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‘Karbala is the path to Al-Aqsa’: an Iraq diary

Iraq’s prime minister hosted a unique conference in Baghdad during the 21 million-strong Arbaeen march, linking the seventh-century murder of Imam Hussain in Karbala to Israel’s current genocide of Palestinians.

BAGHDAD and KARBALA – Arriving in Baghdad today comes as an electric shock to any visitor who remembers recent, somber Iraqi history.

There are virtually no checkpoints, apart from sensitive government areas. None of those ghastly cement blocks from the time of the American occupation, forcing a slow slalom every few minutes. No sense of unpredictable danger capable of striking at any minute. Lush greenery thrives all over the capital city. Haifa Street has been rebuilt practically from scratch. Bustling commerce, from non-stop action in Karrada to a complex of restaurants by the Tigris called (most appropriately) Thousand and One Nights.

After over three decades of unspeakable horrors inflicted on the cradle of civilization, for the first time, Baghdad exudes a sense of normalcy. This has much to do with the new

administration, led by Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, that has been in power for just over two years.

Last week, the Office of the Prime Minister sponsored a unique conference titled *The Road to Al-Aqsa Flood*, inviting popular bloggers and influencers from the Arab world – Palestine, Kuwait, Jordan, Sudan, and Lebanon, among others – and only a few westerners. The bloggers were all young; most had never been to Iraq and, thus, had no memories of Shock and Awe and the occupation – at best, some hazy recollection of the ISIS years. They were all stunned by the hospitality, the dynamism, and, most of all, the hope now firmly embedded in Baghdad life.

The Iraqi government actually came up with a titillating concept, tying a serious discussion about all aspects of today’s ongoing Palestinian tragedy not only to Baghdad but to Arbaeen in Karbala.

Arbaeen marks the 40th day after Ashura, the Shia rite to honor the martyrdom of Hussein Ibn Ali, the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson, who was brutally murdered alongside his entire family by the Umayyad Caliph Yazid Ibn Muawiya. For Shia Muslims, this dishonorable slaughter represents the ultimate embodiment of injustice and betrayal, considered foundational evils by the religious sect.

It’s all about Resistance – without explicitly mentioning the Axis of Resistance. The martyrdom of Imam Hussein at the Battle of Karbala was – in Baghdad today – directly tied to the ongoing Israeli genocide of tens of thousands of Palestinians, in a “twenty-first-century Karbala.”

Twenty-one million walking pilgrims

Flying right before sunset on a Soviet helicopter from a military base by the Tigris in Baghdad to a mini-base in Karbala, some 10 kilometers away from the magnificent Hazrat Abbas shrine, is an astonishing experience.

Irrepressible commander Tahsin, in Karbala, had ordered the pilot to follow the Arbaeen pilgrim route – one of the multiple axes crisscrossing Iraq and leading to the shrine.

The feeling is of a long cinematic traveling shot. Rows and rows of pilgrims, mostly dressed in black, with their backpacks, carrying banners, walking at a steady pace, going through a collection of stalls, resting places, and mini-restaurants, mingling with volunteers offering free water bottles and free drinks to quench the thirst on this spiritual, yet, arduous journey during a scorching Iraqi summer.

As we approach Karbala, the crowd gets much thicker. It’s a sort of community spirit moveable feast. Spontaneous chants pop up, punctuated by infectious rhythm, and above

all, there's this relentless drive to keep walking, to try get as close to the shrine as possible.

We are told it's absolutely out of the question to approach the shrine – the road is jam-packed, body pressed upon body. So the next best option is somewhere five kilometers away: a sort of mini-Palestine compound featuring an exhibition of military feats from Gaza, a space for lectures, a mini-mosque, a small replica of Al-Aqsa and even a road sign: “Al-Aqsa Mosque, 833 km.”

That couldn't be more graphic: the Karbala–Al-Aqsa connection, at the heart of Arbaeen. It's like the spirit of Imam Hussein veiling over every soul along these 833 kilometers.

This compound has been one of the focal points of this year's commemoration. The flow of pilgrims from all over the Muslim world is relentless – and many stop to pay their respects. Nearby, commander Tahsin introduces us to a hard-as-nails anti-ISIS fighter from the Anbar province, who now supervises an Iraqi kebab stall, making delicious food for free, “in the spirit of Imam Hussein.”

Flying back to Baghdad at night, the pilot circles around the dazzling lights of the Hazrat Abbas Shrine – a spectacle worthy of a remixed *One Thousand and One Nights*. Later, the shrine's management would confirm that an astonishing 21.4 million pilgrims had come to Karbala for Arbaeen.

Meeting al-Sudani

Prime Minister Sudani receives the foreign guests for a special meeting at one of those proverbially monumental marble-filled Saddam-era palaces inside Baghdad's protected Green Zone.

Cool, calm, collected, he talks authoritatively not only about the Palestinian plight, but on his vision for a stable nation, detailing his “Iraq First” policy. It's about sustainable development; investments in education and new technology; an affirmation of sovereignty; and in foreign policy, an extremely careful balancing act, juggling the US, the EU, Russia, China and Arab/Muslim partners.

A suggestion is made for Iraq to go to the next level and consider applying to join BRICS. PM Sudani duly takes notes.

The message is clear: Iraq is finally on the road to stability and normalcy. Earlier, a government official had observed, “Daesh [ISIS] set us back many years. Otherwise, we would have made even more progress.”

According to Dr Hussein Allawi, a top adviser to the Prime Minister, ISIS has been reduced to, at best, a few hundred fighters on the fringes of the Syrian–Iraqi desert,

protected by local tribes. The threat seems to be finally contained, despite US [efforts](#) to exaggerate it.

But what gets Allawi really excited are the ramifications of the “Iraq First” policy – and an array of investment possibilities ahead. On energy, for instance, China buys nearly half of Iraq’s oil production; is a leading operator in several oil fields; and even diversifies in projects such as oil-for-schools, helping Baghdad on the education front.

Iraq is at the forefront of China’s ambitious, multi-trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in West Asia. The key focus is on the \$17 billion Strategic Development Road: a transport corridor from Basra to Western Europe, to be finished by 2028, eventually to be connected to BRI – a route that will ultimately prove much cheaper and faster than the existing Suez one.

A visit to Abu Hanifa Mosque seals the Coming of the New Baghdad. This is where the first massive anti-occupation, Sunni-Shia march started in 2003, only nine days after the US-engineered fall of Saddam Hussein’s statue in Tahrir Square. The bombed-out minaret has been rebuilt, the mosque is now in impeccable condition, and an annex featuring precious Sufi objects has been sponsored by a Turkish cultural foundation.

The cradle of civilization is slowly but surely being reborn.

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