

Back to Iraq **Project Narrative**

Summary

Iraq today is a country in the making. Not unlike the U.S., many diverse ethnic, religious and political points of view all represent the voices of the land where I was born. Inspired by the work of my friend and mentor Studs Terkel, I am interested in documenting the voices of my Father, my Uncle, and their generation of academics who have, until now, been systematically discriminated against due to the fact that they are Shi'ite Muslims. In the process, I will revisit my childhood homes, and using the medium of video, construct a portrait of the places and people through the filter of my own strongly visual style. The culmination of this narrative will be the attempt to reclaim my childhood home in Basra, which had been occupied by a member of the Ba'ath party, and to which my father still owns the title. Overall, this 80 to 100 minute experimental documentary will be a study in comparisons and contrasts – between two generations; between cultures; between political positions; between those Iraqi's who stayed and those who fled because of war and harsh economic sanctions; between the past, the present, and Iraq's uncertain future.

Background

In the early fall of 1980, I was living in Basra, Iraq with my family when my Father rushed in the front door carrying boxes of food. He looked frantic and worried. He informed me that Iraq and Iran had just started a war with one another. I was ten years old and was suddenly shaken out of my childhood and aware of my own mortality. This was almost twenty-four years ago.

Since then I have seen the meaningless war between the two Muslim countries battle for eight years. I lived in the U.S.A. as an immigrant and was eventually granted citizenship in 2002. When the Iraqi army wanted me for the draft, I was granted political asylum in the US. I have spent a good deal of my early existence fearing for my life. This has had a lasting effect on the themes and content of my artistic work.

My Father was born in the Shi'ite area known as Al-Khadimiya, four miles North of Baghdad. My Mother, a Sunni Muslim, was a child when her parents fled the city of Jaffa, Paelstine in the 1948 exodus. My parents met in Baghdad and I was born in the Hay-AlJammi 'ia (University Court) neighborhood of Baghdad in 1969. I was the first of five children.

After receiving a scholarship from the Iraqi government, my Father completed his Ph.D. in Business Administration from the University of Iowa in Iowa City, and that is when our family moved back to Iraq.

As a child it was difficult to adjust to Iraqi public schools. I was in third grade and could barely speak or write any Arabic. But slowly I made friends and started to enjoy my life there. At the time, Saddam's regime was growing more prominent and more powerful. There was pressure put on my Father to join the Ba'ath party, when he refused he was ostracized and prohibited from teaching in Baghdad. We then moved to the southern city of Basra.

As a child, I was not aware of the political issues and they were never openly discussed. In fact, I even had a large poster of Saddam Hussein in my bedroom! Naïve and feeling patriotic, I was swayed by the notion of Saddam being our great leader. Years later when I grew more aware I realized how brutal Saddam really was.

Like millions of Iraqis my family fled during the war with Iran, leaving our home and belongings behind. We lived in many countries and we struggled to find our place in the world.

Meanwhile, my uncle Kamal, who taught at Harvard in the mid 1970's, and is a respected Islamic scholar, returned to Baghdad. He was accused of being Persian by the head of Intelligence of the Ba'ath party and had to fight to preserve his credibility. He continues to teach at the University of Baghdad.

My parents divorced and I settled in Chicago, Illinois where I graduated from film school at Columbia College and later met and married my wife, Kristie. In Chicago, I secured a job at the Chicago Historical Society where I worked under a humanities grant to archive and digitize Studs Terkel's audio recordings from over 50 years of his career. Studs and I developed a bond. This led to a video interview I conducted with the writer, as well as video documentation of his various speeches and interviews. Recently, I had the distinct honor of being a subject of his new book entitled *Hope Dies Last*. I was featured in the chapter on Immigrants.

With Studs as a mentor, I realized that the voices of history existed in my own family. About a year ago, I traveled to Iowa to visit my Grandmother who is a recent immigrant to this country. She was born in Jaffa, Palestine where she married my Grandfather and had two daughters. In 1948 they left Palestine during the occupation and immigrated to Baghdad, Iraq. Not wanting to be uprooted once again, she stayed in Iraq through two wars. Finally under pressure from her family, after the death of her husband, she came to the U.S.A. I spent six hours filming my Grandmother's interview. I felt compelled to document and preserve her story as a social and historical voice that is often unheard in the noise of popular media and political propaganda. This was my

first step in understanding the past and our complex story as Arabs, Palestinians, Iraqis and finally as refugees in America - our new country that is now the occupying force in our homeland.

My Father now lives in Amman, Jordan and continues to teach at the University of Amman. He exudes a pride in our identity as Shi'ite Iraqis that has infected me. Although my Father and I come from different generations and have our own distinct experiences, we are both filled with a strong optimism for our Iraq.

My wife, Kristie Alshaibi, will be my companion and producer for this project. She is an award winning filmmaker in her own right and this will be her first visit to the Middle East. With her help I will make sure that I present information clearly and accurately without sacrificing my artistic vision.

I have made over 20 short films and one feature length movie (*Muhammad and Jane*) that have played in festivals and screenings in Australia, Asia, Europe and all across the United States. As a freelance cinematographer, producer and director I am confident in my skills as a visual storyteller. My client lists includes BBC radio, the Mexican Fine Arts Museum, The Indo-American Center and WTTW Public Television, Chicago. I am also confident that my Father and Uncle's vast knowledge of Iraqi culture and history will make this a compelling and important project.

Project Synopsis

My wife and I will fly to my father's home in Amman, Jordan. From there the three of us will pay a driver to take us to Baghdad, which is 600 miles away. Once we arrive we will have several places to stay including the home of my aforementioned uncle Kamal.

We will also stay at the house of my Grandfather, who died in Baghdad shortly after he was denied the right to visit his children that lived abroad. My Grandfather was a proud and religious man who gave me my name, Usama, after the great warrior during the prophet's (may peace be upon him) time. My Uncle Abdullah now lives in his house, and has been there since the early 1980's.

We will visit the public school I attended in Baghdad city. In this school we had a prominent picture of Saddam in every classroom and my sisters and I even joined a type of junior Ba'ath scout during that time. One of the efforts that the U.S.A. has started to implement is a whole restructuring of the Iraqi educational system. I will tour my old school to see what changes have occurred, and most importantly what the children are saying.

My Dad and I will visit his old neighborhood *Al-Khadimiya* (almost 99% Shi'ite Muslim) where I have vivid memories of narrow streets with shops, horse-drawn carriages, and the smell of *Khoobuz*, Iraqi flat bread. We will also return to some areas that are clear in my memory. One of these places is the spiral mosque of Samarra that I climbed as a child. We will visit family in the holy Shi'ite city of Karbala, where there have been some violent and tumultuous activity, and then we head down to the town of Najaf.

What are the stories of my Father and his relatives? For so long Shi'ites in Iraq have had to hide their rituals and very specific religious practice. I would like to capture the mood and tone of those people and their rituals now that Saddam's regime has fallen.

After two weeks in Baghdad and the surrounding areas, we will travel South to Basra where it is reported to be calmer. The house we bought in Basra was going to be our home for the rest of our lives. That expectation was shattered when the Iraq and Iran war broke out. After we left, the house was hit by a bomb and damaged. Later we found out that a Ba'ath official was occupying the house. At the time we couldn't do anything about it. Now the Ba'ath regime is gone and we have no idea what the status of our house is. My father still holds the title.

In our neighborhood in Basra we will visit some of the people that we knew so many years ago. I especially want to go see the Mosque near our home where I witnessed so many wailing women carrying the dead bodies of their brother, father, uncle, and son - all soldiers that died in the war.

One the greatest places my Father took me when we lived in Basra was an enormous park that stretched for miles and miles. It had hundreds of date trees, reaching high into the sky that I would climb to the top as boy. The park was a place that families would come to and bring food for a picnic and enjoy their lives regardless of their social or economic status. It was a park for the people. As Saddam grew greedier he took control of the park and built a palace on the land. I want to go back there and see what happened to my boyhood playground.

After two weeks in the South we will travel back North and then return to Jordan.

Statement of Style

This video project will be shot as a road movie, a diary film and an experimental documentary on the life of Iraqi Shi'ites after the fall of Saddam's regime. I will let the people and places we visit narrate this story. But I will also bring my own personal voice and style into the process, expressing my anxieties, hopes and impressions along the way. The central character of the piece is my Father who brought me to America as a child and wanted me to have a new future in Iraq.

After recently completing a fictional feature length movie that addresses the plight of my own generation of Muslim and Iraqi immigrants, titled *Muhammad and Jane*, I am now eager to place my Father and his generation at the center of this new project.

Inspired by my mentor, Studs Terkel, who has taught me the fine art of listening, I plan to give voice to those people and views that are left out of the nightly news. However, contrary to presenting a set of talking heads, or a straightforward documentary, my artistic style will undoubtedly proliferate. This is much more than just a fact-finding mission. Themes common to my past works, including the power play of interviews, the position of being the perpetual outsider, and a persistent fear of violence, will naturally seep into the project. My story telling methods are predominantly visual, iconic, and dreamlike, and I plan to continue with this style of movie making.

Using my compact three-chip digital video camera (easily mistaken for a home-movie camera), I am able to record without drawing too much attention to myself. I can move with stealth, even in large crowds, as I have in the many anti-war protests I have shot from Chicago to Amsterdam.

Relevance

Some of the voices I hear from the streets of Baghdad are just as diverse as the views most Americans have of George W. Bush. But one thing is clear (and I stand firmly behind this): Saddam Hussein is gone and that is a good thing. With over twenty years of political oppression for Shi'ites, Kurds, Assyrians, Persians, Chaldeans, Jews, and Christians, it is time for Iraqis to take charge of our country. I propose a new form of optimism that is rooted in pride and unity for all Iraqis. I feel that my voice, and more importantly the voice of the generation before me, is relevant today, especially with so much cynicism and inaccurate information being televised about Iraq.

My concentration on the Shi'ite aspect of my Father our Family is also out of my own desire to learn as much as I can about my history and our relationship to Iraq. As much as I have loathed the omnipresent image of Saddam in every corner of Iraq, I do not want to focus on him. Nor do I want to focus on the occupational forces. What I want to focus on are the Iraqi men and women that have survived for so long and still smile when you greet them.

This human passion, and unrelenting faith in ones identity, is more powerful then any bullet, oppressor, or bars on a jail cell. For the first time in history the Shi'ites have a leading voice in politics and strong representation in Iraq's Governing Council. Rather then succumbing to conspiracy theories about the Iraqi Governing Council being a puppet of the U.S.A., or Saddam being a CIA operative, I offer a position of hope and faith in my fellow Iraqi people.

The Shi'ites for far too long have been an object of suspicion in the eyes of the West. I propose that, as Arabs, we let go of using anti-US, and anti-Israel rhetoric to define ourselves. Instead we should look inward and forward into the twenty-first century without losing our culture, our voices and our faith. By telling this story from the voices of proud Shi'ite Iraqis that are part of my blood and my identity, I may come closer to the heart of Iraq and my roots. I anticipate that this project will be partly a history lesson for myself, and others who are curious about Shi'ite Iraqis, and partly a fantasmic dream-view of a place where my past and present meet.

Anticipated Outcome of Project

As an independent filmmaker and Festival Director of the Z Film Festival, I have established close connections with several programmers and curators in various theaters, festivals, and cultural venues. These include: The Gene Siskel Film Center, WTTW Public Television Chicago, The Chicago Underground Film Festival, The Chicago Historical Society, Horse Hospital in London, Experiment Film Festival in Manila, Philippines, and others. These establishments have been supportive in the past, showcasing my work and the various group shows that I have curated.

I have been in close contact with a French distribution company called 'Eurozoom' that has expressed a strong interest in broadcasting my proposed project on French Television.

I will submit the completed project to several festivals including: The Sundance Film Festival, The Arab Film Festival, The Toronto Film Festival, The Berliner Film Festival, The New York Video Festival, The Chicago International Film Festival and the Rotterdam International Film Festival.

I also plan to send copies of the finished work to 'Arab Film Distribution' for possible commercial distribution. Other organizations such as 'Facets Video' in Chicago may also be interested.

I have been self-distributing my own films and videos and currently have the creative resources to produce, promote and manufacture my own DVD's for this project. My goal is to continue to screen the documentary in as many different venues as possible.