

The Road to Understanding Syria Goes Through Iraq

Returning to Iraq After a Decade in Exile

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It should not be a secret to any independent and conscientious thinker, writer, or journalist that what has been happening in Syria since 2011 is nothing but complex and dirty attempts by multiple regional and global powers to “Iraqize” Syria by other means. But, alas, we have very few writers and journalists not on the payroll of the empire or the oppressive powers in today’s world. With few exceptions, most accounts and narratives I hear from and read by the so-called “journalists” and “experts” about Middle East affairs remind me of Upton Sinclair’s immortal words in his work, [I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked](#), where he writes “It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon him not understanding it.”

What has been happening in Syria is nothing but an attempt to destroy the Syrian people, institutions, and society in order to restructure them in the image of the imperial, neocolonial players involved in this dirty war. The imperial and neocolonial force in our world today is concentrated in the hands of the few minority who have the American and most of the European political, economic, military, and media machine at their fingertips. In this sense, it is crucial to understand that what is happening around the world as a result of the Euro-American foreign policies is beyond the control of most American and European people at this point. Most Americans and Europeans are as unfree and suffocated as the Iraqi and the Syrian people in stopping this war machine that has caused irreparable damages to all parties affected. The only difference here is that the politically powerless and suffocated Americans and Europeans are not forced to live in refugee camps, which gives many the illusion of “privilege” and “democracy”, and therefore slows down any serious action to do something about what is going on. Yet most of the American people are crushed daily by the oppressive American economic system, working under slavery-like conditions, just to make it one day at a time, while the war machine is grinding millions of lives in different countries around the world, and under different pretexts. After living more than a decade in America now, I have come to accept that most of my fellow American citizens are as powerless as I am in influencing the American foreign policy, especially in the Middle East. Even more discouraging is that, by pointing out this reality, one is immediately labeled as “un-American”, “anti-American”, or other misleading adjectives and accusations to silence any voices seeking to change this bleak reality. This needs to be challenged by all of us, if we really want better lives and healthier societies.



Today I would like to share with you a “thick description” of how I saw and what I saw in Iraq when I returned to it after one decade in exile in 2015 to conduct a year-long anthropological research for my doctorate degree. I want to paint for you an image of what has become of Iraq, after more than a decade of its invasion, to hopefully give you some important clues as to why the Syrian war has been happening since 2011, and what kind of Syria do the involved neocolonial and imperial players want to create once they finish destroying Syria as we knew. I argue that the road to understanding the future of Syria goes through what has been happening in Iraq. It is the same game, with many of the same players involved. What is happening today has happened yesterday and will happen tomorrow also, unless we take serious steps to stop it.

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After one decade in exile, I returned to Iraq seeking a better understanding of what happened, how it happened, and why it happened. I returned this time as a trained cultural anthropologist to conduct fieldwork on a population that has always had a significant impact on my life and memory—Iraq’s academics. After two previous research in the UK and Jordan (2013-2014), I decided to spend one academic year in Iraq because I knew that the internally displaced academics trapped inside; those who weren’t “successful” or “fortunate” enough to escape wars and violence through the bottleneck, had so much to say about Iraq. After all, I am a child of wars, sanctions, and political upheavals. I know what it means to be trapped inside and what it means to slip through the bottleneck, without ever truly recovering from the wounds inflicted upon us inside the bottle. I opened my eyes in this world in the 1980s, with the then ongoing Iran-Iraq war. I witnessed much violence and destruction. I saw countless dead bodies during the First Gulf War. The thirteen years of the UN sanctions robbed me of the most beautiful childhood and teenage years. The 2003 invasion of Iraq just barely allowed me to safely finish my undergraduate studies at the University of Baghdad, before I had to eventually leave the country into exile in 2005 to escape death and violence. Because of all these experiences that could take multiple books to fill, I knew that my interlocutors, especially those academics trapped inside, whose lives are strongly tied to and shaped by political upheavals and power relations, had so much to say about the story of Iraq. Before the end of my first week in Iraq in 2015, my personal observations and experiences already started to paint a picture about the story this story was going to tell. What I experienced from the moment I was at the airport in Sweden heading to Iraq in September 2015, until the end of the first week in Iraq proved to me that the personal is political and anthropological.

After a long journey with wars, moving, and exile, life has grounded me like coffee beans. My mother used to say that “coffee beans have less value as whole beans.” They must be painfully grounded to become this delicious, stimulating, and awakening drink called “coffee”. After ten years in exile, here I was in Stockholm in September 2015 packing my

bag to go back to Iraq. I couldn't believe it was going to happen in less than 24 hours. I was anxious that entire day. I couldn't sleep or do anything. I went out roaming. I greeted a stranger and had a short conversation. He turned out to be an Armenian in his twenties, thirsty for warm human connection after many lonely, long, and cold Scandinavian winters. He was delighted to meet an Assyrian Christian from Iraq. He invited me for a meal at a nearby Middle Eastern restaurant followed by a walk. It was an ideal way to spend those few hours before heading to the airport. I spoke little. He spent most of the time talking about how much he hated Turkey and the Turks; and how racist the Swedes are towards immigrants no matter how much they like to sugarcoat this fact and claim otherwise.

Towards the end of the evening, the Armenian stranger who was no longer a stranger, asked what I thought about "home" and "exile", because he had been struggling with these ideas for years in Sweden. I told him that life has taught me that it is possible that things, ideas, concepts, and feelings can have the opposite meaning of what one might see at the surface. It was possible that people can be the opposite of what they claim to be. It was possible that "home" could signify "exile" or the other way around. Laughter may be tears in disguise. Revolutions may be yet other oppressive powers taking the carpet from under the feet of the current oppressive powers. Going to the top of the mountain may not really mean "going up". It can in fact be a harsh form of falling; just as fame, cheers, and camera flashes have ultimately led to the demise of countless insecure and lonely souls on this planet. In brief, it was possible that everything we are told and taught is the opposite of what we think, or it might be outright false. I told him that I go through life remembering my mom's oldest advice that "succeeding in an unjust world is the first sign of failure, because it means you're cooperating with injustice." I told him that I carry like a talisman around my neck André Gide's words: "Fish die belly upward, and rise to the surface. It's their way of falling."

My new Armenian acquaintance took an interest in these reflections and asked that we should stay in touch. He walked with me to the door of the apartment building, we said goodbye like two old friends, and he vanished in the crowd as though the whole encounter was nothing but an escaping dream. I thought my year of research wrestling with home, exile, and displacement as some of the most political and politicized concepts of our time had already started in Stockholm.

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The day was September 11, 2015. The place was Arlanda Airport in Stockholm. The time was an early hour in the morning. I was waiting in a line to check in my luggage into the flight that was going to land me in Erbil, Iraq. After an entire decade, here I was going back to see how the many people, places, and things I left behind had continued their lives (and deaths) in my absence. I reminded myself that just as I was changing in exile, so were all the people and things I left behind in Iraq. I reminded myself that it was going to be an encounter between two changed and constantly changing parties. I had to be prepared that some (or many) images of what Iraq used to be in my head may no longer exist.

The check-in line was long. I started looking at the faces of the people waiting, their looks, their clothes, and their luggage. The guy behind me had his headphones on with a traditional Turkman folklore song from Kirkuk blasting. I could hear the song oozing out of his headphones. It was a song that many of our Turkmen neighbors and friends in Kirkuk used to play at weddings. My ears immediately recognized the words: "beyaz gül kırmızı gül güller arasından gelir..." [White rose, red rose, she comes through roses]. I didn't

particularly like the song as a child, but I did at that moment because it was much more than a song. Time had transformed it into fossilized moments and faces of distant people, places, and moments that I may never see again, except in my daydreams. In front of me in the line there were two Kurdish families. They seemed to have just met at the airport. They were speaking in two different Kurdish dialects (Kurmanji and Sorani). These two groups usually don't like each other, particularly since the intra-Kurdish struggle in the 1990s. But, I thought to myself, in exile people have no choice. They simply learn how absurd their differences at "home" were compared to what they endure in foreign lands. They learn how to love the remotest things, scents, and traces that remind them of a lost home and a lost life. The husbands were talking about how convenient it was to have a direct flight from Stockholm to Erbil, but they complained that the flight was too early. The wives were discussing the "right" age for children to start articulating their first words. Further down in line I saw a few guys joking and laughing loudly in a Baghdadi Arabic dialect. They were making sarcastic remarks without taking notice of anyone around them. I already felt like I was in a small version of the Iraq I knew and missed so much, though I knew this might not be the case when I arrive. Perhaps, the Iraq I knew is now more accessible in exile than it is possible at home.

Most passengers in the check-in line were Iraqis. Many were Kurds. Some were Arabs. I spotted a few Christian families. I heard two ladies speaking in my mother tongue, Aramaic, with a golden cross hanging around the neck of one of them. I overheard one talking about how a relative, a refugee in Lebanon, had just been accepted to immigrate to Australia. These conversations are hardly foreign to my ears. Before I left Iraq, many people were either talking about leaving or celebrating how some of their friends or relatives had left, hoping they would be next. Most people want to leave without even knowing whether they will ever "arrive" somewhere.

Ironically—or perhaps not—all the passengers had foreign passports in their hands, including myself. I spotted Swedish, Danish, German, and other EU passports. This, too, was hardly surprising to me. The effects of wars and everything that has happened to Iraq and the Iraqi people over the last few decades made the only way an Iraqi could be treated with dignity in Iraq and elsewhere is if they hold foreign—namely Western—passports. A "good" or a "fortunate" Iraqi can almost be defined as someone who holds a western passport. The Iraqi passport is paralyzing. Like its holders, it is a "suspect" in every airport, every checkpoint, and every point of entry. As an Iraqi, one is not welcome anywhere. One is almost questioned to death before allowed entrance to any country. However, one is always welcome to exit any place or port with no questions asked. Every authority and every official thinks they have the right to interrogate an Iraqi without a second thought. Iraqis know well that holding that useless document called an "Iraqi passport" is a curse at this point in history. But, of course, this is hardly the only such case. Most passport holders who come from nations whose people count as ["the wretched of the earth"](#) experience different forms of discrimination and exclusion. Some experiences are more severe than others. It is all about power, or lack thereof. Your passport has a power. It is not just a document that helps you pass, it can become a sign of humiliation preventing you from passing. Many Iraqis I know joke about the very words on the inside cover of Iraqi passports stating: "all competent authorities are requested to accord bearer of this passport protection to allow him/her all possible assistance in case of need." Every place an Iraqi goes to, the opposite of this statement is what happens. These words are just one more example of how things can have the exact opposite meaning of their appearance as with "home" and "exile", "peace" and "war", "honesty" and "dishonesty", and countless other words in different languages. I

thought to myself how irritated I have become about my first language, my second language, my third language, and all the languages I speak. Words increasingly don't mean what they are supposed to mean in all these languages. Languages are increasingly becoming tools for disguising ideas rather than disclosing them. It suddenly crossed my mind that perhaps one day I will be forced to put every single word I write in quotation marks. Nothing means what it is supposed to mean. I dreamt of a day and a world in which everyone means what they say and say what they mean.

When my turn came, the blonde, cordial, female Swedish employee checking passports and handing boarding passes looked at my American passport and asked "I see that you were born in Iraq. Do you have an Iraqi passport?" "No. It is expired," I answered. She went on, "you know people over there are not crazy about American passports. Let me see your Iraqi passport, even if it's expired." She took a quick look, checked in my bag, and directed me to the designated gate. I couldn't help thinking: why should she care? I am going to Iraq not coming from it. She would care more if the process was reversed, because it is more important to keep Sweden safe than Iraq. What if my passport was fake? What if I was a "terrorist"? It doesn't matter. Perhaps it is better for "terrorists" to exit Europe than enter and cause problems. Is this why many of them are now in Syria? Moreover, her words were far from accurate. I know many American and Western expats living in Iraq and they love it there. I wondered whether she was fed too much propaganda about Iraq and the region.

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I arrived in Erbil shortly after 10:30 am. After greeting the friendly Kurd female officer at the passport control in Kurdish, she stamped my passport and here I was officially in Iraq. As I was walking to the baggage claim area in the small and clean airport, I remembered that I had no one from my family or relatives to meet me. My immediate family members had all left Iraq over the last ten years because of the war. My relatives who are left there, from both parents' sides, are not in that city and I hadn't announced to most of them that I was coming. I wanted to land in the airport *for real* before I could surely tell anyone that I was in Iraq.

The only person who was waiting for me in the airport was my American brother-in-law. I wondered what the Swede who checked my passport at Arlanda would have thought about that. My American brother-in-law is a lovely and helpful guy. He came to Iraq after 2003, fell in love with the country, and decided that he would rather live in Erbil than in the U.S. He feels "freer" in Erbil, he often says. He is not alone in this feeling. Many expats I know love "third world" countries. Many don't mind settling and getting married in them while the locals in these countries are escaping from all directions. The reason is simple: they are treated better than the local citizens in these "third world" countries and even better than the treatment they would receive in their "industrialized" countries in the "developed" world. Again, it is all about power. Who has it and where. Despite my gratitude that he had come to pick me up, I still found this ironic and painful. An American is the only one at the airport to pick me up at what was once my beloved country. It felt as though that complex line between "home" and "exile" was being challenged from the moment I returned to Iraq. I decided, however, that it wasn't helpful to dwell on this thought. I decided not to let anything spoil my first intimate moments of embracing Iraq's skies, lands, trees, roses, buildings, streets, faces, scents, and everyone and everything that has been living and growing in my imagination during the past decade in exile.

I spent the first couple of days in Erbil, mostly with my brother-in-law and some of his foreign expat friends who gave me some tips about life there. They shared things they knew better than me because they had been there and I hadn't. I soon learned about the new malls, the best hotels, the residential buildings where many expats and rich locals live in places with names like the "English village", the "Italian village", the "Lebanese village", and so on. I thought about how in every "third world" country that gets "liberated" from its dictators, the first things that go up are luxurious hotels and residential areas for Western expats and "experts", along with gated communities from which to administer the newly formed governments in places like Baghdad's Green Zone. The expats in Erbil also told me about things as simple as where to get a local sim card for my phone, where to get the best haircut, and the costs of basic foods.

I felt alienated on my first night. It was a feeling identical to how I felt on my first night in America ten years ago. I was lonely, thrown into a strange land. I went out that evening in the majority Christian district of Ankawa in the outskirts of Erbil to buy a sim card. It was a hot September evening. As I greeted the seller at the random shop I entered, he paused, stared at me, and asked: "Are you Louis?" "Yes I am. Wait, don't tell me who you are. I think I also recognize your face, but I have to add ten years of change to it." I recognized him. He was one of our old neighbors in Kirkuk. They had to move to Erbil as security deteriorated after 2003. That was a comforting first connection. It made me feel I am less a stranger than I thought. I am still remembered. I still exist. But that wasn't enough. I wanted more closeness than an old neighbor to feel at home again. I immediately activated my sim card and called my aunt in Duhok, two and half hours north of Erbil. She could sense how sad my tone was on the phone and said, "I will be waiting for you tomorrow..." I went to the bus and taxi station in Erbil the next day to get a taxi and headed to Duhok, the place where I spent the early years of my childhood. A beautiful small city sandwiched between two mountains.

At around 1:30 pm, in the shared taxi heading to Duhok, the passengers were all friendly Kurds. I greeted the driver and the passengers in Kurdish and then started looking out the window to check out the scenery. I heard the two guys next to me saying: "thank God there are no Arab passengers in the taxi. Arab passengers always cause delays at the checkpoints." As the taxi moved, I started checking out all the new buildings and neat streets in Erbil. It was clear from the old and the new infrastructure that whereas some people have gotten better off, others had gotten worse off, or simply stayed as they were. Infrastructure reveals so much about a place and its culture, politics, and people. The disparities between the poor and the rich neighborhoods in Erbil, in a sense, show that "time" wasn't ticking at the same pace for everyone. Time wasn't moving favorably for everyone. Even time is like power in that it moves some people forward, some backward, and some to the sides and the margins. Time also buries some people under the ground. I noticed many unfinished construction and apartment buildings. It looked as though there was an "economic boom" that was abruptly halted by unexpected circumstances made certain parts of the city look like dilapidated ghost towns. As we were exiting Erbil, at every traffic light we stopped, there were poor Syrian or Yazidi women and children begging drivers to buy gum, tissues, and other simple items. Some of these women of different ages ranging from 11 to 30 were so beautiful that it wouldn't be surprising if they were forced to sell other things to get their meals for the day.

Over time, I discovered that many of the women living in tents and dilapidated and deserted buildings have been selling their bodies to make living. In Erbil's well-known Christian

district of Ankawa, I discovered by talking with taxi drivers, that many beauty salons have been turned into places where buyers (men) park their cars and wait to pick up internally displaced women who escaped ISIS-occupied parts of Iraq and Syria.

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The driver taking us to Duhok was talking to the front seat passenger about how bad the economy was, there were no salaries for public sector employees, and so on. I understood that the bad economy had suddenly crippled the Iraqi Kurdistan region. Consequently, public sector employees (most people) were only getting salaries every few months due to deep divisions between Kurdistan and Baghdad. I heard some passengers talking about hopefully resolving oil problems with Baghdad soon so that things could improve. Baghdad has been withholding Kurdistan's 17% share of oil revenues, because the latter has been drilling, extracting, and selling oil through "illegal" contracts with foreign companies without Baghdad's permission. The Iraqi officials in Baghdad, the passengers explained, told the Kurds that if they want to get their share, they must share what they're selling from their region with the central government. The refusal of the Kurd officials to abide by this and the fact that many of Kurdistan's oil searches had been less promising than originally anticipated caused a serious economic problem in the region. This was the main topic the passengers discussed most of the trip.



View on Duhok with the Duhok Dam in the background (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

As the taxi continued driving, I kept looking out the window checking out the many villages and small towns we passed through, as we left Erbil behind. Not much has changed in these villages and little towns, except one could see more "fancy" houses in the villagers' standards. It was an indication that some individuals have been making a lot of money to renovate or build all these new houses. They looked expensive but also indicated a recently acquired financial capital. I noticed how many spaces that used to be beautiful and green agricultural lands on the way had turned into depressing, ugly, half-finished cement buildings. Furthermore, there was a clear disparity between how extravagant many individual houses looked versus the poor state of public services like sewage and streets, that were still exactly the same in most places since the Ba'ath era. During its 35 years in power, the Ba'ath regime had made serious efforts to modernize Iraq's infrastructure in

cities and villages. The road from Erbil to Duhok was the same since the Saddam years. It was narrow, dangerous, and filled with pit holes that have only worsened over the years. I saw a clear pattern of how most wealth was being used for individual rather than communal interests. These images reminded me of the anthropological literature we studied on “development”. Development looked so much like destruction.

My thoughts were interrupted when we stopped at a checkpoint—there were so many of them—and the officer asked everyone to present their IDs. I presented the only valid ID I had on me, my American passport. As soon as he looked at it, he asked me to get out of the car. He said to the officer next to him in Kurdish, “We need to check this to make sure it’s not a forged passport.” The checkpoint looked like a kiosk that barely had a wood cover on the top to protect them from Iraq’s unforgiving summer sun. I wondered with what they were going to check the “validity” of the passport when they didn’t seem to have any equipment or machines in place. I decided to just talk to them. I spoke in Kurdish and told the officer that I am from the region and I was just back after ten years in America, which is why I don’t have a valid local ID. My IDs had expired. As soon as I spoke in Kurdish and he heard my name, his tone changed 180 degrees, “Welcome home, my dear brother!” I went back inside the taxi and it drove away.

I told the driver the same brief story of why I had no valid local IDs and that I am a local of the region, so this helped for the rest of the trip. He did the talking on my behalf at the other checkpoints and everything went smoothly. I could only imagine how an Arab would feel and be treated when going through all these checkpoints where one could pass just by simply speaking Kurdish or be stranded even if they had valid IDs, but didn’t speak the language. In many ways, the language, the sect, and the ethnicity are the IDs in post-U.S. occupation Iraq—the “new Iraq”. In fact, at many checkpoints, I observed, that they wouldn’t even ask for an ID. The first thing they would do is to profile the person based on their face and language. If it became clear that they didn’t speak the language, they would be stranded and interrogated. I noticed over time that some displaced Arabs had learned what one might call “basic checkpoint Kurdish”. But even that was no guarantee for “passing”. The officers could recognize faces. Arabs or Arab-looking people were to be interrogated and even humiliated. Further, sometimes they would linger with the conversation and by the second or the third question, the Arab’s “checkpoint Kurdish” would become inadequate to carry on a conversation, and therefore create serious difficulties for them. Humans can become sophisticated over time to navigate power and its hurdles, but so does power. It is a two-way street. There is no break. One must keep reinventing themselves in this harsh world of power relations to survive.

My impressions from the first days and before even reaching Duhok was that the “new Iraq” was operating on ethnicity and sect; on language as a metonym for power and disempowerment; and on residency cards as a prerequisite for existence for those not from the northern region, especially Arabs. What all these elements have in common is their resemblance to the pan-Arabist project. In fact, today’s reality is a violently amplified and more intense version of the former pan-Arabism, which one would think was over. It wasn’t over. It was only passed on from some actors to others to implement this new project called “the new Iraq” or “the new Middle East” imposed and facilitated by the American invasion. There was a deep anti-Arab sentiment to the extent that it is a blessing not to be an Arab then and there.

Little did I know that these first observations and encounters from the early days were going to be central for understanding the lives of the internally displaced Iraqis in the region. Little

did I know that exile and internal displacement for the interlocutors of my research project were first and foremost an expression of shifting power relations, which had turned them overnight from vital actors in the Iraqi society before 2003 into exiled, internally displaced, disempowered people whose lives are now tied to temporary contracts, residency cards, and living in a permanent state of fear and precariousness in what is supposed to be their own country. My first week in Iraq made it clear that the losses incurred by all Iraqi people are significant and ongoing. Therefore, it is only through tracing these losses from home to exile that we can understand the deeper meaning of these stories. Tracing back the story to “home” is to trace back the story of loss for these people to its early beginnings. The bleak reality of Iraq as a “home” suddenly reminded of the last part of a beautiful and sad poem titled “The Fortune Teller” by the great Syrian poet, Nizar Qabani, in which the fortune teller, speaking about the beloved woman of the man whose cup she is reading says:

You will seek her everywhere, my son
You will ask the waves of the sea about her
You will ask the shores of the seas
You will travel the oceans
And your tears will flow like a river
And at the close of your life
You will find that since your beloved
Has no land, no home, no address
You have been pursuing only a trace of smoke
How difficult it is, my son
To love a woman
Who has neither land, nor home..

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