

The Ongoing Occupation of Iraqi Artists

By [Dahr Jamail](#)

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For centuries, artists, writers, and intellectuals have been meeting in Baghdad's teahouses over tulip-shaped glasses of sweet lemon tea, cigarettes, and shisha pipes.

A car bomb detonated near one of the oldest teahouses a year-and-a-half ago, causing massive destruction around the area. When it reopened recently, Mohammed Al-Mumain, a 59-year-old biology teacher resumed his visits there. The portly, jovial teacher brought tea for my colleague and I before settling to talk, "The mind needs art and education. I come here because the lamp needs electricity. The lamp of my mind, like that in all of us, needs to discuss and review life continually. That feeds me. When I come here I feel like a teenager again. All that I need, the old culture along with the new, I find here."

His eloquence was a pleasure as he proceeded, "Life is interaction. Anywhere, anytime, any moment, we are changing. Our biology and blood pressure changes, and interactions, whether positive or negative, bring us change. Some people resist change, others accept it. It depends upon the culture of the man or woman. This is why we need our art, because it connects us with what has brought us here, and reminds us of where we are headed."

By exploring the human condition, art brings about new insights into the human ability to relate and communicate. By appealing to finer human emotions, it creates a framework of values in society, while giving us a context in which to grasp our relationship to the universe.

Art not only represents the finest in human consciousness, it also manifests in form the mysterious. "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science," said Albert Einstein.

But what happens to a society where this powerful medium of evolution is damaged, repressed, or worse, removed completely? All of it has happened in Iraq. How does the collective consciousness of the nation sustain itself in this void?

Trained at the Institute of Fine Arts and the College of Fine Arts at Baghdad, 46-year-old sculptor Ghassan Alawchi personifies the plight of the artist in Iraq who is stuck in a frustrating, never-ending, yet futile struggle that involves almost no element of aesthetics.

I met the large man on the lawns of the Fine Arts Center in Baghdad, a beautiful setting in sharp contrast to his painful story. "You visit me during the hardest days of my life," lamented the artist, "I have plenty of ideas but cannot release them. When I produce art, it is like my son, and I care about it deeply. I don't know how to choose other paths. I feel so strangled. Sometimes I hate myself."

Prior to the invasion, Alawchi - like other sculptors - had no option but to create sculptures

of the dictator. "During Saddam's regime, we were under an economic siege but we were able to sell our sculptures. Saddam paid us and that was very helpful." To compensate for the severe constraints on their creativity at the time, artists like him simultaneously pursued art closer to their heart, even if such art had no buyers.

Alawchi's favorite theme is the life and legend of the revered Imam Hussein, grandson of Prophet Mohammad. I am curious about this choice of a spiritual figure of the Shia sect. "There are beautiful pictures of people marching to his tomb - these long distances. I want to honor those amazing, revolutionary moments in time," he says.

As sectarian violence and accompanying religious fanaticism began to gain ground and peaked in 2006-07, the sculptor had to stop sculpting, lest he be branded sectarian. That accusation in Iraq can be life threatening.

The situation today is somewhat different, but still not conducive to artistic expression. All artists in Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq are surviving in harsh conditions, "There are so many works, but nobody cares to see them or buy them. Only our friends attend our exhibitions, and nobody is in a position to buy any of the pieces. The government doesn't care and does nothing at all to help us. These are bad days for us."

Artists in Iraq cannot afford to rent studios now, and most of them live in their parental homes. "My wife, our children and I are living in one room in my father's house. In one corner of that room is my studio," says Alawchi, "This obviously affects my concentration and limits the size and substance of my work."

Raad Abdalwahid, a graphic designer and painter, confirmed the grim scenario his friend described adding, "The last painting I sold was in 2006."

After being targeted by assassins and kidnappers, like the rest of Iraq's intelligentsia, artists too have fled the country. The ones left behind feel completely isolated in their attempts to remain afloat under the twin scourge of economic desperation and religious radicalism which has ruined the art scene in Iraq. If galleries have become rare, display of new work therein is rarer. Alawchi is convinced that the only way Iraqi artists will succeed in keeping themselves and their art alive is by leaving Iraq, but he hopes, "those artists can be in community with us, because now we feel isolated from the whole world."

After decades of having experienced repression, censorship, and attack, Iraqi artists were relieved when the dictatorship ended. They were confident that despite the ongoing occupation they would at last be free to give expression to their creativity, and not be compelled to sell their souls in the service of "Presidential Art" in order to survive.

International NGO staff and foreign journalists flooded the country after the invasion of March 2003, and artists found an appreciative market for their work. This renaissance in Iraq's art community was short-lived, however, and met with an abrupt end as the resistance to the occupation grew stronger and more organized. Expectedly, it resulted in wide-scale reprisals by the US military that led at times to the destruction of entire cities. In the ensuing chaos, the newfound market for Iraqi art evaporated.

The situation worsened with a rise in sectarian strife that, in turn, bred religious extremism that brought in its wake fresh repression and censorship, in addition to targeted violence against artists.

A man of many parts, sculptor, journalist and professor Ahmed Fadaam used to work for The New York Times in Baghdad. In 2008, a militant group demanded that he quit his job and pay them \$10,000, failing which they would kidnap his children and kill him and his wife. He sent his family to Syria, and continued in Baghdad with a changed address because he had no other source of income. Fortunately, he was able to leave Iraq when a friend in the US secured an invitation from the University of North Carolina as a visiting scholar for him.

Fadaam presents a bleak picture of the art scene in Iraq when he says, "Artists are a part of the society they live in and their creations reflect their experience of it. Back in the '80s, Iraqi artists talked about war, but there was a kind of hope in their work, it wasn't so dark. During the '90s, their compositions expressed the impact of the embargo, the hunger and poverty, but still ... there were elements of hope. Today art in Iraq expresses no hope because the artists see no hope. Their art expresses the death they witness around them and the all-pervasive lack of everything in their lives. It is a dark art which has lost all hope, just like the society that it projects, which is crushed by occupation and has lost all hope."

He does not believe that art in Iraq will be extinguished. "Art never dies. There will always be artists. In any country that you go to, simply by looking at the art and architecture around, you can identify the kind of society it has. You can tell from its art whether a country is civilized or trying to become civilized, if there is dictatorship or if it is a free society. Art is the visible face of any culture."

The real cause for concern is fundamentalism because, he says, "Extremists in power are no different from any dictator. They impose their ideology on everyone, including the artists. The last exhibition in Baghdad was supported by the Sadrists. All exhibits were paintings of Imam Ali or Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani. Obviously these groups would want to use art as a propaganda tool. If they remain in power, what kind of art will we have in the future?"

I ask him about the prospects of an artistic regeneration in Iraq. It is indeed possible, but "... not with these people around. Artists need to be free in order to create and right now they are not. When you see nudity in the work of the Iraqi artists again, then we can talk."

An important factor to be taken into account in the context of artistic production is the psyche and mental health of the society that the artist inhabits. "A generation that is being raised on death and killing knows nothing but fear, rage, and hatred. What art will they create?"

I realized the extent of devastation caused by the invasion and occupation of Iraq goes beyond loss of life, livelihood and property. The historical and cultural roots of the nation have been wrecked.

"The occupation forces encouraged the rebels to loot museum and libraries. Five thousand years of history and art were irretrievably lost in hours. It is a loss for the world, not Iraq alone. Buildings can be fixed, so can electricity, but where can I find another Khalid Al-Rahal to make me a new statue for Abu Fafar Al-Mansoor? How will I replace the artifacts dating back to thousands of years? Iraq is altered forever."

Since December 2003, the soft-spoken Dr. Saad Eskander has been Director General of whatever remains of Iraq's National Archive and Library. The destruction that has been wreaked upon this august body is inconceivable.

I look at the walls of his office, lined with reclaimed books, as he reveals, "This building was burned twice, and looted. The Americans wanted to demolish it, but we wouldn't let them. We have lost 60 percent of our archival collections like maps, historical records, and photographs. Twenty-five percent of our books were lost. The Library of Endowment and most academic libraries in Baghdad, Mosul and Basra were other institutions that were targeted for destruction."

Of the 13,000 artifacts that were looted from the National Museum only "... tens have been returned and they do not include the most important ones. It has crippled our culture, and culture reaches to the bottom of peoples' hearts, whereas politics do not."

He does not veil his rage against the occupiers as he decries, "The Americans have made a mess of our country. Everything that is wrong now in Iraq, I mean every single problem, is due to what the Americans have done here."

The National Archive building is being rehabilitated. The walls and floors have been restored. Iraqi men and women sit at new desks reclaiming water damaged books. Others file the saved books onto microfiche. I catch an almost palpable sense of urgency to maintain cultural coherence and connection as I witness the daunting task of reconstructing Iraq's heritage in progress, albeit at a snail's pace.

38-year-old Wesam Abud Khalid has been working in art restoration since 1990.

At a studio in the Art Department of the Ministry of Education he restores paintings damaged during the invasion and its lawless aftermath. Fear, however, constrains him from creating original art outside his home.

"Everyone with a genius mind has been targeted. People with outside agendas want to destroy the Iraqi mind. Those of us who have been unable to flee are isolated. Groups that control the governmental departments do not tolerate us. We anticipate death every day," he vaguely hints at the conservative-leaning establishment.

Khalid feel when artists in Baghdad display their work it makes them more susceptible to attacks. "For me, I restore paintings and don't participate in galleries. I choose not to place my work there even though gallery events no longer appear in the media."

Being confined at home stifles him, which is why he continues to restore paintings because it's safer than producing original work.

Although younger than the other artists I have met, Khalid has little hope for the future of artists and appears resigned. "I'm very sad about this situation. Iraqis just need a chance to rest from this tragedy, then we can continue and produce genuine works again. I feel now my capabilities can only bloom outside of Iraq. Here, since the beginning of the occupation, I've been isolating myself."

When Art, a crucial component that sustains the socio-cultural fabric of a society, and the Artist, who weaves this fabric, are both under assault, society tends to get frayed and fractious. As my sculptor friend Alawchi stated most succinctly, "It is dangerous for people to leave the arts. It's dangerous, because art is the front face of the community. We now have the desertification of the art world in Iraq."

That cannot portend well for the world of art anywhere.

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