

Hotel Palestine: 'Welcome home, welcome home ...'

By [Felicity Arbuthnot](#)

Global Research, November 03, 2005

3 November 2005

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#)

The Palestine Hotel in central Baghdad and its sister hostelry, the Sheraton, across the road, attacked on 24th October – and by US soldiers at the time of the invasion – encapsulated, during the grinding misery of the embargo years, the unique warmth of an Iraqi welcome – and reflected equally uniquely, the descent from the impossible to the apocalyptic, as stratospheric inflation denied many the basics even to sustain life. Denied entry to Iraq by the US/UK driven UN sanctions, in place between Hiroshima Day 1990 and 2003, was just about anything one could think of, in a country which, embracing modernity and development from the 1970's and ironically, encouraged by the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations, imported seventy percent of virtually everything.

Life at the Palestine seemed to reflect every twist and turn of the embargo's screws, the small triumphs of uniquely Iraqi inventiveness – and a hospitality which always triumphed even when sheets were near transparent with wear, food was in short supply, water brown from the taps, the electricity supply near terminal and telephones on the blink. Spare parts for essential services were constantly vetoed and even Iraqi creativity in cannibalising one installation to get another half way working could only work, at best, half a miracle.

The Palestine encapsulated the looking glass world of embargoed Iraq, nothing ever as it seemed in the land of mirages which Iraq -ancient Mesopotamia – became.

Early in the embargo it was possible to escape guiltily from the horrors it engendered to the comfort of the rooms, bar or restaurant. Hotels were the flagship frontline showcase for visitors and the government provided for guests what it was largely unable to for Iraqi people. But as the years wore on the money was spread more thinly. Arriving back in the sweltering heat for a mid day shower, towels and bedding were missing, being in such short supply they were taken away to be washed and then brought back, there were no replacements.

On one visit after a beaming 'welcome home, welcome home ...' from the staff, my bag was carried to my room, the curtains pulled to let in the evening sun, the television switched on by the bell boy – there was sound but no picture – and when he opened the wardrobe door it fell off. His mortification was visible: 'So sorry Madam, but welcome, welcome home again.' In the twenty four hour coffee shop Anwar who ran it during the night, was laying the tables. He beamed another welcome and next day returned with a present : my name, framed, written on card in beautiful Arabic, commissioned from a professional scribe. Anwar worked all night, catching the odd few minutes sleep in the kitchen between customers, to pay for the university he attended during the day and to provide his diabetic brother with essential medication. My gift had been hard earned.

Mohammed, courteous, gentle historian who worked at the reception desk to earn hard

currency in tips to provide for his family, brought in, daily, superb books, which he sold to those he liked for pathetically little. His life's collection was gradually depleting, volume by volume, his pain visible – but in a country where staples had risen up to eleven thousand times due to a US driven embargo, the dollar, ironically, was king.

Others too were selling. For several years, a back room at the Palestine was a treasure trove of goods -superb antiques, traditional dresses, woven with gold and silver thread, rare leather bound volumes and manuscripts, silverware, crystal, antique jewellery. They were the belongings and inheritance of the middle class, who brought them, their all, to hotels where, again, the few foreign visitors would buy their precious belongings for so little, which meant so much and not infrequently survival itself. One unforgettable cameo was what was clearly every possession, from beautiful garments to drawing room and dining room furniture, music scores, tapes, records and even a souvenir ashtray from a trip to Paris, green marble with a terrier fashioned at the edge. The custodians of the lives people were selling displayed them together, never mixing one family's items with another's. As I looked at the items which had hosted parties, domestic trivias, life's highs and lows when times were normal, a voice said: 'This is a family from Basra'. It was – their all. I had to turn away to hide the tears.

Susan had the concession for the small shop in the hotel lobby. She was five years old when all her family were incinerated in the 1991 bombing of the Ameriyah Shelter by what was later to be confirmed as a US attack. In spite of the terrible scars under her silk shirts and jeans and what must have been mental ones seared into the child within, she showered her customers, so many from the coalition which had blighted her small life, with hugs, with sweets and the irresistible baclawa, the honied, sticky Middle East delicacy – delicious ruiner of all diets.

The marbled lobby welcomed journalists, archeologists, pre-embargo tourists, anti-embargo activists and before Saddam became the West's demon, former UK Conservative MP's such as David Mellor and US notables such as Donald Rumsfeld.

Mohammed had cuttings which made salutary reading: warm words to the regime and nation host. Saddam should never have privatised that oil – heaven help dictators who get uppity and want their nations' wealth for its people.

With the embargo came the banning of all flights, internal and international, but the Iraqi Airways office in the Palestine lobby stayed open – with airline manuals dated August 1990 – the month life stopped for Iraq. In 2000, the embargo was visibly crumbling with some nations openly ignoring it in spite of US wrath. Shame at Iraq's plight was a stronger incentive. And internal flights started again, with triumphant timetables outside the office and flights to northern Mosul and southern Basra a steal at \$30 return. And sanctions busting flights were coming in from abroad: 'There are tears in our eyes every time a plane lands', said a friend. Isolation had been another searing deprivation. The rebuilt airport which was source of such pride is now a US fiefdom and prison of their 'disappeared'

Abu Ziad, driver, mentor, friend, operated from the Palestine. Reed thin, toweringly dignified, he taught me more than any encyclopaedia on Iraq's myriad complexities – and told me things which exhibited a humbling trust which if broken could have endangered his very life. Visit after visit, even if he was not at the hotel, within five minutes of closing the bedroom door, the 'phone would ring: 'I am Abu Ziad, Madam Felicity, I am in the lobby, welcome

home to Baghdad'. He shared laughter at crazy embargo related incidents - and frequently mopped away my grief after an interview of unbearable heartbreak or the relentless, haunting haemorrhage of infant and child deaths that US Ambassador, Madeleine Albright stated were: 'a price worth paying.'

When we drove into the hotel car park, he would invariably spot a UN vehicle quicker than I and admonish gently: 'Please Madam, no scene, please do not get angry ...' As Iraqis starved, died and drove death trap cars, UN staff lived high on the hog, had the most modern communications, best food and pristine vehicles - which Iraq paid for. Often they would pitch up late in the coffee shop when most of the now limited food had gone and demand the impossible - Nescafe, rather than Turkish coffee when none could be found, food which was unbuyable. It was an exercise in humiliation. There were very honourable exceptions, but many of them were hard to love. But Iraqi hospitality came first, so: 'Please, no scene Madam ...' I had to wait until he left to vent my fury.

UNSCOM - the weapons inspectors frequented the hotel over the years they were there. 'Found any biological weapons yet?' I used to ask, none of my business was clearly the answer. 'Try turning on any tap in the country' - water borne diseases had become the number one killer. Childish, but sorry Abu Ziad, courtesy has its limits.

I had long had a joke with the Iraqi Airways staff that I would be on the first plane to land in Iraq when flights resumed, I in fact made about the third, a flight in defiance of sanctions from Athens, organised by former Greek first lady, Margarita Papandreou. When we landed at Baghdad airport there was not a dry eye on the 'plane - and the welcome was overwhelming.

At the Palestine things were improving, fluffy towels, new sheets and a sense of pride returned. Doors still fell off but there was a smell of polish and they no longer washed the lobby with petrol - in the absence of vetoed cleansing materials this had become a kamikaze alternative in public buildings. All Iraqis smoke like chimneys.

Flowers, fruit - even bath plugs - a rarity for years - welcomed us, with scented soaps - not the near carbolic of earlier years - and shampoo sachets. But it was still a looking glass world. Leaving the room I found the immaculate security manager, crawling the floor on his knees, distraught. He was looking for the battery for his watch. Batteries cost the equivalent of most people's monthly salary. In schools children were still fainting and when asked what was the matter, the most common answer was still: 'It's not my turn to eat today.' Many families ate in rote, one going without to give a little more to the others.

In the hospitals there was fresh paint - but the elevators still didn't work and weary porters carried patients and equipment up flights of stairs. And the children were still dying.

By 2003 signs of the crumbling embargo were visible everywhere. Shops were freshly painted, goods pristinely displayed, windows gleaming and development with the finest craftsmanship if not flourishing, certainly spreading. Jewellery, arts, sculpture galleries were opening, selling hauntingly beautiful goods. Only the few could buy, but Iraq was quietly fighting back.

That needed in massive quantities to restore the infrastructure, the health and education services was still beyond reach, but the spirit had returned: 'For us, the embargo is over ...' was a constant refrain. The invasion, however, was any day. Standing on the balcony in the

dawn light, days before the 2003 assault on the Palestine, I took roll after roll of film of a scene so familiar, so loved - the Mosque, the twinkling lights reflected in the Tigris, the buildings great and small dotted amongst ,the palms and on the great sweeping skyline, the great golden sun rising above 'the land between two rivers.'

Then it was goodbye to the Palestine family and to so many. 'Don't worry, please don't worry', I heard, over and over 'we will be alright.'

On April 9th, the anniversary of the obscene statue toppling, in front of the Palestine, I was packing a small bag I used for Iraq and found an un-noticed package wrapped in a black plastic bag which had blended with the interior of the bag.I opened it and found a glazed grey and pink vase holding a silk rose. 'Welcome home soon, in Baghdad' said the note, from Jemila, the Palestine Housekeeper and her staff.

It is inconsequential who attacked the Palestine a second time. Those responsible are those who were responsible for the first attack: George Bush and Prime Minister Blair, who illegally invaded a far away place of which they knew nothing and brought chaos and mayhem in place of 'welcome home.'

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