran, Hazar's family stayed with relatives in Ilam. Hazar's father hailed from Ilam, a province in Iran bordering Iraq, inhabited by Shia Kurds. At the age of nine, he came to Iraq to live with his brother after the death of his parents. Though he had not returned to Ilam, he kept in touch with his relatives there, who visited Iraq during summers. The presence of a great number of relatives who were keen to return her father's hospitality and favors gave reassurance for the family. They had the feeling the worst was over, "There was this hope: it is OK, don't worry, you're home now."

Hazar's family stayed with one of the father's cousins whose family spoke Arabic, and was entertained by other relatives all the time. Notwithstanding this generosity and support, Hazar's family was still feeling distressed. After a few days, and to have more privacy, space and peace of mind, Hazar's family went to stay with another cousin who lived far away from the rest of the relatives. There a tragedy befell the family. Hazar's brother, who was nine at the time, passed away when he fell from the roof of the house.

"At sunset one day, I heard all my sisters screaming. I remember running to see what has happened, and I saw my brother on the ground, blood everywhere. One of my

sisters was wearing a white dress ... I don't know why I remember clothes. I guess because as a little girl, you always admire what your sisters wear. My sister held my brother and began to run, and got into a car. That was the last I saw of my brother because he passed away.”

When this accident took place, Hazar did not see her parents for some time. Her mother and father spent their days in a hospital outside the city. Hazar and her siblings were reunited with them during the funeral.

“I remember I was sitting in a car. It was very hot. I looked up and saw another car with a small black box on the top. I saw my mom sitting in that car ... I think at that point, my sisters realized my brother passed away. We didn't know ... I remember my mom quite well. She was wearing black from head to toe. I remember my mom being so colorful, and wearing gold ... And then I saw she was totally in black ... I began to scream from the window: Mamma, mamma, mamma. I saw her look at the window and she was crying.”

Hazar's parents insisted that mourning should be held in a house owned by the family. Hazar's mom gave the father all the gold she managed to smuggle out of Iraq. With that money, they bought a tiny house and relatives helped with the furniture. Buying the house forced the family to live in Ilam for three years even though it was a small town with only basic services. In the meantime, her father thought he would be able to provide a decent life to his big family because he had bought land in Iran. To his great disappointment, the relative, who had the land registered in his name, refused to acknowledge the sale.

“I think that was a blow to my dad. It was at that point when he had a stroke. My brother’s death didn’t break him down but when he realized that he had nothing, oh my God ... He had hope before. Nothing major happened to him, but he was bed-ridden for a few months.”

With her father bed-ridden and no income, Hazar’s family relied on the eldest brother, Ibrahim, who was studying in the UK when they were deported. Ibrahim made do with a diploma instead of a BA in order to work and support the family. During the first few months, the family hoped that the stay in Iran was temporary.

“I remember we were waiting to go back to Iraq. We listened to the news. In Iran, we used to get the Iraqi TV because Ilam was on the border. My sisters kept watching Iraqi sit-coms and programs. We always wanted to get some news that we were going to go back ... When the war broke out, my father said that we no longer could go back. I think it was at that point when my dad decided to find a job.”

Not only did the Iraq-Iran War indicate the loss of the hope to return, it made life harder. Given that Ilam is a border province, Hazar experienced the intense bombing by the Iraqi airplanes and later on the Katyusha rockets. She witnessed the destruction of houses and casualties closely. However, the family was lucky in that their house was near a mountain, which served as a protective shield. The horrible experience hit home one day, and it was Hazar who was in the middle of it.

“I was at school. I had a math exam. This is why I hate math so much. I was sitting near the window. The girl next to me asked if we could switch because it was dim where she sat and she forgot to bring her glasses. So we switched and she sat next to the window. The minute we started writing, with no warning, all I could see was that the

windows shattered. And everything came down. All I could remember is a splash of blood on my paper. I didn't know what was going on, and I saw the girl next to me screaming, and all her face was covered with blood. I was hysterical. I remember being so hysterical, trying to get out of the room. During bombings, the buildings were shaking, and the doors wouldn't open. We were screaming, trying to get out of the room. People were jumping out of the windows. Somehow, someone opened the door from the outside. I just saw the door come down. I just remember running, just trying to get out of the building. It was just people screaming, stepping on people. It was horrible. I remember I closed my eyes, and I ran, so that I do not see. I got out of school, and got to the main street. It was horrible. The street had been bombed ... It was like the bombing of Lebanon right now⁶ ... I remember thinking, 'Shit, where will I live, what is going to happen to me, my family are all dead.' I was preparing myself to go home and see the house in rubble. It was that fear, and that scream inside ... That was the worst bombing. The bombing didn't stop. You hear: bomb, bomb. You ran, and then you fell because there was another bombing ... I was so scared to open my eyes. 'You have to open your eyes, you have to open your eyes so you know where you are.' I opened my eyes. My God, there were horrible scenes, and blood everywhere ... I remember I could see the roundabout from far, and I was like, it is near. Our house was one block from the roundabout. I remember I saw this car, full of bodies. A woman was with no leg. Then I saw a leg. I thought that was her leg. I remember trying to connect things. And all of a sudden I saw from a distance my brother's head. He was bald. He was running. I was screaming for him to see me. I was thinking, 'He is not going to see me, he is not going to see me, and I'm just going to get lost.' I was screaming. Then I saw my sister, and they

⁶ The Israeli bombing of Lebanon in the summer of 2006.

grabbed me. I was hysterical ... I was screaming, 'Mamma died, mamma died.' My sister said: 'No, no. She is OK. Mamma didn't die. We are all at home [and safe]. We thought something happened to you. We heard the school was bombed.'"

The family fled Ilam that day and moved to Kermanshah, where the father started a poultry business. Ibrahim decided to go back to the UK to finish his studies, thinking that the family would be prosperous and safe there. The business did not do well because of an infection that hit the poultry, and the father fell sick again. Ibrahim did his best to help but that was not enough.

"The conditions were really bad. The economy was bad. [We lived in] Poverty, poverty, poverty. The poultry died because of an infection, so there was a big loss. My brother had to work in the UK because my dad couldn't send him money anymore, and he tried to send us money. So I would say two years of hell in Kermanshah. My shoes had holes in them. Kermanshah is cold and it snows there. I remember I used to wear seven pairs of socks. I used to get frostbitten because of the freeze. Because the shoes had holes, water got into them. I used to wear plastic bags, and then a pair of socks and then another plastic bags and then another pair of socks and then the shoes. The shoes belonged to my sisters. When things didn't fit them, I used to take them."

Hazar's honesty came as a surprise to me. Most of the Iraqis I met in the UK did not even mention any financial difficulties. This position stems from the stigma associated with downward mobility these Iraqis experienced after they left Iraq. Hazar, on the other hand, spoke openly about hardships in Iran. In addition, she talked about seeing her parents broken as her narrative showed earlier. Not only does her description of her father at the Iranian border convey the psychological shock a child experiences at

such a sight, it also implies a sense of shame of the father. Her father was no longer the handsome man who inspired admiration, but a broken and disheveled figure. The mother's transformation after the death of her son seems to intensify the recent tragic events. Black replaced colored clothes and shiny gold accessories, which paralleled the drastic change in life.

After two years, Ibrahim returned to Iran, and the family moved to Tehran. Ibrahim became the breadwinner. By that time, most of Hazar's sisters were married, and her father was not able to work anymore because he had suffered two strokes. Ibrahim found it difficult to work in Iran because he was used to a code of practice different from the one dominant in Iran. In addition, he came to see the family had no future in Iran, and decided that they should move to the UK.

The life of the Iraqi deportees, who arrived penniless and with no resources in Iran, was made more difficult by the measures taken by the Iranian state. In Iran, these Iraqis were called "unwelcome guests" and were seen as Arabs who were competing with the Iranians.⁷ Hence, they had no legal rights or protection. They were not allowed to go to universities after finishing high school, buy property in Iran, work, or acquire Iranian nationality. Even families like Hazar's, whose father originated from Iran, had no rights. The fortunate families obtained the so-called green card, but this was of no practical help. Some of the hardships Hazar's family encountered in Iran were due to this discrimination.

"We got the green card, but you can't do anything with it. You can't buy a house or go to a university ... The green card was basically a humiliation card, not the green card of the US or Australia ... Whenever we had to renew it, we had to go to the borders

⁷ Shaban (2002), p. 158.

because that is where it was issued when we entered Iran. We had to go all the way down every three years. I remember it was a journey ... The green card always represented something negative, that you don't have a nationality or passport ... I remember that every time I joined a new school, I had issues with registration. My green card wasn't accepted. I would be told I should pay tuition because education wasn't free for foreigners. I used to hate it. My father tried to get the nationality but the Iranians made it so difficult. He went many times to Ilam to get the files that had the name of the family, but he wasn't successful. My sisters wanted to go to university. The families of Iranian martyrs and nationals had priority. As a foreigner, oh! One of my sisters was accepted at a university on the border with Afghanistan, i.e. places no one could go. So discrimination was concealed."

The discrimination at the level of the government was accompanied by prejudice at the social level as well, whereby these Iraqis were called Arabs. This prejudice has been fed by the Iranian nationalistic discourse since the nineteenth century,⁸ which glorified pre-Islamic (Persian) Iran and perceived of the Muslim Arab conquest of Iran as a setback to that glorious past. This state of affairs became a source of more trouble and conflict for Hazar,

"I do remember the neighbors used to say we were Arabs ... My mom used to wear an Iraqi *aba*, so it was evident she is Iraqi. People didn't suspect I was Iraqi because I dressed like them ... I used to get angry when I was called an Arab. When I was a kid, I fought with other kids in the street because they said I was an Arab. I thought they knew that because of my mom's dress code. I used to say to her, 'Why don't you take off the *aba* and wear a chador like them.' I used to get upset because my mom wore an *aba*. I

⁸ Kashani-Sabet (2002), pp. 165-166.

felt she was representing the fact that we are Arabs ... In Iran, we're told we're Arabs. Iranians say Arabs brought problems and wars. At that time, you got people thinking that your airplanes are bombing us."

Hazar's discomfort with this designation was a serious source of anxiety. For instance, when she was told to bring her mother when she had to register, she felt anxious as she wanted badly to be accepted among other girls.

"I remember when they said 'bring your family,' I'm sorry to say, I was so scared or ashamed that my mom would come lest they would say, 'They are Arabs.' I just wanted to get lost among them. I spoke perfect Persian. No one could recognize I was not Persian when I spoke."

To make life more complicated to Hazar, her family rejected "the culture of the Ajam," namely the Iranian. The manifold alienation Hazar felt was especially agonizing at home when she was told not to turn into an Iranian girl.

"When I was growing up, my mother would tell me, 'I don't want to see you with Iranian girls. You're friends at school only. Outside school, I don't want to see you with them.' One of my sisters used to say, 'Your behavior is not nice, and you're unrestrained.' This is just because I laughed in the street. In Iraq, it is unacceptable for a girl to laugh aloud. I remember once my sister saw me walking home from school. I looked back twice. She went mad. She asked me why I was looking back. As soon as I got home, she slapped me, 'What is this! Are you looking for boys?' In Iraq, if a girl turns her head, it means she is looking for boys. For Iranians, this wasn't a big deal. Around the age of fourteen, all Iranian girls start looking for a boyfriend ... The Iranian girls noticed I was different, and used to ask, 'How come you don't have a boyfriend?' I

would reply, 'This is unacceptable to us. And I prefer to focus on my studies.' Blah blah blah ... It was these simple things. I remember I used to be stuck in these simple things, such as going to the shop. It was a different culture. I couldn't understand because my friends used to go out a lot. In Iraq, that wasn't acceptable. My sisters never went out to buy anything. My father would send the driver."

As if this complexity was not enough, Hazar had to put up with the feeling of having missed out on great experiences. Her sisters' stories about Iraq and life there made Hazar feel the difference further.

"When it was Ramadan in Iran, people complained. People didn't like Ramadan. In our street, only two families that fasted. My sisters said that we all used to fast, that there was a culture of Ramadan [in Iraq]. I never knew what that culture was. There wasn't any culture of Ramadan in Iran. In Iraq, people used to socialize and have *iftar* dinners while in Iran we used to spend Ramadan at home. It was a boring month. I was hungry and tired. I didn't experience the atmosphere my sisters and family talked about. For example, they talked about the lantern of Ramadan, i.e. they used to light a lantern each Ramadan. They talked about the cannon in Ramadan. These things didn't exist in Iran. That's what I missed a lot ... I lived in an Iranian country. The culture is not mine. The history is not mine even though I studied there."

Hazar could have added 'the name is not even mine.' When I was first met Hazar, I thought her Kurdish name was unfamiliar. During the interview, she brought the issue of her name when she was talking about her feelings of missing out on an Iraqi experience or lifestyle that her sisters mentioned all the time.

“My real name is Hajhar. At the Iranian borders, the Iranian officer wrote Hazar, which is an Iranian name. Talk about lost identity! I remember for years, I complained about it, and said at school my name was Hajhar. I had a lot of problems because I wrote Hajhar on my exam papers. The teachers had to hold a meeting because of that, and my mom was called. My mom said to me, ‘You have to forget about Hajhar. You’re Hazar now.’ I was like, ‘No! I don’t want to.’ I cried and cried and cried. Then I said to myself, ‘Well, I can always call my daughter Hajhar when I grow up and have a daughter.’ The thing is somehow I let go of Hajhar, but I always knew I was Hajhar. It wasn’t lost. I decided to give to someone when I grew up.”

Despite these layers of complexity, Hazar was surrounded by Iraq and Iraqi culture through her family. Hazar’s sisters all married Iraqi guys. They rejected well-to-do Iranian suitors and chose Arab Iraqis who fled persecution in Iraq and made it to Iran. Moreover, Hazar was not allowed to speak Persian at home. She spoke in Kurdish to her mother and in the Iraqi dialect to her sisters. Some vague sense of Iraqiness was reinforced in her through her sisters in particular.

“I can always say that my family didn’t want me to lose their memory, and I think they kept it alive in me by trying always to teach me about it ... Everything was Iraq. And I think somehow I saw that. I saw the struggles. I saw that when my sisters said, ‘Shame on such and such. How could he do such things! In Iraq, we wouldn’t do such things’ ... I so loved my eldest sisters because they were the most beautiful, the most amazing, the best looking. When they put on lipstick, I used to love it. This is why I had that connection with my sisters. So when they say something like you behave like Iranian girls, I would say: ‘No! I’m not Iranian.’”

Great Britain: Search for roots through routes

The arrival in the UK at the age of seventeen represented another culture clash for Hazar. Everything became a source of shock and surprise, from seeing a woman in a mini skirt in Heathrow, to watching a Coke bottle in drink machines fall by a press of a button, to having Indian, Chinese and black students in a classroom. Hazar felt lonely in the UK, and became homesick. She missed Iran and her Iranian friends. The fact that she could not speak English well made it more difficult for her to make friends at school or in the neighborhood – kids either ignored her or laughed at her English. On the other hand, her family did not understand why she was struggling and why she was always tearful and asking to go back to Iran. While Hazar felt that she had the support of her sisters, she saw that she struggled more because of her veil given that most of her sisters were not veiled. One day, her brother sat her down and told her that the UK is their new home and she had to accept this. Things began to change a year later when she came to accept that she was different, and to master English. At this stage, faith became more important to her.

“I felt the need to stick to my religious belief so I did not lose who I was. I found the social norms unacceptable, but somehow had to live with them knowing they were not mine. I became attached to my faith and tried to see myself in a positive way instead of thinking I was odd. I remember saying to myself I was a special person to God as I was trying to follow Him in difficult circumstances, and that my struggles would be appreciated and rewarded by Him. Around twenty, I had difficulties in my life about who I was and what country I belonged to. I could not see myself Iranian anymore, nor Iraqi. For the first time, I met Kurds from Iraq but I couldn’t relate. They led me to stick more

to Islam and see myself as a Shia Muslim. [Islam is] all that mattered [as it is] something I shared with Iranians, Iraqis and the Shia Kurds.”

Hazar lived in a neighborhood, and went to a school, where there were a few families from the Middle East. The little interaction she had with the Muslims she encountered did not bring the affinity she sought. Hazar was happy to find a Turkish girl at school and felt she could relate to her; however, she was shocked when she found out this girl drank alcohol and ate non-*halal* meat. Again, this was the first time that Hazar came across Muslims who did not follow Islamic teachings and who “disobeyed God.” Given the situation, Hazar decided to make friends, and to mingle, with the English kids, as she had no expectations of them. This resulted in her detachment from the Iraqi and Muslim communities in London. Even faith became a private matter to her, in that it was between her and God, and she did not go to religious institutions for practice or religious occasions.

At the age of twenty-six, the feeling of confusion came to a climax. Hazar began to rebel and to question everything. The cause of this turmoil was the engagement of her sister, Shaima, who was four years older than her and who was still living in the house. Shaima was given the task of keeping an eye on Hazar after the death of the brother in Ilam. Aged ten years only at that time, Shaima always held Hazar’s hand. Since then, the two sisters had a special bond. The engagement of Shaima was hard for Hazar to handle.

“Shaima got engaged, and the world just shattered on me ... because she was always there holding my hand ... I think I experienced loss with her moving out of the house. And I was at the beginning of my training to become a psychologist and I was going through therapy, so there were many wounds opening that I have left for almost

twenty-six years. So when she went away, somehow I didn't speak to her anymore ... At that time also, I met an English guy ... I was feeling lonely, and I wasn't into my religion. I was wearing the veil because I had worn it when I was young, so I just got used to it ... He thought I was the most beautiful girl he'd met blah blah blah. I just thought, 'OK, who cares about religion! Who says there is God.' All I cared about was to have fun and to relax. I just wanted to fill the holes that were provoked by Shaima's loss. He totally took me from my family ... And I spent my time with my English friends ... You reach a point where sex comes into it as well. And you're just wondering, 'I can't do this.' Something about it ... you just can't do it because it is not part of your life. The whole idea wasn't dirty. It just wasn't possible. It wasn't right. ... I became very nasty to my family. I didn't talk to them often. It was just a period of one year. I wanted to move out. I was looking for a flat. I was never home. I was staying at my sisters' houses. Months went by before I saw my parents. They became my worst enemies."

One day, Hazar was visiting one of her sisters. While looking at the books on the shelves, she found a book by the prominent Lebanese Shia scholar Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, titled *Dunya ash-shabab*,⁹ which consisted of questions and answers concerning issues faced by young Muslims. Intrigued by Fadlallah's views and openness, Hazar spent hours reading through the book despite her weak Arabic.

"There was one particular thing Sayyid Fadlallah talked about: the pain the young go through. He talked about how rejected they feel ... There was one section saying that the fact you believe in Allah and his Prophet is enough for you to go Paradise. I thought that can't be. I was surprised how simple he made it ... Then he talked about girlfriends, boyfriends and friendship. Girls have the rights to feel interested in boys, and boys have

⁹ The title in English is *The World of the Youth*.

the same rights. ‘Why are we secluding them, homosexuality happens when you're secluding them, etc.’ ... I was so shocked by somebody like him speaking like that.”

After reading this book, Hazar felt she had a chance to be accepted by God again even though she was not praying or fasting. A few days later, she went to another sister’s house to spend the night. She found pamphlets for Hajj on the table left by her sister who had been to a mosque that day. Hazar picked up one and began to think that she could go on pilgrimage after all, as God had not forsaken her. That night, she had a dream.

“I dreamed I was stuck in an underground train in London. I was in the middle of the train, and it was very hot. I couldn’t breathe. I was dying because I couldn’t breathe. There were so many English people around me, but no one was feeling bad. And everyone was asking me to take off my veil if it is hot. I didn’t want to take it off. Then, I saw an open window, and I was trying to get to the window but I could not ... Then all of a sudden, a breeze came in. I noticed the breeze going to someone, and I looked at that person. It was a guy who was chanting: ‘Ever at Your service, O Allah, every at Your service. Ever at Your Service, You have no partner, ever at Your service.’¹⁰ So I thought, ‘OK, let me say it. Maybe the breeze will come to me as well.’ I began to say it loud and to scream, ‘Ever at Your service, O Allah, every at Your service. Ever at Your Service, You have no partner, ever at Your service.’ The more I shout it, the more I feel the air coming towards me. All of a sudden it was not hot anymore. All of a sudden, people recognized each other because we all are saying the same chant.”

¹⁰ During pilgrimage in Mecca, pilgrims repeat this *Labaayak* chant. The translation comes from: http://www.salaam.co.uk/themeofthemonth/december02_index.php?l=6&sub=6

Hazar woke up screaming the chant, and decided to go on hajj. The next morning, she went to a travel agency to register. She was broke as she spent her money on clothes and restaurants, and had to come up with 1,500 pounds within two months.

“After two days, the manager at work came to me. He told about a new project, and asked me if I’d like to be in charge of it ... Glory to God, in two months, I got the 1,500 pounds. God Almighty procured the money for me. I swear to God. This is why God guides whom He wants. I remember one day I was crying, saying this is unfair. Why do I have to choose! Why can't somebody help me! I don't want to be wrong. I want to do things right ... I was crying inside. I was so angry with Him up there as well. Glory to God, how can I not believe in a power up there who really saves me in situations where I'm really stuck! ... Some people say it is paranoia. But, glory to God, by God, there has never been a time He let me down. How many times have I felt so lonely and lost! Like really serious stuff like either sleeping with a guy or not! This is serious stuff. God can show you the way and pull you out. How can you not believe! Even when I was on a pilgrimage, every time I talked to Him and in seconds something happened, and He gave me the answers. That was the reason for my hajj ... I was not trying to prove You exist but I want You to prove to me that You're looking at me, that You notice me, that You feel me. Glory to God, He never failed to prove that to me.”

Hazar’s narration of these years of identity crisis and of finding serenity is teleological. She understands her struggles with her family and her identity, as well her desperate desire to do the right thing to be part of God’s wisdom in leading her towards the right path. Once she accepted God back in her life, choices became clearer. It was interesting to hear Hazar talk about this part of her life because her narration here was

different from the rest of the interview. In her dwelling upon what she went through during her life earlier, she gave a linear account of events and made certain connections. However, in her account of her struggles, she more presented a parable. The dream, the visit to her sister's house, the pamphlets, the books by Fadlallah, the promotion at work indicated a specific significance, namely God's decision to guide her.

Going to Mecca was part of a journey Hazar embarked upon in 2002 in order to know herself. The journey had three stops, Ilam, Syria and Mecca. Before going on pilgrimage, Hazar went to Damascus to visit the Shia holy shrine of Sayyida Zainab, the daughter of Hussein. These two visits – Mecca and Damascus – reconnected her to her faith, namely Shia Islam. The visit to Ilam was to discover her roots.

“I remember I did feel strongly like a Kurd, and I wanted to get to know my roots ... The only way I could do it was to visit Ilam in 2002. I went and met all my family. It was a journey though time. I was trying to find meaning. I remember I went to the old school. I went to the old house. It was not what I thought it was – I had imagined it differently. It looked quite cramped and small and depressing ... I also met my father's family and place. Then I thought, ‘OK, I know where I come from. This is where I come from because I love my father's family.’ Then I thought that is where they are and this is where I come from: Ilam. I even went to the house where my father was born ... I photographed it all. When I showed it to my dad, he said, ‘Who took you there!’ ... I did it for him but it was also for me, trying to see where I come from. I remember my sisters saying, ‘Why are you bothered, Hazar?’ But I was bothered. I did want to have an identity because I didn't want to be English. I was told not to be Persian. So what was I? Iraqi? Kurd? It didn't make sense because I wasn't in touch with it.”

That same year, Hazar decided to visit Iraq. Her destination was Najaf and Kerbela; as such, the purpose of the trip was religious. She badly wanted to visit these two Shia holy cities given that the trip to Sayyida Zainab in Syria filled her with veneration for Hussein and the tragedy of Kerbela.

“It was more Kerbela and Najaf than Iraq [I wanted to visit] because I could not connect to Iraq. Iraq is the country that destroyed my father, destroyed me, destroyed us. All the troubles we went through were because of Iraq. You can blame it on Saddam, anything. I don’t know what it was, but Iraq represented negative things.”

Back in 2002, Hazar had to apply for the Iraqi visa since she held a British passport. When Hazar stepped into the Iraqi Embassy, she saw Saddam Hussein’s picture hanging on the wall. Though the visit felt strange at the beginning, it turned into a sad one after a bitter encounter with an Iraqi woman working there. Imitating the woman’s high pitch voice and dismissive tone, Hazar recalled that encounter.

“She said, ‘It is written you’re born in Baghdad? What is your father’s nationality? Don’t you have a nationality!’

I said: ‘I brought my father’s nationality.’

She said: ‘You’re taba’iya. You can’t go back. You’re not allowed in Iraq.’

Ah! I hated her when she said that. I came out and cried, and I can’t tell you how hurt I was. I was crying like an idiot, and saying how dare she say you can’t go back. That is where I was born, and I had my certificate from the hospital. I’m an Iraqi ... Something really bothered me. I think it brought up a lot of memories. I prayed, ‘Oh, Imam Hussein, I wanted to come and see you. Take revenge on this government.’”

A year later, the war took place and Saddam's regime was overthrown. Like a great number of Iraqis, Hazar had mixed feelings about the war but she welcomed it. The removal of Saddam Hussein meant the possibility of visiting home.

"I couldn't believe the fall of the regime. It was like: Wow. I'll go to Iraq. I'll go and visit Imam Hussein. But the feeling was very mixed. I so wanted Saddam to be gone, so I could go back. At the same time I was angry with the Americans and the Brits, that they waited too long, and the only reason they took action was because [Saddam] was turning against them. I was quite angry with them that they allowed this guy to do all this, and now they wanted to get rid of him in the name of freedom of Iraq. I didn't buy the story. I thought we could do something about America. We can get rid of them one day, but at least we got rid of Saddam. It's like choosing the lesser of two evils. The war meant I could go back. Anything to let me go back. I don't think they freed us from him. I think it was done for their best interests."

Within six months of the war, Hazar decided to visit Iraq. First, she booked a flight and then she broke the news to her family. Most of the family caused uproar. They could not stomach the idea of a woman going there on her own. Hazar's father did not approve of the decision, but he came around when Hazar told him that she was going to visit Imam Hussein, who would protect her. Finally a brother-in-law convinced them that it was useless to disagree with her, and that it would be better to put her in touch with friends in Jordan and relatives in Iraq. As soon as Hazar arrived in Amman, she took a taxi to Iraq at night. Within a few hours, she arrived at the borders. Having her passport stamped at the Jordanian borders, she was told to walk to a room a bit further.

“They were supposed to be the Iraqis. My heart dropped the minute I set foot in that room, which represented Iraq. There were so many people. Everyone was shouting and screaming. Everyone was wearing *dishdasha*. I thought this sounds like home. I can’t tell you how fantastic it felt to be somewhere where everybody spoke the same language ... Then I go to this guy (an immigration officer), and he looks at my passport and says to me, ‘Why are you here?’ Honestly, I had no answer. I just said, ‘I wanted to come home.’ It came out naturally. It just came from the bottom of my heart. He asked me to go back to the taxi. After five minutes, he came and gave my passport and said in English, ‘Welcome to Iraq, ma’am.’ Oh... my tears... It was so emotional ... Then we were on a highway. I could see American soldiers and burned tanks ... I saw Iraqi cars with signs: Iraq/Baghdad, Iraq/Kerbela, etc. I was looking in disbelief. Then I saw palm trees. I scream, ‘Oh my God! This is a palm tree!’ The driver was like: ‘Yeah, this is a palm tree.’ ... These little things were Iraq ... Then I saw the sign: ‘Baghdad Welcomes You,’ and I began to cry. I couldn’t believe it. I could see damaged houses and burned buildings. It was October, so the looting had started ... The taxi-driver was telling me the name of the places and ministries damaged during the war. When he was talking, I was like, ‘I know, I know. I’ve heard it all.’ It hit me when I was in Tahrir Square. That was it. Tahrir Square represented Baghdad to me. Every time, we saw the Iraqi TV station, it was Tahrir Square on the news.”

Arriving at her in-laws’ house, Hazar relished the small details of the Iraqi culture: sitting on *karaweeta* (Iraqi sofas), sleeping on the roof, walking in Adhamiyya, eating Abbousi’s ice cream, sitting in the garden, seeing the Tigris and the Euphrates, eating famous Iraqi dishes, such as *pacha*, etc. Hazar was dying to go and see the

neighborhood where she lived. She called her only maternal cousin who was still living in the area where Hazar's house was. The cousin, who last saw Hazar when she was six, could not wait for her son to come home from work and take her so she could bring Hazar to her house. In the taxi ride, the cousin talked about life under Saddam and told Hazar the name of the areas they were passing through. Though the names rang a bell, Hazar could not believe these areas were the same ones her sisters remembered fondly, as beautiful and vibrant places. However, her greatest shock was when she could not recognize her neighborhood. The bare and neglected streets contradicted her childhood memory of streets full of big trees and freshness. Her cousin told her that the trees were cut by the government for security reasons in the aftermath of the deportation campaigns. Hazar wanted to go to the house badly, but her cousin kept delaying the visit.

“She didn't want me to go and see the house because it was in bad condition. The house was turned into a police station after we left ... An important officer lived in it later on. After the war [in 2003], my paternal cousin kicked him out and moved in with her family. So I walked with my cousin. We crossed the street, and I was lost. I asked my cousin not to tell me where the house was, but I couldn't figure it out, so I asked her to guide me. We went into a street, and I could see from a distance a sign: 'The house of Hajji Ali Hassan.' And that was it. I began to cry and cry and cry. I couldn't go in. I just could not. Our street was full of trees. There was not one tree left ... My paternal cousin came out and began to cry. That beautiful house looked horrible and dead. There had been balconies to my sisters' rooms but they were no longer there. I remember the door, it was the same door. I thought, 'Yay. I found something.' I went into the guest room. I was greeting my relatives while looking at the house. The windows in my bedroom and

my parents' room were built. I went into the kitchen, and it was disgusting. I remember my mom did all the décor for the kitchen. The floor was marble, and the cupboards were made of wood. Now, it was empty except for a stupid sink and a faucet. Everything was just broken. I cried so much ... I was really a heartbreaking experience ... I was crying for my mom, my dad, my sisters. I did not exist in this house. I didn't have any memories ... I remember this is mom's house ... I could see my mom screaming from the kitchen. I could see my dad walking in ... It was so painful ... I sat and I was shaking ... I couldn't recognize my paternal cousins ... I just wanted to stare at them ... I couldn't sleep in the house. I told my cousins that, and they agreed with me.”

Hazar's next destination was the Shia shrine cities of Najaf and Kerbela. Hazar was eager to visit the tomb of Imam Hussein in Kerbela, but her cousin told her that people first visit Imam Ali's tomb in Najaf, and then visit his sons in Kerbela.

“So we went to Najaf. When I got to Najaf, I got hysterical. I didn't think that Imam Ali would affect me so much. It was just awe-inspiring, as if I was visiting Allah's house [Mecca]. I think because Najaf was forbidden for me to be in. To know I'm standing here, it felt like entering paradise ... I was crying and shaking ... I went in and grabbed the bars of the tomb. I couldn't stand on my feet. I just sat there, crying ... Then we went to Kerbela. Interestingly, I was calmer in Kerbela. Kerbela was more welcoming and calming even though there was so much injustice associated with it because of the tragedy of Kerbela. I felt Imam Hussein embraced me ... I could not believe I'm saying the prayer of Imam Hussein's visit closely. For years, I said the prayer from afar. For

once, I could sit and do, ‘*As-salamu ‘alayka, Ya aba Abdullah,*’¹¹ and he was in front of me. It was really fantastic.”

Hazar stayed for two weeks in Iraq. She visited different parts of Iraq and Baghdad. These trips had a significant meaning to her in that she began to have her own memories of Iraq –not her families’. Having a first hand experience rather than a proxy one, Hazar was able to identify with Iraq.

“I’m glad I went to Iraq. And that was it: when I came back, I knew where I came from, I was so proud of myself, so proud of being Iraqi. I got in touch with a lot of Iraqi music, Iraqi culture. Iraqi this, Iraqi that ... Now I know what [my family] talk about. I have heard a lot about Iraq from my sisters. Now, I can say I was there. All of a sudden, it was a reality; it was no longer just a vision from my sisters ... At first, I wanted to go to Iraq in order to visit Najaf and Kerbela. I think by going there, everything came to one place, and I was Kurdish, Shia and Iraqi. They all represented one country for me. My identities started to intermix. As a Kurd, you’re Iraqi; as a Shia, you’re Iraqi. That was it. I’m Iraqi, which means I’m Kurdish-Iraqi, Shia-Iraqi ... That is my identity now. I’m Iraqi and then through that come all these arrows of being Shia and a Kurd ... I’m also British-Iraqi. I know I’m not English, but I’m British, and this is important because you can still be Iraqi as well as British. Being British means nothing. It means you can be Iraqi, you can be Muslim, you can be anything because it is a nationality ... I studied here. I grew up here. It was my Britishness which allowed me to go back to Iraq.”

Hazar’s choice of terms is telling and typical of the language used by young Iraqis in the UK. Unlike Khalil and Hanan, whose notions of Iraq as the homeland are unequivocal, Hazar sees herself as belonging to different cultures and places. Even being

¹¹ The prayer means “Hail upon you, O Hussein.”

British is turned into something positive. Hazar considers that Britishness has allowed her to go back to Iraq and to discover her roots. Not only are the negative aspects of the British culture – such as pre-marital sex and drinking – downplayed, the boundaries of what it means to be British are pushed to include difference. British society is longer seen to be limited to categories like British-Irish or British-Welsh, but to accommodate terms like British-Iraqi, British-Muslim, etc. Moreover, Hazar’s use of hyphenated identities shows the complex sense of identification she embraces. Hazar does not feel obliged to choose between two cultures or ethnicities since different national, ethnic, cultural and linguistic components are part and parcel of her self-perception.

Two years after Hazar visited Iraq, her father passed away. Not only did his death cause vacuum in her life, given her strong attachment to him, it also “deflated” her enthusiasm about Iraq. Hazar felt she was Iraqi through her father. When he was gone, all the memories were gone with him. As a result, Hazar joined a group formed by young Iraqis who live in the UK. Through this group, she hoped to stay in touch with her Iraqiness and the Iraqi culture, and to talk about her experience and her family’s memories.

Despite Hazar’s uplifting account and positive personality, there is a tinge of anguish that she hinted at once but did not discuss. Hazar was in her early thirties when I interviewed her, and she was still unmarried. She referred to this issue and to the blame she hears from people for being single. Speaking of the difficulties she encountered in Iran and then in the UK, she briefly and unexpectedly commented.

“Our generation is destroyed. Look at young women like you, my friends and me! Young women in our age – whether Arabs, deportees, Kurds, etc. – cannot get married or

find the right person because you become a completely different person. You can't fit anywhere anymore. You can't fit with your Iraqi community or with your Kurdish community, etc. You get the constant criticism: you're not married, you're not married! As if men are presented to you on a plate of gold and you're rejecting them! Those who propose are money-wise and education-wise less than you. Even those who are at our age and married are destroyed. They are providing for the younger generation now. Our generation is destroyed.”

* * *

After my interviews with Hazar, I only came across her during the meetings of this group for young Iraqis, which took place once every two to three months. During one such event, Hazar was among two other speakers who talked about their visits to Iraq. Hazar spoke openly and courageously about her life and about the therapy she went through. I admired her emphasis on therapy, as a good number of Iraqis consider the person who seeks therapy to be crazy. After the event, I text messaged her to say her fifteen-minute talk was moving, genuine and inspiring. She texted back and thanked me, adding that she kept looking at me during her talk because my smile gave her courage and support.

I also know about Hazar's news through Facebook. She visited Iraq during the last two years. During one of these visits, she had a picture in the garden of their house in front of a palm tree. In the caption, she wrote, 'This palm tree is as old as me.' It seems her father planted it when she was born. During Ashura this year (2009), she went to Kerbela to attend the ceremony. She wrote on her status update that she was going to attend Ashura in Iraq. Then there was a suicide bombing among people in Kerbela. I kept

thinking of her, hoping she was not among the casualties. A few weeks later, I saw her status update about how she missed Kerbela and Imam Hussein.

Chapter Five

Ali

I first met Ali in a Shia religious institution. Though he was dressed in modern attire, I kept my distance from him and did not attempt to shake hands when we were introduced. I suspected that he would not shake hands with a woman because he is religious. I get irritated when I put forward my hand, and the man puts his hand on his chest in an indication that he does not shake hands with women. To avoid this embarrassment when I'm around religious people, I simply do not try to shake hands. But more importantly, I was afraid that Ali would be like most of the Iraqi men I met in the UK, who tried to take advantage of me just because I'm a woman. When I saw Ali at first, I thought to myself, "He is just like any other Iraqi guy. He looks polite but given the opportunity, he will be sleazy." So I was acting upon my new policy of being formal and stern with Iraqi men.

When I first arrived in the UK in 2006 to conduct my dissertation fieldwork, I was shaken up by two incidents that happened on the same day, with two Iraqi men who are best friends, Haidar and Kadhim. I met Haidar at the British Parliament during a session on the political situation and increasing violence in Iraq. After the session, Haidar approached me and introduced himself as the assistant of a prominent Iraqi politician in post-Saddam Iraq who lived in London until 2003. He asked about my profession, and offered to help with anything I needed when I told him about my research. A few days later, I ran into him again in another occasion related to Iraq. He sat next to me and kept

telling me jokes and talking throughout the talk. After the event, he asked me if I did not mind joining him for dinner. We went in his car to an Iraqi restaurant in London. When we went downstairs, to the supposedly more quiet part of the restaurant, I felt awkward as all the diners were Middle Eastern looking men who turned to look at me. During the dinner, Haidar's friend, Kadhim, who works for another Iraqi politician, joined us. We talked about Iraq for the most part. When we were leaving, Haidar thanked me profusely for trusting him to the extent of agreeing to accompany him in the car. His comments reminded me of how such a car ride would raise eyebrows and reflect negatively on the woman in Iraq.

The next day, both Haidar and Kadhim called, and we talked for a long time. Both emphasized the fact that they were glad to meet me because I was open, unlike most Iraqi young women in the UK. They complained about how hard it was for them to come across someone like me because on the one hand they could not get along with Iraqi or Arab women, and, on the other hand, they could not understand European women. Interestingly, they both said they were open-minded because they lived in Beirut. Haidar asked me if I would like to attend a meeting held at the house of the veteran Iraqi diplomat, Adnan al-Pachachi the following day. I agreed immediately and felt very lucky that doors were opening as I did not have any contacts when I first arrived in the UK to do my research. We agreed to meet near Harrods, which is close to Pachachi's residence. The next day, I got a phone call from Kadhim, who asked to see me that same evening because he found important books related to my research,

“Can we meet tomorrow or the day after? I don't want to miss the meeting at the Pachachi's house,” I said.

“What meeting?” Kadhim asked.

“You didn’t know about it! I thought you were coming. Haidar is attending it.”

“Oh, that one! It is canceled. Haidar called me last night and told me it was canceled,” he said.

“Oh, do you know when it is going to be held?” I inquired.

“It won’t be held anymore. So are we going to meet? We can have dinner in a nice Lebanese restaurant.”

“Sure,” I said.

I decided to call Haidar and to inquire about this cancelation:

“Kadhim told me the meeting was canceled. Why didn’t you tell me that?” “It is not canceled! It will be held at 5. And Kadhim has nothing to do with it. Did you mention to him that I told you about it?”

“Not really. I just said I was attending a meeting at Pachachi’s house.” I said.

“*Habibti*, you shouldn’t tell people about what you’re doing. Keep your cards to yourself. Call Kadhim back and ask to meet a little bit later. Pretend something came up. Don’t tell him that you called me or mentioned this to me.”

This was not the first time I was told that I should keep my cards to myself. Many people in the community told me that I should not say whom I saw or where I went. At first, I found this advice bizarre as I thought I had nothing to hide. Then, I began to realize that the secrecy and suspicion, prevalent when Saddam Hussein was still in power, still colors the behavior of Iraqis in the UK despite the demise of the Iraqi intelligence activities in the 1990s and the regime change after 2003. On the other hand, this advice indicates the division among the community. Talking to a certain individual or

group is interpreted as a sign of loyalty to, and identification with, that person or group. Hence, if I told someone that I was in touch with so and so or if someone saw me going into a certain institution (which did happen), this was taken to mean that I am sympathetic to that person or institution, and jeopardized my ability to talk to other people. I tried to explain to people that my research necessitated that I talk to people from different backgrounds but this explanation was not taken seriously.

Haidar picked me up at Harrods and the ride to Pachachi's place took a few minutes. Pachachi was warm and friendly. We chatted a little bit and I realized he knew my aunt and her husband. He then asked me whether I shared their political views or not. I did not really understand what he meant and tried to change the topic to avoid getting into the thorny political issues, such the position towards the war in 2003. Haidar, however, insisted I answer.

"Well, before I can answer, I need to know what my aunt's and her husband's political views are. What do you mean?" I asked.

"Are you a communist like them?" Pachachi asked back.

I laughed with relief, and I answered in the negative.

"What are you then?" Pachachi inquired.

"I'm nothing. I'm a just a person who is doing research on Iraqi exiles."

"She is secular, and her political attitude is secularism," said Haidar.

Another four guests who belonged to the ICP in the UK arrived shortly, and the meeting began. It concerned a political coalition in Iraq that included different Iraqi secular parties and figures. The four guests complained that the ICP was excluded from the decision-making process and the benefits enjoyed by the clique of the head of the

coalition (whose representative in the UK was Haidar). Haidar denied the coalition had any offices in the UK, and insisted his representation of the head of the coalition in the UK was voluntary and unpaid. Pachachi looked amused at the heated exchange between Haidar and the four guests, who later on began to argue among each other about the source of their information about the dynamic of the coalition in the UK. The meeting ended in an hour, and Haidar and I left immediately. Haidar was beaming with happiness in the elevator.

“I knew how to shut them down. I fooled them. I get a salary from the coalition’s bureau in the UK, and we have an office.” He said.

Haidar was proud of his performance and tried to impress me by bragging about it. I then saw him getting very close to me. I thought he wanted to whisper something but I realized he was going to kiss me. I put my hand against him.

“What are you doing!” I said.

He looked taken aback and said, “Huh. I don’t know. I’m very excited and wanted to do something. I’m sorry.”

When we got out of the elevator, he added, “Look at the way you’re dressed! It is indecent.”

“Oh, really?” I said sarcastically.

I was surprised at his description as I was wearing a long and wide skirt and a plain short sleeve shirt. When we got into the car, Haidar went to enumerate the things that gave him the impression he had liberties, which included: giving my phone number to men, living with a Swedish lady instead of my aunts (which implied I could have men over with no problem) and having a Lebanese mother. After calling me “a loose woman,”

he commented how shocked he was that I managed to stop him from kissing me “with a single movement of your hand.”

“Look, I’m here to do research. I got in touch with you because of my project, and I’m getting in touch with a lot of people for the same reason. So please do not start having or spreading wrong ideas about me.” I answered.

The short ride was uncomfortable as Haidar insisted that one day “he will get me” and that “my games won’t work with him.” When I got to the station where I was to meet with Kadhim early, I went to a café to regain my calm while waiting for Kadhim. Kadhim came in his car to pick me up. He told me that we were going to have dinner in his place so that I could have a look at his library. I got really scared and was about to tell him to forget about it. However, I felt bad about wasting an opportunity to get research material, especially since I had just begun my fieldwork, and I was trying to establish contacts. I decided to stay calm and formal. On our way to his place, we stopped to get takeout. When we got to Kadhim’s apartment, I was surprised at his meager book collection. He saw my disappointment and he explained, “Oh my books are being shipped from Tehran. I will get them soon.”

I did not comment and sat at the table while he brought dishes. During dinner, Kadhim had a monologue about himself, the politician he works for, Islam and the Iraqi community. I tried to focus on what he said while remaining alert. He also asked me if I had a boyfriend. I did not want to get into my personal life, so I told him that I was busy with my study, hoping that answer would put an end to this conversation. Instead, he directly asked me if I had issues with premarital sex, and claimed that young Iraqi women in the UK, even the religious ones, got over that issue since honor to them is not longer

associated with virginity, but rather with paying taxes and following laws. To avoid Kadhim's relentless insistence, I asked him if he had relationships.

"It is hard to find open-minded Iraqi women, and I don't get along with Western women. They are from a different culture. You know temporary marriage is dominant among young Iraqis in the UK. It is in principle a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship, where a couple lives together and shares responsibilities. It is a manifestation of the greatness of Islam and its understanding of human needs. Freud's findings have long been appreciated in Islam. By the way, when I talk about Islam, I mean the Islam of Muhammad and Ali, not the Islam of the Sunnis, sons of bitches, or the Islam of Omar, son of a bitch," he said.

I could not believe what I heard. Not only had Kadhim denied the existence of sectarianism among Iraqis when I had first met him two days ago, but now he used very offensive Iraqi words. The word for bitch in the Iraqi dialect is "qahba," which is almost a taboo to use publicly. If someone uses it, it is an indication of that person's rudeness and ill manners. Kadhim went on talking. What he uttered did not strike him as disrespectful or obnoxious.

I was waiting for him to finish eating as he was slow. Shortly after dinner, I told him it was time for me to go home. Earlier, he promised to drive me back home as there was no train station close to his apartment.

"Eeeee. Why don't you stay over?" He asked.

"No. I want to be in my bed and wake up in my room. COME ON ! LET'S GO!"

He looked confused, but he brought the keys. A sense of relief and safety came over me when we left the building. When we got in the car, Kadhim looked restless. Finally he said, "I want to say something but I'm not sure if I should."

“What is it?” I inquired.

“No. No. No. I shouldn’t say it.”

“Look, you either say what you want to say or you do not. I don’t like this attitude,” I replied quietly.

“OK, but you don’t have to give me an answer immediately. Why don’t you come and live with me? In this case, you don’t have to pay rent. My place is nice. I hope you’re not like the Iraqi women here, and you’re beyond traditional values.”

I was surprised how Kadhim contradicted himself within less than an hour. From talking about the irrelevance of virginity to young Iraqi women in the UK, he began to lament that they still had “traditional values.” I wondered if he thought I was so naïve that I would believe what he said. I wanted to confront Kadhim with his contradictory comments, but I decided not to. I just wanted to get home and call it a day. Before getting off the car, Kadhim asked me how I was that strong and firm. I remember laughing and telling him that my mother brought me up being strong and independent. When I went in the house, I felt lucky that I returned home intact. I was upset at myself for believing that Iraqi men in the UK could be more open than those I have met in Iraq and for risking my personal safety. If anything bad had happened, I would have been blamed for it. In fact, when I told my aunt and her husband about this day, I was rebuked badly and told I was naïve to be friendly with Iraqi men. Given that nothing went wrong that day, I was happy with the “field material” I collected. However, after that day, I never returned Kadhim’s and Haidar’s calls and emails. I ran into them in conferences, but I kept my distance.

It was around this time that I met Ali, but did not bother to get to know him as I assumed he would act like Kadhim, Haidar and other Iraqi men I met. One day I was

visiting Abu Warda at the Shia institution I frequented. Ali was chatting with him in the latter's office. As I walked in, I was surprised when Ali stood up and he put his hand forward. As we shook hands, Ali and Abu Warda continued their heated discussion about the turn of events in Iraq and about Iraqis in the UK. Ali was saying that until recently he considered himself to be an Iraqi, but not anymore as Iraq died when "fellow-Iraqis" began to kill and take advantage of each other. Abu Warda interrupted him all the time, trying to disagree. I wished Abu Warda would allow him to talk. Ali appeared to realize the futility of the conversation and excused himself. Before leaving, I asked him if I could interview him and he welcomed the idea.

I conducted the interviews in English with Ali because he felt more comfortable speaking English. Ali mixed his immaculate English with Iraqi pronunciation every now and then. It required patience to interview Ali. I had to interview him in the institution, where we were constantly interrupted by Abu Warda and other people. Many times, Abu Warda would just open the door of Ali's office without knocking and chat for an hour. On other occasions, people in the institution would be hanging around and drinking tea. Once, Ali and I tried to go on with the interview. I asked him benign questions about his stays in different countries, and the gentleman who was on the sofa next to Ali commented on what Ali said. After an hour, I decided to leave as that gentleman had no intentions of leaving anytime soon. Ali gave me a frustrated look as we said goodbye.

Ali hailed from a prominent Shia family. His father is a well-respected cleric who fled Iraq in the late 1970s and went to India as the representative of Said Abul-Qassim al-Khoie. Ali was born in Iraq but grew up in India until he was 11 when he came to the UK with his family. When I met him, he was 26, married and had one daughter. Ali's life

story is compelling. His teenage years show someone who is older than his age. He joined the *hawza*¹ in Qum when he was 14. Disillusioned, he left for Syria a year later to join his mother and siblings, where he became a DJ and a music shop owner. Though he is a deeply religious person, he is a staunch critic of the dominant religious practices. He identifies himself as an Iraqi, but he struggles to cling to an ideal image of Iraq that contradicts the reality in Iraq and among Iraqi exiles.

* * *

Ali's mother kept going to Iraq to give birth to her children after the family arrived in India in 1979 in order to be around her family and to rely on them following childbirth. She still managed to go to Iraq because, at that time, it was unusual for a woman to get arrested or harassed. Ali was born in Iraq and spent the first four months of his life in Baghdad, where his parents lived before leaving. His mother took him with her on her later visits to Iraq. The last time he went with her was in 1982 when they stayed for several months. After that, he never saw Iraq. Memories of these stays hardly exist except for one certain memory.

“The other thing I remember is... this I remember. I know it is a reality. In the evening, the family used to go down by the river. My grandfather's house was in Karrada on the riverbank, so they used to go down by the river, and there was a guy who used to sell kebab sandwiches and Pepsi. They used to buy kebab sandwiches and bottles of soft drink and just stay there. That used to be their fun. There was nothing else they could do. That is my Iraqiness.”

Ali went to kindergarten and primary school in India with other Indian kids. His friends were all Indians from different religious backgrounds as they knew no Iraqis in

¹ Seminary.

Bombay except for one other family. His family lived in a Muslim neighborhood for a while. Then, they moved to a neighborhood inhabited by Christians and Hindus, where Ali went to school.

“Actually, the first school I went to was a Catholic school. I used to go to the church, and I used to go to Hindu temples as a kid. I used to come back home, and be beaten up by my father because somebody would see me outside the temple or the church and tell him. We were not allowed to go to non-Muslim worship places. Sometimes on Sundays, I used to sneak to the church and go to mass, I mean, the blessing. It was fun for us. As little kids in India, we were brought up to respect everybody, respect all religions. We were Indians. It didn't matter whether you're Christian, you're Hindu, you're Muslim. You're a kid, in the same school. Our Hindu friends used to be vegetarian, so we used to make sure that, if we eat in front of them, it is something vegetarian. It is normal.”

Ali, along with one sister, was taken by some of the stories told in temples. Around the age of six, he and his sister decided to spend forty nights, meditating and worshipping a certain goddess who was supposed to grant the children their wishes. After the sixth night, Ali was convinced that if this goddess were not going to show up at this time, she would never show up, so he gave up his sleepless meditation. Later on, Ali and his sister got into trouble when their mother discovered the worship lantern they used in their meditation during her spring-cleaning of the house. When no one claimed the ownership of the lantern, she gave it to the father who asked his friends about it. The father was told that it was a worship lantern used by Hindus, and Ali and his sister had to confess.

Despite the fun Ali was enjoying in India, his action was scrutinized and criticized by his parents.

“My parents did not approve of my action. They always say [this is] *najis*, [this is] *tahir*.² I couldn’t understand it at that time. They said it’s *haram*³ to go to a temple, and I said, ‘Well, I go to the temple. I like it. They give me free food. I get to ring the bell.’”

Since his early years, Ali had to behave in certain way because of the family’s distinctive religious reputation. In fact, Ali’s account shows how his life has always been constrained by his family’s name. Like Hazar, he always had to live up to his family’s expectations, even when these expectations did not make sense. Living in a different culture where he mixed with Christians and Hindus aggravated the conflict with his parents.

“Coming from a well-known religious family is a big burden. It still is, and I think it will be until the day I die. I have thought about every move a million times since a very young age. I remember when I used to do something wrong and be punished for it, I heard, ‘What are people going to say! You are the son of so-and-so, and you do such things!’ I always thought, ‘What do people’s opinions have to do with it! If I’ve done something wrong, punish me but don’t punish me because of what people are going to say!’ ... It was always a problem and it still is. I feel this situation took away a lot of my innocence because I couldn’t do things on the spur of the moment. I would be thinking, ‘Can I do this? Can I not do this?’ And finally, when I did the thing, I would have thought about it so much that it wouldn’t be a reaction. It would be a planned thing. Very rarely did I do something just because I wanted to do it, and it actually happened that I

² *Najis* means unclean or impure while *tahir* means the opposite.

³ *Haram* means forbidden.

did it ... For example, I got punished because going to Hindu houses is *haram*. Going to Christian people's houses is *haram*. Our friends are Hindus and Christians. If you don't go to their houses, whose house am I going to go to! I have known restrictions for as long as I can remember. We were restricted in what we did, what we said, how we behaved. I either had to come up with excuses or bear the punishment. One thing we couldn't do is [to be] normal kids."

Though Ali grew up in India and felt at home there, he knew he was an Iraqi. His parents instilled in him this sense of being an Iraq. When the family decided to move to the UK in the early 1990s, Ali was thrilled that he would finally meet Iraqis and live in an Iraqi community. There were various reasons for leaving India and relocating in the UK. Ali's father mobilized the Indian Shias to protest against Saddam Hussein's brutality in putting down the uprising in Najaf and Kerbala in the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991, in shelling the holy shrines there and in persecuting Shia clerics. After the failure of the uprising, Ali's father feared for his safety and came under pressure by the Indian government to end his activism. In addition, the UK emerged as a safe haven for the Iraqi opposition to Saddam's regime as the regime's agents there were expelled. The fact that the UK was becoming a center for Iraqi Shias outside Iraq and Iran, and that Shia faith-based schools were opened in London encouraged this move.

Ali and his siblings, however, were extremely disappointed upon meeting other Iraqis in the UK. Not only was the encounter with the Iraqi community a cultural shock, the "what people are going to say" refrain magnified. Two days after his arrival, Ali was registered in a faith school attended by Shia Iraqi children. There, he was ridiculed for being "an Indian" even though he surpassed them in education.

“Upon our arrival in the UK, I and my siblings did have a cultural shock, but funnily, it wasn’t from the British society. It was actually from the Iraqis. Growing up in India, we were always treated as foreigners no matter how Indian we had become. Indian values taught us that although people may look, speak, eat and believe in different things, at the end of the day, we were all humans who ultimately are the same ... We were brought up on very strict values. And we come here and meet our fellow Shias who have none of these values. And not only that, they mock us for having these values. They say, “You’re backward. You’re Indians. You don’t understand.” For example, growing up as a Shia, the *turba*⁴ comes after the Quran [in sacredness]. Our parents taught us that nothing goes on top of the Quran except the *turba*. We came here, and kids were having *turba* fights. They’re using the *turbas* as stones to throw at each other. We told them this is *haram*, and they laughed at us. By God, By God, I spent the first week in the UK crying. I wanted to go back home, to Bombay ... I was very, very shocked. Very disappointed. Although I was only 12 or 11, I thought back then that I understood the situation. I told myself ‘I’m the real Iraqi, these are the fake ones. I’m the one who has the Iraqi values.’”

This was the first time when Ali began to adjust his views of Iraqis. Unable to identify with, or relate to, the Iraqis he met in the UK, Ali modified his perceptions of Iraqis and thought of himself as representing “the real Iraqi.” Disappointment had not yet turn into disenchantment. After spending a year in that school, Ali decided to move to a state school attended by students from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. His father did not favor the idea at the beginning but had to give in at the end because he was concerned that Ali would cause trouble in the faith school, reflecting negatively on his

⁴ *Turba* is a disc or a square made of the soil in Kerbela, which is considered to be holy by the Shia since Hussein and his brother, Muhammad’s grandchildren were murdered there in the seventh century. The Shias use it when praying. When they kneel, they rest their heads on it.

reputation. Unfortunately for Ali, he went from one nightmare to another, or “from one hell to a bigger one” as he put it. While the faith school was segregated and imposed strict rules, the new school was semi-segregated and lax about smoking, having a girlfriend, etc. However, it was attended by some Iraqi kids who reported what Ali did to their parents, who in turn reported the information to his father.

“At first, I was scared. I had a couple of experiences when news reached my father before I got home. After a while, I said you know what, I don’t care anymore. I’ll be who I am. I’ll do what I want to do in front of Iraqi boys and girls ... One of the things they didn’t approve of was talking to girls. I grew up in India with girls and boys. We used to play together. These kids grew up in London, locked up in the house or in a *husseniyya*.⁵ To me, I can be a friend with girls. To them, that concept did not exist. They wouldn’t understand that if Ali is hanging round 5 or 6 girls, it doesn’t mean something wrong is happening. That is a big no-no they had.”

Ali’s remark sheds light on the social life of some Iraqis in the UK. In this account, we do not see the UK at all. The world of Ali and the people he mixed with consisted of Iraqis only. As he mentions earlier, the source of his disappointment upon arrival in the UK was not British society but the Iraqi community. In addition to living in this limited and limiting environment, Ali was exposed to factionalization among Iraqi kids at this school. There were the Hizb al-Dawa kids and the Shirazi kids. While the latter were friendly, the former were bullies. One time, Ali was beaten up by the Hizb al-Dawa kids because he told them it is *haram* to call Khomeini an imam because there are only twelve imams while the rest should be called *sayyids*. He was ridiculed as an Indian.

⁵ *Husseniyya* is a Shia meeting place and a mosque but it is called husseniyya by Shia Muslims, after al-Hussein ibn Ali, Muhammad’s grandson.

“There is also the *Hindi* tag because I lived in India, because I use Urdu sometimes, because I had Indian friends, because I used to advocate respect for other religions, especially the Hindus. There were Hindus in school. The Iraqi kids used to tell the Hindu kids, ‘Oh, you worship the cow. You sit on the cows’ excrement, and you drink the cows’ urine.’ It is hateful. I used to tell them, ‘Hello! I won’t call myself *Iraqi* if you’re doing this to my friends. So I got the *Hindi* tag.’⁶

Given this negative experience with the Iraqi community in the UK, Ali again refashioned his understanding of being an Iraqi. Not only did he see himself now as the good Iraq, he came to believe that real Iraqis are the ones who are in Iraq, and that the ones in the UK do not represent Iraqis in Iraq.

“I never doubted my Iraqiness. I’m most definitely Iraqi. I was a good Iraqi. I made friends with the black people, the Indians, the Somalis. Iraqi people *in Iraq* are like me, not like this [community here]. Everything was in Iraq itself. Although I had never seen Iraq, this is what I thought about. I ended up making friends with the non-Iraqis and having them as my close friends. You have to keep the Iraqis on hello/goodbye level in order to not cause yourself damage at home.”

Ali had two Iraqi friends whose fathers were friends with his father. They had an understanding that though they had different hobbies and lifestyles, they faced the same problem – the Iraqi community. They had a deal to cover for each other. Ali would tell his father that he was visiting one of these friends; if his father called, that friend would tell him that Ali could not talk to him because he was asleep or in the bathroom while in fact Ali would be hanging with his group of friends. Ali and his friends were caught many times, and he would be beaten by his father. I asked Ali if he was beaten regularly

⁶ ‘*Hindi*’ means an Indian in Arabic. Ali used English all the time. In a few cases, he used Arabic words.

in his life, as physical punishment came up often in the interview. I saw Ali's eyes filled with tears for a second.

“Well, that [beating] makes me who I am. It is good. It is good, although I won't do it to my kids, but it was good for me. I am happy with who I am today. And if it weren't for what I've been through, I wouldn't be who I am today. This is why I say it is good. I don't want to relive it [he said, laughing]. It was painful, and it was very embarrassing, especially in India because we used to wear shorts to school. If you got caned with a hosepipe, you had marks on your legs and hands. At first, it used to be very embarrassing, but then I used to think this is a prestige for me. I'm a man. I can take beating. You have to turn any situation into a good one because if you just sit, you won't get anywhere. Life has to carry on.”

At the age of fourteen, he decided to leave the UK. In his efforts to escape the Iraqi community, or in fact, to rebel against the community, he got involved with “the wrong kind of people.” When he turned fourteen, he decided to quit “his wrong lifestyle.” He thought the only way to do so was to leave the country because he could not just tell the gang he decided to quit. Ali was terse in his reference to his “wrong lifestyle” and the words “gang” and “drug dealer friends” came out of his mouth only once. I did not want to press him on this point despite my curiosity. I thought he has been open to a great extent, and if he wanted to talk about it, he would have done that. Ali's strong sense of religion was another reason why he decided to change his lifestyle,

“Although I was only 14 by this time, I always had a strong sense of religion inside me even though I wasn't practicing. To me, religion has always been and still is your belief in Allah, in the Prophet, and in the Imams. To me, beliefs are more important

than the actions you do in the practices. As a teenager growing up, everything is open, and you're able to do everything ... I knew some of the things I did were *haram* though I was enjoying myself. I thought in order to change this, I have to leave this country ... I was looking for a way out from the UK. I hated the community. I hated the Iraqis [in London]. I loved my life but I knew it was wrong, and I wanted to change it. I thought OK, I'll go to Iran and study in the *hawza* ... Number one, I'll get to leave home on my own. Number two, I'll do something new. I thought it would be the right thing to do, to study religion, to preach religion."

I found Ali's understanding of religion to imply critique of the way Iraqis in the UK approach religion. To Ali, religion is first and foremost a set of beliefs, rather than practices and rituals. The critique implicit here is that a person can claim to be religious by observing and carrying out certain practices (such as praying, fasting, wearing the veil, refusing to shake hands with the opposite sex, etc.), but s/he leads a life completely in opposition to religious teachings (such as gossip, intolerance, dishonesty, etc.) From this perspective, religious practices do not necessarily reflect true adherence to religion.

Ali went to Qum after convincing his father, who did not approve of the idea, but again he had to give in because he was afraid Ali's rebellion would embarrass him in front of the Shia and Iraqi communities. Ali went to Syria in order to get a forged Iraqi passport. Though he had only a British travel document by then, he was advised to go to Iran with an Iraqi passport. Given that the Iraqi Embassy would not give him an Iraqi passport because of his father's opposition to Saddam Hussein's regime, the only available option was to attain a forged passport. In the 1980s and 1990s, a market for forged Iraqi passports thrived in Syria. A good number of Iraqis I met used this resort

when they needed to renew their Iraqi passports or to get new ones because they could not go to an Iraqi Embassy and apply directly. Not only did a visit to an Iraqi Embassy mean harassment (if not arrest), it also involved the passage of one's information about a person's whereabouts and family to the Iraqi government.

Ali went to Iran after he did the little Hajj in Mecca. His life in the *hawza* for the first three months of his arrival was wonderful. He was enjoying learning, even though it required tremendous efforts as his Arabic was poor then – he had to take notes in English and then translate everything into Arabic. Ali stopped listening to music and “thinking about ladies.” He changed his dress code and replaced his jeans, T-shirt and cowboy boots with *dishdasha*, slippers and a skullcap. However, soon, disappointment followed.

“The first three months, it was fun, fun for religion. Then I started finding out about these people. Again, I was in the Iraqi community that was different from what I thought it would be. Not only that, I was in a religious community, which was different from what I thought it would be ... What they were preaching was totally opposite to what they were practicing. I was getting shocked day by day. I went to Iran, thinking this is heaven: Shia scholars, religious people and *hawza*. Then I realized my drug dealer friends that I left behind me in London are a million times better than these people in Qum. At least, they say I do drugs, and I am who I am. But these religious guys I started meeting in Iran were disguised.”

Many things shocked Ali there. First, he found homosexuality was dominant. Ali witnessed many incidents himself when some of these clerics sexually abused young kids who came to study in the *hawza*. Ali also did not approve of the attitude towards women.

“Over there, they look at all ladies as objects of sexual desires. Ladies used to be sometimes touched in the mosque, indecently touched in the mosque. I saw religious clerics making indecent gestures to ladies in the streets. I saw that with my own eyes, not somebody told me about it. I saw it ... The other issue is the misuse of money. That was mindboggling because these people don't work. This is a big problem I had. Where do they get the money? They have houses, beautiful cars, many cars ... But I used to think, and I still think, that if you go to Qum and you find a religious cleric that lives in a mansion while there is a needy person who is starving and doesn't have the money to feed his kids, where is the justice in that? ... Total hypocrisy, total double standards. I just didn't like it ... Corruption. Filth, filth, filth. Total filth.”

To Ali, this situation does not speak about religion, but about the people who are in the religious institutions. It is the corrupt religious clerics who have turned religion into empty practices, and who have forsaken the true message of religion. Ali attempted to voice his criticism of what he was seeing, but he was not successful. As he describes it, “you can't swim against the current.” When Ali tried to speak against the system, he was defamed. He was accused of being mentally and sexually unstable. Rumors began to circulate that he was having an affair with a divorced woman and that he brought pornographic material with him from the UK. His relationship with an uncle who lived in Iran deteriorated. These rumors even reached his father in the UK, who in turn stopped talking to him. Ali tried to explain his viewpoint to his father, but he would not listen. Finally, after spending a year and half in Qum, Ali left Iran for Syria to join his mother and siblings. Ali's father decided to relocate the family because he wanted his children,

who were rebelling against the Iraqi community in the UK, to grow up in a Muslim country and to learn Arabic.

Realizing the atmosphere of the Iraqi community in Damascus is not different from that in Iran or the UK, Ali spent little time with Iraqis. He had some money and wanted to invest it. As an Iraqi, the only investment options available were opening a sandwich and juice shop, a grocery store, or a toy store and stationary. Ali opened a music shop in a place far from where his family and the Iraqi community lived.

“I started up a business, a very *haram* business. I opened a record shop ... I assumed a double role. When I’m there [in the neighborhood where we lived], I’m like [speaking in a meek voice], ‘Hey, how are you?’ Then I go to the shop and I say, ‘To hell with you. I’ll see you in hell.’ I made a record empire there, selling music and posters and magazines, which worked. I made good money ... [In Syria] I just went straight into the hippy community: youngsters, boys and girls who wanted to be European and who wanted to listen to English music. I told them I could be your key to this new world. I got the latest technology in recording. There were record stores there before, but I made it cheaper for them. I went to the British Cultural Center and told them let’s have a disco night, so they gave me the space, and I provided the music. Easy work, OK money and most importantly fun and a chance to meet new people. Although I had the music store, I also spent time working as an accountant and administrator for an Islamic seminary. Due to who my father is, I have always been surrounded by the so-called religious community.”

A few years later, in the late 1990s, Ali decided to return to the UK. By then, he had sold his music shop and had begun to change his lifestyle after his mother’s death.

Having finished high school and learned Arabic, there were no prospects for him in Syria because of increasing political and social constraints on Iraqis there. For instance, Ali could not join the university. Moreover, he did not appreciate the fact that he had to endorse either the Syrian state's Arabic nationalistic discourse or the dominant Shia religious lifestyle. His attempts to secure a visa to Australia did not work out.

Upon his return to the UK, not only did Ali find the community riddled by the same problems he encountered before, but he also sensed the deep political schism among Iraqis aggravated by the strengthening of the Iraqi opposition to Saddam Hussein in the UK in the 1990s. With these factions, the community seemed to be more divided and fragmented than ever.

“You know the pigeonholes? People here have these imaginary pigeonholes, where they fit people in different categories. They can't bear a person who is not in a pigeonhole, so they see which one [pigeonhole] is the nearest to put the person in, so that they know how to deal with you. They would like to have a few holes. The first one would be, 'he is one of us.' The second one is, 'he is close to us.' The third is, 'he is trustworthy.' The fourth one is, 'he is religious.' Then they have, 'he is from a such and such group.' These are the close groups. Then come the people they don't like: 'he isn't good,' 'he drinks,' 'he gets drunk,' 'his wife isn't veiled!' So what if a man's wife is unveiled. So what! 'He doesn't pray.' 'He shaves his beard!' So what!”

Interestingly, Ali's views of religious practices among Shia Iraqis and the political situation in Iraq are deeply interlinked. Whenever I asked him a question about a religious issue, he usually ended up Iraqi politics and Iraq, which reflects his critique of

the way religion is employed for political purposes as well as his disillusion after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime.

“The sad thing is that these people [religious clerics] got hold of the Iraqi politics. They manipulate the Iraqi politics the way they want to ... You would think these people went to elections, advocated elections, so they must believe in democracy. The reality is not like that. Elections were the way for them to get into power ... Deep inside, they probably think democracy is *haram*, totally against Allah because democracy is by the people for the people. If that happens, they would lose all their power and class ... They misused [Sayyid Sistani's] authority,⁷ they misused his power, and they misused the love of the people. People love the *'imama*,⁸ people love the *hawza*, people love their religion because they think the religious clerics are supposed to be better than us. There are many religious clerics who are better than a lot of people, but the majority of them think this is just a job, so they have to make money as much as they can, to gain as much influence as they can. If you say this to the community, they say, ‘you’re becoming a communist.’”

Like the majority of Iraqis, Ali was waiting for the fall of Saddam thinking he would be able to go back to Iraq. Not only did the turn of events disappoint him, it shattered his image of Iraq.

“Iraq died after 2003. I think the first word I ever learned was, ‘May God curse Saddam.’ My mother passed away when I was seventeen. These whole seventeen years of my life, the one thing that my mother was doing every day, every day, every day was waiting for Saddam to go so that she could go back to Iraq ... To me, every day, it was the same story: we’re children of Iraq, and we’re waiting to be reunited with that country

⁷ He is the most important and influential cleric in Iraq in the present time.

⁸ *'imama* is the turban worn by religious clerics. Figuratively, it also means the religious institution or religious authority.

... But then, we waited and waited and waited. And the day finally came – although we had mixed feelings [about military intervention]. There was a march against the war, and I was there ... We wanted Saddam to go, but this was the wrong way. Military action was the wrong way because there are innocent people who will die, and that is what has been happening ... On the night of April 9th, I went home early from work. I used to be a partner in a grocery store, and I worked there in the morning ... When I got home, I turned the TV on and saw the statue of Saddam brought down. It was unbelievable. I kept pinching myself. I couldn't believe it ... Is it really happening! This is the biggest nightmare that we have had since we were kids, and it is just going so easily! And these people⁹ came and killed it. Not the Americans, not the British, it is our people! May Allah never forgive them for that... because *knowingly* they came to efface our country ... They killed it, they killed our hope. I don't think it will ever go back to the way it was before.”

Ali came to have a certain image of Iraq, which enabled him to maintain his identity as an Iraqi and to deal with the many disappointments he felt. Indeed, one can say that Ali's life has been driven by the search for “real” Iraqis and by the hope of living in Iraq and/or among an Iraqi community. His first shock when he encountered the Iraqi community in the UK made him go to Iran and then Syria, hoping he would meet different Iraqis there. When he could not relate to any of the Iraqis he met, he was left with his childhood hope that things were different in Iraq. After 2003, this conviction was shattered. Instead, he is left with a memory of Iraq.

“I was born an Iraqi. I lived the whole of my life as an Iraqi. I will die as an Iraqi. But the Iraq I affiliate with isn't the Iraq that exists today. Also, I don't affiliate with the

⁹ He means the Iraqi politicians and religious clerics who got involved in politics.

Iraqi people or the Iraqi community ... I'm an Iraqi but I think the Iraq that I would want to go back to is the Iraq of 1950s or 1960s. That is the Iraq when my grandfather lived. ... All the good things we hear about Iraq, they all happened in that age. I'm an Iraqi of that age, which is why I don't want to go to Iraq right now. I want to go for *ziyyara*,¹⁰ but I don't want to go and see the people or see the society because I'd like to have fond memories of Iraq. Although I've never seen it, these are my fond memories. So I'm an Iraqi of that age, not this age. I think the Iraqi people now unfortunately have done themselves more harm than good by embracing sectarianism I'm an Iraqi of my idea of Iraq, not of the existing Iraq.”

Ali's encounter with Iraqis abroad has not always been negative. To Ali, there are two categories of Iraqis: the civilized and the sheep. The first group includes the older generation, those who drink and write poetry as he puts it.

“They are the ones who planted the seeds of an ideal Iraq, because of their experience, because of what they used to see. My idea of Iraq isn't an imaginary or a made up thing. It is a country, it is a system that existed, it is a society that existed ... I'm saying people are equal. Back in those days, people were equal. Now, if somebody said to you I'm an Iraqi, he would say I'm Sunni or Shia or a Kurd. Religion is something between you and the Lord. It doesn't come into the public sphere. This is what I'm saying. I think these elder people planted the seeds of the ideal Iraq that did exist. I think some Iraqi communities try to live along these lines. I have Iraqi friends in Sweden. Everybody hates them because they are secular and communists, and they drink, etc. I've been to their gatherings, and it is nice. I would like to identity myself with them. These are my fellow Iraqis. They are respectable and care for each other. They live as a

¹⁰ Visiting the holy shrines.

community, not like here or in Iran or Syria, [where] everybody just wants to kill the other person. I say to these people: Islam teaches you to do something, but you're not doing it while these other people who you claim are bad, they're doing everything Islam says except they don't pray and they drink *arak* ... You see, I don't think that my imagination of Iraq and my view of Iraq is a dream. It is reality. That [reality] was there one day, that might come back, hopefully."

The sheep, on the other hand, are the people in the community who engage in sectarianism.

"The community members are fools. I pity them because they are like sheep. They look at the shepherd, and whatever he says, they do. And the shepherds don't live in the UK. They live in Iraq or Iran or somewhere. Whatever tune they play, the sheep dance to that tune. The older generation – the civilized and educated ones – don't see difference [among Iraqis]. Unfortunately, some southerners, the new generation, some revolutionaries, and some people who left Iraq during the uprising [in 1991] ... their segregation and their sectarian sentiments are very evident. That causes a lot of trouble because just like the Sunnis are attacking the Shias, some Shia elements are doing the same. They come out with newspapers abusing Aisha and Hafsa, Abu Baqir and Omar,¹¹ and so on and so forth. My argument to them is that nobody is asking you to respect them. Nobody is asking you to take them as your leaders. But what I'm asking you to do is to respect those who believe in them and who follow them. How would you like it if Christians came and said, 'You Muslims are crazy fools because you wrap a towel around yourself and go to Saudi Arabia in the desert with no underwear on!' How would

¹¹ Omar and Abu Baqir were Muhammad's companions. Aisha and Hafsa were Muhammad's wives. These figures are considered to be Sunnis by religious people, whether they are Sunnis or Shia.

you feel! Give other people the same courtesy. Nobody is asking you to follow them. Allah said ‘You have your own religion and I have my own religion.’”

Ali’s attitude stems from his belief that no religion has monopoly on truth. To him, his religious belief is the truth to his best knowledge, but that does not mean other people have to share his religious convictions. To him, just as he has non-Muslim friends, he has Sunni friends whom he sees as his “brothers in religion.” As far as Ali (who is married to a Sunni woman) is concerned, while this attitude entails respect for different religions and sects, it makes him part of his ideal of Iraq when people did not care about differences. On the other hand, the prevalence of sectarianism among Iraqis fills Ali with shame of being an Iraqi and leads him to sometimes identify himself as British, to the displeasure of Iraqis in London.

In an attempt to make a difference and to bring people together, Ali has been engaged in interfaith activity. To him, religion should not be used as an excuse to go to wars and to reject the other. His efforts focus on making Iraqis in particular accept those who are different. To him, interfaith is not just about meeting people and taking photographs with them in order to say that something was done. The institution where he works occasionally holds and participates in interfaith activities but this is also part of the institution’s obligations for receiving funding and support from the British government. Rather, Ali believes interfaith is about accepting a different point of view and the other, and it has to start with Iraqi Muslims respecting each other – namely Sunnis and Shia – as a first step for them to accept Hindus, Jews and Christians. Ali is aware that this is not an easy task, but he was full of hope when I interviewed him, despite all the challenges.

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I hardly ran into Ali after the interviews. I met his younger brother, Mustafa, at a panel on the situation in Iraq held at the School of Oriental and African Studies. Mustafa asked a question during the discussion time, and I immediately suspected he was Ali's brother. In addition to the physical similarity, Mustafa voiced concerns in his question that were similar to Ali's. After the event, I went and asked him if he was Ali's brother, and he said yes. Mustafa, who was 18 at that time, refused to shake hands with me. He apologized for leaving my hand hanging in the air. I met with Mustafa several times and interviewed him, and we became friends on Facebook. Mustafa has been my link to Ali, and he told me when I last went to the UK in 2008 that Ali had another child. Ali and I exchange emails sporadically. The last time we emailed, he told me he enrolled in university to do a degree in the Abrahamic Religions as he thought this subject would enrich his interfaith work and would benefit him personally and professionally.

I was lucky to come across someone like Ali, who was open enough to share his views on religion, his criticism of the Shia religious establishment, and the familial and social constraints he encounters. Like Hazar, Ali did not dwell upon the British society or anti-Muslim sentiments. The concerns and challenges he faces are more related to the Iraqi community in the UK, whether these Iraqis are religious or not. Given that many Iraqis escaped oppression and wars, the UK is usually seen as a place where they have respect, security and freedom. Indeed, whenever I asked religious Iraqis in the UK about any difficulties or prejudices, they encountered in the UK, they talked about issues they had with their families or members of the community.¹² While this state of affairs shows the tensions among Iraqis, it indicates that the religious members of the community,

¹² Only once did a young woman tell me that a British woman taunted her for wearing the veil while she was in the bus; however, the rest of the passengers rebuked that woman for being intolerant.

generally speaking, are not involved in debates on the position on Islam in the UK. On the other hand, the debates on Islam or “home bred terrorists” in the UK focus mainly on Muslims from South Asia or Somalia. The activities and debates that Iraqis from different backgrounds are engaged in are still related to Iraq. As such, the religious members of the community do not seem to see themselves as part of the larger Muslim community in the UK.¹³

¹³ For a study on Muslims in the UK, see Ansari (2004).

Chapter Six

Rasha

I'm on my way to meet with Rasha at her office in Central London. We are going to meet "my groom." Given that the groom is an Iraqi man and may misinterpret my showing up alone, Rasha decided to accompany me as a chaperon. However, the main reason why I want Rasha's company badly is that Rasha's social aptness will help in directing the conversation as I have never been in such a situation. This whole business of matchmaking came up when I first met with a group of religious Iraqi women through Rasha. These women asked me why I wasn't married and wondered if I was open to the idea of marriage since they knew some Iraqi men who were looking for Iraqi brides. One of them immediately called a friend and told her that she had an Iraqi bride. Matchmaking is an alien thing to me, and I could not believe I found myself in this situation. I agreed to the idea because of my research. I thought this experience would give me insight into an aspect of Iraqi women's life and into matchmaking in the UK. In the moments leading up to meeting the groom, I felt anxious and regretted agreeing to meet. My only relief was that Rasha's presence would take the burden off me.

Rasha played a key role in introducing me to the world of Iraqi women in the UK, including Shia religious women, even though she is not a Muslim. Rasha arrived in the UK only in 2004, but she had built an enormous network of Iraqi friends and acquaintances by 2007. I first met her at an event organized by a young Iraqi group a few

months after I arrived in the field in 2006. In that meeting, we rubbed each other the wrong way. As we told each other later on, Rasha thought I was an uptight bookworm who did not care to color her gray hair or to wear makeup, while I immediately felt ill at ease. This feeling reflects my instantaneous reaction when I sometimes meet Iraqis for the first time. Rasha and I kept running into each other every now and then. It was only after five months of that meeting that we became friends. Rasha was surprised to see me dance at her birthday party and saw a different and more light-hearted aspect of my character. I, on the other hand, began to open up to her and to appreciate her lively and dynamic personality. In fact, Rasha is my first *close* Iraqi friend. Unlike my friendships back in Iraq, which were based on self-censorship and caution, lest a friend or her family worked for the regime, my friendship with Rasha was carefree and spontaneous.

I came to know Rasha well at a time when her life was wrapped with anxiety and sadness. In 2006, her family had to flee Iraq because they are Mandaean, a religious minority that became a target with the increase of violence in Iraq. The fate of the family in Syria was not clear and their only hope was resettlement in a Western country by UNHCR. Rasha had to support the family at that time since it was not easy for Iraqis to work in Syria. In addition, Rasha was still mourning the loss of one of her best friends who had been killed by a car bomb in 2004 near the entrance of the Green Zone. She herself had narrowly escaped death when a car bomb destroyed her office in Baghdad. Rasha came to the UK shortly after these two incidents for a change of scenery, and decided not to go back. These personal woes were complicated by bureaucratic obstacles. Like any Iraqi who has recently left Iraq, Rasha had a hard time securing the definite leave to remain as British immigration laws often changed and became stricter. On the

other hand, due to corruption and forgeries, the Iraqi government constantly issued new brands of passports. Rasha could not visit her family in Syria for more than a year because she was waiting for the latest version of the Iraqi passport, which was issued only in Iraq. To top it all, Rasha got involved romantically with an Iraqi guy in London who broke up with her abruptly. This failed relationship caused her tremendous pain.

Interestingly, Rasha and I did our bachelor's degrees at Baghdad University at the same time. We joined the English Departments of two adjacent campuses. However, we never met in person, though we realized during our conversations that we had friends and professors in common. Our shared memory extended to pre-college days, such as those of the war in 1991, the Iraqi songs glorifying Saddam Hussein and "the victory" of the Iraqi Army in the Iran-Iraq War, the TV programs and news, etc. Sometimes, we would reminisce over certain occurrences, such as the marches cheering Saddam Hussein that we were forced to participate in. We would tell each other how we managed to escape from the marches and go back home on the day when the late King Fahd of Saudi Arabia visited Iraq in 1989, or on the day of the Liberation of al-Faw in 1988.¹ When we were in a good mood and wanted to laugh, we would sing the songs praising Saddam while joking about how twisted we must be that, nowadays, we sing the very songs that we hated so much but learned because they were on all the time.

Rasha hails from a Mandaean family. The Mandaeans originally inhabited the south of Iraq, near areas where water is plentiful as baptism is an essential part of their ancient religion. Rasha was born in the south where her grandparents lived. Her father was a communist. He was imprisoned for four years beginning in 1963, in a notorious prison built by the British in the desert, because of his political activity. After his release,

¹ Al-Faw is an area in south Iraq, which was occupied by the Iranian army in 1986.

he got married, and the newly wed couple moved to Baghdad. Rasha's mother, who could hardly read and write, asked her husband to choose between his family and his political life, given the increasing persecution of communists. Rasha's father chose his family and ended his political activities. This spared him arrest; many of his communist friends were arrested and faced untimely deaths by the late 1970s.

Rasha's childhood, like Hazar's, had been orchestrated by fear alongside joy and fun. While Rasha talked about the fun of sleeping on the roof, the way she was dolled up as a child, she remembered the fearful and uncertain atmosphere that surrounded everybody. At age five, Rasha began to hear the phrase, "this guy belongs to the Dawa Party," and she remembers an incident in which agents of the state cornered a neighbor and arrested him. Rasha did not understand what belonging to the Dawa Party meant, but she knew it was a bad thing. By the late 1970s, after the murder of the prominent religious cleric Muhammad Baqir Al-Sadr who had consolidated the Shia Dawa Party, even the suspicion that a person was a member of the Dawa Party meant death. Rasha's biggest fear, though, was that her father would be enlisted to fight during the Iran-Iraq War.

"My worst memory of that time is that my father could have been recruited to the Popular Army. He was the only breadwinner, a teacher, and didn't have any brothers, so he should be exempted, but he was not. There is no age limit in the Popular Army because it is not a national army. We lived in fear all the time. The phrase 'Popular Army' horrified us whenever we heard it. My father used to go to Poland every summer to have a break from this constant worry. When Saddam banned travel in 1983, he went to the north of Iraq in summers."

The Iraq-Iran War dominated the atmosphere at schools as well. Every Thursday morning at every school, a man in khaki uniform would come and shoot bullets in the air from a rifle after the end of the flag ceremony that took place on the last day of the week. Whenever there was a battle, students would be gathered in schoolyards and had to listen to an unfamiliar rhetoric.

“Teachers read the main articles in the newspapers. We didn’t understand anything, such as ‘our valiant soldiers,’ and ‘the remnants of the enemy dispersed.’ Also the word ‘martyr’ became very common. One day, a teacher asked us what this word meant, why a fallen soldier is called a martyr, and what martyrdom signifies. Also, at school, we heard time and again the phrases, ‘We are Muslim Arabs. The Iranians are the Magi Persians.’ There was emphasis on the Arab identity: we are all Iraqis and Arabs while they are the Magi Persians.² Coffins wrapped in the Iraqi flag and black banners announcing the martyrdom of a man became common scenes.”

Rasha’s descriptions call attention to the political and social transformations in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War. On the one hand, the political discourse demonized the Iranians – it cast them as the ultimate other, whose hatred of the Arabs went back to the pre-Islamic time. On the other had, the specter of war overshadowed people’s lives. The fear of having the men of the family enlisted and sent to war was dominant. Families who had members in the front were stricken with anxiety. Black banners, as Rasha stated, became a normal sight all over Iraq. During fierce battles, these banners increased in number exponentially, reflecting the number of fallen soldiers despite the government’s

² The Iran-Iraq War was called Qadisiyyah Saddam, or the Second Qadisiyyah, in reference to the Battle of Qadisiyyah in 664, which marked the Muslim conquest of the Sassanian Empire in Iraq and fall of Iraq under the Muslim rule. The Sassanians were Zoroastrians. The implication of the term the Magi Persians is that the Iranians are not Muslim but Zoroastrians who worship fire.

insistence that only the Iranian army sustained casualties. Indeed, the fact that Rasha's father had to go to Poland shows the length to which families were willing to go in order to spare their men conscription. These annual trips by Rasha's father constituted a strain on the family since he was the family's sole source of income. Had it not been for the strong Iraqi dinar and the cheap living expenses in Poland at that time, her father would not have been able to go abroad.

Rasha lived in a neighborhood considered the highest among poor areas in Baghdad. It was one of the few areas where her father could afford buying a house big enough for his family, which consisted of six children and his wife. Like most areas in Baghdad, people from different religious, ethnic and social backgrounds lived there. There were Muslims, Mandaeans, Christians, communists, Baathists, etc. The same diversity was reflected at school. Rasha rarely had trouble at school because of being a Mandaean.

"I was different at school because I'm a Mandaean. There was tolerance, though. For instance, I didn't have to attend the religion class. However, if I felt like attending, I could do that. I could even read the Quran if I wanted. I only had a bad incident when I was in high school. One day, a girl in class told me I shouldn't touch the Quran because I'm an infidel. I was hurt. I asked my other friends if they shared her opinion and if Islam dictates that non-Muslims shouldn't touch the Quran. They told me there is one rigid Sunni school that believes so. Other than that, I never had any problem. Religion wasn't really important in the 1980s. At school, there were hardly any girls who wore veils. There was one veiled girl in my class. We always thought she was dumb or dirty. The image of the ideal and smart student was that she has a white ribbon in her hair, she is

beautiful, she wears her skirt below the knees, and she is fair skinned and chubby. If she were white, that meant she was very smart for some reason.”

I got off at Liverpool Street stop and walked to Rasha’s office. It was already five o’clock and we had more than an hour before we were to meet Laith, “the groom.” When I walked into the building, Rasha was coming out of the elevator. Rasha, who is squat with a round attractive face thanks to her beautiful radiant eyes and a nice smile, works for an international humanitarian organization. We walked out of the building and went to the train stop across the street. Rasha was unusually silent. When we got into the train and sat, I asked her if there was something wrong with her or her family. Reluctantly, she told me that she had a fight on the phone with her Iraqi friend, Nabil. Nabil, who was in his 30s, arrived in the UK recently. He fled Iraq because he was a Christian and feared for his life. He was a good friend of Rasha.

“Why? What did you fight over?”

“You!” Rasha said.

“Oh, my! Here we go! What did he say?” I asked rolling my eyes.

“He told me that my friendship with you is reflecting negatively on me and my reputation.”

I met Nabil with a group of Iraqi doctors, who left Iraq either in the 1990s or more recently, through Rasha. There was a mutual liking between one of them and me. Zaid and I went out a few times. I decided not to see him anymore when he told me that he would not allow his sister to get out with us and other friends because she should not be around someone like me. When I first met Zaid, he expressed his liking me. I was not enthusiastic about going out with him because I knew he would look down on me if I

dated him. The reason I changed my mind was his comment that we Iraqi women have the complex of going out with European men and rejecting Iraqi men. I tried to explain to him the reason for this attitude was that a European man would not call me a whore. Of course, he said he would not do that. Nabil was a friend of Zaid, and he was around when a group of us, including Rasha, went out occasionally. I asked Rasha what else Nabil said. She told me he did not say more because her answer baffled him. Rasha asked him why he found no problem with hugging and kissing his Scottish girlfriend in front of her, and why this behavior would not reflect badly on her, while my action would. Moreover, she informed him that his double standards were sickening, and that, though she disagreed with the way I acted, she respected my choices. Rasha, then, asked me angrily, “Zainab, I really can’t understand you. Did you have to hug Zaid when we were in the pub in front of everybody!”

“Well, if I were in Lebanon, this is how I would have acted and it would have been normal,” I answered.

“WE ARE NOT IN LEBANON,” Rasha snapped at me.

“Exactly, we are IN ENGLAND,” I retorted.

“Let’s not talk about this. How was your day?”

“Bad. I fretted all day. I regret agreeing to this matchmaking business.”

“Take it easy. I’m glad you’re doing this. You can’t be an Iraqi woman and not go through this experience. Your mother wouldn’t have put you through this and your aunts here won’t put you through this either. I’m glad your research made you do this.”

The trip was very short – we got off after two stops. We had plenty of time. We went to Café Nero, across from Angel Station. Rasha received a phone call from Mary, a

friend who is now in Sweden. She got excited and was talking and laughing. I tried to read Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, but I could not focus. I heard Rasha tell Mary about Randa's visit to London a few weeks ago. Rasha, Mary, Randa and Sulaf were close friends in Baghdad. They worked in the same building from 1998 to 2000. Though Rasha left that job and joined an international organization, the four friends remained close. After 2004, Rasha, Mary and Randa suffered a huge loss when Sulaf died in a car bomb at the entrance of the Green Zone. Randa and Sulaf worked as interpreters for the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) shortly after the war in 2003. Sulaf was engaged and was preparing to join her fiancée in Europe.

“The girls paid us a visit at home to check on my father, who had been in a car accident. We were all laughing and having fun. After three days, Sulaf was killed in a car bomb on her way to work. There were four passengers in the car in addition to the driver. Two of them died, the rest were injured. Randa who was sitting in the middle in the back seat was badly injured. I was in my office when I heard the sound of the explosion. I thought, ‘Oh, my God. I hope all my friends and family are OK.’ We couldn't find Sulaf for three days. Her mother contacted me thinking I was a VIP because I worked for an international organization, and I had a lot of contacts. I contacted everyone I knew. Her family contacted the American troops thinking she might have been transferred to Kuwait. After work, I went to look for her but couldn't find her. On the third day, I went to her house as usual to see if her family got any news. I found her brother crying and he asked me to wish her peace. I screamed, ‘No! You can't say that. She isn't dead.’ He said, ‘Do you know how I recognized her? I recognized the ring you gave her on her birthday.’ Her birthday was less than a month earlier, and I thought of getting her a ring

so that she could be proud of her friends in front of her fiancée. Mary, Randa and I got her the ring. I couldn't believe my ears when her brother told me she was dead.”

That was the third loss Rasha suffered since April 2003. A Canadian colleague was shot to death in crossfire in April 2003. Three months before Sulaf's death, Rasha's office was destroyed in a car explosion, and Rasha lost a dear colleague and escaped death herself only because her driver was one hour late. It was the first day of Ramadan and work hours were changed. The driver came according to the new time though Rasha asked him to come at the usual time. Just ten minutes before getting to the office, Rasha heard a loud explosion. Within minutes, the CNN announced that it was Rasha's office that was bombed. When Rasha got to the building, she was not allowed to go in; however, she managed to sneak in through a side door.

“I went in and saw my office. The glass was all down. Some pieces were in the wall like knives, and I imagined myself if I had been sitting there. I would have been cut into pieces. The whole place was covered with debris ... then I went to the front door, where the explosion took place, and I stepped in a small pool of blood. I then realized I walked in blood, and everybody was screaming, ‘This is Hani's blood.’ I said, ‘He is injured, right?’ I was told, ‘No. He is dead. He's cut into pieces.’ I lost it then and began to scream. He and I had a conversation a few days earlier. When our Canadian colleague died, we had a ceremony where we planted a plant for him. We wished that the plant would always remind us of him. I was talking to Hani, and I said, ‘I don't know who would be next. How many trees are we going to have to plant? ... Maybe, one day, nobody will be left to plant a tree.’ Hani said, ‘Take it easy. It was the time for him to die. He just passed away. Wish him peace.’ After ten days of that conversation, Hani died. He

was a close friend. He was one of the people I trusted and felt cheerful around because when I applied for this job, he accepted my application, and it turned out to be my dream job. When he died, I felt terrible for weeks.”

The chaos and violence that followed the fall of Saddam Hussein was hard to believe for Rasha, who thought the hardships of the years of the blockade between 1991 and 2003 could not be trumped. Like the majority of Iraqis, Rasha and her family suffered a great deal economically. The standard of living deteriorated rapidly and tremendously. For instance, in the 1970s and 1980s, one Iraqi dinar equaled three dollars, while in the 1990s, one dollar came to equal between 2,000 and 3,000 Iraqi dinars. People suddenly found that their salaries and savings are valueless. Bribes and thefts became widespread as a result. Teachers, professors and state employees began to ask for bribes openly. A university student could pass with flying colors if s/he gave two tires to a professor. People could no longer park their cars in the streets unattended. People sold their houses, furniture, cars, books and precious items in order to survive for just a few months. Prostitution became a source of living for women, and children begging suddenly filled the streets. In addition, people had to live with the aftermath of the 1991 war, which entailed not only the destruction of infrastructure but also environmental devastation due to the heavy bombardment. The number of children born with deformities and cancer, the spread of disease and cancer and the drying up of trees shot up overnight.³

This turn of events marks a stark contrast to the economic prosperity in the 1970s and 1980s. Iraq’s revenues aggrandized in the 1970s due to the rise in oil prices and to

³ See Simons (1998) and Graham Brown (1999). For literary accounts, see al-Radi (2003) and Sharara (2000).

the naturalization of oil. Oil revenues jumped from \$575 million in 1972 to \$26 billion in 1980.⁴ Some of the revenues went into establishing industries, implementing agrarian reforms, building up the educational system and health services and expanding the state bureaucracy. This increase in expenditure resulted in momentous social transformations, such as a decrease in infant mortality, increases in literacy and life expectancy, a huge migration from the countryside to the cities, an increase in the population and the growth of the middle class.⁵ Given the tight grip of the Baath regime on the revenues and on the country, this unprecedented economic and social affluence had been dependent on state salaries and expenditures. As such, the sanctions brought an end to this prosperity as the state ceased to provide social services and when the limited means of the majority of the population did not suffice to cope with the inflation and a collapsed social fabric.

The hardships Rasha encountered during the 1990s still dominate her consciousness. While she talks extensively about the 1990s, she hardly mentions the Iraq-Iran War, the heavy bombardment during the war in 1991, the uprisings in the north and south of Iraq afterwards or the lack of electricity, water and fuel. This omission is particularly poignant given that Rasha and her family lived near the airport and the Amiriyya Shelter, which was bombed during the 1991 war and the four hundred civilians inside burned to death. When I asked Rasha about those days, she told me that they left Baghdad on the first day of the war and went to her parents' city in the south of Iraq. The family, which consisted of eight people, had to squeeze in one car. After spending a few days in the south, they decided to head back to Baghdad as the area was overcrowded. When the Amiriyya Shelter was bombed, the family was in the house, and Rasha thought

⁴ Marr (2004), p. 161.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 162-168.

they would not survive the bombing. As for everyday existence, Rasha's family had to store water in whatever containers were available whenever water came through. They had a hard time since they did not stock up on fuel. They had to chop the trees in the garden and use old editions of newspapers and any papers they could find at home. However, all these difficulties and fears were overshadowed by the embargo years that followed.

During the blockade, the family continued to suffer financially. The father who started a business in gold after his retirement as a teacher could not cope with the fluctuating market and the rate of inflation. He lost his money in the unstable economy.

“My father lost everything: the building he owned, his gold shop, our house and the two cars he had. We sold our house and had to rent a house in another area. We also sold the carpets and the chinaware in order to survive. The economic insecurity took its toll on relationships among the family. We began to have a lot of fights because we didn't know how to organize a budget. The pension wasn't enough. I was in tears many times because I wanted bus fare. My father didn't have money to give me. I had to tutor children in our neighborhood to make some money. The educational system collapsed at this point, and teachers were no longer teaching, so students who could afford it relied on tutors. It became very hard to buy a new shirt for instance. It took tremendous efforts for me to get a new shirt.”

Not only does Rasha's candid narrative shed light on the devastating impact of the blockade on the Iraqi society in general, it shows how she and her family were personally affected. Like Hazar, Rasha did not try to suppress these accounts of hardships. To Rasha, moreover, Iraqis who left before 1990 cannot comprehend the changes that took

place in Iraq in the 1990s, which in turn shaped their perception of Iraq as a place of nostalgia.

“During the blockade, handymen, drivers and mechanics would take a doctor as a second wife. A doctor earned 3,000 dinars a month. A driver or a mechanic would say to a woman doctor, ‘I’ll give you 10,000 dinars a month if you quit.’ This happened a lot in the Iraqi society. Iraqis in the UK didn’t have this experience. I lived in an epoch totally different from the one they lived in. They know the Baghdad of the 1970s. They had a comfortable life in Iraq. This is a big difference in identity.

“Another thing they didn’t experience is the increase in religiosity especially after Saddam started the Faith Campaign in 1991. Religion became a core course in the curriculum in schools. Religious programs on TV increased. Before, there were hardly any religious programs. At the same time, *kawaliyya*⁶ cheap songs increased. Class distinctions turned upside down. Upper classes became low and vice versa. We were completely cut off from the outside world: there was a cultural blockade, a scientific blockade, etc. We had to rely on old resources only in universities ... We didn’t have any leisure. Our life was very limited. There was no political awareness: you can only be a Baathist and this is it!”

After Rasha finished her B.A. in English at Baghdad University, she did an M.A. in the English language. She kept tutoring students and began working in gold with her father in order to secure spending money. After she finished her graduate degree, she could not find a job. She was so desperate that she agreed to work in a lawyer’s office where she had to clean the bathrooms and serve water and tea to the clients. Rasha quit this job after one of her sisters found about it and got very mad. After a short while,

⁶ *Kawaliyya* refers to gypsy singers and dancers whose performance is deemed vulgar and low.

Rasha took up two jobs, a morning job in a translation and photocopying office, and an evening job teaching English as a second major in the Faculty of Languages. For the former job, Rasha had to photocopy all the time while she was in the office and do the translation at home, even though she had applied for the job as a translator. She had to accept her boss's unfair demand to do all the required photocopying because of her need for money. Rasha's second job at the university was short-lived. Soon after the start of the academic year, a student approached her. He told her upfront that he was "Uday Saddam Hussein's man" and that he would like to start an affair with her. Rasha could not tell if the man was part of Uday's clique or if he was lying. In any case, she could not take risks and went home immediately after this exchange without submitting a written resignation. She never went back to campus and phoned her superior to inform him of her resignation. Uday was particularly notorious – if he liked a young woman he saw in public, he would have her. If she refused these advances, she and her family would face severe punishment, and she would not escape rape by him. In the 1990s, not only could Uday claim any woman he wanted, his associates began to do the same, taking advantage of the fact that people feared the repercussions. Rasha could not even tell her parents what happened, lest they prevent her from leaving the house again in their efforts to make sure that man would not find her.

In 2000, Rasha applied for a job at a humanitarian organization and she succeeded in getting it. Given that the organization was international, Rasha's salary was good and provided a relief from the financial hardships. After the war in 2003, Rasha was offered a better-paid job with the CPA as a translator. She was tempted to accept the offer and to join Sulaf and Randa, who were already working there, but a foreign colleague advised

her not to work with an occupation power. Rasha did not comprehend this concern fully at that time, but she trusted her colleague to a great extent and followed her advice. It was this same lack of awareness that made her support the war in 2003.

“I, as all Iraqis who were oppressed and lived in darkness, supported the war. We didn’t know what was going on around us. We couldn’t travel. We couldn’t have a comfortable life. The regime was totalitarian and ruthless. To us, the war would get us out of this situation. Everyone I talked to, with few exceptions, supported the war. The picture wasn’t clear. We thought we would live in a rosy dream after the fall of the regime. We thought the US, the most advanced country in the world, would take care of us. We thought they would bring us democracy. We thought we would surpass the Gulf countries because we have a secular tradition and a diverse society. We saw the big demonstrations in the UK and Europe and everywhere on the news. No one wanted the war. We used to say, ‘For heaven’s sake, can’t they shut up and leave us to live. Isn’t what we have been through enough!’”

Rasha’s family did not leave Baghdad during the war in 2003. They tried to listen to international news on the radio, as Saddam’s regime banned the acquisition of satellites. A limited number of people defied this ban and acquired satellites, but they had to be careful since the penalty was heavy. Hence, when the regime fell, a moment represented by the famous image of the fall of Saddam’s statue on April 9th, Rasha and her family were not aware of it. As mentioned in the Introduction, while many Iraqis in the UK told me they had witnessed this historical moment directly because they saw the fall of the statue live on TV, most of Iraqis in Iraq were not even aware of this event.

“My sister who lived nearby came to see us with her husband. They had a satellite and a generator so they were watching the news. She came before anyone knew about the fall of the statue. She was still at the entrance of our home when she began saying, ‘Congratulations, Saddam is gone. The regime fell.’ We opened the door and told her to shut up in case someone hears her and we’d all be in trouble. We tried to use the few Mandaean⁷ words we knew to ask her to shut up. She said, ‘I’m telling you Saddam is gone. Can’t you understand!’ She got inside the house and she told us about what she saw on TV. We had different reactions. I was surprised that this had become a reality. Saddam to me was like God, an unchanging fact in life. He is there all the time whether you like it or not. Imagine you wake up one day and you’re told there is no God. I was dazed.”

Rasha thought the worst she could see in life has gone. She still could not believe that the regime was toppled. She and her family did not venture out after the war. Along with other Iraqis, Rasha was shocked to see the looting and the destruction of state institutions that ensued. She did not know who to blame: Saddam’s loyalists who did not want to see a stable Iraq, or the criminals that Saddam released from prison shortly before the war, or the Americans who were behind this chaos and destruction as the conspiracy theories claimed. The days that followed intensified the disappointment.

“We were hoping the technocrats would take over. We hadn’t heard of the word ‘technocrats’ before and suddenly it was on everybody’s tongue. People were disappointed when the Iraqi Governing Council was set up on a sectarian quota. At the daily level, there was no electricity. We no longer had water 24/7. We had a terrible summer in 2003. The system of traffic lights disappeared. All types of fuel disappeared. Violence became rampant. The early killings targeted the barbers and hairdressers

⁷ The Mandaean language belongs to the Aramaic language family.

because they were seen as a part of Saddam's apparatus. Contracting and sub-contracting through the Americans became the norm. Corruption was obvious. Ordinary people's purchasing power evaporated. The borders were infiltrated. Most of the state offices remained closed. I don't know how the schools opened. The teachers insisted on going back to work despite the de-Baathification law. All teachers had to be Baath members in order to teach. Religiosity increased. There was a huge march on the anniversary of the murder of Imam Kadhim.⁸ Baghdad was clothed in black for this occasion. Iraqis who came from abroad to rule brought sectarianism with them. Everything began to collapse around us."

I heard Rasha tell Randa that she was not in touch with Fouad at all, and that she was avoiding the places he frequented. Rasha and Fouad, an Iraqi doctor who lived in London since his childhood, dated for four months. That was the first time Rasha dated a man. Rasha thought the relationship was serious and would end in marriage. Fouad, on his part, was carried away by Rasha's character and the fact that she was "a true Iraqi" because she lived in Iraq; however, he could not understand why Rasha refused to have any physical relationship with him. After four months, he broke up with her suddenly and without providing any explanations. The breakup was especially painful for Rasha because Fouad gave her flowers and a present a day earlier. Rasha was left with unanswered questions, pain and self-doubt. She spent hours telling me about Fouad and the relationship, trying to make sense of what happened. Many times, she would cry when she talked about him and about her emotions towards him.

Shortly after that the conversation on Fouad, Rasha and Randa said goodbye.

"Can you please stop shaking your leg! You made me dizzy," said Rasha.

⁸ Imam Kadhim is one of the twelve Imams venerated by Shia Muslims.

“I’m sorry. I’ll stop now,” I replied.

“Just try to relax. Besides, you need to have a different attitude. Give the guy a chance. You never know. You already made up your mind, and this is wrong.”

“Rasha, no Iraqi guy will want to marry a woman who has been in relationships.”

“Well, you can go to Syria and have your hymen reconstructed. You can go to Dalia’s doctor. Dalia seems to think highly of him and to trust him,” she answered.

Dalia is a good friend of Rasha. She left Iraq recently and managed to apply for asylum in the UK. Rasha was keen on introducing me to Dalia, who was defiant enough to have affairs with men when she was in Iraq. In fact, though Rasha adheres to the Iraqi conservative values regarding women, virtue and pre-marital sex, she is open enough to accept women like Dalia and me, who have been in relationships. I first met Dalia at Rasha’s place, which was close to where I was living in London. Dalia was in her twenties, tall and slim, with a nice figure and long black hair. She was wearing tight denim pants with a metal belt that hung down to her knees, and a tight black T-shirt with a big scoop neck. She had many accessories on, and wore heavy make-up. Dalia spoke coquettishly, moving her eyebrows a good deal. Before meeting Dalia, Rasha warned me that Dalia did not know limits or tact, and that she may ask some personal questions. On the other hand, Rasha advised me to be open with Dalia about my personal life, as this would make Dalia open up and tell me about her adventures in Iraq and the UK, and about other Iraqi women. Rasha was worried that the distance I tend to keep would discourage Dalia. Little did I suspect that Rasha’s worries were unwarranted. When Dalia came, I thought a hurricane hit the room. Her spirited character and loudness combined with her immediate blunt questioning about my life caught me by surprise.

“So I finally met you. Rasha talks about you all the time,” Dalia said.

“Well, she talks about you a lot, also.”

“You live in New York, right?” Dalia asked.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Did you date there?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Tell me, did you sleep with the guys you went out with?”

“Sometimes,” I replied uncomfortably.

Dalia turned to Rasha and said with her left eyebrow raised, “Wow, she is naughty! You don’t give this impression. Why don’t you dye your hair and wear makeup!”

“I thought she was a widow or divorced when I first met her, and she thought I was a cow,” Rasha laughed.

“Come on! I didn’t think you were a cow! I thought, ‘Wow, this woman must be very confident. She is overweight and she is wearing a white dress, which would make her look bigger. Don’t distort what I told you,’” I answered with a smile.

“Wait, wait. I have a question. Are you still a virgin?” asked Dalia.

“Damn, Dalia! You’re relentless! I said I’ve been in relationships. How can I be a virgin?” I answered.

“Well, I’m wondering if you had it in the desert style.”

“What? What is the desert style?” I asked.

“Where are you from, *habibti*? Are you really an Iraqi? How can you be an Iraqi and you don’t know what the desert style is!” Dalia exclaimed.

“Oh, her mom was of Lebanese origin so she doesn’t know these terms.”

“The desert style means anal sex, *habibti*,” Dalia answered sarcastically.

“No. I didn’t do it the desert style!” I answered.

Dalia jumped from her chair and hugged me.

“Good for you! I really wouldn’t have thought so if I saw you in the street.”

I was very uncomfortable by this time and had to divert the attention from me. I asked Dalia about herself. Dalia began to tell us angrily about her “second loss of virginity.” In Iraq, Dalia kept her virginity by having anal sex – or the desert style as she liked to put it – only. When she came to the UK, she slept with a man and lost her virginity. Regretting this move, she decided to have her hymen reconstructed in Syria when she went there to have a few plastic surgeries, including a surgery for her nose, liposuction and botox for thin cheeks and lips. After returning to the UK, she met an Iraqi man, who assured her that he was experienced and he would not penetrate her. Unfortunately, Dalia lost her virginity again. It was hard to keep a straight face while listening to Dalia’s account. While I was trying not to laugh, Rasha burst into laughter when Dalia said, “The idiot penetrated me. I had just had the operation. I didn’t even have the time to enjoy it [having the hymen].” Dalia got mad especially at Rasha, and asked her if she was happy that she was still intact.

Rasha replied, “Dalia, you’re like the woman in this joke. There is a woman who kept going to a doctor for hymen reconstructions. At one time, she asked him ‘Doctor, don’t you have hymens that come with zippers, so that I open it when I want and close it when I want.’”

“Why did you do all these operations?” I asked.

“Well, it is very cheap. All these operations cost me around \$700. Can you imagine this! I hate working out and I wanted to get rid of the fat. I had very thin cheeks and lips, and I really didn’t my looks. By the way, I can give you the number of my doctor if you want to have any plastic surgery, or if you want to reconstruct your hymen before marriage,” Dalia said.

“Don’t worry. I don’t want to have any plastic surgery. I had one for my nose when I was in Iraq but that was because I had a failed deviation surgery. I won’t be with a man who wouldn’t respect me because I’m not a virgin,” I replied.

“Oh, God! Are you one of these girls who believe in this bullshit! Look Iraqi men would never ever trust an Iraqi woman who lost her virginity. Even if he agrees to marry you, he’ll always doubt you and remind you of your past. So give them what they want. They want a virgin, be a virgin,” Dalia said.

“Well, we’re not going to agree on this issue,” I answered.

Rasha was referring to this conversation when we were sitting in the café. It was six o’clock by now. After a few minutes, I got a text from Laith saying he just got off the train, and he would be there shortly. Rasha, who was facing the entrance of the café, told me that an Iraqi looking man walked in. I turned my head, and I saw a dark, head-shaved man of medium height. Laith, who wore denim pants and a T-shirt that showed his well-built muscles, walked towards us and greeted us. His hazel eyes and big Roman nose, with a that curve started in the space between the eyes, gave him a strange appearance. Before sitting down, Laith asked us if we would like to have some deserts as he saw the coffee cups on the table. Though we said we did not want any, he went ahead and bought two pies.

A small talk ensued. Rasha and Laith realized that they are both from the south of Iraq and they began to talk in the *shroogi* dialect used by Iraqi southerners. When I was in Iraq, the *shroogi* dialect was looked down upon; it indicated that the speaker was an unsophisticated member of a low class. This perception, first promoted by the British to dismiss the Iraqi Shia, was consolidated by the Baath regime. Rasha told me that while she used the *shroogi* dialect at home, she switched to the Baghdadi dialect when she went to school or when she was around her friends lest people would laugh at her. However, after the fall of Saddam, there was a reaction to this negative association, and Iraqi southerners began to openly and intentionally use the *shroogi* dialect. When I began interviewing Rasha, I noticed her use of *shroogi* sometimes instead of the Baghdadi dialect that she usually used when conversing with me. Of course, she was fully aware of the significance of the interviews, and I thought her use of the *shroogi* dialect in this particular instance was meant to convey an aspect of her identity and her pride of her native dialect.

“When did you leave Iraq?” I asked Laith.

“I left in the early 1990s. I went to Germany and applied for asylum. After I got the German passport, I came to the UK as an EU citizen,” Laith answered.

“Why did you decide to come to the UK? Zainab and I know a good number of Iraqis who arrived in Europe first and then they came to the UK once they were naturalized,” replied Rasha.

“There is a huge Iraqi community here. You don’t find that many Iraqis in Germany. It’s depressing to be there, so I thought of coming and living here. What about you? When did you leave?”

“I left in 1997. I lived in Beirut for five years before I went to New York to study.”

“I left three years ago. My best friend and a colleague died in explosions in Iraq. I was depressed so I went to Jordan through the organization I worked for. There was a training course for the employees, and my ex-boss was still working with the same organization but in the London branch. He asked me to apply for a visa to the UK. I applied and I got it. I couldn’t believe it because I just had a travel document, which is a piece of paper issued by the Iraqi government,” Rasha replied.

“Come on. You’re exaggerating. No Iraqis can get a tourist visa to the UK these days,” said Laith.

“She did. I saw the document with the British visa stamped on it,” I replied.

“Did you apply for asylum when you arrived in the UK,” Laith inquired.

“No. I thought I was visiting for a few weeks. I had no intentions of staying here. After a week, I decided I wasn’t going back to Iraq. I thought life could feel different. There was no bombing, no death surrounding me in London. Through my ex-boss, I found a job in the same organization I work for in Iraq, four months after my stay here. I applied for a work permit and I got it, so I didn’t have to apply for asylum. I was going to if I didn’t find a job by the time my visa expired.”

“Do you have the British passport?” Laith asked Rasha.

“No. I still have the definite leave to remain. I was about to get the indefinite leave to remain. I had two more months to get it when the laws changed, and I went back to square one. I was fortunate enough that I could stay in the UK when the laws changed,

because they became stricter and there was a high possibility I wouldn't be granted a work permit."

"I haven't heard of any Iraqi who managed to sort their papers out that quickly. You're lucky."

"Yeah, I'm lucky in comparison to other Iraqis. Anyway, enough of me."

"What do you do, Laith?" I asked.

"I did a degree in Engineering in Iraq, but I don't work in my specialty. I'm a truck driver. What about you? Um Ahmed [the matchmaker] didn't mention that you live in New York or that you're studying."

"Um Ahmed told me you're an engineer. As I told you on the phone, I live in New York, and I'm going back in a few weeks. I'm surprised Um Ahmed didn't say anything about it," I answered.

During the conversation, I found out that Laith, who was in his early 40s, was divorced and has a boy. He told us about his story with his wife, who coordinated with her brother to steal the cash he withdrew from the bank, and who took the boy and ran away from the house. He said he hoped God would punish her and her brother one day.

"Have you been married?" Laith asked.

"No," I answered.

"Why don't you talk and see if things can work out between you?" Rasha said.

I saw Rasha reclining on the sofa and beginning to read some printouts. I could not believe that Rasha left me alone to deal with this situation.

"Well, are you open to the idea of marriage?" Laith asked.

“Yes. I’m not against the idea but I need to finish my degree. I have two more years left.”

“How old are you?”

“Thirty four.”

“Well, if you aren’t against the idea of marriage, things are simple. You’re at a critical age. You don’t have many years left. I have to be honest. I think we can get married and start a family, and you have to quit your study in this case,” Laith said.

“I can’t quit. I’ve been working on my Ph.D. for years. I won’t quit now!”

“Well, it is up to you, but I’m telling you’re at a critical age. If you don’t have children now, it’ll be too late. When you have children, you’ll never be able to work with your degree. Your degree will be useless. The situation is really simple. What do you think?”

Laith and I went on and on making the same arguments. While he insisted we should marry now and I should give up my study, I maintained that I would not quit. At a certain point, Rasha leaned forward and asked Laith.

“Tell me. Do you have savings? Are you planning to buy a house? If you want to settle down, you need to provide a secure a life for Zainab.”

“I don’t have much. My wife and her brother took everything. Right now, I’m living in the moment. Sometimes, I decide I want to travel, so I pack and go away. I love to live spontaneously. Zainab, I hope you don’t have a problem with living in the moment, like if I tell you, ‘let’s pack and travel?’”

“This isn’t a responsible way if you’re planning to get married and to have kids. How can you live spontaneously and without planning if you have kids? You need to

provide financial security for your family. You can't just come here and say you want to marry without thinking about the future," Rasha answered.

"I know but the point is whether Zainab wants to quit her study and remain in the UK, or not," Laith said.

"I can't make up my mind right now. I need to think about it. I didn't realize that Um Ahmed didn't mention I'm studying," I answered.

"Look the matter is really simple: you're at a critical age. You don't have many years left to have kids, and I don't see the point of finishing your degree."

"It isn't that simple to me. I have to think about it," I answered.

"Well, I don't think getting married is a good idea if you don't have any savings and security in your life," Rasha replied.

"I think we need to leave now. It is already seven o'clock," I said.

"Don't you want to have dinner? I would like to invite you out for dinner. Come on, please. You don't have anything to do, do you?" Laith asked.

"Yes, we do. We're going to watch a movie with a friend at 7:30," I answered.

Laith insisted on inviting us for dinner and asked if we could cancel our meeting. We made it clear we could not. We said goodbye to him at the entrance of the café, and we went to Angel Station. Once we crossed the street, I asked Rasha, "How could you do that to me! What on earth came over you!"

Rasha laughed, "You had to go through it on your own. You had to deal with it yourself. You did OK. He isn't a good match. A truck driver! And he wants to live spontaneously. He wouldn't be a good husband."

“I don’t care whether he is a good match or not. I wasn’t going to marry him anyway. You shouldn’t have let me alone to deal with it,” I replied.

“Take it easy. Now, you have the experience all Iraqi women go through.”

I did not answer Rasha since I did not want us to have an argument. What mattered to me was that this meeting was over. Still, I could not shake the encounter off my mind. I was surprised at how easy it was for Laith to suggest, within less than half an hour of our meeting, that we should get married. Nothing seemed to give him pause: not our educational difference or the fact that we were total strangers. What struck me was his assumption that what I could/should walk away from my study and everything else in order to get married. My situation in the UK seemed a far cry from the experiences of Hanan and my mother’s generations. These women had high social and political aspirations; moreover, they were taken seriously. For instance, my father waited for my mother for eight years while she did her Ph.D. in Russia. I, on the other hand, was told that I was a loose woman because I got in touch with men, that I should be a virgin so that I could find a man, and that I should give up my dreams of having a Ph.D. in order to marry a stranger.

Rasha, who is a great source of jokes and has a special way of delivering them, began to tell some fresh jokes. Nadia managed to change my mood, and we laughed all the way. When we got to the Institute of Contemporary Art, we found Pierre – Rasha’s boss in Iraq – waiting for us. Pierre, who is French and in his early fifties, is a tall and slim man. He speaks perfect Arabic, and we always speak to him in Arabic. After we collected our tickets at the information desk, we entered the theater. Rasha was telling Pierre about “my groom” and catching up with him. She was clearly delighted to see

Pierre, whom she calls her guardian angel since she would not have been able to come to, and stay in, the UK without his unlimited support. Before the beginning of the movie, My Country My Country, I got my pack of pocket issues and handed it to Rasha.

“Why are you giving her tissues?” asked Pierre.

“Pierre, Rasha will start crying during the movie. Whenever we watch a documentary about Iraq, she cries. I’m getting her prepared now.”

Rasha, who thought my gesture was amusing, was laughing and said, “I won’t cry this time. You’ll see.”

“OK! We’ll see, but I’m not putting the tissues back in my handbag.”

The movie opened with a song by the famous Iraqi singer, Kadhim al-Saher, singing in a sad voice and in a slow rhythm a song called ‘*ya watani*.’⁹ Once Rasha heard the word ‘*ya watani*,’ she burst into tears. Rasha feels so strongly about Iraq. Whenever she hears the news or reads something about it, she gets emotional. Once she compared her relationships to London and to Baghdad.

“London means the present, future, security, life and fun. Iraq is my past, friends, family and roots. All the people I know and I meet here relate to me on the basis that I’m an Iraqi. It is like when a person gets married and leaves the family house and starts living in a new house. He isn’t separated from his family emotionally. What adds fuel to the fire is that you know that the country you left is bleeding. You know it is in tremendous pain. You can’t but feel pity for it. I see what is happening to Iraq. I see that fire is devouring it up. This is all very painful. I have a strong sense of pity. I’m sorry that I feel pity. I wish I felt homesick. Of course, I feel nostalgic when it comes to songs,

⁹ *Ya watani* means my country. The rest of the opening line is: “My country, good morning. Bring everyone together. Heal your wounds. I wish to see you laugh one day. When is sadness going to release you, my country?”

memories, food and everything. I can't have fun but with Iraqis. I enjoy Iraqi jokes. I have British friends, but when it comes to fun, it has to be in the Iraqi way. This is how I'm molded. I'm too old to change. I've created an Iraqi environment here. However, I feel more pity than nostalgia. People who left in the so-called old good days are eaten up by nostalgia. To me, England is home now."

Rasha believes the change in her feelings towards England and Iraq stem from her last visit to Iraq in 2005. Rasha visited her family a year after she left Iraq in 2004. That visit was painful. Not only could she not believe the destruction she saw on her way from Amman to Baghdad, she could not go to her parents' house directly lest the neighbors see her. In 2005, anyone who came from abroad and/or worked with any international organization at any point became a target; s/he would either be murdered or kidnapped for ransom. Rasha's family feared word would get out that she came from the UK through neighbors. Rasha had to go her sister's house and only went to the family's house at night. She was deeply hurt that she had to sneak into the house at night like a thief. Moreover, she could not see her friends, for the sake of her safety and theirs, and had to hide when the neighbors visited her mother.

"I stayed in Baghdad for two weeks. I lived in terror. I was just shocked. Since then, I stopped feeling homesick. One day, without intending it, I said to my father, 'I want to go home.' My dad was surprised and said sadly, 'This is home.' I replied, 'I mean London. I want to go home, to where I feel safe.' ... One day, I insisted on going to Karradah, my favorite shopping area. I love Karradah. I love Iraq. I feel I'm a small bit of Iraq. It is like I'm nothing without Iraq, but Karradah is the place where I would want to spend all my life. My brother agreed to take me but insisted that I should cover my hair.

Otherwise, I would be recognized either as a non-Muslim or as a visitor, and both scenarios are dangerous. When I got out of the car, I left the scarf behind me. I didn't want to cover my hair. I felt as if I were walking in a graveyard, and death could hunt me at any second. My eyes were wide open. I loved the bridge that connected the part of Baghdad where I lived and Karradah. It has the best view of Baghdad. I couldn't believe that I was back on this bridge but the feeling was different. I was expecting death. It was an awful feeling that ended my homesick feeling."

Despite this, Rasha still feels that she is an Iraqi, first and foremost, because she managed to leave to Iraq. As far as she is concerned, her Iraqi identity encompasses all the different components of her identity.

"Even now, I feel I'm an Iraqi. I left at the right time. I maintained my sense of being an Iraqi. When people hear that I'm a Mandaean, they see me as belonging to a minority, but I don't see myself like that. I left Iraq when I was 30. The last feeling I had when I left Iraq is that I'm an Iraqi. Then you have: I'm lower middle-class; Baghdadi; sort of a feminist because I look for equality; from a sort of open family; from the south because I was born there, my family is from there and I speak the dialect; and then I'm a Mandaean. I didn't suffer to the extent that makes say I'm a minority wherever I go. My family, for instance, have begun emphasizing their Mandaean identity. They had to leave Iraq because they are Mandaeans. They applied for resettlement as Mandaeans. In Syria, they lived where the Mandaeans congregate. They began looking for an identity after they lost all the other identities. The Mandaean identity is helpful to them. The Iraqi identity doesn't help or enable them to live. On the contrary, it'll result in their death.

They lost their Baghdadi identity because they left Baghdad because of the violence that targets them. What is left is the Mandaean identity. This situation was imposed on them.”

Rasha’s analysis is fascinating and shows her exposure to the identity talk dominant in the British media or among young Iraqis. Rasha perceives herself as an Iraqi, and she understands this identity to consist of different dynamic components. Interestingly, she believed that leaving Iraq enabled her to maintain her Iraqi identity, unlike her family who were forced to embrace a Mandaean identity and to emphasize their minority status. In addition, Rasha saw Britain to be part of her identity even though she was not yet a permanent resident in the UK. It was through living in the UK that she continued seeing herself as an Iraqi.

However, Rasha could not escape her Mandaean identity even in the UK, given the sectarian, religious, and ethnic categorization among Iraqis. Ironically, the Mandaean identity enabled her to be more accepted by most Iraqis. Had she been identified as a Shia, Sunni or Kurd, she would have been excluded from different circles and networks. While the Mandaean identity provided a wider social circle, this state of affairs did not mean total acceptance. Many times, Rasha was told by some Muslim Iraqis that she should appreciate their tolerance that they allowed a non-Muslim inside their houses. Such attitudes were shocking to Rasha, who had not had such experiences in Iraq, where the Sunni, Shia, Christian, Kurdish and Mandaean neighbors mingled and no one cared or thought about their differences. While Rasha was hurt by the attitudes of Iraqis in the UK, she came to understand more the impact of the exiled Iraqi politicians in promoting sectarian and ethnic identities.

“To be honest, I experienced sectarianism here, in London. When I left Iraq, we didn’t have any problem. The neighbors next door are Sunnis. Their son married a Shia woman. The family on the other side consisted of a wife who is a Kurd, born in Mosul, and is a convert to Shiism, while her husband is a Sunni from Baghdad. When we talked about being a Sunni and Shia, it was just a cultural exchange about rituals. Everyone mingled with everyone else. We didn’t have religious sectarianism or class distinctions. Everyone around us was like that. All the neighborhoods were mixed. Some neighborhoods were inhabited by people from a certain profession or class, such as the Kifa’at, where mostly professors lived, or al-Atiba’, where doctors lived, al-Jadiriyya where people from the upper class lived ... We lived under an oppressive regime and in hardships. We didn’t have a life of luxury that allowed us to think about sectarianism. When I came to the UK, I was shocked at the dominance of sectarianism among the community. Then, I understood what happened in Iraq, because the politicians who returned to Iraq are the product of the UK, not of Iraq. I couldn’t believe the level of divisions they have here.”

The movie lasted around 90 minutes. Rasha did not cry during it as much as I expected. I saw her wipe her tears every now and then. The documentary is about a Sunni doctor who lives in a Sunni area in Baghdad, al-Adamiyya. He works in a hospital close to his house. Not only did he provide medical service to patients who were both Sunnis and Shia, he gave money to those who seemed poor. The documentary follows him in his unsuccessful attempt for nomination during an upcoming election. His political program, which was based on rejection of violence and sectarian divisions, did not enable him to secure a nomination. When the movie was over and we walked out of the theater, we

were silent. Like any documentary on Iraq, this movie showed the destruction and the depressing situation in the country. It was as if the three of us needed sometime to process what we had seen.

“That was a powerful movie,” Pierre said.

“It is sad. I was heartbroken when I heard Kadhim al-Saher sing *ya watani*. It was painful. The neighborhood where the doctor lives is close to the campus we went to,” Rasha replied.

“We used to go to that hospital a lot when I was still in Baghdad. Adamiyya is where we used to go to buy the groceries and meat. It was very close to where I lived. And the Sarrafiyya Bridge! We drove through that bridge all the time,” I said.

“Yeah, it was very painful to see the Sarrafiyya Bridge in the movie. I can’t believe it was bombed.¹⁰ Are you OK, Zainab?” Rasha commented.

“Yes, I’m OK,” I answered.

“I don’t know how you can control your emotions. How can you see all these places and not cry!” Rasha said.

“I’m the product of a totalitarian regime. I learned not to show any emotions, or laugh at jokes ridiculing Saddam.”

We got to Charring Cross Station. Rasha and I said goodbye to Pierre who lived northeast of London, and we took the Bakerloo train. We did not say much during the ride. Rasha mentioned something about her Iraqi passport. She got off at Baker Street to take the Hammersmith train.

¹⁰ The Sarrafiyya Bridge was built by the British in the 1940s. It is considered a historical landmark since it was the second modern bridge to be built in Baghdad. In April 2007, an explosion destroyed one fourth of the bridge.

The next day, I received a phone call from Rasha around 11 a.m. She was crying and screaming. At first, I could not understand what she was saying because she was talking in the bathroom. It turned out that Rasha just received her new Iraqi passport in the mail. When she opened the package, she saw that her last name was misspelled. Instead of Gasid, it was written Kasid.

“When I went to the Iraqi Embassy to apply for the passport, I was told that I should write my name and surname in English as well, and that the way I spell them will be written on the passport. I asked them to take extra care because my last name is written with g, not k. Then I get the wrong spelling! I’ve been waiting for this passport for more than a year. My name in the passport is not compatible with my name on the British documents. This will always be a problem. If I want to apply for the infinite leave to remain, for visas, I will always have to explain the discrepancy, and I may be told that my documents are not correct. I knew it. I knew the Iraqis would make a stupid mistake.”

“Did you call the embassy?”

“Yes, I did. Guess what the consul told me! He said I should be happy that I finally got the passport as people are waiting for two years to get it. He said I’m lucky that I finally received it. He said most of the passports that are issued have more serious mistakes, like in the date of birth.”

“Can they do something about it?”

“He said I should go to the embassy to have the correct name written on the page of the notes. The stamp of the embassy will be on the correction so that embassies and the British government will recognize it. Can you imagine! After more than a year of waiting, I get a passport with the wrong name.”

“I’m so sorry to hear this.”

“On top of that, he is telling me I should be happy! Be happy for what! As if my life as an Iraqi isn’t complicated enough. Now, I have a passport with the wrong name. Whenever I’ll apply for visas or residence here, I’ll have to say, ‘Please, look at the correction on page 5. Oh, it is handwritten, but it has the stamp of the embassy.’ Isn’t that great.”

“Try to calm down. Would you like me to come to the office and we go out?”

“No. Thank you. We have recruitment today. I can’t leave. I’ll see you after work. Thanks for listening. Let’s meet at five in my office.”

* * *

I went back to New York a few weeks later. Rasha calls me from work almost everyday after I wake up. We talk for a few minutes. She makes sure I am doing well, and, most importantly, updates me on the community, and people I met in the UK. Indeed, Rasha has been my link to the Iraqi community in London since I finished my fieldwork. Given that we were very close in London and that she is sharp, she knows what information and details matter to my research. Last year, her family was resettled in Finland. Rasha felt a tremendous relief; she always worried about the future of her family, her nieces and nephews in particular.

Conclusion

The great majority of Iraqis in the UK remain on the margins of the British society. The “success” of those with success stories is limited to the domain of wealth and career. The space they occupy is that of nostalgia – nostalgia for an imagined place (Iraq), for an imagined time (the golden age of the 1950s) and/or imagined experience (that of Iraqis who lived during that golden age). They are on the margins because their social reference is the “was,” rather than the “is.”¹ That they had to flee Iraq and lose contact with families and friends made Iraq a constant object of worry and yearning. Unfortunately, the long-awaited and much anticipated removal of Saddam Hussein ultimately dashed their hopes of return. Not only has exile become permanent, Iraq itself continues to suffer further violence and destruction.

The stories of Iraqis in the UK provide a venue to do an anthropology of Iraq through studying the Iraqi diasporic community. Thus, this dissertation is, to a great extent, an ethnographic study of Iraq. Most studies on Iraq focus on the political history of the Iraqi state. Though this literature offers nuanced analyses of the Iraqi state from its inception in 1921 until the present, it remains abstract in the sense that it examines big events to the exclusion of individuals. This dearth in individual narratives is due to the impossibility of conducting ethnographic research in Iraq during the last four decades.²

¹ Stewart (1988), p. 227.

² The only ethnographic works on Iraq were conducted in the 1960s by Elizabeth Fernea (1969), Robert Fernea (1970), and Wilfred Thesiger (1964).

In addition to questions related to exile and life in the UK, I seek to tease out accounts about Iraq, and about life in Iraq under Saddam Hussein's regime. Given that the great majority of Iraqis fled Saddam Hussein's brutalities, that they had family members who were killed or disappeared, that they had their hopes of return shattered after 2003, they are living these tragedies every single day in the UK. This is the reality that travels with, and defines, them. Life history became a fitting method to write this ethnographic account of Iraq and to bring to light individual stories. It allowed me to elaborate on what it meant to live under Saddam's regime and on panic and suffering. It has also enabled me to bring out stories about the pre-Baath era, and how this era came to be perceived in relation to later developments. Through focusing on the accounts of five Iraqis in the UK, I discuss different questions related to Iraq. Hazar's story calls attention to the plight of the so-called Iraqis of Iranian origin. Those Iraqis who were deported to Iran between 1980 and 1982 because their great-grandparents held the Persian Nationality under the Ottomans had to live as refugees in Iran. Hazar's narrative points to the trauma of deportation, to living in poverty in a hostile country where she was seen as an Arab, and to the struggle to be accepted by her family. Rasha's account, on the other hand, tackles the hardships of living under the blockades and through three wars, and of living under a dictatorship. The accounts by Khalil and Hanan, on the other hand, emphasize political life and vibrancy in pre-Baath Iraq. All of these issues bear relevance to an anthropology of Iraq.

The salience of Iraq in Iraqis' conversations and thoughts is striking. This presence, moreover, is characterized by the absence of the UK even though some of them have lived in the UK for thirty years. I tried to engage my interviewees in conversations

about the multicultural discourse in the UK and about experiences of discrimination and prejudices, but to no avail. My constant questioning about life in the UK during interviews was ignored. If the UK ever came into conversation, it was usually in a quick remark about how they never encountered any problems with the police or authorities and about the respectful treatment they had. I then recognized that my anxiety over the absence of the UK stemmed from my conviction that I need to provide a balanced account that focuses on both Iraq and the UK. It was I who was more concerned about the multicultural talk in the UK than the Iraqis I met. Once I paid attention to this fact, I ceased to be insisting in seeking critique of life in the UK, and focused on the concerns of the interviewees.

The preoccupation with Iraq brings up the question of nostalgia. As I noted earlier, Iraqis yearn for a certain time, place and experience, for a past that only partially existed at best. The turn of events after the fall of Saddam Hussein shattered not only the hope to return but also the romantic picture that the majority of Iraqis³ had of Iraq. The impact of three decades of dictatorship, during which the country went to three wars and placed under an embargo, began to sink in only after 2003. Iraqis began to realize there was no future left. It is this loss of hope that has aggravated a sense of tragedy among them: that, after all these years of exile, return is no longer possible and home is no longer the way it is imagined. When the very object of desire is destroyed, what is left is a romantic past that becomes more idealized vis-à-vis the present. The narratives by Khalil, Hanan, Hazar, Ali and Rasha reflect the increased comparison of the present with the past: the political and social situations after 2003 provided further material for

³ For instance, Hazar did not experience such a disappointment. On the contrary, the fact that she is able to visit the Shia holy places in Iraq was something she always yearned for.

comparison between a utopian past (of the pre-Baath era), and later decades (the Baath regime and Saddam Hussein's rule) plus the post-2003 events (the American invasion, sectarian violence, displacement and sectarian quota system, etc.) Hence, nostalgic feelings for an imagined past have been intensified in relation to the bleak present and future.

The endeavor of doing an ethnographic work of Iraq, as well as of an exiled community, shaped my choice of the five characters to a great extent. The stories of most of the Iraqis I interviewed are equally compelling and can be the basis of a life history chapter. However, the accounts of these five Iraqis are both unique and representative. They are representative in the historical topics they cover, like the above-mentioned questions of the blockade, Iraqis of Iranian origin, political life in pre-Baath Iraq, Iraqi women's movements, social and political transformations under Saddam Hussein's regime, the role of the Iraqi opposition to Saddam Hussein's regime in the UK and life after the US invasion of Iraq. In other words, these interviews shed light on social and political aspect in Iraq over the last sixty years at least and on life in diaspora.

These interviews are unique in that these five Iraqis offered candid and open accounts of their lives and views, and had experiences that other Iraqis in the UK did not have. These five Iraqis openly discussed issues that other interviewees did not mention. One issue is poverty, which is associated with the loss of status. In this regard, both Rasha and Hazar talked about considerable financial difficulties in their lives. Hazar's narrative sheds light on the plight of Iraqis who arrived in Iran penniless. The prejudice against Arabs in Iran and the confiscation of Hazar's family's property in Iraq resulted in a drastic downward mobility for her and her family. After living a comfortable life in a

middle-class neighborhood in Iraq, Hazar lived in poverty in Iran. Not only is account insightful regarding Iraqi deportees, it also points generally to what happened to those who had to flee Iraq suddenly (whether to the UK, Eastern Europe or Arab countries), and who were not allowed to take anything with them. Most of these Iraqis found it hard to make ends meet in the host countries. The fact that the UK offered them social benefits made things more bearable, though that did not eliminate the shame of downward mobility. As I mention in the Overview, many Iraqi doctors who were educated in Iraq could not work in the UK unless they took the board exams and started from the bottom of the ladder. Job opportunities for engineers, teachers, lawyers and merchants were even harder. For instance, Hanan's comfortable life is due to her husband's successful business. Iraqis who fled Iraq before Saddam Hussein became the president, and who managed to smuggle their savings abroad, were better off than those who were forced to leave suddenly. Rasha's narrative of the blockade years, on the other hand, conveys the devastating impact of the blockade on the Iraqi society in general. Rasha hails from a lower-middle class family. During the 1970s and 1980s, her father could support his big family relying on his salary. With the inflation during the early 1990s, the family struggled financially to a great extent. Through Rasha's story, I discuss the destruction of the middle and lower-middle classes in Iraq and the destitution of the majority of Iraqis.

Another question related to openness is how interviewees would share their political views, whether of current or past political events. For instance, unlike (ex-)communist Iraqis who either idealized or dismissed the ICP, I found Khalil's criticism of the ICP and careful narration about certain events to be very balanced. Hanan was very outspoken in her opinions, such as her criticism of Palestinians and Arab

nationalism. While both of these accounts cover more or less the same era, they offer two different perspectives of the same events. Also, these five Iraqis were willing to express their views even they knew could be problematic, especially their positions toward the war in 2003. In fact, the question of the war in 2003 has been an additional dividing factor among Iraqis in the UK – in addition to the political, class, sectarian, ethnic and educational differences. Bitter arguments over the war and the occupation of Iraq by the US have resulted in breakups in friendships and family relationships. Some Iraqis no longer express their true opinion of the war back in 2003. I had to be cautious in raising this matter since some people took offense when I asked if they had been for or against the war. Khalil directly told me that he supported the war because he thought it could have had good results. Rasha, on the other hand, is more critical of her pro-war position back in Iraq. As she said, she was shocked at her political naïveté.

Ali's critique of the Shia religious establishment – whether in Iran, Syria or the UK – and its political role in Iraq constitutes a view rarely heard. That Ali was willing to share his views with an outsider like me provided me access to a critical religious voice. While some religious Iraqis I met alluded to their disapproval of corrupt religious clerics, they were not willing to speak about it during the interviews. Moreover, the fact that Ali is a devout Muslim who has studied Islamic theology makes his critique more poignant and credible. Many communists (like Hanan) criticized the religious establishment, but this critique stems from a general disparaging position towards religion. Ali provides a critique from within the establishment, so to speak, and from his commitment to religion.

Aside from these “objective” issues, my choice of these five people brings up the issue of my position in the field. On one level, I was not a neutral outsider who was doing

research on the Iraqi community. I am an Iraqi, and I was related to as such. I constantly heard comments on why I should have a code of behavior different from foreign women researchers who were in touch with Iraqis in the UK at the same time I was in London. I was often told that I was not an American and, therefore, I should not talk to Iraqi men freely or ask them for their phone numbers because this behavior was not acceptable. Had I been an American, I was reminded time and again, my action would not have raised eyebrows. While being an “insider” constituted a constraint in this regard, I do not consider it to be a drawback. After all, no anthropologist can be a complete outsider, as the observer – whether Iraqi, in this case, or a foreigner – is always observed. In case of a “native” anthropologist, certain expectations and assumptions existed. For instance, the attendants of Shia institutions during religious occasions received me coldly and asked me if I was Iraqi. My perfect Iraqi accent did not factor in their perception of me. What surprised them was the fact that I was not veiled – even though I wore a scarf. Had I been an Western anthropologist, my dress code, which was very decent, but indicated that I was not veiled, would not be a problem. Hence, Iraqis’ perception of me provided insights I would not have received if I were not an Iraqi.

On another level, I myself was not a “disinterested outsider,” working on the Iraqi community in the UK. Rather, I already had questions and convictions that I wanted to pursue and to bring into the text. For example, had it not been for my mother’s beliefs that the Iraqi communists would have been capable of cruelties had they had power, I may not have paid close attention to the Mosul Massacre or a critical view of the ICP. Hence, Khalil’s critique was an opportunity for me to discuss the question of the action of the ICP. In the same vein, had I not lived in Iraq during the blockade and under Saddam

Hussein's dictatorship, and had I not witnessed the collapse of the society and basic services, I may have not included Rasha. Finally, had I had idealistic views of the Shia religious establishment, I would not have sought someone like Ali.

I was also an insider in a very unusual sense. Iraqis, particularly Shia, opened up to a great extent once they knew that all my immediate family members died because of Saddam Hussein's persecution. The discourse of suffering is rampant among Iraqis in the UK. While I was told that I had my own share of suffering, I was reminded that my suffering paled in comparison to what the speaker experienced. One woman, Nada, once told me that she would agree to be help me because I suffered under Saddam Hussein's regime; however, she was quick to add that my suffering is nothing in comparison to her own tragedy and loss. Nada was deported to Iran in 1980 with her parents and sister. Her three young brothers were detained. The family knew nothing about them and cherished the hope they were still alive. After the fall of Saddam's regime in 2003, she went back to Iraq and found out that there were executed in 1987 and buried in mass graves. She could not find out how they were killed or which mass grave they were buried in. She does not know if they died under torture or if they were subjected to experiments. It was only after this discovery that the family could hold mourning sessions for the young men. To Nada, I am lucky because I know how my family died and where they are buried them. This knowledge, in her view, has enabled me to mourn and move on, whereas she is eaten up by questions about how they died and whether they suffered.

The discourse of suffering is also, associated with the question of identity. Suffering has become another element of who is "the true Iraqi" among fellow Iraqis. Some Shia Iraqis, especially, who had horrific experiences consider themselves to be

more Iraqi than Iraqis who had not lost family members. One of the comments I often heard from Iraqis who expressed their displeasure with those who assumed important positions in post-Saddam Iraq was, “They aren’t Iraqi. They didn’t suffer like us.” In other words, the discourse of suffering reflects a shift in social imagination, namely what constitutes an “Iraqi” and suffering as an essential component of the Iraqi identity to some Iraqis. In this case, the more the person suffered, the more s/he is an Iraqi. On the other hand, this discourse is predicated on the issue of power. Suffering is seen as conferring the privilege of having power in Iraq after 2003. An openly expressed view is that the more the person suffered, the more s/he is eligible to assume an important position in Iraq. Given all these issues at stake, the discourse of suffering has gained currency among Iraqis in the UK.

My choice of these five Iraqis is also related to the issue of gender. One of my intentions in this project was to focus on Iraqi women’s movement and education, their political activity prior to Saddam Hussein’s reign, their role in the public sector during the Iran-Iraqi War and the erosion of their achievements and roles under the blockade and the occupation after 2003. Iraqi women in the past were pioneers of women in the Arab world and even the Third World in terms of rights, responsibilities and positions in the government. While Hanan’s story stresses this aspect, Rasha’s and Hazar’s accounts show the social changes in the status of women under Saddam Hussein and after the American invasion. Also, through concerns expressed by Hazar and Rasha, and through my own experiences in London, I examine the changes within the Iraqi community. For example, my encounters with the groom and young Iraqi women and men show the beliefs of the younger generation, such as the emphasis on virginity and marriage, the

issue of arranged marriage and views towards pre-marital sex as far as women are concerned.

In addition to these explicit issues on gender, my selection of these five Iraqis is related to gender in another way. With hindsight, and following a comment made to me, I realize a trope of “the Iraqi man” pervades my text. Except for Khalil and Ali, the Iraqi men that appear in this text are either making advances or proposing. Khalil and Ali were not the average Iraqi men I encountered in the UK. Khalil is my parents’ best friend, and I could be myself around him whereas Ali had his own difficulties with the Iraqi community given his upbringing in India and his views. Indeed, my account of my interactions with other Iraqi men runs the risk of stereotyping them – hence the trope of the Iraqi man. My aim of providing that account – on both my interactions with men and women – is to point to what a woman anthropologist encounters in the field. Being an “insider” complicated this interaction since I was related to as an Iraqi woman and, hence, was expected to behave as one, whether by men or women. Also, by discussing my relations with both men and women, I aim to shed light on the social world they occupy.

In short, this dissertation is an anthropological study of Iraq as well as the Iraqi community in the UK. Through the life histories of five Iraqis who arrived in the UK during the last thirty years, I focus on the lived everyday under Saddam Hussein’s regime, the nostalgia for an Iraq that is imagined to have existed in the 1950s, the social and political transformations in Iraq and in diaspora, the meaning of living in the UK in the aftermath of the 2003 war, the various understandings of “home(s),” the reconfiguration of memory in light of present events and the impact of family memories

on the perceptions of Iraq held by the younger generation in the UK. For instance, Hanan, Rasha and Hazar perceive Iraq differently. While Iraq represented secular ideas and political vibrancy to Hanan, it is more associated with religious meanings to Hazar, given her family memories and the importance of faith in her daily life. To Rasha, Iraq became a place of terror after 2004 with the increase of suicide bombings and the loss of her friends. While these perceptions are the product of the three narrators' different views and backgrounds, they also indicate the changes in the social and political situations in Iraq throughout the decades. Indeed, one can describe Khalil and Hanan as "romantic exiles" whose aspirations ended in futility and tragedy, as Edward Carr says of the Russian exiles in Europe in the mid of the nineteenth century.⁴ Despite the futility of their struggles and the end of secular political life in Iraq, their past and the stories of their lives became the basis for the imagination of an ideal Iraq, namely "the good old days."

⁴ Carr (1933), p. 363.

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