

Unscripted: Green Zone Theater and the Shoe Drama

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The plot, so unexpectedly, thickened in Iraq on a Sunday like no other. The two main actors – US President George W. Bush, and Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki – took to the stage to perform another well-rehearsed press conference. The scripts were ever so predictable: Bush to tout the ‘progress’ achieved in Iraq, while al-Maliki to express gratitude for the freedom bestowed on his country. Both men were to caution from overstated optimism, and to forewarn of the great challenges that are yet to come. The two partners were to shake hands, smile and walk away. Things, however, didn’t go according to plan on Sunday, December 14.

A surprise appearance by till then little-known Iraqi journalist Muntadhar al-Zaidi provided a most unpredictable conclusion to the public performance regularly held in Baghdad’s Green Zone theater. Every joint press conference of US and Iraqi officials has, for years, concluded, more or less according to plan. Since the toppling of President Saddam Hussein’s statue in 2003, in a well orchestrated – Shakespearean even – series of events, until that fateful Sunday, few have dared to violate the carefully prepared, monotonous media appearances, which often end with a handshake, unconvincing smiles, and the mutter of disgruntled journalists for failing to land a last minute question.

But al-Zaidi changed all of that when he hurled his shoes at President Bush at the exact moment the two main actors were scheduled to exit the stage – compelling the US president to duck twice, astoundingly escaping the makeshift, but largely symbolic weapon. Truth be told, Bush’s timely dodges, were as impressive, as al-Zaidi’s seemingly impeccable pitches.

Much has been said of al-Zaidi’s daring act, which will indeed secure a permanent footnote in history books for an Iraqi man’s footwear. Stories are told of poems, computer games and artwork idealizing al-Zaidi’s shoes; and a rich Arab has reportedly offered millions of dollars for the pair of shoes that were meant as a “farewell kiss” to Bush. While most Americans are likely to remember Bush’s legacy as that of a man who has guided a nation into unprecedented economic mayhem, Iraqis, and others, will remember him as a brutal, self-righteous zealot, who invited untold bloodshed, humiliation and the destruction of a once a magnificent and leading civilization.

According to the US government’s logic, Iraq is now better off than ever before. As for the millions of lives that have been unjustly taken, and the millions of Iraqis on the run, their plight is a worthy price for freedom and democracy, precious US commodities that apparently come at a heavy price. Americans and the sanctioned Iraqi government are never to blame for any wrong doing. Iraq’s tragedy is always someone else’s fault, but

largely the making of elusive terrorists, whose identities and sources of funds change according to whatever Washington's political mood dictates. The insurgents, as they were called until recently, were initially remnants of and Ba'ath Party loyalists, disgruntled Sunnis, then they morphed into foreign fighters, then they were depicted as al-Qaeda sympathizers, copy-cats, then al-Qaeda itself, then Iranian agents in cahoots with rogue Shiite militants loyal to whatever character doesn't suit the interests of the US and its allies. New characters were occasionally added to the Green Zone's ever predictable play, unwanted characters were swiftly removed, and the play's language was repeatedly rewritten.

Then al-Zaidi showed up and hurled his shoes at a grinning Bush, who just finished shaking al-Maliki's hand and was ready to conclude his own ominous chapter in Iraq, one filled with lies, deceit, and the blood of many people, in fact too many to count.

As al-Zaidi was being overpowered, then dragged away by Iraqi security – who must've tried to impress their American security 'counterparts' by teaching the poor al-Zaidi a lesson in good manners, Abu Ghraib-style – the script writers, and stage directors and actors were likely to have been summoned to discuss what CNN described as a 'security breach,' but what should be more accurately described as a deviation from the script. Their orders were straightforward and seemingly simple: to create a parallel reality to the anti-occupation fervor and bloodbath outside, by staging a play of few actors that depicts the occupier as a friendly, obliging outsider, violence against the Iraqi people as a war on terror on behalf of the Iraqi people, governmental corruption as a fostering process of democracy and good governance, and so on. Naturally, the moment that al-Zaidi flung his shoes at cowering Bush, a new, although haphazard play was drafted, mixing the painful reality outside the Green Zone, with the comforting, imagined reality inside. If the al-Zaidi episode is to be credited in one thing, it should be for tossing up the terminology of the two stages. Bush was called "dog" by angry Iraqis for years, but not in a press conference. Iraqis mourned their dead, cried for their orphans and widows, millions of them, outside and Green Zone, but never inside. An Iraqi man, Muntadhar al-Zaidi, in a seemingly fleeting moment, changed everything.

What also confused the script is that al-Zaidi was not al-Qaeda, or an al-Qaeda sympathizer, not a foreign fighter, not a member of the dissolved Ba'ath Party, nor was he affiliated with it in any way, and not even an Iraqi Sunni, for any such affiliation would fit perfectly in the political and media scripts that would demonize the man as an enemy of the Iraqi people, stability, democracy, freedom, and the rest of the redundant clichés. Al-Zaidi is simply an Iraqi man who has, as a journalist, highlighted the suffering of his people as politely, 'objectively' and 'professionally' as he could, and when he could no longer tolerate the lies told in the Green Zone's ever malicious drama, he scrapped the script altogether, chucking his shoes at the main actor: This is a farewell kiss, you dog! This is from the widows, the orphans and those who were killed in Iraq ." His words, although uttered for the first time in the Green Zone theater, echoed the voices of millions of Iraqis outside, who have chanted these words, for six long, tragic years.

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