

An Uncertain Dawn On a Scarred Street -- Baghdad Today: Pessimism and Resilience
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Last of three parts

On June 23, 2005, a war more than two years old arrived at the busy commercial district of Karrada, where Amal Salman, now 16, lived with her family.

For months, hardly a day had passed without a car bomb somewhere in Iraq; the scenes unleashed in Karrada by the explosion at 7 a.m. were so familiar as to have become routine. Twisted wreckage smoldered, its acrid smoke mingling with the stench of seared flesh. Water cascaded over the fires, then, turning black, mixed with pools of blood. Shattered glass danced along the buckling asphalt like a hailstorm.

Left in the bomb's wake were the ruins of the Abdel-Rasul Ali Mosque, a neighborhood place of worship entered through wooden doors graced by a blue, floral-tiled portico and decorated by calligraphy invoking God, Muhammad and Imam Ali. In quieter months, under lazy fans and chandeliers, Amal, her mother and sisters had gathered there to celebrate the religious holidays of Shiite Muslims.

"I woke up terrorized by the powerful explosion, with my heart beating fast, fearing that someone might have died or been wounded," Amal wrote in her journal that day.

With her sisters and mother, she clambered onto the balcony of their three-room apartment. Surprisingly quickly, police had arrived, vainly trying to direct dazed bystanders, some of their faces frozen in the blank stares of shock. From the third floor, Amal heard the shouts of others - cries of anger and, more frequently, helplessness.

Minutes later, in a tactic that had become more and more common those days, another car bomb detonated, then another, all along her street as Amal watched. Before the spasm ended, four in all exploded, killing 17 people and hurting many more.

"For a moment, I thought I had died," Amal wrote in a long entry. "Then I realized I was not dead, but I was so scared. In a moment the police car was burned and those inside it were dead, burned. A young man who had only recently announced his engagement died, along with a good old man who lives in the neighborhood, named Abu Karrar, and Khalil the Kurd, who owns a shop in one of the small shopping centers here."

Since she had begun keeping her diary in 2003, Amal had witnessed the events of a lifetime: an invasion and the only government she knew toppled in a few weeks; an occupation; promises of prosperity and the disappointment that followed; an insurgency and the specter of civil war. That Thursday morning was the first time she had seen death.

"It was a true disaster which I will never forget as long as I live. Total destruction, not only in the Karrada district, but inside me, my family and among our neighbors," she wrote. "I was really in pain over this scene which I hope no one would ever have to see."

Residents sometimes remark that Baghdad is cursed by how little is ordinary. It is a city that Karima, Amal's mother, calls forsaken, tempered perhaps only by its resilience - the city's best and, in these days, most valuable trait. On a hot summer day, as a sandstorm cast the capital in a sickly glow, Amal recovered from the latest disaster. She helped care for her sister, Hibba, whose right arm was torn by flying debris. She traded gossip with neighbors about who lived and who died. She watched police clear the streets, then saw the Americans arrive. A military truck brought bottles of water; people lined up to receive them.

"It was a scene that was hard to describe, as if the Iraqis were beggars standing in line in a humiliating way," she wrote. "During the dispensing of the water bottles, the American woman soldier gave a camera to the translator to take a few pictures."

By nightfall, the dead were buried, carried to their graves in funeral processions.

"Women were crying," Amal wrote, "and many people with grief on their face seemed bewildered and unable to understand why so many people have to die."

Coping With Hardship

Amal had turned 16 on March 23, her hair still pulled back in a ponytail. But she looked older, having passed abruptly to adulthood from an abbreviated adolescence.

Her sisters, too, wore the years of hardship. The twins, Hibba and Duaa, were now 14. Hibba wore a hijab over her hair, while Duaa braided hers. During the invasion, they had been friendly, even effervescent, eager to show off their Koranic recitation, chants for Saddam Hussein and snippets of elementary school English. With their faces and bodies no longer boyish, tradition now dictated that they keep a distance from men.

Fatima, at 18 the oldest, had long ago left school to help Karima, a widow, raise the children. In the time since then, her literacy had faded, as had some of her confidence.

Zainab, the quietest and most beautiful of the girls, had married in the spring at 17. Her husband, Ali, had been a police officer, earning \$300 a month. In July, though, he received the leaflet that so many of his colleagues dreaded: a death threat from shadowy insurgents. "They told him either you quit or we'll kill your wife," Amal recalled. He quit.

A year before, Karima had finally found work as a maid at the Palm Hotel, since renamed the Rawabi, cleaning eight rooms from 8 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. In a racket of sorts, the local employment agency took a third of her wages. That left her with about \$33 a month.

Ali, 22, a former soldier and Karima's oldest son, had secured a job, too. He was now serving tea in a nearby real estate office, working from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. He made about a dollar a day,

"depending on the baksheesh ," or tips. His younger brother, Mohammed, 20, was long without work. A ne'er-do-well, he spent most of his time prowling the streets; even his family suspected he was up to no good. Mahmoud, at 11 the youngest, sold soft drinks in the street during summer. At his best, he could bring in nearly \$2 a day. Already, the time outside had given him a precocious street sense.

With the exception of Mohammed, their trials had brought them closer; as their city collapsed, they looked inward, their isolation a source for their strength.

"My family is my country," Amal said.

The words that danced that summer across Baghdad's landscape, a panorama washed of color by the sun and time, were almost always confusing.

Billboards along highways with heaps of trash marketed the mobile phones of Asia Cell. "Now your voice is heard," they declared. Another pictured a fingerprint, the hoped-for symbol of the January election, when voters dipped their index fingers in dye to certify they cast ballots. "Iraq," it intoned. Those faded posters were now dusty, some of them torn. Graffiti on a dirty wall in the capital's Sadr City slum spoke to the present: "You traitors, we don't want elections, we want electricity." In Amal's neighborhood, another poster, its meaning ambiguous, suggested the past: "Today is the same as yesterday."

"Today was quiet, and no one spoke about anything except electricity, which comes only for short times," Amal wrote in her entry on July 4. "Water is not available because the terrorists are targeting water pumping plants every day. The rich can live outside Iraq very comfortably, but the poor who can't have to stay suffering."

As they had during the war, Amal and her sisters still filled buckets of water each day from a leaky faucet in the courtyard, then lugged them up two flights of stairs. The summer before, her family sometimes had as many as 12 hours a day of electricity - cycles of two on, two off. For an entire week in June this year, they had just two hours. It was one hour a day for stretches in July. In August, it had doubled to two hours.

As they sat in the dark on one sweltering day, the lights flickered on. "God's prayers on Muhammad and the family of Muhammad!" they shouted, with weary smiles. In 10 minutes, the lights dimmed again. "Is this real?" Karima asked, shaking her head.

In one of the bedrooms, a visiting Zainab was gathering blankets from the floor, where Karima's five daughters had slept together. From the kitchen, Amal brought in tea and a single fried egg. The others shared this, along with Iraqi bread known as samoun .

Their conversation that morning turned to money, then to their lack of it. Neighbors had purchased a small generator, but a share of its power was expensive: \$10 a month, along with \$1.50 a day for the fuel. The Karrada bombing had damaged the nerves in Hibba's right forearm; she could no longer grip a pencil. A doctor's appointment cost \$5, and physical therapy ran \$2 a day. Given the family's budget, they would let her try to heal on her own. The money would go

instead to put the youngest daughters through school.

'Death Is All We Hear'

Like many in Iraq over nearly three years, Amal's family was locked in a cycle of moments of optimism, followed by long months of brutality and dejection. There were turning points - Hussein's fall, the formal end of the U.S. occupation in 2004 - and Iraqis often greeted them with anticipation and hope. Disappointment typically followed. One of those turning points was the election in January, when Karima, Ali, Mohammed and Fatima defied insurgent threats and walked cheerfully to the polling station.

"I regret that I went to the elections and voted," Karima said seven months later, as she sat with Amal and her sisters over breakfast. "What did we elect? Nothing."

"If we voted or didn't vote, it's still the same thing," said Fatima, her oldest daughter and most pessimistic. "If the Americans want to do something, they'll do it."

Karima nodded, her veiled head cast to the ground. It was a gesture that seemed to mean: What more can be said? Her city was mahjura - forsaken or abandoned.

"I feel sorry for Baghdad," she said softly.

In the worst days of the invasion, Karima once said something as Amal and her sisters sat around her. "It's like we're part of a play on a stage," she said, her voice reflective. "Life's not good, it's not bad. It's just a play."

As Iraq entered a third year of war, those words acknowledging her powerlessness seemed to take on new meaning. The script was already written. People like Karima sat as spectators, watching a performance.

Violence, now mundane, was reshaping their lives. Its pervasiveness was breeding distrust and fear as amorphous as Hussein's repression was pervasive.

"While I was downstairs, my brother Mahmoud came and said the road was blocked. Everyone was asking why and some said they had arrested terrorists," Amal wrote on July 5. "The truth however was that police had found a bag, and at first thought there was a bomb inside it, but in fact they found a girl of 16 years - dead, beheaded, and naked. She was thrown on the street, inside a bag, raped by someone unknown."

"Death is all we hear in the news everyday," she wrote in another entry, a few pages later. "Death, slaughter, murder, kidnappings and robberies. Nobody knows why."

At times in the summer, Amal's street would assume a veneer of normalcy. Lines of cars still stretched miles from gas stations. But markets along the sun-soaked sidewalk overflowed with goods piled on rickety stands: socks imported from China and T-shirts from Syria. Down the street were children's toys. There was a "Super Mega Heavy Metal Fighter" action figure and a

doll that, when squeezed, played "It's a Small World."

In the family's apartment, though, the daily mayhem cast a long shadow. Weeks after the Karrada bombing, Amal and her siblings recalled its scenes in almost photographic detail.

"The dead have become cheap," Mahmoud, the 11-year-old, said dispassionately.

He recalled one piece of burning shrapnel that sliced through five people. Abu Karrar, he remembered, stumbled across the street, his shirt bloodied. Then he died. A bone of Abbas Rubaie's leg flared through his pants. The flesh of another neighbor's arm was seared off. A car's engine, the boy said, fell on top of a corpse.

"Only the best people die," Mahmoud said. "They always pick the best fruit."

In her diary, Amal recounted the police raids that followed, as officers forced their way into apartments and searched for suspects. She and her sisters watched passively, in silence. Two people were arrested; neighbors said they were innocent, "poor laborers at a soap factory." More raids ensued that summer, sometimes every few days.

"God knows who is telling the truth or not these days," Amal wrote in July. "No one has trust in anybody else, whether the police, the National Guard or even our own folks."

Liberation and Contradiction

In 2004, a year after the invasion, Amal had sat with her mother, confused about occupation and liberation, unsure about the fortunes of her country. Some blamed the Americans for their plight, she said then; others blamed Hussein, or even the Iraqis themselves.

At the time, Amal shook her head. "I don't know what to say," she confessed.

Another year on, though, Amal was no longer the young girl who parroted the hollow slogans of Hussein's state and, as it crumbled, directed prayers to God. She no longer deferred to her sisters, formulating her tentative opinions but often too shy to deliver them. The conflict around her had become more than a simple struggle to survive. Karima, her mother, now listened to her, as did her sisters. They might disagree with her, but they witnessed in Amal liberation measured in the most personal of terms: She saw for herself.

"All the government officials say, 'What do I want,' " her sister Fatima said one afternoon in August. "They don't care about the people. They don't care about the nation."

Amal interrupted her. "I feel like it's going to change," she countered.

The girls sat together in the apartment, where iconography had proliferated over the months. More posters had gone up of Shiite saints, placid portraits. A blue porcelain plate still hung. "God," it read simply. The electricity was on, and the dank stairwell was lit. Inside, enough sun filtered through the window, and the girls left the lights off.

"The intervention of the Americans in Iraq has brought about the biggest revolution the world has ever seen," Amal insisted.

"It's an occupation," her older sister answered.

"Did the Americans change the regime or not?" Amal said.

She was speaking neither in support nor opposition; she was simply reflecting fact. She didn't try to reconcile contradictions; she understood there were ambiguities.

"It's an occupation," Fatima answered again. "When the Americans move, we have to stop in the streets. We have to pull over. If we don't stop, they'll hit us. It's our country. Why do we have to stop for them? We should be giving the orders."

"It's going to get better and better," Amal countered confidently. "This is just my opinion," she said, "and I'll say my opinion freely."

"The people who died, did it get better for them?" Fatima asked, a little frustrated.

Amal turned her palms up and smiled.

She talked about the insurgency. Guerrillas fighting American troops in the western province of Anbar were honorable, she said. "I respect them, but it's not resistance to kill someone working for the Americans. That's not what we call resistance."

"The American presence has positives and negatives, but it was a revolution," she said. Amal pointed her finger at her older sister. "It changed the regime. We don't say it's all good now. We don't say it's all positive. But we hope, we hope."

Occasionally in her diary and more often in conversations, Amal speaks of what she calls the contradiction - pessimism and hope, sentiments seemingly irreconcilable.

In that contradiction is perhaps one of the truths of her city: Baghdad, its residents often say, deserves better, and they mourn the perpetual loss of the most fabled Arab capital. Resilience, a truly Iraqi quality in its defiance, somehow propels it forward.

"There's no answer to our problems. If you look for one, there is none," Amal said. Her family had turned quiet, listening. "The situation is bad. It's true, it's really bad. It's true that every day is worse than the one before. But we don't ever want to be hopeless."

"I always want to leave something for tomorrow," she went on. "The sun will set today, but it always rises again. Everything rises again. Even without life, there is hope."

She stopped for a moment and smiled at the attention the others were paying her.

"I don't know how to express it," she said softly, "but I understand it."