

conflicts can be certainly explained because of the leader's personality and his strong control of all the power, but also testify to his fundamental ignorance of politics and international relationships. Qualified as a "strategic idiot", he calculated that he would fight a *blitzkrieg* against Iran. Finally it was an everlasting war of wear and extermination, causing around a million deaths. And the aggression against Kuwait generated the largest and most powerful international coalition of history against him, with Arab and Western participation. First supported by the Arabs and the Westerns, who were all afraid of the threat of the Revolution in Iran, these occasional allies made their contribution in forming a perfect monster during the eight years of the war, and later his own friends were forced to destroy him. Defender of the world against Khomeiny and big bully of every foreign interest, he became a furious consumer of weapons and bombs, no matter where they came from. In his fight against Iran he was doing the dirty work without noticing. He armed himself to the teeth and he tried to be authorized by the international community which had spoiled him, so he committed all the atrocities he wanted, remaining unpunished.

This was the man who was fond of weapons of massive destruction, using them to prosecute the Kurds and the Shiites and to threaten the world, the man who thought that nobody would stop his invasion of Kuwait. He was the instrument of the enemies of the Iranian Revolution and a compulsive client in a great universal business of all sorts of legal and illegal weapons, which were handed over to him with a very rare unanimity: someday these weapons would be used against the suppliers. The universal consent he thought he had ended suddenly with 1991's defeat, followed by a hard decade of international sanctions, which the country started to overcome in the beginnings of the XXI century. The attacks of 9/11 and the war in Afghanistan interrupted any perspective of normalization and international acceptance of a broken country, ruled by a regime with a chimerical evolution which credited only the distrust and the antipathy of the region and the world. Nevertheless, it seems that the cure was worse than the disease, and the invasion and the war which started in March 2003 have not opened the doors to peace and prosperity yet, in 2008, not to say anything about the fantasies of the creation of a new Middle East or the shame about the impossible elimination of non-existing weapons of mass destruction in an impoverished country with an exhausted regime.

The Iraqi people do not deserve so many years of suffering, and the invasion has not repaired this situation. Things are even

worse now. The war did not end with the conquering of Baghdad in April 2003, nor with Saddam Hussein's execution in December 2006. It goes on and on in many forms and it has different phases, responding to the old conflicts in Iraq from time out of mind: revolts, ethnic and religious sectarianism, territorial tensions, terrorism and crime. The alternation of all of them, as if they acted in communicating vessels with reciprocal variables of intensity, can explain the characteristics of a war with a high cost for Iraqis, but also for the occupying troops. These old conflicts, now unusually intense, correspond to the pieces of the national puzzle. These pieces tried to join together in the first decades of the XX century, and they could have continued together in a quite acceptable way, but almost a century later some insensible agent has kicked the table and put the game out order: the arrogance and ignorance of the author of this mess make any kind of correction very difficult, and we even have not seen any self-criticism. Regardless, almost a century later as well, the Iraqis must start again and refound the nation.

Spanish Ambassador to Iraq (2005-2008)  
Baghdad, February 2008

## BAGHDAD, A TRAGIC STORY

Gema Mart n Mu oz

Baghdad represents a grand paradox. The mythical images which its name invokes do not translate into a physical identity of the city which allows one to follow the footsteps of its millennial character and profound status in history. Different from El Cairo or Damascus, it has been the victim of repeated experiences of destruction and violence which have been erasing the major part of its historical and cultural legacy. This city does not translate or narrate its secular and intense political, social and artistic peripeteia. On the contrary, nowadays what this city tells you when you see it and tour it is a definitive "memoricide" to which it has been fatally condemned.

Another of the paradoxes of its violent and tragic destiny is that its original founding name was "City of Peace" (*Madinat al-Salam*), a name chose by the caliph Al-Mansur in 762 when he created the city *ex novo* from a small village called Baghdad on the western bank of the Tigris to represent the new capital of the Abbasi dynasty, upon the fall of the Omeyyad caliphate with its capital in Damascus. Sources say that upon looking for an ideal location to construct a new capital of the Empire, al-

Mansur he became convinced that this was the best spot, an enclave on the banks of the Tigris, close to the Euphrates, surrounded by four agricultural zones, and which was easily accessible to the Egyptian and Syrian caravans. Additionally, it was accessible to the rich products of China, coming up the Tigris, and down river were those of the Byzantine and Mosul. Protected by the proximity of the two large rivers, it was also an excellent location for military defense.

Destroyed five centuries later, nothing remains from that magnificent city, which, following the Persian Parto-Sassanid tradition, was circular and surrounded by three concentric walls with four doors that opened towards Basra, Syria, Kufa and Khorasan. The palace of the caliphate, with an immense throne hall inspired by the Persian palace of Ctesiphon, occupied the center of that enormous urban circle, together with the grand mosque and more than a kilometer of gardens.

The city, whose name of Baghdad ended up being imposed upon the "City of Peace" as if they intuited the lack of accuracy with its original denomination confronted with the avatars that history provided, became the center of the great lines of communication with Persia and India, and of an intense cultural life which gave the Islamic Empire its most glorious centuries. However, even though the glory of Baghdad has found a legendary memoir linked to the caliph Harun al-Rashid in *One Thousand and One Nights*, reality was more prosaic. The fifth Abbasi caliph Harun Al-Rashid spent the majority of his reign raging war outside of Baghdad, and leaving his legacy to be the division of his empire among his two sons, which lead to the death of the first and a bloody civil war of which Al-Ma'Mun came out as the victor. It was to this caliph that the creation of the House of Knowledge (*Bayt al-Hikma*) in Baghdad is attributed. This was a place of philosophic and scientific development, where they translated Galen, Hippocrates, Dioscorides, Ptolomy, Euclid, Archimedes, and where algebra and optical studies were born, converting Arabic in the language of knowledge.

The Mongol invasion of 1258 completely destroyed Baghdad and massacred its inhabitants. Following the Mongol law that prohibited the shedding of royal blood on the ground, the caliph al-Musta'sim was rolled between carpets and stomped by horses until his death. This was only the prelude to the future catastrophes that the city and its citizens would suffer up until nowadays.

Although one of the Mongol governors remade Baghdad as a royal residence, in 1393 Tamerlan (Timur-i Lang), who, from his rule in Samarkand carried out bloody expeditions through Persia, Caucasia and the Middle East, returned to

devastate the city, taking it down a definitive decline. The Egyptian historian Maqrizi, in the xv Century, related that: "*Baghdad is in ruins. There is no mosque, no faithful, no market. The majority of its canals are dry. It is difficult to call it a "city"*". Recovered by the Ottomans, the city began to be restored, and in 1535 was made capital of one of the provinces (*wilaya*) in which the Ottoman Empire divided the Arab territories of the North of Africa and the Middle East.

## THE OTTOMAN RECOVERY

In accordance with the indispensable study of André Raymond about Arab cities in the Ottoman era, the wide perimeters of what had been the great urban center of Baghdad were only partially occupied, a situation which continued even in the xix Century, as the traveler J. F. Jones described in 1855 when he drew a map of Baghdad. Its urban growth, for example, was limited and only occurred in the interior of its walls without any expansion of external neighborhoods, as was the case of other important cities in that era, such as El Cairo, Tunis, and Damascus. Be that as it may, its status as a border region with Persia, an old historical rival, obligated the city to maintain and permanently consolidate its surrounding walls. Another characteristic of the new organization of the city was the moving of the "*cittadella*" (fortified center of the city), center of political power and Turkish military, from the center to the periphery of the city. This was built in the Northern wall of Baghdad, since in the center of the city, close to the bridge over the Tigris River, the majority of the markets (*suq*), the "*alqaysarriya*" (public building for trade), and the "*jan*" (building for housing merchants). The principal explanation for this location was based on the Ottoman desire to guarantee the safety of the political center by isolating it from an Arab city whose agitation was feared. The Ottoman system was based on the control of its provinces through an oligarchy composed of the governor or "*pachá*" (political power), the militias, composed primarily of Janissaries (military power) and the judges or qadies (legislative power), so that the Sublime Porte had to accept inevitable dynamics of local autonomy. This system was not a highly centralized government.

The system of the *millet* organized the religious minorities into autonomous groups, regulating their recognition and rights, at the same time that there was a larger spatial repartitioning of the city into residential neighborhoods where there were different communities of Christians, Jews, Shiites and Kurds. The Ottoman tolerance with respect to minorities, and

the ample autonomy they were afforded in their internal administration also explains the growth of the Jewish presence in the Ottoman Empire, where European Jews seeking refuge from the persecutions in Europe were combined with the historically present communities already there. Although Baghdad always had a tradition of a very representative Jewish community (until 1451 it was the headquarters of the Jewish community of Babylon, to whom the Abbasids conceded substantial independent authority in many cases), in the Ottoman period the Jewish community of Baghdad became one of the most numerous and influential, through the banking system (*sarrafi*), a situation that remained until the fifties, after the creation of the State of Israel. Of a total area of 340 hectares, with some 90,000 inhabitants, the Jewish neighborhood occupied 17 hectares and had around 10,000 inhabitants.

### THE EUROPEAN MOMENT

The transition between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century marked the progressive European economic tutelage of the Ottoman Empire and the *growing* loss of sovereignty of the Sublime Porte over its Arab provinces. Those years were dominated by the "Great Game" in Arabic Orient, a complex and sinuous exercise in secret diplomacy between the English, French, Russians and Germans, in which the English were finally victorious. The First World War allowed them to impose an artificial division on the map of the Middle East, marking the dramatic fate of all the populations of the region. Democratic Europe ignored the people, creating superficial elites who could be tutored. They only considered the immediate exploitation of the territories, where petroleum had been appearing since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In order to justify their colonial business, the Europeans put forth the principle that Europe was assuming the mission of creating a civilized Middle East *ex nihilo* out of a region already populated by primitive Bedouins and archaic communities incapable of self-government. However, in all of that region, the cities, the towns, the religious and ethnic communities already had secular modes of administration, arbitration, and government that the new international system scorned and ignored. Thus, France created Lebanon at the service of their Maronite Christian clientele, ripping that territory off of Greater Syria, against the primarily Muslim population that claimed their belonging to Syria. The British fabricated a country called Transjordan, and then later Jordan to address London's needs to create a buffer state between the French protectorate in Syria, an unruly Saudi Arabia, and Mesopotamia, which was difficult to unite. The petroleum

rich region of the Gulf was fragmented into little emirates that needed protection to survive as the weak national entities that they were. Great Britain imposed all the circumstances that led to the creation of the State of Israel, which created the unsolvable dilemma of how to import a national entity composed of foreign settlers without threatening the subsistence of the native Palestinian population. Then, Iraq was constructed, groping three regions whose Sunni, Shiite and Kurd populations had no desire to form a national whole.

The term *al-Iraq*<sup>1</sup> has been significantly used by Arab geographers since the VIII Century to refer to the territory that extended along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and known in Europe as Mesopotamia. The Iraqi State was the result of three different Ottoman *wilayas*: Mosul, to the north, Baghdad in the center, and Basra to the south. The city of Baghdad was proclaimed capital of the new state entity and thus began the new contemporary history of this old and abused urban area. Through the successive transformation of its urban and architectural structure, it came to represent not only the symbol of the regimes that governed the country, but also the multi-religious and ethnic kaleidoscope that it characterized.

The British had to confront a radical Iraqi opposition since the beginning, which exploded in the "revolution" of 1920 when the League of Nations conceded the Mandate to Great Britain. Only the repression and military intervention that cost 6,000 Iraqi lives and 500 British and Indians managed to impose the State and political system decided upon by London. It would not be the same revolution that occurred in Baghdad.

On November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1920, Sir Percy Cox proclaimed declared an Arab state, a precursor to the current country. On August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1923, Emir Faysal was enthroned by the British in Baghdad to head a hereditary constitutional parliamentary monarchy whose functioning democratic principals were actually quite artificial.

The city on the banks of the Tigris was later to be characterized by a process of urban renovation, with which the pro-British Iraqi monarchy hoped to modernize, in the European manner, its landscape and visibility. A new city of large avenues, plazas and Western style buildings was to be erected, using urban planning to strengthen the belief that modernization was Europeanization. In addition to the English architects during the colonial mandate, the renovation of the city at the beginning of the fifties was given to well known international architects like Wright, Le Corbusier, Gropius, and Constantin Doxiadis.

After the Second World War, Baghdad was witness to the development of a new political generation which also reached

the youngest officials of the army. On one hand was the Iraqi Communist Party, which, although clandestine, began to organize strikes in the petroleum industry, followed by severe repression. The Arab socialist party of the Baath, born in Syria, also gained more acceptance among the new generation of Iraqis who felt more disaffected toward the liberal dependent model of Great Britain, and towards the Iraqi parliamentary class dominated by nobles and landowners who no interest in social or economic reform for the country. Added to this was the bitterness about the creation of the State of Israel followed by the Arab-Israeli War in 1948-1949 and the influence of the revolutionary Egypt of Gamal Abdel Naser. On July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1958, Baghdad suffered a new bloody revolution which ended the monarchy and proclaimed the Republic. The pro-British prime minister Nuri al-Said was dragged to death through the streets, and the king was hanged in one of the central plazas.

#### THE RESTITUTION OF SOVEREIGNTY

The Baghdad of the Iraqi republic would experience a profound transformation linked to the process of development and industrialization of the country, to the emigration from the countryside to city that the development instigated, and to the urban monumentalism that the megalomania of the Baathist regime (in particular with Saddam Hussein) would arouse.

Until the end of the sixties Iraq could be considered an underdeveloped and scarcely industrialized country. However, in the following decade it would experience a process of intensive economic and industrial development that would place it at the head of the Arab countries of the region, and would even convert it into an object of immigration. Of course this process would take place within the framework of a rentist state, subordinate to the profits of petroleum and quite dependent on exterior technology. The definitive naturalization of the petroleum in July of 1972 and the increase in prices due to the Arab-Israeli war of 1973 marked the era of great social and economic development. Baghdad, a symbol of the regime, would begin grand modern projects (palaces, ministries, bridges, triumphal arches, stadiums, museums, mosques, and the central bank), a sign of prosperity, of the distributive socio-economic model and of the arrogance of the governing class. Foreign architects such as Venturi and Bofill were assigned many of the projects for this new renovation of the city.

The Iraqi development of this era led the country to experience a large social transformation (a demographic growth of more than 3%, full employment, intensive access to education,

etc), which motivated the emigration from the countryside to the city, so that in 1980 the process of urbanization was going off. Baghdad would be the premier attraction, already gathering 26.4% of the total population of the country in 1977. This accelerated process of migration towards the capital converted Baghdad into a laboratory and display of the great religious and ethnic diversity of Iraq.

Iraq is the Middle Eastern country that has the most complex plurality of communities, whose identities and cohesive factors are derived from religious, ethnic, and linguistic references, not to mention the different styles of life of Bedouins, country and city dwellers. Without a doubt, the famous expression regarding Iraq as being a "mosaic of peoples and religions" should not hide the existence of the two majority populations, the Muslim and the Arab. The question here is that the two majority groups, Arab and Islam, have never been factors of national unity and cohesion in this country. The Muslims represent the vast majority, more than 90% of the population, and the Arabs are around 74%, and the Kurds 20%. However, there are other substantial divisions between them that fragment and separate them. Sunni and Shiite Arabs have different collective memories and a distinct historical experience that prevails over their common "Arabness", while among the Kurds (who are also Muslim) what undoubtedly prevails over their shared identity as Muslims is their non-Arab identity, of Indo-European origin, and the preservation of their own language, which comes from Persian.

As a consequence, the three largest populations of Iraq are the Shiite Arab majority (55% of the total population), and the Sunni Arabs and the Kurds, who represent more or less 20% of each one.

These divisions, complicated to begin with because they are at the same time ethnic and religious, are even more so due to geographic configuration in which each community is adjacent, far from the borders, to majority dominated regions. The Kurds are from the mountainous zones in the north of Iraq, but the Kurdish population is spread out between Turkey, Syria and Iran. The Shiites are originally from the southern middle of Iraq, although the Shiite identity extends to Iran, with whom they have a long history of relations. The Sunni Arabs are from the north center of the country, and feel a sense of belonging with the Sunni Arab majority of the Middle East.

However, it is important to point out that the individual relationships between the members of these communities are not historically characterized by confrontation, preferring coexistence and even mixing, as seen in the normalized

existence of mixed marriages. The violent confrontations always had political roots due to the turbulent relations, especially from the Shiites and Kurds, with a hegemonic state monopolized by circles of Sunni Arabs.

These three groups of the Iraqi population are concentrated in different regions of the country, and that has demarcated the most insurgent geographical zones with respect to Baghdad's regime. From the south of the region of Baghdad all the way to the Gulf, following the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates, the most densely populated region, is what could be called Shiite country. To the north of Baghdad and the middle-Euphrates is where the historical dominion of the Sunni Arabs along with Shiite enclaves. And the mountains, in the north, mark the Kurdish region, basically Sunni, with Christian and Yezidee enclaves. But this geographically plural universe, distributed between north, center and south, is globally represented in the capital, Baghdad, a principal city for the internal migrations and where 65% of the population is Shiite Arab (with three million in the popular neighborhood of Sadr City), and at least 10% Kurd.

Despite the fact that the most important sacred Shiite sites are in Najaf and Karbala, the city of Baghdad also has important Shiite sanctuaries in Kazimayn, a neighborhood to the north of the capital, where the tombs of the seventh and ninth Shiite Imams, Musa Ibn Yafar and Mohammed Ibn Ali al-Yawad are found, historically attracting a multitude of the faithful on their pilgrimage. Baghdad is also home to many sacred sites of important Sunni Muslims, such as Abd al-Qader al-Yilani, the well-known Sufi Maaruf al-Karji and the founder of the Hanafi School of jurisprudence, Abu Hanifa.

### Baghdad under Bombs

Beginning in 1980 Iraq would undergo a series of wars, of different origins and in diverse regional and international contexts which would continue until nowadays. Baghdad would suffer a continuing destruction. First was the war against Iran, which lasted until 1988, the decade in which Saddam Hussein was hailed as a "liberator" by the west, and a leader in the fight against the Iranian regime of Khomeini. This useless and irrational conflict had a chapter known as "the war of the cities" which held a particularly destructive destiny for the Iraqi and Iranian cities. In the end, both sides were ruined and worn out, suffering a million deaths, including a multitude of civilians. Iran had not been able to carry out any program of development, with all the benefits from petroleum going to finance imports and the war, while the social and economic situation of the post-war year was

catastrophic: between 1979 and 1988 the brute domestic product had only gone up 10%, while the population had grown 30%, and official estimates said that reconstruction would require three billion dollars more (300 thousand million in European terms). Iraq ended the war with a debt of 80 billion dollars, and the destruction totaled 70 billion dollars, all of which translated to enormous economic difficulties for facing the future of development that had been achieved in the seventies.

The invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein in 1990 was initially ascribed to the same strategy of political survival and the search for leadership that had led him to invade Iran ten years earlier, accentuated this time by the difficult internal economic situation and the growing social unrest provoked by the ruinous war years earlier. However, diverse factors made this second conflict quite distinct: the aggression was directed towards another Arab country, endangering the petroleum rich region *par excellence*, and took place in a moment in which the international order was determinedly changing due to the collapse and last gasp of the U.S.S.R. In that moment of great uncertainty Saddam Hussein did not know how to calibrate the meaning of the international changes that were underway, nor did the United States want to miss the occasion provided by this conflict to establish new hegemonic bases in the Middle East, and the world in general.

That new international war against Iraq, called the Gulf War, once again made the citizens the primary victims. Baghdad, bombarded once again, continued to accumulate destruction and underdevelopment. The eleven years of severe international embargo that followed brought this country and its capital to pre-industrial levels with a humanitarian crisis that, according to UNICEF, brought the death of more than half a million children between the ages of 3 and 5 years old. The U.S. invasion of this country in 2003 brought about a definitive "memorycide" for Baghdad. In the first weeks of the invasion the systematic looting and pillaging of its cultural and archeological patrimony, in front of the incomprehensible actions of the occupying forces that only projected the Minister of Petroleum, left this city without historical memory. With the destruction of the National Library and the National Archeological Museum, which guarded all the treasures of the first civilizations, the memory of humanity was also left burning. Since then the violence, chaos, and socio-economic degradation have brought this ancient and abused city to a path of destruction for the time being, with no end in sight.

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## Notes

- 1 We have tried to introduce the smallest possible number of Arab terms, although in some cases their inclusion was unavoidable. These cases are always written in *Italics*. In cases of proper names we have opted to transcribe them in the most simple and accessible way for the Spanish phonetic system. (Note: the same has been done for the English translation)

## DRIVING THROUGH BAGHDAD IN AN ARMORED VEHICLE

Tomás Alcoverro

Every time I am able to explore the city (which I visited for the first time in the summer of 1972, when it still was a provincial capital with only one large hotel –*The Baghdad Hotel*– on the banks of the Tigris), with bodyguards of course, I try to absorb its life and to keep its landscapes in mind. Baghdad is a very dangerous city for its inhabitants, especially in certain places such as centrally situated streets, market places or crowded mosques where attacks are committed often: in spite of these never-ending massacres, the people come back over and over again because there is no other chance; they must resume their tasks, go from their houses to the workplaces in order to live, day after day.

Since a couple of years ago, spectacularly, the river Tigris with its meanders and bridges has become a sort of borderline between two zones where the Sunni and the Shiite populations gather together, each of them at one side of the river. Before these sordid threats of ethnic cleansing began, Baghdad was a metropolis of more than six million people, mostly Sunnis, where all the Iraqi communities were mixed up, or at least they could live together with each other in many mixed sectors: Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Assyrian and also the numerous Shiite community.

The new Baghdad, emerging under threat from violence and segregation, has its mostly Sunni neighborhoods at the west of the river, in Karaj, and those dominated by the Shiites at the east, in Rusafa. Between Karaj and Al Mansur (Yarmouk), we find the Green Zone, and the most residential and modern areas from the city, where there were many buildings from the former regime. The old Abbasid palaces are in Rusafa: here is the popular heart of the capital. There is also the large and crowded periphery of Sadr City, a stronghold of the militias of Muqtada al Sadr.

But even in these increasingly homogeneous areas, the exceptions persist: neighborhoods like Karrada or Adamia (Sunnis and Christians in the Shiite bank) or Kadimiya (Shiites in the Sunni side). I used to live in Karrada before the American-British invasion, with its Christian minorities and its churches, its long Arasat el Hindie Street, with restaurants and bars where alcoholic drinks were allowed.

The borders of these enclaves are more and more precise, and here the extremist fighters from both sides encourage a long-term war, which settles, in fact, these bloodcurdling religious limits. With suicide attacks, kidnapping, mortar shots and machine gun bursts, they scare away their neighbors like in Beirut during the seventies and eighties, when the city split into the so-called Eastern and Western areas, Christians and Muslims. More than one hundred and sixty thousand people have been forced to leave their neighborhoods and settle in others under the shelter of their respective religious communities. Some caricaturists even draw their cartoons about “wars and peaces” in this “league of republics of Baghdad”.

This neighborhood-cutting causes the erection of walls, brick barriers of concrete, and surveillance by armed guards day and night. The urban geography of Baghdad is breaking into pieces, it is becoming more and more “medieval”. The people reduce their living space into minimums, and every time they have to move they feel the danger of not knowing who is the uniformed policeman, who is the mercenary, who is the criminal: they do not know who is friend nor enemy. There is no need of a curfew because everybody locks themselves in their homes at dawn, although they are not sure of having electricity or any drinking water. There are building workers who would rather stay at night in the workplace better than return back home.

I have entered the “green zone” inside an armored vehicle, with a bulletproof vest and accompanied by the police guard from the embassy of Spain. This is the privileged area of Baghdad where the great diplomatic representation of the USA has its seat and the offices of its administration. It is also where the most important rulers of Iraq have their residences. In the “green zone” or international zone (as the Americans like to call it in order to avoid such an exclusive shade of meaning in this enclave), thousands of people live and work, especially Americans and foreigners.

It is an urban space where we can find the ostentatious palaces of the overthrown President Saddam Hussein, like the Palace of the Republic. The busts of the hanged statesman were decapitated in its towers. Very near, a singular building of gracious Mediterranean style is still standing. It is the work of