

January 31, 2020

Tishreen Revolution: Fighting for Iraq's Future

The screen of my phone is filled with the darkest black I have ever seen—endless engulfing ink—unusual given the time of night; the streetlights should be on. Something is wrong. My chest tightens and anxiety grips me. The slightest movement, maybe the turn of a corner, reveals an inferno. A brilliant contrast of orange, yellow and red flames burst into the night sky, fingers of flame grasping for purchase in the abyss. I imagine the smell of the burning fabric. I feel the heat, almost hear the crackling of the flames. Relatively quiet up until now, suddenly yelling explodes from the phone speaker. I hear a phrase most Americans are familiar with, although probably discriminatorily. A man's voice choked with emotion yells "Allahu akbar!" This popular phrase that is commonly associated with terrorists, in this context, is like an American saying, "Oh my God!" On January 26th, 2020, when people were flooding social media with the news that Kobe Bryant had been killed in a helicopter crash, I was sitting on my couch frantically trying to get in touch with my family in Iraq as I watched the tents they had been staying in at the protest site be completely consumed by fire. There is a revolution happening in Iraq right now. To understand what led up to the events in Nasiriyah, where my in-laws in Iraq live, one must go back to October 2019, in truth, even further, to 1991, but more about that later.

Sixty percent of Iraq's population are twenty-four years old or younger (indexmundi.com). Undoubtedly, the youth of the protest have infused the uprising with its momentum. Young Iraqis who have lived the entirety of their lives under the banners of war, bloodshed, and misery demand change from their government, and their passion for the cause keeps the wheels turning. It is not just the men who are protesting. Women are also taking to the

streets, demanding that their voices be an integral part of this movement too. This is a relatively new thing for Iraq. My brother-in-law Ammar sends me pictures of his two little girls at the protests with him, the flag of Iraq painted on their faces. Students have also joined the demonstrators. Medical school students transform the roads into a river of white doctors' coats. My nephew Ali is a pharmacy student. He was drawn to the protests by his professor. These young people are mixing in a way that has not been seen in Iraq for a very long time. Men and women marching together. Shia, Sunni, and Christian—a sign that young Iraqis are ready to shed the divisions of the past and move forward as a collective people sharing a country. A Christmas tree ornamented with pictures of the martyrs was put up in Tahrir Square and still stands today, a touching tribute from the Christians of Iraq and a clear symbol of solidarity.

The first leg of this journey was short, lasting only a week. Every year in Iraq there is a pilgrimage, one of the biggest in the world, where millions of Shia Muslims walk to Karbala at the conclusion of Muharram. This occurs on the fortieth day, also known as Arbaeen, marking the martyrdom of Imam Hussain during the battle of Karbala. Clad in black, faithful Shia march, some for as many as twelve days, to reach Karbala. Tents line the roads, offering a spot to rest and eat. “Karim, 48, a tribal leader from Najaf, who provides free food for the pilgrims, recalls that when he first took part in an illegal Arbaeen walk under Saddam Hussein, ‘we had to take a roundabout route by the river [Euphrates] and try to keep hidden because, if we were caught, we would put in prison or executed’” (Cockburn). This history of persecution for the Shias is a testament to why even during an active protest, demonstrators temporarily abandoned the cause to pay respect to one of their most beloved martyrs.

The protestors decided to start a new wave of demonstrations. On October 25th, protestors filled the streets of Baghdad marching towards the highly fortified green zone, chanting for the

fall of the government. Initially, they were met with mainly tear gas and sound bombs to prevent them from getting too close to the green zone, which houses government buildings, villas, Saddam's Republican Palace, and the U.S. embassy. The green zone is widely regarded as a city within a city, a prime example of what Iraqis are angry about. "So now what they're calling for are really simple things. They want electricity. They want clean water. They want jobs. And they're fed up with this government that they say is completely corrupt. So, the government, in fact, is in a - quite a precarious position" (Arraf). In this oil-rich country, citizens see no reason why their lives should not be better. The members of parliament certainly aren't doing without. The protestors began calling for a complete government change after security forces began using live rounds against demonstrators throughout Iraq. In November 2019, 44 protestors were killed by security forces in the southern Iraq and 33 of those deaths were in Nasiriyah alone (Ibrahim). Other protestors have been arrested, tortured, and some are still missing.

Militias are prevalent in the south. Young men and women demonstrating in Nasiriyah, Basra, and Najaf have faced escalated opposition from these groups. Truckloads of men creep into cities under the veil of nightfall, with the help of high-ranking officials, murder protestors, burn their tents, and threaten them. My brother-in-law Ammar just recently received a death threat, a letter warning him to stop participating in the protests accompanied by a bullet that serves as an ominous promise. Ammar messaged me on Facebook, sharing a picture of the letter and bullet that was slid under his door while he was at the protests that day. My heart broke for him when he told me he had to send his wife and their daughters to her family's house for their protection.

There is also a tribal element at play. Tribes are still a part of life in the southern provinces and an individual rarely leaves the tribe they are affiliated with, even in marriage. A

human rights activist in Iraq, Ali Wajih, had this to say about the tribal influence on the protests, "The demonstrator in Dhi Qar in general, and Nasiriyah in particular, is the hardest and fiercest compared with the demonstrators in the rest of the provinces, because the tribal environment focuses on masculine concepts and develops the ego of the young men over time" (al-Salhy). The protestors are not deterred by danger, especially in Nasiriyah. They mourn the martyrs of the revolution lovingly and then they throw themselves back into their work. This includes burning tires so that streets and crucial bridges are completely blocked off. These protestors know that when they disrupt the flow of traffic and therefore the flow of money, that packs the biggest punch. Protestors have also engaged in sit-ins throughout various parts of their cities and held marches.

When a protestor is martyred their coffin is carried through the streets by a sea of mourners. The deceased is delivered to their respective mosque, where prayers are held, the family then takes the body for burial. In Nasiriyah, the family will typically deliver the body to Najaf. This is because Najaf is the holy city of the Shia south. It has a burial site, Wadi-Al-Salam cemetery. Wadi-Al-Salam is the largest cemetery in the world, stretching for nearly 1,500 acres (Hill). In the streets of the martyr's hometown, their pictures and names line the walls. During the attack on the protestors in Nasiriyah on January 26th, a man who had fought against ISIS was murdered by a militia, his name was Abady Ali Al-Asady (Naji). He survived fighting ISIS only to be cut down by his Shia brothers. He fought against one of the greatest threats Iraq has faced, ISIS, but was gunned down in the streets of his hometown because he wouldn't allow the militia to burn his tent. His picture now joins the others, a tiny shrine to a big cause. The greatest honor the protestors can bestow upon the martyrs is to continue with the revolution they lost their lives to, ensuring their sacrifice was not made in vain.

Protestors sleep in the streets of Iraq dreaming of a better future. My nephew Ali recently spent the night sleeping on a lonely stretch of highway to guard a blockade erected by the protestors. Trash bags serving as the only barrier between him and the relentless rain. All for Iraq. All for a brighter future for his country. I am awed by Ali's dedication. Winters are wet and cold in Iraq, but the protestors must hold their line. To give up and go home to the comfort of their warm beds and hot meals would mean the end. The militias would quickly seize upon the moment and make it difficult for the protestors to organize and assemble again. These brave men of Iraq take their rest in large tents erected on the protest grounds. The tents are furnished with bright colored carpets, heavy blankets and plush pillows—small comforts from home. The protestors discuss the day's events and what tomorrow might bring. When they are hungry, they sit on the floor and share a meal, their hands serving as utensils. An unmistakable show of brotherhood. No meal in Iraq is complete without the fragrant, fresh baked Iraqi bread, shaped like a diamond and sprinkled with sesame seeds.

One of my nephews, Mustafa, who is just seventeen years old, has been involved in the uprising since its beginning. Mustafa will send me pictures from the demonstrations and videos. It is a precious feeling of connectedness to see him and the other young men from his neighborhood smiling and singing. I open our conversation on messenger and I feel my heart swell with pride. A group of young faces fills the screen as Mustafa pans around the inside of their tent, encouraging them to sing or attempt to say something in English. In these moments, they seem boyish, joking around in front of the camera for a stranger far away in America. It's easy to forget that any one of them could be transformed into a picture on the wall like the martyrs. A calculated risk they accept with pride. I've asked my husband before how he feels about his nephews and brothers taking part in the protests. My husband knows all too well what

is at risk when an uprising fails. Tears glistening in his sad brown eyes he always answers, “Scared and proud. But we are Iraqis and we will look at a bullet coming towards us and welcome it. We are not afraid to die for Iraq. Especially in Nasiriyah.”

Nasiriyah has become an unofficial leader in the uprising. Other cities have been sending blood letters requesting the people of Nasiriyah continue the protest in their place, signed with bloody fingerprints. This comes as no surprise to anyone familiar with Nasiriyah, the southern provinces, and its history of rebellion. The Shia uprising of 1991, which resulted in my husband coming to America, was birthed in the southern provinces. “The province is known for its rebellious nature and has been an incubator for many of the country's political movements... It later became a hub for Shia armed groups challenging the rule of former president Saddam Hussein and its marshes were used as sanctuaries for these groups after they carried out attacks” (al-Salhy).

In the spring of 1991, having spent decades under the foot of the government, men began to quietly organize, whispers of a revolution quickly spread through the weary and battered south. These men were fed up with not having access to the same employment opportunities that Sunnis were afforded. Further education was out of reach for anyone not belonging to the Baath Party. Shia Iraqis had their houses searched by police and government officials and were often placed under arrest and detained without having committed any crimes. The intifada of 1991 was short, lasting only a month before it was brutally crushed by the regime. This has been a very difficult subject for my husband to talk about. We have been married for almost thirteen years and over this span of time, I have heard small pieces about his time in his homeland and his involvement in the uprising of 1991. He grips these stories tightly, memories of another life. Even in marriage, trust is earned and intimate knowledge of the most painful parts of a person's

life is meted out in small pieces. The intifada had some of the same goals that the revolution of today has. They wanted to overthrow Saddam Hussein and have a new election. When I ask Haitham how many battles he was in with the Iraqi military he tells me, “I was in at least one fight a day, some of them lasting all day” (Al-Abdullah). One of the first stories I heard about Haitham’s active role in the intifada was about a gun fight he was in. He told me he felt bullets go through his hair and skim the top of his scalp. Our second Valentine’s Day, Haitham was in the hospital, grappling with overwhelming feelings of despair from the painful memories that haunted him. I was twenty years old and sitting in the hospital’s visiting area, holding his hand, when I first began to comprehend the weight that these memories carried inside of him. A few days prior, while at work, I received a phone call that he had attempted suicide and that I needed to come to the hospital right away. I was so confused, and in my immaturity and self-centeredness, I questioned why I wasn’t enough to make everything better for him. During his stay at St. Alphonsus he was diagnosed with PTSD. In that moment, I finally began to understand that Haitham was dealing with long shadows from his time in Iraq.

I have been helping Haitham collect and organize his documents over the last few years. These documents are an important part of his history and I want his descendants to know his story. As painful as these memories are, I don’t want these stories to die with him. Last year I requested his original paperwork and intake documents from when he applied to come to America as a political refugee. Our lawyer was able to obtain a transcript from his first interview with American officials. Reading the transcript was heartbreaking for me. My husband had been shocked, tortured. I remember holding the paper in my hand shaking slightly and asking, “Is that what the marks on your back are from?” My husband only nodded in response, a nervous smile on his face. I know he doesn’t like when I cry, it makes him uncomfortable and unsure, but I

couldn't help it. The tears were there before I could gain control. I had asked before. When he had declined to explain, I let the matter rest, not wanting to pressure him into sharing something he wasn't ready to. I think of the thirty-plus scars on his back, and I now understand their origins. From my past research I knew that electric shocks were and are still used during interrogations in Iraq. Knowing someone who has been tortured in this manner is different though, it puts a face to these horrors.

During my husband's final days in Iraq, he visited his aunts and cousins. Slinking through alleys at night to avoid being detained. He was a wanted man for his activities during the uprising by Saddam's regime and they had already taken his father and one of his brothers because they couldn't find him. He was at risk of being executed if they did. He played one last game of soccer with some friends in his neighborhood. This was the last time his feet were on the soil of his beloved Iraq. When he left, he went to Saudi Arabia where he waited in a refugee camp in the desert for six years, awaiting the green light to come to America. Haitham told me he was surprised that nearly all the men in his family were participating in the current uprising. I told him he shouldn't be. These men were following his example, picking up the torch he had been forced to lay down. A fact that my nephew Karam had relayed to me in a previous conversation. I have pushed myself to have more contact with Haitham's family and I plan to visit Iraq soon. Meeting his mother and family in person is so important to me. The bond I have formed through phone calls and exchanging messages with my nephews and in-laws has formed an unbreakable tether to the lives of people across the globe. My hope is that this protest will be successful, and my family members will emerge from it unscathed.

This story is unfinished. The revolution plods on, lives are lost and mourned. Fires are burnt and extinguished. Destruction comes and repairs are made. Every morning the sun rises

over Iraq with new possibilities, indifferent to the previous day's losses and gains. In all, the cycle of the protest is much like the cycle of life in Iraq. Life is hard but, it is also beautiful. Children grow up, go to university, get married, and new babies usher in new generations of Iraqis. All these precious new lives, a sunrise all their own. Maybe the future isn't with the Iraqis of this uprising, but it is most certainly somewhere amongst these new little ones. Iraq is ready for freedom, ready for change, ready for peace that will be won by these proud descendants of Sumerians. Iraqis call themselves the lions of Mesopotamia, and I can think of no better description for these courageous people, willing to risk everything so that future generations can live prosperous lives and have the opportunities they deserve.

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