

The 'Surge'

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The 'surge' is going well. With streets blocked by check points and American troops 'advising' Iraqi forces, on consecutive days, the Bab Sharqi market was attacked, body parts strewn amongst stalls, goods – and bodies and injured hauled away on the wooden carts used to bring goods to sell. Shorja market was next in firing line, with its covered and outdoor stalls, alleys, serving all from traders who used to come from Kurdistan for the cheaper Baghdad price (road now too dangerous) locals, the Catholic priest, workers and refugees housed in the church moments walk away.

Next was the Friday Ghazil animal market, believed the oldest in the Middle East, a weekly amble through the exotic, the heartbreaking, the songbirds, snakes and the illicit. An exceptional act of bravery was the attack on the bird market. It takes a particularly fearless mindset to declare a war on birds. The mortars which landed in the Kholoud secondary school, in west Baghdad's Adil district, killing five students and injuring twenty, shredding young bodies with flying glass, were reportedly fired just thirty metres from a 'surge' crackdown checkpoint.

In 2003 Baghdad's ancient Muntanabi book market, a place to wander in wonder at its offerings, was blown up. It had stood on the site for innumerable generations, books laid out on the street, on trestles, on laps – and in the ancient alleyways and covered nooks and crannies, near dark, where the dust was blown off seventeenth century gems and first editions of the wonders of French philosophers, poets. Goethe, Shakespeare, Dickens, hid on piled shelves, no country's greats seemingly not to be found. The booksellers, professional or amateur, handled their volumes as if fragile, utterly precious. A purchase meant a parting.

'Bring 'em on' : the books, the birds, the kids, in this 'last ditch crackdown', part of a plan devised by George W. Bush, according to Al Jazeera. Perhaps when the last remnant of Mesopotamia's ancient heart and soul has been finally ripped out and the last Iraqi has left or been slaughtered, the new pioneers will arrive and build Walmarts, Starbucks, Kentucky Fries, Mesopotamia Mackburgers, from northern Nineveh's wonders to Basra, from Babylon to Eden (Qurna.) The myriad marvels of this extraordinary land are truly pearls cast amongst swine – the occupying, brute forces.

The duty of care these illegal occupiers have is total, thus they are responsible for ever tragedy. But so depraved are these new Mongols, they have moved on from sending pictures of burned and slaughtered Iraqis to porn sites in exchange for their revolting images and reportedly now collect Iraqis' brain matter for 'trophy' to put in the fridge back at base. Heaven help the communities to which they return and the children they raise. And again, from where are these deviants recruited? Such psychotic sicknesses could surely only have come from a recruiting drive in secure psychiatric institutions, or maximum security

penal institutions.

The grief of non Iraqis can never mirror that of Iraqis with the courage to live through this hell, or those forced to flee all they held dear and watch its destruction from afar. But the horrors of the last near four years for those who love this incomparable place, surely feels like the real thing.

Barbara Nimri Aziz, in a shortly to be published book ('Swimming up the Tigris' - Florida University Press) who knows the country as her own, writes in a chapter headed: 'Imagine'. She recounts a call from a friend, Mohassen: 'As an Iraqi, I will not be forced from my homeland ... my country .. I love my nation. I will not allow Americans to take it from us, from my father, my President, from any Iraqi.' Then:

'Imagine (the embargo) years of your friends dying, give up before you, departing ... stricken by cancers, heart failures, miscarriages, diabetes, ulcers' (denied embargoed medicines.) She recounts also those who fled to save their children from Americans, British and their few straggling 'allies'.

'Imagine, a military invasion days away, calling your dearest friends, with whom you stood for twelve years, to say, after all their pleas and wishes: "Goodbye, Allah Karim".'

'Imagine leaving you brothers, your neighbours, to pray themselves through another war.'

'Imagine packing up the house ... paintings .. documents, assembling a few valuables and delivering them along with the children's pet bird, to your sister's house ..telling the children you do not know when they might return ... instructing the neighbour's gardener to guard the house .. imagine arguing with your weeping children about what they can take with them, locking the gate ..' Imagine, imagine, imagine: justified by the venal, oil grabbing, shameful, stomach turning, discredited, disgusting words : 'liberation, freedom, democracy'.

As the Palestinians before them, Iraqis who flee either abroad, or under 'liberation's' ethnic cleansing, take with them the keys of their homes, the deeds of their home and land, all they have of their precious, only place on earth. As the Palestinians, how many generations will dream of the right to return? Sixty years after Britain's establishment of the State of Israel and the ever ongoing displacement, Britain, with the support of the biggest bully on the block, is playing the same game. And Palestinians in Iraq, safe for generations, too, flee yet again, with other nationalities who have lived there equally long, accused of being 'foreign fighters'. Sorry, 'foreign fighters' R us (U.S.)

And the markets, forgotten, dismissed by the invaders in their pathetic 'surge'. Some personal snapshots: Bab Sharqi, where, days before the war, a stallholder ran after me to give me change I had forgotten, pennies to me, a huge amount to him. We both knew devastation was coming and that every dinar was needed to survive. Please keep it, I said. He refused. Unlike the invaders, he did not steal.

Vibrant, heart rending Shorja, where I bought baby items for expectant friends, who could not afford them, only to return to find the joyously awaited baby had died, for want of simple, embargoed medicines. Where we filmed Denis Halliday (who resigned as a UN Under Secretary General and UN Coordinator in Iraq, walking from thirty four years devotion to the U.N., talking across the globe, of the embargo as 'genocide.)

Halliday stood in packed Shorja, for R.T.E., (Irish national television) holding up simple items to camera, tomato paste (vital to Iraqi cooking) milk powder, bottled water (tap water equaled biological weapon – repair parts U.N., vetoed) and such, explain that the embargo made all unbootable for most. Suddenly, for the second time in the day, the filming was halted : the stallholders and small amount of buyers, realized who their brave and distinguished guest was: ‘Thank you, thank you Meeester ‘alliday for what you done’. The market erupted and I thought he might be trampled to death in the collective appreciation. As Senior Researcher, I would have had some responsibility for this unexpected event. But all everyone wanted to do was hug, love and thank this brave, urbane man.

The Ghazil animal market will ever be two images. Iraqis love birds as the west dogs and cats. Mr Noor was hunkered down on the pavement with four purring Russian doves, who stroked his hands, with their heads, their beaks. People were selling all to survive. He had sold everything he had, he said, but he would never sell his birds. He had an aviary since he was a child. Then he said that he had nothing left, so he had to sell two birds a week, ‘...and I pray the next week, the embargo will be over’. I looked at the four: ‘This must be a bad week’. His thick glasses misted over. And the little girl, tears running down her face, taking her pet poodle to be sold : her parents could no longer afford the food.

The book, Muntanabi, market. A book of memories. Just one, is another whose books were his life. One day, having sold all, he walked through his three rooms of bookshelves, and talked to them. ‘All my life, I have spent my money on you, looked after you, nurtured you, now it is time for some of you to look after me’. He took a few to Muntanabi, put them on his lap and started to cry. Week after week, he took them till he had no volume left, his tears flowing. He became a spectacle. Now his great country – cradle of civilization – is destroyed by a President who boasts that he does not read a book.

I do not know the school at Adil where the liberators actions (yes it was, you are responsible, as an occupying power) forced them to walk past streams of their classmates blood, but I know many others. The courteous Head Teacher, to whom I returned unexpectedly, to find clinging to a pillar in a Tigris-side, beautiful (Catholic) complex, tears streaming down her face. I embraced her and this brave, amazing woman, who gave so much hope to the children in her care, embargoed, bombed, illegally and continuously by the UK and US, broke down. ‘Why are they doing this to us?’ She asked – and sobbed: ‘My son is a Doctor in Washington.’

‘I gave them a good boy and they sent me back a monster’, said the Mother of a Viet Nam veteran (the indispensable ‘Four Days in My Lai – a war crime and its aftermath’, Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, Penguin.) Nothing has changed. America, Britain, take your monsters home. Illegal invasion, illegal ‘surge’, illegal executions, illegal oil grab. Just go away – and take your discredited politicians with you.

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