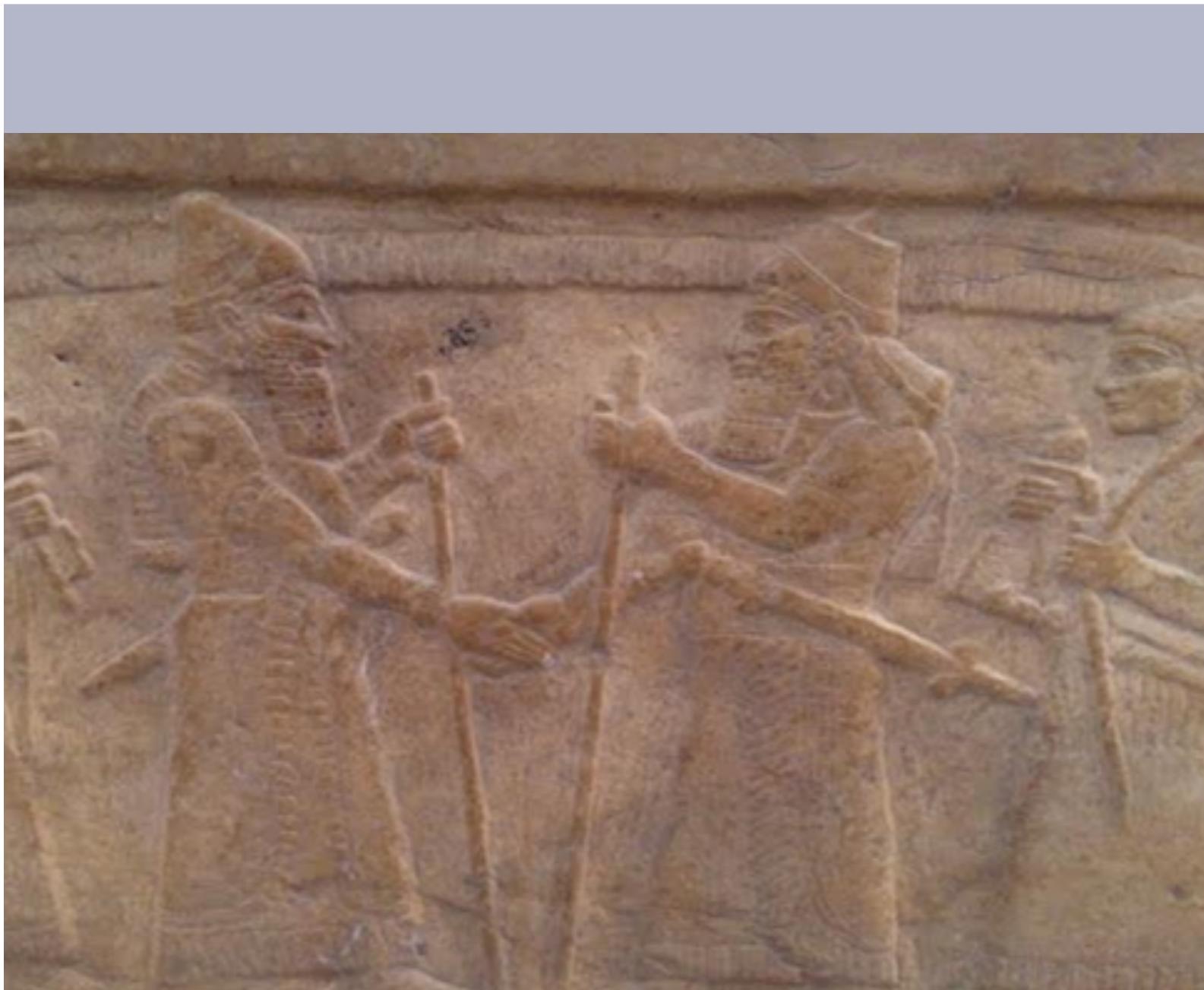


# The Last Optimist in Baghdad

Brian Brivati



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The Stabilisation and Recovery Network

4 Charlotte Mews  
London W1T 4EA

E: admin@tsrnetwork.org

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© the author: Brian Brivati

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## **Optimism**

We have one morning on this earth. I woke on mine. The soundtrack to my adolescence was the sea.

And later, I did not see them take his body from his bed.

I saw only the corpse of my father, a stranger.

Each morning the beach is remade, smooth, virgin soil, redemption in a landscape.

Each morning the tube leaves empty and the mass of humanity moves from one place to another to earn a life worth living.

We trust repetition.

The sound of breaking waves, my children asleep, my wife sitting reading, the sound of the breaking waves asked then, how should you live?

They still ask, who do you want to be? And gradually we are alone again.

Amid the clutter and the chaos of my sister's death, I remember most of all her faith.

My mother crying on the phone, her mind is going: Can I go back to God?

Will he take me?

We have one morning on this earth. We need to know how to use it.

Brian Brivati, 7 August 2012

## The Last Optimist in Baghdad

This is an extract of a memoir about my habbibi, my colleague and working partner in Iraq, Ghassan Jawad Kadhim, pictured below in London in 2015. My father was the most important male influence on the first half of my life. Ghassan has shaped the second half, as has the history of Iraq. So this is also a reflection on the state of contemporary Iraq.



1.

My *least* favourite journey in the world is to Paddington station. If I am going to Paddington, I am going to British Airways Terminal Five at Heathrow, which means that I am going on a trip. On this occasion I walk from the house across Fitzroy Square to the tube, pulling my loud broken suitcase along. I like British Airways simply because I know how it works. The lounge at terminal five is excellent and I can print out any last minute documents I might need there. Turkish is also a good airline most of the time and Istanbul airport is a scene from Blade Runner. The scalextric in the business class lounge is always fun. At least it was before 41 people were killed and 239 injured in the summer of 2016 by suicide bombers attacking this terminal. It will not feel the same again.



On an earlier trip I persuaded a colleague to change airports in Istanbul. This means driving from Europe to Asia across the Bosphorus, it is something that I have wanted to do since I was a child. It did not disappoint. We even got a crescent moon.



But as always when I am on a trip, my mind is still at home. It is charting the day remotely, estimating where my wife and kids are at this moment. I know this is not a very healthy way to travel but it is how I do it. I hate being away. I hate travelling. The work drives me forward but it baffles me sometimes how I came to be doing this work. It strikes me that if I was not my father's son, i.e. slightly mad in my optimism about what can be achieved through hard work, I would not be doing this. I would still be a professor at Kingston University delivering my lectures on human rights and writing books about dead white men in the Labour movement. I was an historian. The only thing I had ever really wanted to be. Now I am flying BA to Istanbul and then Turkish to Baghdad.

The other thing on my mind this morning is how the hell am I going to open the workshop tomorrow? In the kind of work I now do, facilitating workshops on issues like reconciliation, you need a peg to hang a session on. You need an element of theatrics. For tomorrow's session I do not have that yet.

In 2009 I left Kingston University to run the John Smith Memorial Trust, established to honour the memory of the former Labour Party Leader, John Smith. The Trust ran individual capacity building programmes in the former Soviet Union, promoting the ideas of public service and the rule of law. Ghassan was one of the first two Iraqi fellows who were an advance guard for a larger programme that followed. These two fellows were: Aziz from the Kurdish region and Ghassan from Baghdad. They joined a team of John Smith fellows from across the former Soviet Union. Fellows from Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Russia, Turkmenistan and Moldova. I

remember sitting in the John Smith office wondering with the team how this Arab and this Kurd would fit in with this group of Eastern European civil society organizers, politicians, and journalists. In fact, we needn't have worried.

Ghassan makes friends as easily as he buys his signature double breasted suits. That is not to say that sometimes he does not put people off. He can be a divisive figure because his opinions are expressed strongly, freely and he believes he knows what is right for Iraq or for dinner or for how this workshop should be run on this particular day.

When I was originally on the phone to the John Smith Trust, thinking of giving up my professorship at Kingston University to apply for the directorship of the trust, one of my first questions was would they consider doing a program in the Middle East, specifically in Iraq? They said yes. This wasn't particularly true. They had never really considered it and there was very little support for it from the Board of Trustees because their passion and interest was Russia. Eventually we managed to raise some funding from B.P. and then from the Foreign Office and we launched the Middle Eastern program.

Ghassan instinctively understood the Fellows from the former Soviet Union. He explained afterwards that of course the Russian presence in Iraq was considerable, many Iraqis had gone to university in former Soviet Union and their way of life under the former communist regime was not dissimilar from the way of life under Saddam Hussein's regime. Everything was run with a chit through an immense bureaucracy. Process and fear were a way of life. There was the same arbitrary exercise of power and the same systematic corruption. And although late communism was considerably less violent than Saddam Hussein's regime, they shared a commonality of not being Western, they shared the same "other", and that other was people like me. We discovered, as so often in this line of work, what they already knew, they had more in common with each other than either had with me and our other Western implementers.

Ghassan became something of a mascot for the group. And when, at the end of the programme it was time to meet the prime minister, guess who got centre stage at the photo shoot? Not because he forces his way to the front of the queue. But because the front of the queue is wherever he is standing.



He is, in that Iraqi way, quite precise about his status in a particular group. He made it his business to befriend me, as the academic director of the program, as quickly as he possibly could - because he understood my status in my group. I am not suggesting that this was particularly cynical. But it is very much Ghassan's way. I have met many others across both regions who found a way of coping with the inefficiency and the sclerosis of the state by becoming fixers. There are many in the former Soviet Union, Armenians and Georgians especially. The Lebanese are famous for it. The Lebanese state is based on a confessional system in which eighteen different groups need to be represented. If your sect is not in charge at a particular time when you need something you need to know how to work the system. This was an excellent way to end a civil war but it is a terrible way to run a country. Obviously the post- Soviet guys understood working systems perfectly. And what they saw in Ghassan was somebody who instinctively knew how to work a system. Ghassan managed, somehow or other, to end up as the regional coordinator and recruiter for the Middle Eastern program and he was very good at it. Particularly at delivering a string of extremely interesting Iraqi fellows. We have worked together ever since.



Ghassan with Ammar Al Hakim, a Shia leader who is key to the future of Iraq.

2.

2016 is seeing the most complex counter insurgency operation we have perhaps ever seen in this country of wars.

Daesh, or Islamic State, or IS, or ISIL is a strange amalgam of Sunni religious fanatics, young men seeking status, engineers trained in the west, rich Saudi kids looking for power and the last stand of the old Baathist regime and its organised crime partners. All the Iraqi communities want it destroyed, even a majority of the Sunni. They have recaptured Fallujah; they will now march on Mosul. Most Iraqis believe that if the government is to win against Daesh then it will have to fight like the Syrian government has been fighting. If they do fight like this then they will [flush Daesh out of Iraq](#) – but what will remain, outside of Kurdistan in the north, and Basra in the south, will be a failed state.

The jargon. Iraq is a conflict affected or failed state. Or perhaps a failing state. It is not hard to see what that might mean as you drive around Baghdad. Once driving in with a former UK Special Forces officer we pulled up to a check point. He looked at the endless queues of SUVs and taxis. The chaos, the sheer physical challenge of doing anything. Almost to himself, he said, “What did we do to this country?”

It has failed because it does not work. Because there is a breakdown of law and order. Because services are not delivered. To an extent of course all that is true. But although the state might have failed, the Iraqis have not failed. They are not an electricity supply that can turned on and off, even if their electricity supply is frequently being turned off and on. And with the temperate reaching 50 degrees it is no joke if your AC goes off because the grid fails. There is law. In many places there is order. The space that has been vacated by the state’s failure has been filled by Iraqis. How they do this is a mystery, I suspect even to themselves. That they can do this is made real to me by Ghassan’s wardrobe. I look at him waiting for me at immigration at Baghdad Airport.

He is wearing a double breasted suit. His tie matches his breast pocket handkerchief. This might not be so remarkable. What completes the picture and sums up the miracle of survival that is Iraq, is that the frame of his glasses also matches his tie and his handkerchief. He woke at 4 am to drive through several check points to meet me off the plane and take me to a day of meetings. After we finish at the end of the day, it might take him two hours to drive home from the I.Z. But, his glasses match his tie, match his handkerchief.

It reminds me of the John Lewis Theory of Conflict Stabilisation. It is summer a few years ago. Ghassan is in London and we go to look for presents for him to take back for his wife and kids. This is a long standing tradition. Ghassan does not travel light. John Lewis has always had a calming effect on me, much like Tiffanys has on Holly Golightly, so I never refuse a trip to the Oxford Street branch.



It is partly the principle of mutuality on which it is based. It is partly the underlying design values of Robin and Lucienne Day. It works as a social institution and as a business – which is pretty remarkable. It can be attacked for its underlying middle class, Middle English safeness, of course, and every department store is in the end about capitalism and profit and selling us things that we do not really need. But if you take a step back and look at the John Lewis store in Oxford Street from above and picture the thickets of law, supply chains, designers and partners, that allow this institution to exist, then you begin to see that John Lewis is something much more than a department store. It is the attempt to reconcile capitalism with the co-operative idea. It is therefore the product of the British Labour movement, of European social democracy. It is the tripartite thinking that has kept Europe at peace for over 70 years. It is this consensus based social democracy that underpins the legal basis of the John Lewis Partnership. Consensus is necessary for this kind of social entity to exist. Consensus is the basis on which the rule of law exists. It does

not mean, and has never meant in the UK, complete agreement on everything. It means that the principles that underpin our ability to live together can support a cross over institution that combines a profit with mutual benefit for its employees.

The very safety of the design is also something that underpins the consensus. Surely there is nothing in the idea of the John Lewis Partnership anyone could be offended by. No reasonable person could dislike the institutions or the things that it sells. Many of those things are made within the UK, some by small workshops and small and medium sized enterprises. These are also encouraged by the Foundations it supports. The supply chain that feeds it also supports sustainable farms and businesses around the world. The John Lewis theory of stability that we work out that day is simple: the world will be at peace and will be stable when every city on the planet can sustain a John Lewis shop.

Iraq is a long way from being able to support a John Lewis but there is much that is going on if you are allowed to see it. Some British capacity building workers only stay in the UK Embassy Compound. To get into the Embassy Compound, you drive down a driveway which takes you into the basement that is guarded by Gurkhas, unsmiling until they realise you are English, and then you get a sort of a grudging smile over their dagger. Because of the regulations, that means that some people never actually see the outside of the I.Z. Never go to the market, never go to a restaurant, and never see families together. The I.Z. feels like a place on pause. Iraq is not on pause. As soon as you step out of the I.Z. and into Iraq you find a place where life is moving fast. As fast that is as the checkpoints and the security, and the endless bureaucracy or complete absence of the state, will allow. But it's a country, a place that is functioning, that is working.

Ghassan likes to say that many things that happen in Iraq are ultimately just about corruption. That people are making money left, right and centre. So much money has been already stolen. He's not naive about the corruption that takes place, but he will also say, "This guy is a good guy, we can work with this guy. What these guys are trying to do is working." There is, at heart, the optimism that somehow or other, something will emerge from Iraq that will look like the country of Iraq. At least he's like that on good days. On bad days, he just wants to get out of Iraq. Not so much for himself, more for his wife and his children.



He wants them to be safe, he would like them to live something like a normal life.

Whenever he is in London, he has an exuberant expression on his face almost all the time. He loves the normality, the safety, the predictability of life here. He loves the shopping and the football. But he does not want his children to come here, his wife does not want to live here. They want to live in an Arab country. They do not want to adopt a British culture. They want a safe Arab life, a safe Arab culture – as long as he can access English tailoring, Disney Stores and of course, John Lewis.

That will be difficult. We are working all the time to get his family to safety because everybody who worked for the Americans or the British is a target. He is on numerous death lists. A pipe bomb exploded at the end of his street. Someone was killed he was on the way to meet. There may have been assassination attempts directly on his car. I think deep down he feels perhaps it is only a question of time before they get him. But what he does not want is for his whole family to be got at the same time. If they do move out of Iraq, he will come back, he will continue to work for his country. He will continue to struggle to make peace between the different ethnic groups at tribal level, at provincial council level, at national level. Despite himself almost, despite his level of knowledge, despite his feeling of mistrust, despite his experience, he continues to fight. And it is this that should give us some hope. According to Vesna Goldsworthy in Yugoslavia only 10% claimed their identity to be Yugoslav. In Iraq, outside of the Kurdish regions, most people grew up feeling Iraqi. But Iraq is both a geographical expression created by the West in Sykes-Picot

Pact and a state of mind, created by Saddam Hussein as a nationalist and later through a much more divisive pseudo-religious project. The collective idea of a cosmopolitan state still exists in Iraq. Many of the clerics closely associated with Iran are fighting to moderate the Shia militia so that Iran is not seen to have taken over the south of the country. Many others, at senior levels on both sides of the confessional divide, still feel an affinity with the idea of Iraq. The terrible truth is that in the same way that the idea of Yugoslavia proved to be just that – an idea, so the idea of Iraq is withering before our eyes. If it disappears, if the centre cannot hold onto it, then the violence we have seen in Iraq and Syria so far will be just a prelude to the real sectarian war, fought through the even greater movement of people.

There is still a small space in the Iraqi imagination that is shaped like the country of Iraq. That this small space still exists is a miracle. How much longer it lasts is the mystery that holds the key to the defeat of Daesh. Ghassan was at a meeting in London recently, as part of the emergency Archaeology programme run by the British Museum to save antiquities targeted by Daesh and one of the projects we are moving forward on this trip to Baghdad. All the Brits were discussing Iraq. How do we help save antiquities there? How do we fight Daesh? It came to Ghassan's turn – he asked them, "What do you mean by Iraq? Iraq no longer exists." In DC recently I met with some Kurdish leaders. I asked them: "What about the contested territories?" They replied: "They are no longer contested."

In the West, the question is slowly but steadily becoming not if Iraq will break up but into how many parts. What will the partition look like? But there are still some people in Iraq for whom the debate seems to be stubbornly, desperately, slightly different – how can we hold this together? Even if we do not want to, should we not try? Only an alliance of all elements of the Iraqi state, including the Kurds, can defeat Daesh, and as discussed below, I am not sure Daesh really can be defeated.

Knowing the importance of unity, the Kurds in the north have, until recently, shown restraint in terms of making land grabs and talking of independence. Every day that passes brings a Kurdish state closer to reality but the manner of its creation is key to its chances of succeeding without a civil war. The clue to why many in Iraq are clinging to the wreckage of the idea of Iraq is because of the alternative. If Iraq simply becomes a geographical expression the human cost of partition will turn out to be immense. Many parts of the country have had, traditionally, mixed populations. Many of these areas have changed their ethnic make-up in the last year but the internally displaced create new sets of problems around issues of a right to return, compensation and property rights. Many have not fled and many mixed areas have not been taken by Daesh.

Large numbers of people live in the mixed areas of Iraq. Many fewer today than in the past but still significant numbers. Any redrawing of the map of the region that could create countries that were ethnically "cleansed" of other groups would entail the movement of millions of people. Millions of IDPs would have no right of return and millions more would have to accept that their Iraqi/Syrian identity and their tribal loyalty had been replaced by a loyalty and identity to a religious based state. And all of this would have to happen after Daesh had been defeated. The implausibility of the shaping of these states sits alongside the growing sense of their inevitable

arrival. On the flight over I had been reflecting on the agenda for the workshop I was going to be running. In designing any facilitation event you have to think through how you are going to bring the participants to yes. Humans are motivated by complex sets of stimuli that cannot be reduced to money or social status. Why does this matter? Because it means that not all problems can be solved. Some problems can only be minimised and contained. Not all human needs and states of mind can be reconciled. Since the mid-20th century there have been modern nihilists amongst us. They are not going away.

This is a constant topic of conversation between Ghassan and me. What drives people? If you know that you might be able to change people. Imagine you want to change a policy of a government that has labour practices that look a lot like contemporary slavery. Or you are facing an armed group that are committing what looks like acts of Genocide or at the least Crimes against Humanity. How can you get either of these actors to change their policy or behaviour. A classic human rights industry response would be a variety of forms of campaigning. Use the media to shame the government to change its policies. Mobilise the international community to put pressure on the government. Try to impose sanctions perhaps. And for the armed group? Mobilise the global community of the “something must be done” – a club I often belong to. Have biting editorials in the *New York Times* and the *Abergavenny Chronicle*. Write stinging letters to the International Criminal Court and Welsh Assembly. Of course you must do all of these things because that is what the NGO world does. I would rather live in a world in which these things happened than in one in which they do not. But they do not work.

What works is to find out what the key individuals in that government really care about or what combination of things they really care about. Find the institutions in front of which they do not want to lose face. For some states that might be the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. Why? Because they like standing up in that forum and in the general assembly and attacking Israel or other states and that is harder if the council is investigating them. It might be that there is a key religious leader who if persuaded to come out against their current policy, might change their minds. It might be money. In my experience though it is never really money on its own, or status on its own. It is the combination that shapes the rational choices that they make. Ghassan does not generally agree with me. He believes in action but life has made him more of a Clausewitz than I am.

I suppose one of the problems is that mine is a nuanced argument. Iraq is not place in which nuance gets noticed. The best expression of my moderated realism is by Gerard Alexander in his seminal work, *The Sources of Democratic Consolidation*. If you can identify what works in aggregate to influence key groups, Alexander argues, you can understand why some countries became democracies in the 20th century and some became dictatorships. So you can understand how to change the mind of that government. You can do that because they have things that are in our power to grant them and we have things that can pressure them. It might take time but it is doable. So what of the armed group. I am thinking of course of Daesh or ISIS. Can you understand what pushes them forward to ever greater acts of violence? Again it is not one thing – it is not faith, or money or love of power on its own. It is a complex mix of all of these wrapped in the most dangerous vehicle of violence in the world – young men without a sense of place, value or identity.

The mix of ideology, redemption, violence, money and sex that life in Daesh offers gives them an identity, a place in the world, and with the veneer of Islam, even the fake promise of place in heaven.

In Alexander's model, the followers of Daesh would have to see that they have more to gain from opting into peace and coexistence than they have to gain from continuing to wage war. As Ghassan says, what are we going to give those guys they do not already have? Until they are defeated in several major conflicts, multiple versions of the victory that the Kurds famously achieved in Kobane or more liberations of Iraqi towns like Fallujah, there is no prospect of them even beginning to ask themselves that question in sufficient numbers to make a difference. So perhaps you should concentrate on the leadership. Capture or kill the leaders. Seize and control the money. Confine them geographically into an area in which they can be contained and destroyed militarily. By the end of 2017 or early 2018 we will hopefully see the military defeat of Daesh in much of Iraq. They will be forced back into Syria and into other places or killed, or captured. It is going to be a brutal counter insurgency operation and it will fail.

As the leadership is destroyed new leaders will emerge. As the resources are seized, new money will be stolen. As the land is retaken, new fronts will be opened. The combination of drivers that would make Daesh disappear is not possible to assemble and our ability to defeat them on the ground is not feasible because of the number of states and the number of forms in which they operate. An overwhelming military invasion and occupation of all the land in which they operate, logically and politically impossible, would also not work. The attack would switch to western cities and new countries not occupied.

We are not dealing with a rational actor or set of actors. Not because they are not rational but because Daesh is not a set of actors on the stage of history, Daesh is a state of mind. They are an idea that justifies a life of violence which answers a need in young men and a much smaller number of young women to find an identity, a sense of belonging, a meaning, in nihilism dressed as Islamism. It is a nihilism that now has a history, a narrative of struggle given comfort by many fellow travellers in the west. This narrative has a permanent and immovable presence and ability to recruit on the internet.

A recent *Atlantic Monthly* article told us: What ISIS really wants. The answer this article gives, a Caliphate rooted in ancient teaching of Islam, would suggest that if offered such a thing ISIS would opt for it and opt out of savagery. I see no real evidence of this in the *Management of Savagery* – the handbook of Daesh. What I see is a blueprint for generations of young men who cannot find their place in the world to use violence to find it. It is a description of a state of mind, one that has been with us since the middle of the 20th century in its modern form, amongst those who would not opt into the world as it is because they could not see their place in it. It is a state of mind which will be with us in this form for a generation before it warps into something new. It will not go away and it cannot be defeated but only changed in form.



A younger Ghassan at an International Republican Institute event.

3.



Two masters of Spin: Ghassan with Tony Blair's spin doctors, Alastair Campbell, London

Ghassan was born in Baghdad in 1973. He was born into a big family. They were five brothers. His father was wounded in the Iraq-Iraq war in 1980 and from that time could not walk properly. So he saw his mother raising five boys. She became his hero. She helped all the brothers finish school and college. Ghassan has done many different things in his life. For the first part he did these things to make money to help his mother and his family. He was a barber, which goes a long way to explain his liking for hair products. He opened a gallery for painting, he is, himself, an accomplished painter. He was also a taxi driver in Baghdad.

Then he trained as accountant. This is a powerful kind of life experience - the need to bring money into the family. As he says: "So I know everything about everything, it was all jobs to bring at the

end of the day some money to the house."

He was and remains young and old at the same time. His beard is grey-white, his slicked back hair is carefully arranged each day. The grey shows his age. His smile defies it.

He is also an equal opportunities victim of the history of his country. Violence has not discriminated in its treatment of him. His resilience – that word beloved by international donors – comes through and from his bones. They hold his body together, but they really should not. He smiles often, like punctuation for his moods comes his laughter. It really should not. He should not smile. His bones should not be working. Like Iraq itself his resilience should not have been enough to carry him through. He has lived a little too much of the history of his country. He has decided that for the rest his life he will dress well. He will eat well. He will live in defiance of the violence that engulfs his home. But living is not enough for him. He will help to fix his broken, shattered, country. His body is a map of Iraq in two stages.



Ghassan with the then Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki

It is 2006, Ghassan is in the market getting some things for his family. He notices a group of government vehicles and Humvees. The men in uniforms appeared to be government troops but something is not right. He keeps watching them. Maybe they spotted him watching them, he is not sure. They start to talk to people, then they begin to shoot at people. They herd them towards the trucks. Ghassan was the first one they took. He thinks maybe a 100 were taken in all and driven to a building. Being Ghassan he tried to speak to those who had been kidnapped with him. To find out if they were Shia or Sunni. If he could find that out, then he would know why he had been kidnapped and could judge if he was going to live. This time it was the Shia who had taken him. He would need to pray but perhaps not as hard as if it had been a Sunni group.

Ghassan was born Shia. He could hear the call for prayer as the people were being unloaded from the trucks. It was, he was sure, a Shia calling. So it is a Shia area. So he felt that he would be safe because his name shows his identity. But that's not what happens. He is tied up with the Sunnis. Ghassan asked them: "From which tribe you come." He knows the people from their tribe and their area. And he was surprised. All the victims are Sunni. He goes forward, in part to let the guards know that he is Shia, but also because he cannot help himself. There is no queue that he does not try to join at the front. He raises his hand and asks: "Why no one has asked me any questions?" Because he has raised his hand he is the first to be tortured. They start beating him. He remembers it: "It was very difficult for me, the way of torturing. There's no bones in my body not broken. Shoulders, legs. They ask me questions about my relationship with the invader." He replied that he had gone to market to buy stuff for his family: "So what's my relationship?"

This time they put him up against a wall and reverse a truck into him. This was their torture. They had tortured him to the point at which he could no longer speak. He understood they came from one of the groups trying to create hatred between Sunni and Shia. So they did not care that he was Shia. He knew he would die. So, he thought, now death was coming. He remembers seeing an angel. Still alive they threw him into the garbage. They did not finish him off with a bullet. They left him for dead. Did they leave him alive because he was a Shia? He will never know why they abandoned him.

Years later Ghassan walks into the reception area of the hotel on Northumberland Avenue that his group of John Smith Fellows are staying in. He is wearing white socks, sandals, stripy shorts and a bright pink polo shirt, carrying a cooler. He is going with a friend to see Manchester United play. He is laughing even more than normal. Can this be the same person? The person left for dead, thrown out like garbage into a side road. He cheated death. It is an odd expression. Cheated? As though death was meant to win if we played by the rules of life. I tease him about sandals and socks. Suddenly he becomes serious, "Is this wrong?". "No," I say, "it is not wrong for you but if I wore that, Meg, my wife, would divorce me." He laughs and smiles broadly again, "Well it is right for me". In the invention of the self there are no rules but our own. But what if the invention of the self comes after you have been left for dead? Can you trust the story that you now tell yourself about yourself. He is the most resilient person I have ever known. He is also the most fragile. Eventually people came and rescued him from where he had been left for dead. They took him from the side of the road. They took him home. He couldn't talk and couldn't even see what was going on. The only thing he could see was his first born daughter. She was barely walking at that time and she came to him. Perhaps she was the Angel.

One year later, physically recovered. It was the end of Ramadan. It is usual for the Sunnis to break their fasting before Shia. Ghassan pretended not to mind that his wife had gone to her family to break her fast. But deep down he was pissed off and hungry. He knows that she loves him but, like any spouse, sometimes he feels that maybe their partner loves their family more than them. Especially a spouse who is starving. And Ghassan likes his food. He had, what he calls, "selfish doubts". He didn't want to bother her. So he goes for a drive, to get away from the house for a while. He drove across the bridge into the middle of Baghdad, not taking very much notice of where he was going. He came to his senses and he was on Haifa Street.



Haifa Street shooting, 2004

This was a “very hot area” filled with “Qaeda guys”. He had found himself in the midst of armed men. They stopped him and one got him out of his car. The armed man he faced was from Yemen. He asked Ghassan where he was from and not thinking quickly enough Ghassan told him, he came from an area that was Shia. And he said to the others “He's a believer. So the Sharia judgment, he should be killed.” He was pushed onto a trolley with three other men and some women and children. They told him that the judgement was that they would be killed because they were Shia believers. Before the gunmen could act on his words, they heard a weird horn sound. They were military horns announcing the arrival of the Americans.

The gunmen start shouting: Americans, Americans and they run, they even leave behind his car. An American came and untied them, speaking in broken Arabic. Ghassan started talking to him in English and telling him that he works with Americans. They took him to the I.Z. to do an intelligence debrief.

So, this second time he was found by an American patrol. I first wrote that he was rescued by an American patrol. But that would imply they were looking for him to rescue him. They were not. They found him by chance. No one left behind. That is not what happens in life. In life, in survival, there is no plot line, it is chance, pure chance. In Iraq, if you are Iraqi, you live or you die by accident.

The second kidnapping made him even more determined to change. As he puts it, in his beautiful but crazy English syntax:

I don't know what power that you have to complete your mission? Your mission is not done. So I decide from that time to create my Culture, to be like the new power to make change in my country. And I create many, many proposals. I've been involved on many laws, legislation, through my work with organizations, I'd been involved with women's projects to make changes in some amendments using my links and my network. And now I'm here. [At a John Smith Trust conference] I've been the first fellow, we have five or six groups and I've been attending most of these groups to London. And it seems that I'm seeing the truths of the pain that I had. And it starts from yourself, to the family, to your neighbour, to your country, and to the region. And, it's not done yet.

After these two cases of kidnapping, his wife began to really want to move out of Baghdad. Ghassan told his supervisor at International Republican Institute (IRI) that he wanted to move to Erbil where it would be safer. They agreed and so Ghassan went to Kurdistan and got to know the Kurds and the region very well. He started to build his network in Erbil and to learn Kurdish. As he says, "We have a saying of the Prophet Mohammad. "He who learned the language of people, he will be protected from the evil of those people." From time to time he took a kind of vacation for three or four days with his family in Baghdad. But at other times he could not return because of the work. He didn't see his second child, Maria, for 40 days after she was born. She was called Maria because at that time he was living in a Christian area of Erbil. And he saw in a dream Jesus' mother. "I didn't want to call her Maria as Muslims would, I called her Maria because I was living with Christians, and they usually call her Maria."

He describes his life in politics, during his time with IRI and after, like drawing a picture. He would like to make it as perfect as he can and to put as many colours on that picture as he can. Especially for his country. His country, he says, has many colours, "we are diverse minorities and majorities of types of religions and beliefs".

He often recalls working with IRI in 2008:

When I started projects with IRI to build up a councils of tribes, I was driving around the whole country from Basra to the Kirkuk, seeing people for three months. People from villages, cities, they represent the tribes. I learned their accents, I learned how to communicate with the tribes, and how to build the right friendship and future friendship. I slept on roads on some occasions with a fear that people if they found me and what I was doing would kill me. I didn't tell of course my wife about it. One day, I slept with a driver in a Chevy, an old one 1991, in a check point on the road between Fallujah and Anbar because there's no hotels in these areas.

This had once been a very nice place, because the people in Anbar, mostly Sunni, used to be known for their hospitality. So they did not build many hotels. They would host people in their own houses. But when Al Qaeda came it became very dangerous to let a stranger into the house. So Ghassan and his driver had to sleep on street, close to the soldiers: "To feel that I'm protected because Al Qaeda, they might kill me because I'm Shia."

Ghassan is not, he says, angry. He feels like a student studying for an examination. You do not get

the results you expect so you have the desire to do more, to learn more. You must face anger with peace. Everybody will die one day. He says this then he does not smile for a moment. And then he grins. Laughs. But he is angry. It comes through sometimes in his responses to people. The charm empties out of him and his anger takes hold. People are dismissed, attacked. But these are rare moments. Most of the time that I spend with him, Ghassan is like a battery of positive energy. I say, when I see him, because there is a private Ghassan, of course, which no one sees.

In the silences before sleep, in his dreams and nightmares, in the space that shock takes in the mind when the latest attack takes place, there is another Ghassan. That Ghassan stares at the darkness and tries to make sense of it. He is a quietly religious man. He is not devout. He observes the outward manifestations of his faith in uninteresting and obvious ways - he fasts, he does not drink, he does not eat pork, he prays but not obsessively. The private ways his faith emerges are more interesting. He is patriotically Muslim in the way of so many Muslims I know. They concede the existence of other religions but not their necessity. Ghassan will also at times praise aspects of Judo-Christian traditions but his faith is firm. There is also the space created within his brain, his heart, his soul, by trauma itself.

In his mind the trauma cannot be processed. The events, the torture, the beatings, the abandonment, reoccur in the front of his mind. The feeling of those memories darken but do not overwhelm his heart. And his soul. His faith, the toughness of this soul, the robustness of his heart and the health of his mind have all been stretched beyond a point at which my own would have shattered. I do not say this out of false modesty. It is a vital point. We in the west are not the strong ones. We need to see people like Ghassan and what they have endured differently.

Years ago a friend working in development was assessing a potential advertising campaign. The photo presented was of a women carrying a large jug of water on her head. The strap line that would drive the fund raising campaign for Christian Aid week was: Everyone needs a hero. My friend loved it and wanted to commission it. Her boss rejected it. We cannot say that. We are not the hero, she is. Of course, my friend replied, that is what this means. The advertising people looked at their feet. No, we meant the people making the donations were the heroes



Ghassan completing his John Smith Fellowship with Lord McNally

4.

Ghassan is waiting for me as I walk through customs at Baghdad airport after an uneventful journey. Sometimes I have a visa in my passport and sometimes just a letter. On one trip Ghassan was waiting as I entered the terminal from the transit bus and escorted me to the VIP entrance – which he loved. On this occasion I go through and he is there with a hug, “Brother, we must move, our first meeting is with...” And we are off. The heat hits you like a cricket bat as you come out of the terminal and into the car park. We get in his SUV and speed off towards the centre of the city. On the dashboard is a bobble head of Rowan Atkinson as Mr. Bean. It is incongruous that this bizarre face bounces along. There is a lot of activity off the road. Military preparations for the extended operations against Daesh. As we drive Ghassan starts taking calls to firm up meetings, I look at the passing tanks, armed SUVs, troop trucks. The attack on Mosul, the most populous area occupied by Daesh is set to begin.

There are a number of key factors that make the challenge of a peaceful transition to civilian government in the Mosul region uniquely complex. The ethnic make-up of the region includes a more diverse population than the other occupied areas. In terms of post-liberation reconciliation this means that the social fabric that is being reconciled begins from different and more complex divisions. You have to go back into the history of the Saddam Hussein regime when a policy of Arabisation took place that systematically forced Kurds from their homes. Many of the Sunni who were settled in places like Mosul were not from there, a high proportion of the IDPs from Mosul

do not favour return although they also do not want to give up their property. Whose rights in this situation, should the law favour, the original owners? The new owners?

The Iraqi government forces that are carrying out the liberation are a mix of regular army and security forces backed by coalition air strikes. And Shia Militia groups called to jihad in a national mobilisation. The militia have been responsible for human rights violations and mass killings. Though not as bad, they fight more like Daesh than a regular army. It is hard to see how the rest of Iraq can be liberated without the militia but it is hard for the militia to play a role in places like Mosul where their actions could make everything even worse. Ghassan often asks, "What are we going to give those guys?" by which he means, what are we going to give the militias to encourage them to join the national guard or to demilitarise.

The fragile social fabric is reflected in the political context of Mosul – Ghassan understands this well because his wife's family is from Mosul. Iraq's second city has been a centre of anti-government sentiment since the removal of Saddam Hussein. Many Sunni who felt let down by post-war Shia governments came from Mosul. In part that is why Daesh targeted it, and was effective in occupying it. Its political system did not work for the interests of the people. This fragility has a number of consequences. The existing political leaders are poorly placed to assume leadership in reconciliation processes, because they are widely seen as corrupt and in conflict with both Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government.

The inter-community hostility was reflected in actions during occupation. For example, Ghassan told me that some Sunni tribesmen had joined with Daesh and targeted the women of the Yazidi community for human trafficking and sex slavery. Military gains by Peshmerga have pushed more Sunnis into Mosul. The population could be as high as 1.5m and these people have taken over houses emptied when Daesh attacked.

As the military operations to liberate Mosul begins there will be more people moving into Mosul and others trying to flee. This raises the question: where will the civilian population go during the liberation operation? If they stay, what will happen to them afterwards? There are serious differences of opinion between different ethnic groups as to what would constitute a return to the status quo. Would this be a return to the ethnic divisions before the old regime's Arabisation? Would it mean going back to the situation in 2003? Restoration of the position from 2014 and an acceptance of the changes between 2003 and 2008? What will the outcome be for any Sunni IDPs left in the city when it is liberated? For Ghassan's family, these questions are all very real. Eighteen of them fled the city and came to Baghdad. When can they go back? And to what?

Given the presence of these challenges, the aim is to move the process from armed conflict through transitional politics to transitional justice to the rule of law and a functioning politics. My colleague at the workshop I am running, Mark Salter, has a wonderful expression that packages the whole challenge up: The right to co-exist in a common space. To get to Mark's space you first have to remove the conflict-revenge paradigm that is shaping present politics. A process, my other colleague, Alex Attwood, calls victim centred justice. This would put truth, accountability, and acknowledgement at the centre of (re)-establishing the rule of law in Nineveh, the governorate in

which Mosul sits.

What everyone seems to agree on is that if an opportunity is to be created it will come from local Sunni leadership at community level being able to open lines of communication with other local ethnic groups and with the national processes for reconciliation. This is what Ghassan has been working on for years.

His John Smith action plan in 2011, argued that the political context at national government level needs to be linked directly to local action both in terms of the national reconciliation process but also in terms legislative and transitional justice responses to recent history. Though it is all rather technical, to understand the situation in Iraq, you need to think hard about this complexity. Ghassan has taught me that any intervention needs to consider the local and national interface between at least nine different areas:

- 1) Survivors and the families of victims of Daesh demand justice for the crimes against them and accountability of the perpetrators and leaders.
- 2) Here the objective must be to create spaces for different ethnic groups to articulate their demands and for this to be linked to a clear road map for a transitional justice process that will seek to address them.
- 3) The Sunni basis of Daesh and the presence of old regime perpetrators can overwhelm the transitional politics process entirely. This will happen unless Sunni tribal leaders can be brought into social and political leadership positions in the transitional process. Only when these stakeholders can work with their Shia, Kurdish and other minority counterparts will confidence in the mechanisms be created.
- 4) The behaviour of those who stayed behind in Sunni areas must be investigated. However, there needs to be a debate about the most effective transitional justice process.
- 5) Likewise debate and agreement is needed over the period during which the transitional justice process would review ownership and the status of land and property – as well as crimes against humanity.
- 6) The IDPs demand for a right of return is mitigated by two factors: the high numbers who do not seek a return but will push for compensation; and minority groups who are seeking autonomous status. The platforms created need to have representatives of these groups feeding into the design of the process it is not to be perceived as being a top down imposition.
- 7) The broader transitional justice that was established when the regime changed is flawed, as was the attempt to fix it in 2008 and the new legislation proposed in 2015.
- 8) The local Networks need to attempt to influence the shape of the national reconciliation processes that are devised. There needs to be a National Guard law to legitimize and depoliticise the Shia militia as a confidence building measure acknowledged locally by central government.
- 9) Recent Shia governments have arrested many Sunni and there needs to be discussion as part of the overall transitional justice process of an amnesty law to deal with politically motivated arrests and prosecutions.

To deal with these nine challenges will be hard enough but there are real barriers in place that will slow or even stop progress. The desire for revenge and short term political self-interest may block any real progress in the implementation of a transitional justice process. There are powerful external actors who might be simply too strong to allow local actors to compromise. Iraq might have already reached a tipping point in the political power of the militias and this will not change even after Daesh is neutralized. To overcome these barriers, the case for the stabilization of Nineveh and other occupied areas, through transitional justice processes needs to be made so that it makes political sense for key actors at elite and grass roots levels. Others might put different emphasis in different places. They might contest some of the assertions. But the reality is that this is where we are. Put all the jargon and technical analysis to one side, the simple inconvenient truth is that Ghassan cannot guarantee a peaceful future for this children.



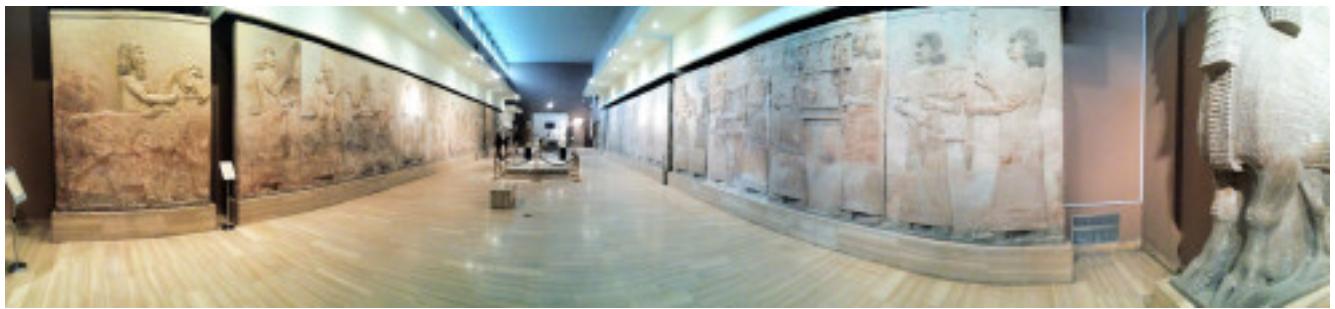
The author with the extraordinary Dr Qais, Director of the National Museum of Iraq

We head straight to our first meeting. Dr Qais, the Director of the National Museum of Iraq, grey haired, distinguished, trim and well turned out in that very Iraqi way, leads me into this office. It is long and large. The furniture is oversized, inlaid, deep brown and shiny. Along both walls there are rows of sofas – deep black leather of course, and glass topped coffee tables. His desk sits at the

end of this row of sofas. Deeper brown, even more ornate, every surface is covered in stuff. Plates commemorating the visit of a delegation, certificates for courses completed, ceremonial daggers given as gifts on the occasion of a visit by another head of a national museum. Papers, documents – chits. Like Britain during the Second World War this is a country run on the basis of having the right chit for the right purpose.

The ritual of the meeting begins. First water and then a huge plate of sweets. Then some fresh juice. Then black Iraqi tea in glasses decorated with peeling gold paint. Then Turkish coffee. If you are doing a day of meetings you have to pace yourself otherwise your bladder gives out. We sit. Ghassan sits next to me, as ornate and perfectly turned out as one of these chairs. He translates the conversation. Sits forward, as this is business the smiles are present by less frequent. We are here to help and offer advice on the emergency archaeology programme being run by the British Museum.

One of the targets that Daesh have set themselves is the destruction of any evidence of non-Islamic antiquities. They stormed the Iraqi national museum and destroyed exhibits. Now restored by Dr Qais and his team. In other places they have sledge hammered statues. They have blown up some of the most important sites in the world. It is unclear what will be left in the areas that they have occupied. What we will find, after liberation. The Day after Daesh, it is called. Archaeologists will have to come back to these sites. Some argue that they will have to come back to rebuild, reconstruct the historical record. Others that this is just the next chapter in the history of these sites and the job of the archaeologists will be to care for the sites once we have them back but not try to get them back to the position they were in before they were taken by Daesh. The British Museum is training a team of 40 in emergency archaeology techniques to be used on the sites. It is a wonderful and important programme.



Ghassan is smiling, squeezing Dr Qais's arm. They have agreed to something. Both their phones go simultaneously and both of them answer their phones. I check mine. As usual as soon as I have gone away a mouse has appeared in the living room, killed by one of our cats –Scout rather than Lana. It is uncanny. My wife and kids both enjoy the drama of it all and are appalled that they will have to deal with the dead mouse.

Dr. Qais is discussing the challenge of recruiting someone from Kurdistan, someone who might know the area of Mosul. Of all the many challenges the Iraqis face, building a country after Daesh is one of the hardest. Before that they have to actually fight their way through the cities and

villages. But then, the Day after Daesh, they will have to begin the job of rebuilding. Dr Qais is thinking of that future, even as his plans on how to preserve Iraq's past.



Ghassan with John Smith Fellows and Lord Kinnock, former leader of the Labour Party

5.

Simply driving around Baghdad is in itself a challenging operation. We climb into Ghassan's SUV and drive out of the Museum car park later. There are armoured cars at regular intervals once you're in the international zone, but outside there is less of a security presence on the road as such. It's only when you reach a checkpoint that you see both the armoured cars and lazy men with their machine guns strewn across their laps as they sit in the heat. First the car will pull up to the checkpoint and there will be the usual exchange, "salaam alaykum". Ghassan manages to make a joke on almost every occasion with these guys. He laughs at them, they laugh at him, and they look at his ID. He has a special contraption which springs out the ID cards, because his day is basically ruled by his ability to have the right ID in the right location at the right time. After the laugh and the joke, we are waved through, always with Ghassan in the fast lane.

But as you pass, through the fast lane, you see row after row of trucks, lorries and cars, families, being searched and re-searched. An industry of security professionals monitoring the movement of people, because checkpoints are targets for car bombs. The biggest checkpoints, and the most heavily armed ones, are to get into the I.Z. We have to pull up. Ghassan grabs my passport, runs

into the checkpoint passport office. We are logged into the I.Z. An American, usually looking like an extra from a Vin Diesel movie, approaches with the sniffer dog.

Ghassan always makes the same comment, what a waste of time and money. These dogs, most of this machinery, most of these checkers are useless, they are for show. They are part of the theatre of security, which keeps very few people safe when a bomber really wants to bomb something. It's not cynicism, in Ghassan's words, this voice is not world weary so much as simply stating reality. He says, anybody who thinks this isn't reality is a fool. The dog sniffs around the car, the boot is popped open, everybody is happy, and we drive into the I.Z. Big, wide boulevards, two, and three lane roads. Checkpoints, tanks, men asleep holding machine guns, watching the roads. Very little happens in the I.Z. Occasionally, one of the international groups might get drunk and try and ram one of the checkpoints at speed, encouraging the guards to try and take a shot at them to see if their weapons actually work or not. But in the main, it is a slow motion place. You don't go out in the I.Z. very much. You occasionally see an American running or jogging down the road. But once you're in your building, whether it's DoJo's or the Al Rashid Hotel, or wherever else you're staying, you tend to stay there.

The bulk of the security presence in Baghdad and elsewhere is designed to stop bombs. And that matters of course. But the next challenge is how to make peace not just stop war. The workshop I am running here with the Parliament is about that. It has to be the next focus because Daesh have 9,000 soldiers in the city of Mosul. Daesh are Sunni and they control predominately Sunni areas. When these areas are liberated it is going to be very hard to separate the fellow travellers of Daesh from those Sunni who were victims. Ghassan told me one very vivid story of what the problem is going to be like. The neighbour of a Sunni man joined Daesh. He raped the wife of his neighbour and took his house. Before Daesh they had been friends. It reminded me of the extraordinary book about Bosnia and Rwanda – *The Key to My Neighbours House*. The person you would leave your spare keys with is the person who has taken your house and perhaps even your family. How can that man forgive his neighbour and live again in that community? He will seek revenge. And this is between two Sunnis. As already mentioned, fighting alongside the regular Iraq army in the war against Daesh are the Shia militia. They want revenge.

The challenge of reconciliation, on the “Day after Daesh”, as outlined in the eight points above, will be immense. And with the oil price low, it will be hard for the government to deliver the jobs that will be needed to smooth the transition. There are almost unfathomable hatreds riven across this country. Then suddenly, there are moments of reprieve. Moments in which the normality comes suddenly into focus.

The Baghdad Mustang owners club assembled on the banks of the Tigris in the early evening. It was the second night of a curfew free Baghdad. On the first night bombs had gone off, killing at least 12 people. But then they captured a key bomber, and there was a determination to enjoy the evening.



The midnight curfew in Baghdad did not start at midnight but hours before because you have to get out of the centre before the checkpoints started to close, so early evening is often quiet. We were heading to a great barbecue place outside the international zone. We had the most amazing Carp – which would have cost a fortune in London. As the evening progressed, birthday parties came in. Groups of men, or families, the odd couple or two enjoying a mid-week dinner. As we drove back even more people had gathered along the river – drinking, smoking, and laughing. The Mustang drivers club continued to block the road. Ghassan was amazed and delighted by the scene – “it is really good to see”. It felt almost normal.

There was talk in Baghdad of opening the international zone to traffic again. This would reduce much of the congestion in the city. They have to look at the number of checkpoints. But even the small step of lifting the curfew seemed to have an impact on peoples' moods. Perhaps the pleasures of peace combined with the destruction of Daesh will help to build a momentum for peace. Perhaps not. The poison of optimism is in the air. There are many, many people in Iraq who want to have peace. That should not, I suppose, surprise us. They want peace but first they will destroy Daesh.

This is the real meaning of taking your country back, the phrase we heard so pathetically in our recent referendum debate in the UK. This unity against a common enemy has to last if Iraq is to stand a long term chance of surviving as a single nation-state. It is not clear if it will and few Iraqis have any optimism left in the ability of their politicians to come together.

With an independent Kurdistan now almost inevitable, this new mood might also allow for this to be a separation by consent rather than a partition. It is the only real route to the future that does not involve mass killing. We leave the BBQ place happy and enjoying the normality of the noise bustle.



After dinner Ghassan drops me at Al Rashid. I assume he is heading home. I will hitch a lift back to Dojos with the UN later. The team of UN staffers I am working with on the workshop are gathered in the smoking bar. They are huddled around their boss, a Palestinian from central casting, with the voice of a chain smoking gangster with bronchitis and a stare that brooked no bull shit. I liked him immediately.

I had heard from people outside the U.N. a great deal about the internal politics of the UN Mission in Iraq. This was my first gig as a facilitator directly with them. Many people who work on conflict in the U.K. are very cynical of everything the UN does. The group that gathered on that occasion were hardworking, smart and committed. They were completely and utterly exhausted, shattered, by the process, the repetition of the process, the repetition of the problems and the challenge of getting anything done at all. The head man was smoking long slim black Bitch cigarettes. He lent back and asked me what was going to happen in Iraq.

Years of working with the managerial class of British Universities has taught there are usually two conversations going on: the conversation the process wants you to have and the real conversation about what is and will actually happen. It is the same in the Middle East and in the former communist bloc. Maybe it is the same everywhere. In the Middle East there is the conversation for the guest or the donor or the trainer or the facilitator. What they want to hear and what you know they need you to say.

This is the conversation we then pretend to listen to.

"The Anti-Corruption programme in parliament will make a big difference."

"They tell us the reforms are working slowly but they are working."

"The election will be free and fair."

It is all about aims and objectives, logical frameworks, outcomes and outputs, theories of change. Up to the moment in the bar, in all the emails and in conversation we had been operating entirely in this conversation. In this is *single loop* - words are spoken, heard for what they say and replied to as though everyone means everything they are saying.

Now we have switched. Luckily I spotted the switch. I don't always spot it. But now I gave a highly realist account. As we were leaving. My closest contact in the U.N. group pulled me aside, "You passed the test."

The **double loop** story of Iraq is brutal. The words we speak need a double take and then their real meaning comes through. The reality is that a Hobbesian world has been created. In this state of nature there is indeed a war of all against all. All that matters is power. The Shia militia have now too much power to give up their ability to project it with force.

The Sunni groups are fighting for their lives in a pre-genocidal state. It will end in partition or the annihilation of the Sunni populations. The only possible hope is a miraculous rebirth of Iraqi national identity. There seems little chance of that rebirth. In trying to build a nation we have killed the idea of a unified multi-ethnic Iraq. But we have to carry on trying to put it all together again. This group of deeply experienced UN workers may have been cynical under the surface, even fatalistic. But tired as they were, all agreed, that though knackered, an English word they loved when explained to them, they had to try.

We have to try to fix this place. We have to try to help the people of Iraq fix their country. And not only because we broke this country, also because we were right to try and save it in the first person. We were right to remove Saddam Hussein but we should have been ready for what came after. There is no discussion amongst this group about whether the war was right or wrong. They must have had it already a million times. They have got to the point at which they say it happened and we start from here.

But there may be a third loop. A loop in which they talk about their pensions and count the days until they are rotated out. A loop in which they admit to each other the futility of it all. I did not see it on this occasion. The only time I really heard that expressed was by David Marshall talking about his book, the *International Rule of Law Movement*. This was not quite the cynical third loop but something more powerful. David's argument is that the UN cannot fix States. We expect far too much from the UN in areas like the rule of law. What occurs is an addiction. An abdication of responsibility by state actors and an assumption that the UN will fix things. The UN cannot fix countries. Only the people of those countries can do it. My guess is that this group knew that. Their feeling was that we were there to help the Iraqis fix their own country. I saw people who felt it was their duty to try and save what they could and work with whoever was prepared to turn up and try to be saved themselves. A group of people who desperately needed a nap.

The double loop seems to involve a great deal of smoking and waiting. I am waiting to get a lift back to Dojos. There are not many places within the I.Z. to hold these events. Fewer to stay in. On an earlier trip as a guest of the prime minister, we had been housed in his "guest house". This was a vast empty former Saddam palace that had been converted to look after the guests of the current ruler. After three days of meetings and waiting we were checking out when the manager proudly showed us the Olympic sized swimming pool and well equipped gym. Would have been good to have seen that when we had arrived. On another occasion we had been put in Jo Jo's. This is a bit of an institution. Many international aid workers take long term rentals there. Its great

advantage is that you can have alcohol. The variety in type of wine available is somewhat random. The beer constant. Asking for red wine once, we received a Chianti bottle complete with straw covered bottle. The label read Italian style wine, product of Bulgaria.



The view from the Ministry of the Interior, Baghdad

It was on that trip that we visited the Ministry of the Interior. Sitting on the deep black leather sofas in the office of the director of the security service of the Ministry of the interior, the three generals stare at us. One is overweight, one is thin, and one has distinctly odd hair. The Marx brothers. But little in their life is funny at the moment. "We are losing". The thin one says. "Every day we are losing." This was a year before anyone in the west seemed to notice that Daesh existed. "Our officers do not know what to do. They cannot reach people." My colleague shifted in his place. Their boss agreed. "The criminals, the bad guys, have disappeared and we do not know how to look for them." We were in town to do a training needs assessment. Our task was to find out what these guys did not know. Ghassan was excited by what might be possible. But we faced the heart of the capacity building conundrum. These old guys knew what to say. They had mastered the lexicon of international donor speak. They were desperate for greater transparency in the security sector reform that they would embrace. They wanted to mainstream human rights in the training of their officers. It was a classic single loop conversation.

Waiting is a national pastime in Iraq. Ghassan is not good at waiting. This, along with his Savoy

Row dress sense, make him an atypical Iraqi. So I am surprised when I get back to Dojos that he is waiting for me in the café. We have a coffee and we enter Ghassan's third loop. It is late at night, he is facing his long drive home, and so, Iraq is finished. But even in these moments he will not concede that the people of Iraq are finished. While they may not triumph, they will endure. He likes to say that he is a Shia when the Sunni's are on the offensive and then he is Sunni when the Shia are on the offensive. There are fifty meters from his and his brother's house to the house of his parents. Iraq is sometimes just those fifty meters in his mind.

When I am not here we facetime almost every day. Mohammad often shouts in the background when he calls. "Habbibi, what is happening?" I give the news of our bids, our projects, thumbs we place in the broken dykes. He is drowning. Bombs at the end of his street. By his mother's house. Driving to a meeting and the café he was going to is bombed. The shop in the market where he buys his cologne is destroyed and 200 people killed. And still the laugh punctuates the sentences. And yet. Sitting in our living room on a visit to London he grows bored of our banter with the children. We should talk about God. He says. As though there is too little time to talk about small things.

The many futures that we can imagine for Iraq are also the futures for Ghassan and his Iraqi nationalism. Ghassan's world could face partition. His family split by him taking his wife and children to safety, leaving his many other relatives behind. Ghassan could face destruction. He could die tomorrow in a bomb attack or a shooting. But he could also triumph. The question that haunts him is if Iraq too could triumph.

Our failure in Iraq, our failure of Iraq, has been so complete it is difficult to really grasp. In supporting regime change I made assumptions that were stupid. I believed that there would be a plan for reconstruction. Perhaps deep down, I knew that this was not in place. So even more dangerously, I wanted to believe. I wanted it to be the case that the world was going to remove a genocidal dictator. The hysteria of the anti-war movement seemed so much more about being anti-American, about appeasing the dictator, than about the people of Iraq. It was not about being pro-Iraqi. But their analysis of the implications of regime change were right and mine were wrong. Finally, I force Ghassan to go home and I return to my room to shower and sleep. I play music from my phone, Lana Del Rey, a recommendation of my daughter Hannah, wafts quietly across the room, as a dog barks and a armed car trundles past the small garden at the front of the hotel:

*All I wanna do is get high by the beach Get high by the beach get high  
All I wanna do is get by by the beach Get by baby, baby, bye bye*



Ghassan with Simon Hughes, then Minister of Justice in the Coalition and with the former Iraqi Minister of Human Rights

6.

So, next morning, I am now sitting in Baghdad, running a two-day workshop at the Al Rashid Hotel. Unlike like Dojos, the Al-Rashid in is dry and vast. We have two rectangular meeting rooms. No windows. Far too much furniture. And laid out so the delegates will be spoken at and not with for whole time. It is a long and complex job getting the room changed. At least I now know how to start the session and my main focus is getting the projection to work probably.

On the previous afternoon, after the meeting in the Museum Director's room, he invited us on a tour. I remember the pictures from a year before when Daesh ransacked the place. Now with the help of donors and the hard work of his team, over 30 rooms are open again. The re-creation of the Museum is a miracle. There is an old joke told against the Armenians. In the national museum of Armenia there is a picture of the first Christian church consecrated in Armenian. It is dated 300 years BC. Iraqis used to be like that. Everything was done first in Iraq. As we walk through the restored halls, glass encasing stone carvings from centuries before the Armenian Church, it is impossible to resist giving in to the feeling that you are strolling through the cradle of humanity. Ghassan has few moments in which his innate sense of superiority, his gentle but firm nationalism, his unspoken patriotism, is given free rein. As we walked, it is unbound.



Then we approach a base relief. Dr Qais stops. This he says is the first image of a handshake between Kings – see cover. The image is from the central panel of the throne base of Shalmaneser III (858-824) of the Assyrian King Shalmaneser III and the King Marduk-Zakir-Shumi I of Babylonia. Wikipedia tell us this about King Shalmaseser:

His long reign was a constant series of campaigns against the eastern tribes, the Babylonians, the nations of Mesopotamia and Syria, as well as Kizzuwadna and Urartu. His armies penetrated to Lake Van and the Taurus Mountains; the Hittites of Carchemish were compelled to pay tribute, and the kingdoms of Hamath and Aram Damascus were subdued. It is in the annals of Shalmaneser III from the 850's BC that the Arabs and Chaldeans first appear in recorded history.

An essay in the Art Bulletin from 2006, describes the scene thus:

It depicts an instance of agreement and bonding between the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III, shown to the right, and his Babylonian counterpart, Marduk-zakir-shumi, to the left, after "Shalmaneser suppressed a revolt about Marduk-zakhir-shumi and confirmed his position on the throne of Babylon.

This is the image I load onto the laptop and we project at the opening of the workshop. The Iraqis begin to discuss the image and its history for a moment they are Iraqis again. There is a feeling of pride. A little competition to see who knows more about the image and the ancient history it represents. It does not last through the open discussions but it does help the discussions to take place. If we are to look at this workshop through the third loop then we are pretending to build capacity and they are pretending to have their capacity built.

I take the team into the second room in the afternoon. All the tables have been removed and we sit in more comfortable chairs, the idea is to relax everyone a little. During breaks there had been some interesting discussions. I am missing Ghassan because he could not work on this workshop and normally he is my eyes and ears amongst the delegates, advising me on what is being said and how it is progressing. The private sessions in the afternoon are opened by two charismatic Imams one Sunni and one Shia. They set the tone and the discussion is open and seemingly honest. We are making a tiny amount of progress. These are talks about talks. They agree to take talk more. Everyone is pleased.

So the image of the kings has done its job. Later, after I have told them about the workshop the British Museum use the image as the symbol for the emergency archaeology program. I see it projected in their lecture theatre in Bloomsbury when the first set of archaeologists have completed their training.

Ghassan arrives at the hotel to pick me up. As we drive out of the I.Z. he asks me how it went but there is a limit to what I can tell him. He seems preoccupied anyway, I assume he is feeling offended that he was not allowed in the session. I ask him why his rear windscreen is missing. He said it was a bullet. An assassination attempt. He thinks. He's not sure. He cheers up. I realized that he must have been worried about me refusing to come with him and he wanted to take me to a meeting and then to his home for the first time. The meeting takes place in the front of the hotel by a main road. We sit outside with a trim well-dressed man looking a little bit like an estate agent. He runs one of the main Sunni civil society organizations. We have a fruitful discussion. Many months later we hear that there was an assassination attempt on him and now he spends most of his time in Amman but he still runs the civil society organization.

We get back into the car. We are now friends. And this is the first time I will come to his home. Much more than with Europeans, it means something to be asked. It means a staging post in our friendship. We drive through several checkpoints to his house. There is a split between the public and the private in the Iraqi houses I have visited. A nineteenth century split between the public and the private in the form of a receiving room in which guests sit. In Ghassan's beautiful house this room is full of Zelig like photos. Ghassan with prime ministers. Ghassan with visiting dignitaries and even with the prime minister of the U.K. when he was a John Smith fellow. Thankfully we move into the kitchen and everyone relaxes a little bit more. His children run around the room. His wife and he prepare the food and serve it.

War destroys the barriers between the public and the private. As this barrier is highly complex in Arab society it makes the ability to navigate even more complicated but the truth is that Ghassan

and I would be friends in whatever context or state of the world, we had happened to meet in. We have the same stubborn optimism. Optimism is a disease; it is a symptom of hope that can lead to terrible choices. It was optimism and not experience or knowledge that led me to support intervention in Iraq in the first place. An optimism about leadership and our ability to learn from precedent. It is that optimism that gets me on planes to run workshops in hotels in Baghdad. But my stupid optimism is nothing next to my friend's romantic optimism. For him, his family and the people of Iraq to get through everyday requires a belief, a hope in our better angels, which is constantly humbling to see. Ghassan is of course unique but also typical of the kind of people for whom history one day arrives in the form of an invading army and nothing can ever be the same again. He is a romantic optimist living in a hell that we have created and trying in big and small ways to overcome the evil that surrounds him every day.



The other half of this memoir, not published here, is about my father. It is obvious why at the age of 50 I would write a memoir of my father. But it is more complicated to explain why I want to write about Ghassan. They share that same endless optimism that does not allow them to give up, even when they should. It is an optimism of both the intellect and the spirit. But many others share that optimism. I have been very lucky to work with many interesting people over the course of my career as an academic and now working in international development. I have been blessed with the chance to meet and work with people from over 20 countries. Of all these places Iraq has come

to occupy a dominant position because of the challenges the people there face. The evil that surrounds them but does not engulf them, provides a moral driver to engage constructively. My mistaken support for an invasion with no plan for a new country obviously also feeds the imperative of engagement. But in the end, I write about Ghassan because he reminds me of my Dad and because everyone needs heroes.