

distinct groups, providing access to almost the entire population.

“Democracy has failed,” Mamoul declared on a parting note, tugging at the red-tinged tie that matched the hue of his large, gold watch. “But democracy can work if we have a better electoral process, debates like America, and if the educated class lead — and we don’t leave the decisions to the religious societies.”

A few days later, I visited his party’s headquarters nearby. One of his advisors had learned that I was — in what now felt like my former life — a ballet dancer. He insisted that I see the old theater they had transformed into a Parliament-like hearing room with an extensive sound system and towering podium poised in the center of the stage.

The blend of old Iraqi fixtures was contrasted by a western boy band soundtrack blaring through the speakers: “What Makes a Man” by Irish pop group Westlife. The commixture of bodies in front of me — suits, skinny jeans, traditional attire — created a clashing combination of the past and the present.

THROUGH THE TRIANGLE OF DEATH

October, 2016

In the morning light, when the sky was still gentle and pink and the Tigris River shone in front of me, the dualities between Baghdad’s past and present were most pronounced. For a place thrashed by decades of war, it still possessed such voluptuous beauty.

I sat alone on the balcony of the Al-Mansoor hotel in the city’s center. The hotel itself was a plain, dull brown tower with various layers of security arranged outside. Like most major hotels in Baghdad, it had been a target of insurgent attacks throughout the U.S. occupation. In June 2007, twelve had died in a suicide detonation, including a Shiite lawmaker and some Sunni tribal sheikhs. Yet its view remained peaceful and unparalleled.

As the sun crept higher against the humming of the day’s first call to prayer, I admired the reflection of the palm trees, the light flapping of the row of flags, the quiet. Baghdad held a raw, unexpected beauty.

Across the street stood mortar-fissured apartments that once housed Saddam's elite guards. Adjacent to those, there was the General Arts and Theater, once a beloved place of the dead dictator. I was told that the theater had been assaulted repeatedly "by the Americans" with bombs lined with uranium. That was how they justified why it had not been repaired or rebuilt — to get close would be too dangerous.

A study by Dutch peace group Pax released that week, found that U.S. forces fired depleted uranium (DU) into civilian areas soon after the 2003 invasion, although the issue has been one of contentious debate. DU is deemed to be less radioactive than the original, but is still considered a toxic chemical. When it comes to the use of mines and cluster munitions, biological and chemical weapons — even blinding lasers — there are international treaties devoted to regulating their production and deployment. But little was made clear about the creation and dissemination of DU weapons.

Nonetheless, some defense experts I spoke to said no such weapons were ever used in Baghdad.

Our driver, Hassan, wove through the maze of streets, narrating as if he were a war tour guide. He pointed out Saddam's shattered old Prime Ministry, the bomb-blistered structures, and the shells that remained, routinely citing the presence of uranium. Little kids played happily in the trash, roving for treasures.

The city was lined with religious flags — some of which commemorated the Shia Imam Hussain's fight for justice almost 1,400 years ago and some of which were Iraqi flags — in a display of nationalism and religious adherence to the Ashura, which was just seven days away.

Every time I attempted to scrawl in my fast-filling notebook, Hassan instructed me to look up and out at their beloved country. He was a doctor, he said, but had given up the medical profession to venture into politics; he wanted to do something more for his country. Everyone everywhere, it seemed, wanted to exercise their political prowess.

We reached the highway to make the seventy-mile journey to Kabala, the holiest of holy sites in the Shi'a religion, home to the Shrine of Imam Hussein. Outside of Mecca and Medina, his tomb was one of the most important places for Shi'ites. Millions of pilgrims visited the city annually to observe Ashura,

which marked the anniversary of Imam Hussein's death.

Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, was slain in battle at Karbala in the seventh century. His martyrdom, celebrated on the day they now call Ashura, was considered a pivotal occurrence in the Sunni-Shia discord that would rock the Islamic world and energize ISIS and its predecessors.

The Sunni militants of ISIS regarded Shia as apostates who must be wiped out so that one purified form of Islam could be established. The Shiites believed that Islam was imparted through the household of the Prophet Muhammad, while the Sunnis believed that it ascended through followers of the Prophet Muhammad — his chosen people. The sects were ultimately divided over who was the true inheritor of the mantle of the Prophet.

We continued down Karbala Road, a passage that contained a wealth of memory — from the spiritual to the malefic. I could not help but envision the lives lost in roadside attacks, from all sides of the spectrum. The region was renowned for heavy fighting ten years ago. If I closed my eyes for long enough, I could see it: my own countrymen and women sacrificing their lives for a cause none of us were entirely sure of all these years later. I could see them taking their final breaths along the desert road, graphed by withered palm trees, blood crusted into the tar and greenery, and into energy that could never die.

We soon arrived at what was known as the “triangle of death.” During the U.S. occupation — or invasion, depending on who you talk to — the rural area was the ultimate Al-Qaeda playground. It was a site of high unemployment for locals, frequent American kidnappings, and savage attacks on the Musayyib Power Plant, a crucial supplier of Iraq's electricity.

“Nobody could pass through here,” Hassan said, glancing out at the remnants of war — skeletons and fragments of fighter tanks and missile launchers. He again reminded me that the waste couldn't be removed because of the uranium.

Checkpoints were dotted with posters of wanted terrorists, designed like old-fashioned posters from the Wild West of the American frontier. At every checkpoint, kids would come to the car window flashing peace signs and smiles, trying to make a buck or two to get by. The soldiers were sweet with

them, patting them softly on the back.

We stopped for a cigarette by the blue-green Euphrates River, its edges brushed by overgrown greens and palm trees. Along with the Tigris, the Euphrates is one of the two decisive rivers of Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization. Originating in Turkey, it streams through Iraq and Syria and empties into the Persian Gulf. Religious scholars often cite the Euphrates as the location of the Garden of Eden, referencing the Book of Genesis.

According to Biblical prophecy, just before Jesus returns to earth, God will compel the river to dry up. Then all the armies of the world can assemble to battle Jesus on his return to earth. That battle will mark the last of the world wars humankind will ever have to fight. It will mark the end of the world.

We finally arrived at Karbala. As the lone female in the group, I was cautioned against shaking anyone's hand and told not to get out of the car until I was fully covered in a black abaya. After the hasty wardrobe change, I watched the faces of the Iraqi men change. Before, I was a western woman defined by my own dress and rules. And suddenly, now — looking the same as every other black-cloaked female in the street and barely visible — I was deemed “more beautiful.”

Was beauty not to be seen — or to be seen only as pure and pious?

The streets were busy but calm, full of people going about their daily lives, bustling in and out of markets, to and from the stalls that had been set up to offer free food near the shrine's entrance. But there was always a precipice of uncertainty to Iraq.

Just a couple of weeks earlier, eighteen people had been killed in a vicious bomb attack just west of the holy city. And, two days earlier, another round of ISIS attacks had been thwarted. Suicide bombers had been busted at the city's conduits, allegedly with the intention to detonate during the changing of the flags. Intelligence officials tracked every single person entering Karbala. They surveilled cars from the moment they left their homes until they reached the city, employing thousands of “secret volunteers” to help arrest suspects. The direct connection across the Western Desert from the Sunni-majority Anbar province to Karbala was an especially monitored location.

At the Holy Provincial Council, officials touted the shrine like executives in a board room. One told me that the greatest challenge — greater even than keeping terrorists out — was ensuring that diseases didn't spread. Some twenty-five million people each year lay their naked hands on the Imam Hussein Shrine throughout the forty-day Ashura period alone. They had hired experts to test for germs that may be thriving on the shrine, but everything had “come out clean,” the official assured me.

Nseeif Al-Khattabi, a Shia Muslim and governor of the Holy Province Council, invited us for tea. He wanted us to listen to him preach of peace and espouse the lessons we could all learn from the great Iman of the Shi'a sect.

“He led a revolution to fix corruption,” Nseeif boasted. “And he paid with his life. Without him, humanity would be in a dark sleep right now.”

He assured me that Iraqis were the ones “fighting ISIS on behalf of the world.” It was a phrase I had heard numerous times from the Kurdish side. What was the cause of the ISIS existence? How much were Iraqis to blame for their own dark reality? Was it the western invasion on their land? Who was really to blame and at what proportions?

After an almost poetic soliloquy about Iraq's future — a future that will be unified, tolerant, and accepting of all religions and sects — Nseeif noted that such peace would only come if the U.S.A. — the world's commander — supported the Shi'a over the Sunni.

We flounced from meeting to meeting, office to office. In almost every room, there were “No Smoking” signs, but every room stank of cigarette smoke. Rules were voluntary. Various men entered and exited. I was often addressed last.

Ironically, inside the great shrine, the element of male and female seemed to dissipate. There was a feeling of equality that came from people from all walks of life worshipping one leader. In the end, they were all children under God. While the genders had separate areas, there were sections on the floor where everyone sat together reading, praying, discovering, and dreaming, all deeply devoted to something much bigger than themselves. There were also those taking selfies and giggling, absorbing the moment in a far less orthodox way.

One young woman excitedly approached Steven — ever the Facebook superstar, with an extensive following of his journalism — for a photograph. All these miles away from home, and somehow she knew about our lives and embraced us like long-lost friends. As it turned out, the young woman — via my friendship with Steven — also followed me on Instagram.

It was dark when we left to head back to Baghdad, unveiling the darker side of Ashura. We passed men self-flagellating in the streets, their eyes damp and their clothes daubed with their blood of self-sacrifice. Self-flagellation was the religious ritual adopted by Shiites leading up to the Day of Ashura in remembrance of the Battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein.

Five weeks later, another truck stuffed with ammonia nitrate and other explosive material would explode at a gas station and restaurant in the nearby town of Hilla, slaughtering some seventy-seven pilgrims who had journeyed from Iran and Afghanistan.

What is war? Everyone is ensnared in the violence; the violence does not discriminate. The pilgrims had merely stopped to rest and eat after commemorating in the holy city of Karbala. I never knew their names, but their rest was to be eternal.

THESE WERE THE ORDINARY

October, 2016

Families of Baghdad had come to accept that an eternal military structure would define their lives. Just as religion would forever play a profound role, perhaps so too would the armed forces rolling through the flat, wide streets.

Past midnight, past streets lined with armored trucks and tanks and the echoing of gunshots, we met with a military family and weaved through the traffic into their humble home in the al-Benok region of Baghdad. I was not sure who they were — Steven had orchestrated the visit. I had momentarily resigned myself to stop asking questions. Sometimes not knowing the plan is knowing the plan. That was the way people here existed; one second to the next.

Steven knew the young father of the house, Omar, an Iraqi Special Forces