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perspectives from across the globe

The Struggle for Iraqi Artists

Kim Schultz



It had been quite a month, to say the least.

I had been in Syria less than 24 hours when I started descending a set of old cement stairs that would forever change my life. We walked through a sunny, art-filled, flower-filled courtyard to the top of a set of stairs that would take us down to a much-cooler-than-the-late-summer-Syrian-day cavern of sorts. This is an art gallery. Immediately, I love this place, and not just because the temperature just dropped 40 degrees, there’s something magical here. I feel it.

I turn the corner and ten Iraqi artists, all men, all displaced here in Damascus because of the violence, all look at us. Us—eight American artists come over to Lebanon, Jordan, and now, finally, Syria to listen to Iraqi refugees bravely tell us their stories of exile so we can return to the U.S. and turn it into art that will raise the profile of this crisis in our country. We have been told stories of bloodshed and bodies, of kidnappings and militia, of threats and bombs and bullets and their eventual exodus from the land they love – their home, Iraq.

Strangely today, we are not here to hear these artists’ stories, but rather to commune, to learn, to interact. Artist to artist. No nationalities, no religions, no rules, just artists sharing work and conversation and a glorious glass of wine.

The Americans discretely eye the bar...

At first it's awkward. We are all formal, stiff. No one quite knows what to do. (...less discreet looks to the bar.) The Iraqi men slowly introduce themselves and their style of art. They are visual artists and musicians mainly. One man stands out. Omar is his name. He has been in Damascus four years, fled from Baghdad, but does not consider himself a refugee. Strange, I think, sounds like a refugee to me.

"I left Baghdad because I could no longer make art," he says through a translator, although I suspect his English is better than he lets on, "It was bad enough during Saddam, but then, after...no one buying art anymore. Not safe."

The long years of sanctions and violence in Iraq left many of Iraq's well-established artists trapped under debilitating conditions, struggling to survive. And then, after the fall of Saddam and the chaos that ensued, brought on by the U. S. invasion, a bad situation got worse.

Omar spoke of a basic economic struggle of how to sell art in a place where people often have no electricity, food, or home, even! Art becomes a luxury no longer affordable, an often overlooked consequence to war: those living in the war zone, trying to make a living, when their complete universe is flipped upside down.

But there's more, of course. During this time, it wasn't just about censoring the artist; it was now about murdering the artist. Artists became targets, simply for what they could say through their art. Art schools closed, as did music and theatre schools. Artists were not to be trusted, a sentiment not necessarily felt by everyday people, but by extremist groups that were now running their country. Because artists speak truth and incite emotion through their work, because art makes people think, militias targeted artists, hoping to silence their voices in anyway necessary.

So what do artists do when their lives and livelihoods are at risk of death? Some forty or fifty of them came here – to Damascus – to try to eek out a living. *Artists in Exile*, they are nicknamed.

Back in the cavern, Omar and I catch each others' eye. We talk, we flirt (I think...I don't know, does flirting translate?) We are worlds apart, but in his studio the next day, his art draws us together.

"All Baghdad," he says, "I can't stop painting Baghdad."

I don't see Baghdad, or at least not the Baghdad I am shown on American TV. I see the most beautiful paintings I have ever seen: Ripe, lush, vibrant, full, colorful, deep, engaging, hopeful. I fall – for his art and eventually him.

Two years later, still stuck in Syria, he is losing hope, as am I.

"I can do nothing. Nothing in my hand to do, Kim."

I'm an American. I believe anything is possible! I want him to remain hopeful, to believe in the possibility of change for him and us. But six years have passed now since he left his homeland and his family, six years of feeling like a criminal in his host country, six years of living and working in hiding; painting, literally for his life. Six years of waiting to go home. That's a long time to not lose hope.

He shared, "The truth is, I cannot always command my hand paint. There are limits to what the heart can endure."

Omar considers returning to Baghdad ("Still dangerous, but what choice I have, Kimy?"), staying in Syria ("There is revolution here. Don't you see news? More dangerous every day. Plus, no one buys art now.")—

that sounds familiar) or coming to America (“I am scared. How will I survive?”). But no option is a good option. Not one. Not now.

Of course, getting to America, *might* be the best option, but it’s certainly not the easiest one since the rate of Iraqi resettlement hovers around 3%. It’s even less easy to *be* an artist here, state of the arts and all, although generally, one would assume, less threatening to his life.

But talking to Omar and the other artists, all desperate for a new chance, a new life, after their old one has slipped out of their grasp, I find myself wondering: what happens to Iraqi art if all Iraqi artists leave? With the large refugee exodus in Iraq, people speak about ‘brain drain.’ When the violence escalated, many educated Iraqis left (over 2 million fled the country). Too much of a risk to stay after seeing their uncle killed, child kidnapped, neighbor decapitated. Doctors, lawyers, engineers are all gone, at a time when Iraq needs those ‘brains’ in the country.

But what of the ‘art or culture drain’? Baghdad is the cradle of civilization, the city that gave birth to the arts, the cultural center of the entire region. Now it’s decimated. What future does Iraq hold with all its artists gone, museums pilfered, and sense of identity flattened? What happens to this region when there are no artists to speak their truth and tell their story to the next generation? What happens to the traditions and styles particular to that region? To the taste and feel of it? To the diverse trends, techniques, and styles Iraqi artists have utilized in their work? What of the young artists, with no mentors? The Iraqi artistic identity is one rooted in ancient civilization – one of diverse ethnic, racial and religious composition. Does that get diluted? Or worse, does it die? Thankfully, people who have held on to their traditions through decades of war and repression are unlikely to let them go too easily. But do the artists themselves become assimilated – become ‘hybrid’ artists, losing their own historically unique voice in history?

It’s dangerous for a society to lose its artists. Artists are the face and voice of that community. Historically, the easiest way to understand an ancient culture is to look at its art. Artists distill and interpret the events of the day. They speak truth in a way that affects people and speaks to common experience. Art creates understanding. Contrary to much current popular American political theory, art does matter.

So maybe in this case, the region’s art won’t die. I don’t believe art ever does. Perhaps this exodus and experience will unlock the doors of the artists’ creativity in new and profound ways, opening doors that would have otherwise forever remained shut. Maybe it will lead to an explosion of cultural rebirth, curiosity and pride of the region and its offerings. Maybe...

Of course some artists will find a way to stay in Iraq and others will someday return, but I do worry about the day to day survival of a country and its people drained of its cultural resources. This is the cost of war never calculated in budgets and bills, the results of which we may not see for decades.

Today, Omar still sits languishing in the old city of Damascus, with a few of his Iraqi artist friends, all waiting for what’s next, desperate to sell a piece of art to survive, to eat and feel the confirmation that they too are valuable, they too are necessary as artists and humans.

What story will they tell through their art? What story will be told of them?

Kim Schultz is New York-based actor and writer who traveled to Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria with the New York-based social justice Non-Government Organization (NGO), [Intersections International](#), to meet Iraqi refugees and hear their stories. A result of that trip is the play [No Place Called Home, this isn’t supposed to be a love a story](#), currently on tour. For more info on Kim or the play, please go to [www.kimschultz.net](#) or [www.omarwashisname.blogspot.com](#).

POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org or post on FUTUREtakes blog):

- *Some nations have murdered their artists (e.g., Iraq, as the author points out), whereas other nations – especially developed nations – have marginalized art and artists in favor of science and technology, often for economic gain and competitiveness. What developments might spark a resurgence of interest in the arts?*
- *Some nations have evolved new forms of art – for example, clothing fashions, automobile styles, and even trinkets. What additional new forms of art might evolve within the next 15 years, and to what extent might “traditional” forms of art remain relevant to national and cultural identity?*