

‘We’re isolated. Our grief is killing us’

Members of Britain’s Iraqi community have seen their homeland destroyed by a dictator and now must watch it being torn apart by war. **Raf Sanchez** meets the people struggling to come to terms with the fate of the country to which they still long to return

seems that the situation in Iraq has moved on; Saddam is no longer relevant. Yet for the Iraqis I spoke to, any discussion of what is happening today must always take place against the backdrop of the regime he personified. As Hasan puts it: “Saddam was Iraq, and Iraq was Saddam.”

The importance of Saddam is unsurprising when you consider that many of the London-based Iraqis have spent decades watching him from afar and campaigning and praying for his downfall. Hasan explains how thoughts of Iraq will never leave those forced to leave it: “Iraq is a daily ingredient of our day—the one time we don’t talk or think about Iraq is in our sleep. That is, if we don’t dream about it.”

Like Hasan, Dr Abbas Al-Hussaini has spent nearly his entire adult life struggling for a country he left in 1972. Today he is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Westminster’s School of Architecture. While studying in Britain in the early 1980s, Al-Hussaini was a prominent member of the Iraqi Student Society, a no-longer-existent offshoot of the NUS. The struggle to galvanise support against Saddam was a frustrating one. The Labour party and elements within the trade unions were sympathetic but impotent, while Thatcher’s government showed more concern over keeping Iraq as an ally against Iranian radicalism and Soviet expansion.

Today the enemies in Iraq are, for the most part, faceless. The conflict is made up of glimpses of masked insurgents and the unsigned work of suicide bombers. There is no one at whom Iraqis can channel their hatred and

frustration. This is a marked difference to the past 35 years when all that was wrong with Iraq could be embodied by Saddam. Aya Jaffar Al-Kadhimi, a student who now lives in Canada, told me that in her home the very word ‘Saddam’ was used as a curse whenever anything went wrong. As I listen to the passion with which Saddam is spoken of by those who spent years fighting him, I can’t help but feel that for some their opposition to him has become an important part of their identity.

Perhaps inevitably, this concentration of emotion on a single figure, however distant, can lead in some cases to the forming of a twisted sort of relationship with him. Zahraa Al-Shamary is a dentistry student at Bristol. Born in Iraq, she has since spent most of her life in the UK. Despite experiencing relatively little time under Saddam’s regime, she still has intense feelings towards the dictator: “They say you grow to love your enemy. I grew to love Saddam. He was cynically overpowering; dominant yet detrimental; he was passionate about his land. I watched him on satellite television. I read about him in books. I knew his hobbies, habits and addictions.”

I sense that many in the Iraqi community share a similar level of knowledge of Saddam; he might have been a figure of distant enmity, but he was also one of disturbing familiarity. For this reason, I was intrigued to know how it felt when he was finally executed on December 30 2006—the first day of

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Eid ul-Adha, an important Islamic day. How does it feel when the wall against which you have pushed for so long suddenly gives way before you?

The range of responses to this question is as diverse as the community itself. When I put it to Hasan, he smiles slowly and defers to his young son, who looks no older than 10 and has been playing contentedly at his father’s desk for the course of the interview. The moment is a strange one. The boy ponders briefly. “Well, sort of... happy,” he begins. “He did many crimes against humanity; he made a lot of people suffer and die. So, I think it’s good for him to be dead, so we can be finished with him, once and for all; so we can move on with our lives.” The answer is delivered with thoughtful confidence, the vocabulary picked up in a political household and employed with the simple logic of a child. Hasan

affirms this view. “It was a big relief for us. At least we achieved something, we got rid of him. He faced what we think was a very fair trial. His crimes were exposed and he was executed, although it was in an unprofessional way. We are all hoping, working, struggling for a new Iraq. But people must face fair trials and be treated like humans, whoever they are. This became like a revenge.”

For Zahraa, the strong undercurrent of revenge rather than justice that seemed to motivate Saddam’s executioners undermined whatever catharsis his death might have been able to provide. “To me, it was a childish school trick; to show the leader of the other gang that this was our territory now. I preferred Saddam alive because I could hate him without the burden of guilt. I can’t hate him anymore because he’s dead. He can’t defend himself.”

Saddam was eventually convicted and executed for the murder of 148 people in Dujail, a Shi’ite town in northern Iraq. Estimates of the total killed during his regime, however, are as high as 2 million. Like Hasan, many of the Iraqis I spoke to could name close family members and friends who had disappeared into Ba’athist jails, never to be seen again. The weight of the dead is suffocating. Yet, beneath it are more subtle, yet important, losses that need to be understood in order to have even a vague idea of the pain Saddam inflicted.

The first is that Iraq, and with it an important part of their identity, was brutally torn from them. Hasan’s longing to return to the house of his birth is followed by an acknowledgment of bitter reality when I ask him if he sees himself ever returning to live in Iraq. “I have to be realistic,” he says. “Go back to what? If I went to Baghdad now I would get lost. I’m a complete stranger. If you and I were to go together, the only difference would be that I speak the language, and you don’t. We would both be strangers in the town in which I was born and brought up in.”

Najim Shamma is a former civil engineer I met at a meeting organised by the Iraqi Association. Eager to talk about his home and his past, he speaks kindly and slowly to me in somewhat broken English (he refers to it jokingly as his “second-hand language”). He was deported in 1980 with his family; his newborn son was just over a week old. From his wallet he produces a lovingly preserved photograph of the family taken several years later in Iran. He tells me of being forced out of Iraq: “The people who deported me and my family took my papers too. I am Iraqi but I have no proof to say that I was Iraqi. No one believes me. I went to the Iraqi Ambassador to say to them ‘Please give me my Iraqi nationality’, but they told to me go to Baghdad and

get it from there. This is not possible because of my health.” He looks distant as he speaks. “Saddam Hussein took my papers, he took my country.”

The distance from home makes the current violence all the more difficult to bear. Hasan tells me, “We are currently dealing with a family who lost two family members. They are grandparents living here in Hounslow. They lost their son in Iraq, six months ago. He was assassinated. Two weeks ago their granddaughter was killed in the street. She was only five years old. They said one thing. They said if they were back home they could have mourned their loss much easier. ‘Here, we are isolated. We are mourning amongst ourselves. It is killing us.’ It has been the same for every Iraqi here.”

If there is anything more painful than each individual’s loss of Iraq, it is the collective loss, the sense that Saddam took Iraq from itself. Throughout the community, the old and the young, those who lived in Iraq and those who never have, there is an enormous pride in their country. The walls of the Iraqi Association are covered in photos of the Mesopotamian architecture of Babylon. Iraq’s title as the ‘Cradle of Civilisation’ is often evoked. The point repeated again and again is that the madness that plays across our television screens is not representative of Iraq, but rather the result of the vestiges of Saddam’s poison, still coursing through the infected veins of the country.

Perhaps the most painful manifestation of this venom is the sectarian violence currently sweeping the country, presented as a division along Sunni-Shi’ite-Kurd lines. Safa Hadi Al-Mafraji, a student and the son of a former Iraqi Communist party official, insists that before Saddam, “Iraqis were united; we had Jewish musicians, Assyrian athletes, Kurds holding several ministries. All working under one flag and banner. Now, everyone works for his own sect, own race, own religion. Before 2003 no one asked me if I was Arab or Kurd. Now a small minority of people go into details asking me not only if I’m Arab or Kurd, but also if I’m Shi’ite or Sunni.”

Yet for all that has changed and all that has been lost, there is still a palpable sense of optimism. Hasan and Al-Hussaini, both of whom have watched Iraqi politics for decades, predict the insurgency to be in its last throes, and claim to see the first signs that the Iraqi people are beginning to turn against the insurgents. Whatever the future brings, Iraq will continue to hold an immovable place in the hearts of its displaced community. As Aya puts it: “Walking in a dirty street anywhere would just be walking in a dirty street; but walking in a dirty street in Iraq would feel a million times better.”