

Amman : Responsibility for another Tragedy

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When Iraq was illegally invaded in 2003, separate from the grief, horror and fury of those who love the Middle East, was a common, selfish thought – none of us will be safe in the region, indeed in the wonders of the Islamic world, for decades, maybe centuries, to come. One commentator called the all:

‘A terrible mourning.’ As this is written reports are emerging of the shooting of western tourists in the Roman theatre in downtown Amman, Jordan.

On a shelf in the room where I work, are three tiny, exquisite, stone Roman seals, dug up in their hundreds and sold for little at the entrance to the magnificent amphitheatre. This was a jewel of Roman Philadelphia, now reached passing the shops, soukhs and the King Hussein Mosque of Amman’s teeming heart. The short walk takes for ever, as distractions from dusty antique treasures in shop windows, to loofas from the glimmering Gulf of Aqaba and other natural products, foods, spices and great baskets of shimmering semi precious stones, costing just one Jordanian Dinar (£1), Saddam t-shirts and every kind of mouth watering scent wafts from alleys, from fast food, Arab style, delay and divert.

Then, there suddenly, are the great colonnades, the towering tiers of seating carved from the rock of a vast natural indentation, for six thousand thespian worshippers, when Rome ruled. Off the main theatre is a small, intimate one, for dignitaries and their families and guests. This is now again a venue for theatre and dance on balmy evenings, under an azure sky..

There is a guide whose life has been devoted to the site. He is an archaeologist who has excavated and documented for as long as he can remember. When he was of retirement age, he could not bear to part with the place he loves, so now he takes tourists round and imparts his vast knowledge and passion for the small tips from visitors, who leave with much of his lifetime’s unique academia of one of the Middle East’s wonders, crammed into a brief wander.

‘Let me show you something’, he said on one visit, instructing me to walk to the far side of the vast performance area, whilst he stayed at the other.

Then he whispered. His whisper travelled across and around the theatre, up the tiers, volume increasing, spreading across the area and heavenward. An acoustic miracle from architects of another millennium.

On 4th September, two British tourists have been injured and one killed, with a Dutch national, an Australian and a Jordanian guide injured in a shooting at the site. Whilst an American diplomat was killed and last year’s hotel bombings killed sixty (and left many

question marks as to the real story), Jordan has been – as the region, a place of warmest welcomes to visitors. Arriving at the airport the welcomes include that of the resident airport cat, who rides round on the carousel as the luggage comes up and when it stops, wanders among passengers, occasionally favouring one and rubbing against legs, purring loudly.

There is a resident cat who favours certain visitors at the small hotel where I stay. He spots returning friends (or suckers) from his sunning area in a plot of trees across the road, when they appear in the restaurant three balconies up. Somehow he negotiates the balconies from ground level and sits the other side of the window, demanding a share of what ever is on the plate. Informality and warmth (notwithstanding, as ever in the region, complexities) are the hallmark of this tiny Kingdom, walking a political tightrope between the West and its neighbours, Israel, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Not unlike the cat negotiating the balconies – or the carousel.

I have only once felt unwelcome in Jordan. Heading back to Iraq in February 1998, when the world was convinced Britain and America would bomb again (in the event they bombed in December, Prime Minister Blair announcing a further illegal decimation in front of the Downing Street Christmas tree .)

Photographer Karen Robinson and I dumped our bags at the cat hotel (Hotel Firas, Jabal al Wabdeh) stroked the cat and headed downtown to usual haunts to buy items for Iraq : caps and hats for children undergoing cancer treatment who had lost their hair, crayons, colouring books and basic medicines. Familiar haunts always gave extra and discounts in solidarity.

This time there was no welcome, no discount, no meeting of the eye. As every Iraqi was being demonised as ‘Saddam’ by the popular Western media, we were clearly equally the face of the aggressive west, bent on attacking the collective Arab nation. The street word was that the British were behind this latest planned devastation. Britain’s arrogance in redrawing borders and donation of swathes of Palestine and Palestinian homes, to what has become the Israeli apartheid state and double dealings in the Middle East, in the last century is recent, never to be forgotten history.

The well of hate the US and Britain have drummed up in a complex but so welcoming region, is a sin of enormity at every level. The cat hotel staff decorate a stunning Christmas tree, every year. It is a work of art. Each evening, in breaks, they debate in front of it, the slight moving of a bauble, a bit of tinsel, to improve its beauty. But as the region is destabilised by western arrogance, few see these regional embracements of all our joyous celebrations. Land at Beirut at Christmas and as the plane approaches the airport after dark, all the pines across the mountains are a heart stopping, decorated fairyland of shimmering silver lights. Just before the invasion of Iraq, I sat at the bar in the cat hotel and reminisced about their beauteous trees. ‘ We did one last year too’, said the bar tender,’ but no one came.’ US and UK slaughter or threatened slaughter have scared visitors from this richest of cultural regions. Those who cancel are the losers.

The shootings in Roman Jordan are another tragedy, but to again return to George W. Bush’s infantile response to America’s tragedy on 11th September 2001:

‘we will track down those responsible’ (if the official version is correct : dead, stupid.) We know exactly who is responsible for elements of the warmest of peoples turning against those who they perceive as representatives of countries who have given nothing but blood, gore, greed, destruction and labelled it ‘freedom and democracy’ to the region.

And is the shot guide, my gentle archaeologist, thespian whisperer?

Read more from Felicity Arbuthnot on her website: <http://arbuthnot4iraq.blogspot.com/>

or on her BRussells Tribunal webpage: <http://www.brusselstribunal.org/bios/Arbuthnot.htm>

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