

Iraq's Streets Are Littered with the Memories of Our Dead

The daily repertoire of deadly misery leaves me suffocated, shouting aloud inside my head words I cannot write

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To no avail, the water pump wheezes tonight. Iraq, the [land between two rivers](#), is thirsty. Barely a few drops drip from the kitchen faucet in my family's residence in Baghdad.

The power is off, too, and private diesel generators roar deep into the night. The tranquility that used to lullaby Baghdad's alleys, allowing its residents to sleep during the hot summer nights on rooftops, has long gone. So has the safety that enabled them to do so in a now-distant lifetime, hardly visible beyond the thick plumes of smoke rising from a violent past that – in the collective memory of Iraqis – continues to burn.

"Iraq's night is long," the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish once wrote in [a poem](#) for his Iraqi peer, Saadi Youssef. In his own prophetic poem, "A Vision", Youssef [wrote](#):

"This Iraq will reach the ends of the graveyard / It will bury its sons in open country / Generation after generation / And it will forgive its despot." *

More than two decades have passed since the late Youssef wrote those lines in 1997, and Iraq still buries its sons, generation after generation.

As the last military choppers rape their way through the skies of Baghdad back to their military camps, and the lilting echo of the last Quran verse recited in nearby mosques fades away in grim alleys, where anguished mothers sob for lost sons, news arrives of the day's [fair share of death](#).

It is during the night that reports of air strikes, terrorist assaults and militia rocket attacks arrive. This lawlessness is enabled by the same lethal failure that pushes [miserable youths](#) to hang themselves, or to leap from the highest bridges in towns that, despite being bombed by western armies, rarely appear on TV screens in the West.

Western opportunists

Growing up in Iraq is traumatising. To be an Iraqi writer is life-threatening. I watch the daily repertoire of deadly misery, but for an endless series of assassinations and intimidation, I opt to stifle my pen. It leaves me suffocated, shouting aloud inside my head words I cannot write.

In today's Iraq, one needs to live by the saying "eat and chirp". Those dissatisfied with living on crumbs and who stray from the herd are [mowed down in broad daylight](#), executed by "unknown" gunmen under the gaze of CCTV cameras at their doorsteps.



An Iraqi woman standing next to her martyred son's portrait in Baghdad on 25 February 2021 (Photo by Nabil Salih)

This thuggery makes me think twice before writing a single word on Iraq – if a platform even considers a native's perspective worthy of publishing in the first place.

Iraq, after all, is a dream destination for many western opportunists drooling over the prospects of the next opening in the Global South. Not only are we, inferior humans, unable to travel and work in their countries as easily, but we are unable to find equal opportunities in our own lands, too.

They build their careers not only on our suffering, but also on our insights, tips and evocative stories. While these indolent tourists, who are usually detached from the streets, occupy jobs usually inaccessible to us, and [write divisively](#) from the safety of bureaus in a ghetto on the Tigris banks, we local writers pray that our emails merit a reply from equally clueless foreign Middle East editors.

But judging by the recycled, boring "hit" stories they deem "great", the latter seem to have struggled to write a postcard during their time "on the ground" without the help of local "colleagues" they keep in their shadow.

Stranger in Baghdad

So when writing becomes both dangerous and an unattainable luxury, [I walk](#). Every evening, I put on a pair of beaten shoes and wander the alleys of Baghdad alone.

What today's Iraq has to offer stabs me in the eyes, leaving me muted. How do I conjure adequate words in the presence of such tragedy?

The streets on which I flicked marbles with my friends and scurried under bullets no longer seem familiar. Or am I the stranger here? I do feel like one in [Baghdad](#), a city where militiamen and fine-suited crooks grow rich, and dead youth [stare from billboards](#) at the living who will soon follow them to the Najaf cemetery, either in coffins or in the company of confined relatives or friends – all thanks to war criminals of [Donald Rumsfeld](#)'s ilk.

With a heavy heart, I walk the streets of Baghdad, bitter to have arrived too late to see the city I love in its glamour, and grateful to have lived a few peaceful days in its bosom before war destroyed it.

How happy and naive and hungry we were before [Kanan Makiya](#) and his friends danced to the bombardment of Iraq! The "liberation" his ilk cheered for entailed dropping cluster bombs on my family's garden in Baghdad, where in previous years, my friends and I had chased a nylon football in bare feet, with joyful hearts. We were oblivious to a war that was holding a sickle over the gates of Iraq, to hordes of warmongering [columnists](#) in New York salivating at the imminent sight of fireworks over Baghdad.

I remember huddling with my family in my late grandmother's room when the bombing started. On one of those nights, we received a telephone call from my aunt, telling us to keep a bucket of clean water and pieces of cloth handy in case of a chemical attack on Baghdad.

Endless bombs

Of course, the sons and daughters of the Green Zone's democracy knights, who decorated their Christmas trees abroad while we starved under genocidal [UN sanctions](#), have rosy childhood memories.

They weren't submitted to humanitarian starvation imposed by western officials yet to be held accountable for the killing of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children, nor did they hear the deafening sounds of "liberatory" bombing that scarred the face of Baghdad.

But I did, and I still have bombs going off inside my head.

After former US President George W Bush announced ["mission accomplished"](#) in 2003, every day carried news of tragedy in Iraq. Images of women beating their chests in mourning of sons torn apart on the streets became constantly present on our TV screens.

Off the screen, I would wake up to Abrams tanks cruising down our street at hysterical speeds, and walk past camouflaged gunmen and rotten corpses on my way to school.

Both my father and my uncle were abducted by gunmen from rival armed groups. Later, both families received death letters, and we were both forcibly displaced from our homes.

Those years have engraved indelible images of carnage on the inner walls of my memory, and they haunt me as I stroll the streets of Baghdad at night.

Bodies of the dead

In my childhood alley, the elegant houses with luscious gardens of palms and Ziziphus trees have long disappeared, along with the familiar faces. In place of each house, three or four, or even more, ugly apartments have sprung up – an erasure of the city’s architectural identity, and a burden on the water and electricity grids.

From the labyrinth of my neighbourhood, I make my way to a nearby bridge. There, on a distant afternoon, someone in an orange jumpsuit was hanged from the railing. His lifeless body swayed in the air as speeding cars zipped by beneath his dangling feet.

We were young then, myself and friends now scattered around the globe, and we watched the spectacle from a vacant lot where once, on another distant afternoon, gunmen dumped the corpses of two women onto piles of garbage.

Time flies, I think to myself. We are grownups and traumatised now. The stray dogs who fed on the dead bodies littering my neighbourhood alleys must be dead by now, I suspect. But who knows? I know that the little girl whose father’s car was blown up on this same bridge was still young.

It was one of the loudest bombings I’d ever heard, and I have heard so many in my life. The explosion killed the father that day, and tore the daughter’s body in two. My neighbour, who now lives in exile after gunmen held him and his family members at gunpoint in their own kitchen, found the lower part of the girl’s body in the trunk of the family’s charred, blue Volkswagen.

It is painful to be Iraqi. Even the streets of memory are littered with the bodies of our dead.

I think of the little girl as I make my way home, and I wish her a good night. I hope she has toys and friends up “there”, where hopefully no bombs need to go off, and she never looks down to see what’s happening to the rest of us here, in an Iraq that still buries its sons in open country, generation after generation.

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Featured image: An Iraqi man walks the streets of Baghdad on 25 January 2021 (Nabil Salih)

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