

GRANTA

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THE AMERICAN  
AGE, IRAQ

*Anthony Shadid*

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**B**AGHDAD COLLAGE WELCOME YOU, the sign reads along a street that is ordinary, but only if you live in Baghdad. Nothing really escapes the detritus of death in this wreck of a city. Certainly not the cement barriers along this wayward street, painted yellow and white but more distinguished by the chisel of wear, tear and bombings. The date trees are unharvested, fruit shrivelled by the sun falling into a pyre of overgrown weeds. A dusty black banner mourning two Iraqi soldiers killed ‘in the line of duty’ stretches along its kerb ploughed with bottles of Tuborg beer, plastic bags – some of them snared in barbed wire – and empty packages of Foster Clark’s Corn Flour.

Unlike Beirut or, closer to home, Fallujah, Baghdad was never destroyed by its war. The city here feels more like an eclipsed imperial capital, abandoned, neglected and dominated by the ageing fortifications of its futile defence against the forces that had overwhelmed it. Think of medieval Rome. An acquaintance once described all this refuse of war as *athar*, Arabic for artefacts, and I thought of the word as I drove down the road to Baghdad College, past piles of charred trash, to see a teacher there.

It was a sweltering day. Alaa Hussein welcomed me with coffee and we sat in the high school’s dusty Internet room, next to computers that had no Internet. The red trash can was full, even though there were no students during summer to fill it. He squinted his grey eyes, magnified by thick lenses, and delivered a judgement that I have heard often in Baghdad. ‘A jungle,’ he called it all, wearily looking around. He meant the school and its disorderly decline. But his terminology felt elastic to me, as if something unruly had encroached on what was here long ago.

No more than a footnote in the histories of the civil wars, invasions, defeats and revolutions that have shaped the Middle East, Hussein’s school – run for thirty-seven years by New England Jesuits with precise haircuts and names like McCarthy, Connolly, Donohue,

McDermott, McGuinness and O'Connor – once represented something more. 'The gem of Baghdad,' one of the 143 Jesuits who taught in its tan-brick citadel told me, with the ardour of someone who could still smell the jasmine outside his door fifty years ago. 'A piece of heaven,' recalled Father Solomon Sara, who had studied at Baghdad College before going on to a seminary in Massachusetts and returning to teach at his alma mater after graduation. 'For America, it was something that people could point to that was noble.' Even now, memories of the school, sepia-tinted as they might be, are seldom short of superlatives, recalling a simpler age it inhabited that may be forever lost. 'A special relationship' was the way it was described by Laith Kubba, a long-time activist and former Iraqi official who lives in Washington and credits the Jesuit priests with making him a more devout Muslim. 'Of course, there is no comparison today. Of course, of course.'

More than eight years after it invaded, the United States has begun leaving Baghdad and the rest of Iraq. The American military, at least. This last summer, in a date more symbolic than practical, it reduced its number of troops to 50,000, a fraction of the 170,000 who once roamed the country and helped write perhaps the most traumatic chapter in America's relationship with the Arab world. The rest are supposed to leave by year's end. 'Our uncles', Iraqis now call the Americans, a term that suggests both intimacy and bitterness in a once-occupied country where names like Abu Ghraib and Haditha have become more idea than geography. Yet the Obama administration wants civilians to stay, and it has pledged the dawn of a new era in ties between the two countries. With a suggestion of hope, and maybe a current of naivety, American officials now speak of soft power – the stuff of culture, education, trade and so on – that the barrel of a gun rarely projects. 'Partnership' is the word they like to use. As one embassy official puts it, 'a strong civilian partnership with a lot of Americans of a variety of stripes involved in every sector of Iraq'.

Down the undulating street, Baghdad College, filled with the remnants of American trajectories blunted a generation ago, is a

lesson or perhaps a lament about that ambition. The *athar* of the last real intersection between America and Iraq are still here, fragments of memory at Hussein's school. From the window, you glimpse the cemetery where five Americans are buried under white marble, one of whom taught at Baghdad College for thirty-five years, returning home just once. In the library, cards are catalogued for books that long ago disappeared: *An American Engineer in Afghanistan* and *America's Tragedy*, telling the history of another war. The groves of date palms, once nurtured by Father Charles Loeffler, have thinned. And the octogenarian priests in Boston who taught here grasp from the haze of memory at words they spoke before they were expelled in September 1969: *mudeer*, principal; *shwaya*, a little; and Arabized equivalents of Americana like *Bebsi* and *besbol*. America, at least Father Sara's nobler notion of it, left a long time ago, though. Gone with it is the Iraq that those men idealized, when identities were still inchoate enough to mingle, blend and, occasionally, merge. On the high school's walls these days, English is inflected differently. THUG LIFE, reads graffiti rendered as machine-gun fire. BAGHDAD, reads another, with barbed wire coiled along its top. Someone else has drawn a penis and a flower, or something approximating it.

I once asked Ryan Crocker, the former US ambassador to Iraq who has served in the Arab world during some of its greatest tumult, whether America, and the Obama administration in particular, could fulfil that promise of a new era here. Or, more to the point, could America and Iraq reclaim that nobler sense of each other that Father Sara recalled? Crocker paused, careful not to share the pessimism that is so often heard.

'It really is too early to tell,' he said finally.

With a history of saints and martyrs, Jesuits often mention the notion of heroism, not to mention suffering and endurance, and only a few minutes into our conversation at the Campion Renewal Center, a sylvan Jesuit retreat outside Boston, Father Myles Sheehan, the Provincial, and Father Michael Linden brought it

up. 'To go to Baghdad, for a group of guys from Boston and New England, really is as far out there as people could have imagined,' Father Sheehan said, a hint of admiration still in his voice.

It was 1932, and the school began, officially at least, with a telegram dated 5 March, from Abdul Hussein Chalabi, the minister of education, perhaps best known today as the grandfather of one Ahmed Chalabi, present-day politician, provocateur and former exile. 'We take this opportunity to wish you complete success,' he told them. It wasn't the Jesuits' first trip to Baghdad. Two of them had gone in 1850, but were robbed twice as their caravan crossed the Syrian Desert. Invited by the local Chaldean patriarch, they were received better this time, as they sailed from Boston to Beirut, then overland by bus to Baghdad. 'A lifetime assignment,' Father Linden called it, and indeed some would spend more than twenty years there, regardless of deaths in their families, bouts of hepatitis and, in the case of Father John Owens, cancer.

The four founders included Father John Mifsud, whose Maltese name translated poorly into Arabic ('corrupter', it could be rendered). He became Father Miff. They lived in what Father Linden called 'relative austerity', and contemporary accounts of the school's temporary quarters were similarly understated. 'Not gems of the builder's craft,' wrote Father Edward Madaras, one of the five Jesuits buried there.

Yet amid the date palms on Baghdad's outskirts, the school soon flourished. Its enrolment grew from 107 students and four Jesuits in one building to more than 1,100 students (a fifth of them on scholarship) and a faculty of thirty-three Jesuits and thirty-one Iraqi laymen on a campus of ten buildings designed by Father Leo Guay, who consciously borrowed from Iraqi styles. 'An Iraqi school for Iraqi boys' was the motto, and it mirrored an era before 1958 in Baghdad and elsewhere in the Arab world when Britain and France were still the imperial powers, reviled for their deceptive agreements in World War I that indelibly shaped the modern Middle East and resented for their colonial ambitions in North Africa, the Levant and Iraq.

The United States, seen as a beacon of modernity, progress and prosperity, was perhaps known better for education, thanks in part to flourishing schools American missionaries had set up throughout the region. (Across town was the American School for Girls, which had opened in 1925.) Crocker called it ‘an age of innocence’, and although Iranians with memories of the 1953 American-backed coup against the democratically elected Mohammed Mossaddegh might disagree, the era did lack the traumas that war, invasion and occupation have left the present generation.

No project like Baghdad College could probably escape at least a notion of the white man’s burden, but those Jesuits, many of them fluent in Arabic, dressed in pith helmets that shielded them from the sun and cassocks of khaki that hid the dust, were at least conscious of its implications. Over time, they managed to embrace – and to be embraced by – their environs as scholars and residents. Even now, Father Charles Healey, a ruddy-cheeked, seventy-seven-year-old Jesuit in Boston and former teacher at the high school, retains a sense of awe for the intellects that spent time there. Some, like Robert Campbell, went on to get doctorates in Arabic studies. Men like Richard McCarthy and John Donohue became formidable scholars of Islam; McCarthy completed a two-volume work on the spoken Arabic of Baghdad, published a collection of his sermons in Arabic and, after suffering a stroke that paralysed his left side, completed a translation of the classic autobiography of al-Ghazali, a medieval thinker.

In an Iraq of Green Zones and barricades, concrete and barbed wire, the Jesuits’ ability to knot themselves into the society’s fabric was remarkable. So was their determination. ‘This mission has to be the biggest waste of money and manpower in the history of the Church – not a single convert from Islam!’ Richard Cushing, the former archbishop of Boston, was quoted as saying in an unofficial account of the college. He was right, and therein lay a fulcrum of the Jesuits’ success over those years. The student body was eventually half Christian, half Muslim; unlike the practice for a time at the

American University in Beirut, Muslims at Baghdad College were not required to attend chapel services, and proselytizing was forbidden. The priests set up a school to teach themselves Arabic – with mixed success, in the case of Father Joseph MacDonnell. He had accepted an invitation to visit the house of an Armenian student, only to find the student was out on an errand. Father MacDonnell tried small talk with the student’s mother, who didn’t speak English. He uttered the three phrases of Arabic he had learned in his five months in Iraq: ‘The winter is cold, the river is deep and the brown cows are eating the green grass on the high meadow.’ After finishing his tea, he said goodbye to a puzzled host. The following Monday, he learned that the student’s mother spoke no Arabic either, only Armenian.

Those social calls, often conducted more fluently, were part of the Jesuits’ staple. They were welcomed to wakes and funerals. Many of them visited parishes around town, learning to deliver Mass in Arabic and even Aramaic. Father Robert Farrell, now eighty, remembers teaching Shakespeare to his students, sleeping on the roofs in the summertime and, like his neighbours, often waking up to crows perched on top of the support for the mosquito nets. They rode public buses. Their students, themselves elderly these days, still remark on how comfortable the Americans were with the Iraqis. ‘They were part of the society. They ate with us, they ate like us, they learned our customs and they were respectful to our parents,’ said Waiel Hindo, the son of a Christian general and one of five brothers who attended the school. When his father was arrested after a coup in 1958, a Jesuit visited their home every day. ‘What struck me at the time, and struck a lot of students, Muslim and Christian, was this idea: why would an intelligent, handsome, young, educated American give up all the luxuries of the United States – there was a perception that the US was the land of plenty – and come and serve in a high school with no pay, no wife, having to learn another language, having to learn a new culture? These guys must either be crazy or eccentric or dedicated to an ideal that we don’t understand, so what is it?’ Dave Nona, a graduate in 1964, told me.

*Fatheria* was what the students called the Jesuits, an Arabized plural of Father. It was probably their most distinct identity. ‘They did see us as Americans, but I think they saw us first as *Fatheria*, Jesuits, you know,’ Father Healey told me. Father Linden and Father Sheehan, the Jesuits I met at the Campion Center, too young to have taught at Baghdad College, said they suspected the same. ‘They were innocent of what came after and the meanings connected to them, the loss of American innocence from, say, Vietnam forward,’ Father Linden said.

Both men visited Iraq in May 2010; it was Father Linden’s fifth visit. ‘To just be part of their world temporarily’ was the way he described his travels to me. They stayed in friends’ homes, drove around town in an old black sports-utility vehicle, its windscreen broken, and as Father Linden put it, ‘stayed clear of the Green Zone’. In time, they made it to Baghdad College. ‘So we get out, and I guess it was the headmaster who said, “Who are you and can I help you?”’ Father Sheehan recounted. ‘I said, “I understand we built this school and could we see it?” All of a sudden, he clapped his hands. “Coffee! Would you like to smoke?” “No, thank you.” And we sat there, and they showed us the yearbooks.’

The volumes of Baghdad College yearbooks are stored – tossed, might be a better word – on two shelves at the back of the library. As I thumbed through them on a sun-soaked morning, with the rattle of gunshots in the distance, the same *athar* kept coming to mind. They were the artefacts of a bygone Iraq, as unfamiliar as an America that, in more than twenty years, I had never encountered in the Arab world. They suggested a notion of an inclusive future that bound two countries unencumbered by their pasts, still – as Father Linden put it – innocent in each other’s eyes. The first yearbook, handsomely done, was dated 1945.

‘The flames of global war have ruined our world; our books were written on the model of the happy, peaceful, pre-war days,’ read the farewell, printed as an editorial on a glossy page 23 of *Al Iraqi*, or

*The Iraqi.* ‘We know too well that ahead of us lies a thorny path until the stabilization of the peace is a reality.’ That notion of a great, even climactic conflict, punctuated the yearbooks in those years. So did a determination – you might call it hope – that its end meant a new chapter for Iraq, America and the world. ‘There remains the task for men of goodwill to bring the world from physical and spiritual devastation to law and order, if we are to have peace, real peace,’ another essay read.

As I turned the pages, another war still echoed outside. Two American helicopters rumbled overhead a little after 10 a.m., and the staccato bursts of more gunfire ricocheted through the library windows a half-hour later. Hope remains an elusive sentiment these days in Iraq; triumphalism and expressions of loss, threats, condemnations and vows of vengeance are far more common. The present made the pages feel so earnest as to be naive, until I realized I was probably too cynical. Or, perhaps more accurately, they had the advantage of being written before the revolutions, civil wars and onset of decisive American power in the Middle East, when two cultures still occupied a common space or, at least, a shared American and Arab idea of what progress represented. Each still had a sense of the other’s goodness; in some ways, the Jesuits were the right people at the right time. One of the yearbooks at the American School for Girls volunteered its mission this way: ‘The path of learning leads to . . . exploration in science . . . explanation in Arabic . . . expression in English . . . expansion in mathematics . . . expectation in art.’

American optimism pervades the yearbooks. So does American culture. Students are compared to Charles Atlas. Hairstyles are American, as is the cut of Tawfiq al-Sabunji’s suit. The dedication for Claire Shlomo, a graduate of the girls’ school in 1949, captures the mood: ‘One word will tell what Claire reads, dreams and talks about – America.’ One Jesuit dispatched his students with this homework: ‘The Roxy Cinema tonight, boys!’, where they were tasked to watch Orson Welles’s version of *Macbeth*. COME AND CHEER THE GOLD AND MAROON ON TO VICTORY, reads a poster from 1955, announcing the

finals in basketball against the top government school.

Not that the students had abandoned their roots. The yearbooks are filled with essays like ‘Chemistry and the Arabs’ and ‘Kurdish Tribes in Iraq’. (A sample: ‘The Kurdish people are so skilful in fighting that one might think they are born to fight.’) Students often listed their hobby as Arabic poetry. (‘Oh, the Arabic poems that we had to memorize!’ others complained.) The identities simply seemed less defined, with fewer assumptions, at a time that American influences were perhaps more pliable. ‘We learn foreign languages in order to be able to benefit from what foreign people have said and written, and also to make these people understand what we wish to communicate,’ Dhia Sharif wrote in another yearbook. More light-heartedly, students in 1947 noted that ‘without flinching, we can spell “jaw-breakers” like *contemptuously* or *equilibrium*’. The favourite expression of Antwan Shirinian, a graduate in 1950, was ‘my golly’.

Many of the students in the yearbooks from the 1950s and 1960s are familiar today. Ayad Allawi, a former prime minister and leading politician, has the same burly build as in his youth. ‘He was a fighter,’ remembered a contemporary, Waiel Hindo. Ahmed Chalabi is recognizable by his eyes. ‘So smart,’ Hindo called him. Vice President Adel Abdul-Mahdi had a reputation as a bully. Chalabi’s brother, Talal, was ‘one of the best swimmers in the school’. Another brother, Hazim, ‘studied French in his spare moments’. Kanaan Makiyya, a writer and academic, was on the honour roll in 1965.

‘The prospect of progress’ was how Ahmed Chalabi described the school’s ambience to me. Like so many other graduates, he still spoke reverently about what the college represented as an American institution and, perhaps more poignantly, what America represented in an age imbued with the faint echoes of Wilsonian idealism and a notion that America and its success were the model to emulate. ‘Hope, progress, enlightenment, prosperity, education.’ In a phrase, he seemed to capture the era’s ethos. In 1957, the year before American Marines landed in Lebanon, the school’s debating society offered this resolution: ‘That the United Nations be revised now into a federal

world government.’ ‘This is the space age!’ one essay declared. ‘An atomic age,’ another insisted. ‘We may yet see the day,’ wrote Tariq Dib in 1953, ‘when we shall travel in these rockets for a picnic on the moon, that is, if the moon can be used for such a delightful purpose.’

**A**n advertisement at the end of the 1949 yearbook caught my eye. It was for Levant Express Transport. Based in Beirut, it had branch offices in fifteen cities in Jordan, Syria, Iraq and Iran, along with a car service running between Baghdad and Tehran. (Until the 1948 war, it had offices in Tel Aviv and Haifa, too.) An essay around that time noted that seven airlines offered flights from Baghdad to Calcutta, Sydney, Kabul and all of Europe and the Middle East. Pilots from France, Britain, Italy and Egypt often overnighted. These days, there are regular flights on Iraqi Airways to only two cities – Stockholm and Istanbul – beyond the Middle East.

The history of the past century in Iraq and the region is, in many ways, a story of borders. There is the simple notion of them, frontiers demarcated by war and imperial impetuosity that transformed the eclectic expanse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I into the jigsaw puzzle of the modern Middle East. No less far-reaching, though, are the barriers that narrower notions of identity have created over the past generation. These have served to re-engineer a region, always more diverse than its reputation, that had long represented a remarkable *entrepôt* of languages, traditions and customs across boundaries gracefully ill-defined. The names in the yearbooks of Baghdad College and the American School for Girls testify to that earlier age: Suham Jack, Haifa Ashoo, Anita Papazian, Nellie Aslan, Vartan Garabetian, Varujan Khalil, Surin Zawin, Victor Rowland and so on. In faith, they represented Jews, Christians and Muslims, though a secular sense of self often held sway. Their nationalities were as diverse: Egyptians, Armenians, Syrians, Iranians, Palestinians and, of course, Iraqis all mingled together under an American rubric.

Today, in a claustrophobic city, where you always know where you are – neighbourhoods precisely demarcated by the colour,

flag, portrait or symbol of its Sunni or Shia inhabitants, cauterized by the memories of carnage often visited there – the yearbook pictures of classrooms, basketball games, graduations and picnics are geographically indeterminate. You could be in Spain or Italy, the Greek Club in Cairo or, say, a Lebanese wedding in Sayre, Oklahoma, circa 1952. You never know where you are. Only the number 7 rendered as an Arabic numeral on the jersey of a basketball player leaping for a jump shot on an open-air court tells you the Middle East.

‘There were few institutions in Iraq that created national identity and, believe it or not, Baghdad College was one of them,’ Laith Kubba, the former official, told me. It was a theme often reiterated by others when we talked about the school’s legacy. The time itself was still difficult, nostalgia notwithstanding – Baathists and Communists fought bloody battles in those years, and even today, people recall the televised show trials of Fadhil Mahdawi’s *People’s Court*, as sordid as it was carnivalesque – but there was a sense of a broader identity shaped by the idea Ahmed Chalabi mentioned of a progressive future. ‘In that melting pot, where merit was the essence of competition, it wasn’t who your parents were,’ Kubba said. ‘The essence of differentiation was merit. Everybody accepted and respected that. Those other essences of belonging became secondary. They didn’t teach us nationalism as such, but by creating that atmosphere where we were all Iraqis by default, and the values we had were based on the ability to compete and learn and not who you belonged to and where you came from, it was implicit. At the end of the day, where can you find institutions that link Iraqis of different backgrounds? Those graduates of Baghdad College all over Iraq created a fabric; they were part of the fabric that pulled Iraq together. They related to each other irrespective of the things that pulled them apart.’

What Kubba and others were talking about, in the end, was a notion of cosmopolitanism, defined foremost by an absence of fear. Father Linden and Father Sheehan, the Jesuits who visited Baghdad in the spring, mentioned it. So did Father Farrell, who taught there long ago. Chalabi eventually went to the Massachusetts Institute

of Technology, where, he says, 'I did not feel alien at all. I did not feel homesick, nothing. There were no surprises for me.' Kubba remembered the same feeling. 'I knew America before I came here,' he told me by telephone from Washington. 'I was comfortable with it. I'm an Arab, I'm Muslim, I had my political views, I had many things I would differ with, but in essence, I knew how Americans think. In essence, I knew American culture.'

**M**any people still debate the year that might be described as the moment that changed America in the Arab world. President Wilson's failure to follow through with his promises of self-determination could be one date, but it seems too early. The year 1948 is as good as any. It was then that America, over the vociferous, even bewildered objections of Arabs, lent crucial support to the creation of Israel. Some point to 1952 and the revolution that brought Gamal Abdel Nasser to power in Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country. Crocker, the former ambassador, sees it as 1958, when the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown, the Marines landed in Lebanon and Syria and Egypt, led by Nasser, declared their union. 'Before that, the United States was mainly known not for political engagement or military conflict or boots on the ground but for education and culture,' he said. Soon, he added, 'that became overshadowed by everything else'.

Everything else was the Cold War, which the United States fought in part in the Middle East, wedded to a paradigm of 'us against them' that still echoes today. Likewise wedded was America's growing alliance with Israel, which soon confined to memory the goodwill generated by President Eisenhower's shining moment, when he forced Israel, Britain and France to withdraw from Egypt's Sinai Peninsula in the 1956 Arab-Israeli war and, by default, declared America – not fading European powers – the pre-eminent Western actor in the Middle East. The climax was 1967, when Israel, supported by America, scored a victory so decisive, so complete, that its legacy still reverberates a generation and more later. Ideologies

crumbled, most notably a secular nationalism that spoke a language far more familiar to America than the political Islam of today. Coups followed, and yet more borders in a region full of them were drawn; no longer could Ramiz Ghazzul visit Bethlehem. Neither America nor Iraq and the Arab world would be the same again. Within a year of the war, the Jesuits themselves, still teaching in Baghdad, were adrift in the trajectories of a new Arab-American era dominated by the interests of a global power: securing oil, breaking the opposition of secular Arab nationalism and ensuring the supremacy of its allies, namely Israel.

On 4 July 1968, in a modest ceremony, Father McCarthy, the formidable scholar who translated al-Ghazali, laid the corner stone for the Oriental Institute, to be built by Father Guay. It was his dream. He had planned every detail and conceived its mission, a bridge between East and West, where two cultures would meet in mutual respect. But just weeks after the ceremony, the Baath Party returned to power in Iraq in a bloodless coup. ‘The handwriting was on the wall,’ Father Linden said. Father McDermott, who had returned to Iraq that year for research on his dissertation, remembered the mood. ‘They had no illusions,’ he said of his fellow Jesuits. ‘They knew we were in trouble.’

In September 1968, the Baathist government took over the administration of al-Hikma, a small university the Jesuits had opened in Baghdad in 1956. ‘The whole matter is confined to the fact of their being foreigners,’ the new president, Saad Abdul Baqi al-Rawi, told an Iraqi weekly the following month. ‘Because of this they are unable to understand the stage at which our nation is living, nor can they comprehend our national problems and our struggle with imperialism and Zionism, nor are they favourable to our strivings and aspirations.’ The Jesuits continued to teach at al-Hikma and Baghdad College but tensions grew. In a letter he wrote in Arabic to the Revolutionary Command Council, Father McCarthy pleaded their case. ‘The Fathers, from the day of their coming to Iraq to this

very day, have never meddled in political party or sectarian matters. Moreover they have always been supporters of just Arab causes, and in particular, they have defended, and continue to defend, the Arabs' position and rights regarding the question of Palestine.' There was no reply. Four days later, the Jesuits decided to go on strike at al-Hikma, a move undoubtedly viewed as a provocation by a party that prided itself on its toughness. Within a month, the government expelled them from the country.

Baghdad College remained open, still run by the Jesuits, but it became a target of anger and frustration, themselves an epitaph to an older sense of American charity. An article in the newspaper *Al-Thawra* read: 'Baghdad College still stands in the way of the immortal revolution as a stumbling block and an imperialistic foothold in which minds that try to thwart the course of this revolution and call for the return of imperialism have made nests for themselves.' They were some of the last Americans left in the country, and on 24 August 1969, the thirty-three Jesuits of Baghdad College were ordered to leave, ending their nearly four decades of work in Baghdad.

The crucifixes in the classrooms came down. Fridays, not Sundays, became the day off. There was no more baseball. Nor was there an edition of *Al Iraqi* in 1969. When the yearbooks resumed, they were more modest. The 1970 edition was dedicated to the minister of higher education. The following year, the foreword declared that Baghdad College was once 'established in a strange, closed world and never experiencing the bitter realities, nor taking pride in a glorious past. Its world was as foreign as those foreigners who administered it and who were quite indifferent to this country and its aspirations.' In each successive year, the argument was reiterated, sometimes shrilly, in the bluster of people desperate to convince someone of something not even they believe. 'Feelings of isolation and lostness' were swept away. Another edition read, 'by the colossal Revolution of July'. At the former American School for Girls, the principal sponsored a burning of books in English. A xenophobia not unfamiliar to wartime America became grounded in the official discourse. The yearbooks lost their

flair. Essays that once waxed eloquently about the Kurdish spring, ‘when the land turns into a sea of green grass waving in the winds like angry waves of a roaring sea’, became impenetrable agitprop. The 1975 yearbook offered this Gordian knot of prose: the situation, it said, ‘required theoretical stands and positive process inter-reacting with the objective circumstances and tangible reality dialectically and creatively, preserving the strategical revolutionary horizon in accordance with the aims of unity, liberty and socialism’.

It would be the last yearbook. It was dedicated once again to Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, president of the Republic of Iraq. But he shared the honour with a newcomer to the yearbook’s pages, Saddam Hussein, vice chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council. ‘Long live the Leader Party, the Arab Baath Socialist Party,’ the foreword read.

Just as the date of America’s new incarnation abroad is debated, so is the moment that marked a new watershed for the Arab world, when older, more secular sensibilities, the kinds that made it possible for Jews, Christians and Muslims to study amicably together at Baghdad College, gave way to narrower identities. The Baathism of the 1968 coup descended into an instrument of power and oppression, as brutal as it was crass, wielded by an empowered Sunni minority from the countryside, then Saddam Hussein’s own family. War with Iran would ensue, a chapter that traumatized and brutalized Iraq like no other conflict; it was to Iraq what World War I was to Europe. A tenth of Iraq’s population became soldiers, many of them schooled in violence. A quarter of a million would die. ‘Soldiers lying like matches on the ground,’ as one Iraqi general would describe them.

Across the region, Islamic movements ascended, seizing the language of their eclipsed secular and nationalist rivals and soon making a mockery of a common Arab and American notion of progress. Conflicts were redefined as West and East, Muslim and Christian, currents that once intersected deflected by the absolutism of Manichaean and messianic paradigms. In Iraq, the battles were no longer between Baathists and Communists – at least nominally

adhering to an idea of universalism. Gone was a notion of citizenship – if it ever existed – in Iraq or other Arab countries. Primordial identities, exclusive as they are, became the sole axis around which politics revolved.

The Iraq that the Americans inherited after invading in 2003 bore as much resemblance to the one the Jesuits knew as the America they represented stood true to Iraqis. As the Jesuits in Boston mentioned, neither was really recognizable to them. Iraq had suffered Saddam's tyranny, the murderous war with Iran and sanctions that destroyed a middle class that once watched Orson Welles's *Macbeth* at the Roxy. America was, in the best reading, a country of unimaginable power bent on achieving its interests in Egypt, Iraq and the Persian Gulf. A worse reading, uttered by a taxi driver in Baghdad, is that it had become merely a warmonger. The memories of another age often reside in exile, where many of Baghdad College's graduates have sought refuge. 'The United States is no longer the America that people knew in the 1950s,' said one of them, Faruq Ziada, who has moved to London. A classmate had the same lament for his own country, bereft of its cosmopolitanism. 'The sectarian flame has been kindled everywhere,' said Muwaffaq Tikriti, who now lives in Montreal, Canada. 'I'm not sure who is who. We don't have an identity. Sunnism, Shiism, these are not Iraqi identities. These are separations, these are isolations. These are chauvinistic and fanatic approaches to life and to politics.'

**T**he American Embassy in Baghdad is a severe place, architecturally at least, full of sharp angles, thick glass and reinforced concrete. You might call it American realism, the fortified style of diplomatic outposts these days that altogether lacks the grace of Father Guay's syncretism, his arches and domes evoking another age. It is a garrison in a place where cultures, visions and identities are now contested.

I had an appointment there with Martin Quinn, whose portfolio includes education and cultural affairs, and David Ranz, the embassy's

spokesman. Quinn, sixty-five, is a garrulous, gracious type, with an impressive record of time in the Middle East. He taught in Iran before the revolution, then at Cairo's storied Al-Azhar University, before becoming a diplomat and serving in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, Israel and elsewhere. 'Complicated' was the way he described America's relationship with the Arab world over his time, which barely missed intersecting with the Jesuits' departure from Baghdad. Part of his job these days is to try to make it less so.

Billions of dollars have been spent on 'public diplomacy', a diplomatic term for trying to make people like us more. American radio and television stations broadcast to Iraq and the rest of the Arab world, with mixed success. President Obama, at Cairo University in 2009, called for 'a new beginning' between two cultures that, in a phrase that could have come from an etiolated edition of *Al Iraqi*, 'share common principles – principles of justice and progress, tolerance and the dignity of all human beings'. The American Embassy in Baghdad, and diplomats like Quinn, have the formidable task of making that a reality – or, more bluntly, trying to recapture what America (its missionaries, diplomats and graduates of its schools) managed to do in a gentler era.

In the offing is a potpourri of acronyms and good intentions – exchange programmes, training initiatives, English instruction and, with an investment of \$7.5 million, partnerships between Iraqi and American universities that will bring to Basra the oil expertise of Oklahoma State University, and to Najaf the University of Kentucky's approach to learning English. Quinn spoke of a process that, while gradual, 'is going to happen'. Ranz spoke about treating the 'many, many years of isolation'. The American government wanted to build what he called 'a long-term relationship', Ranz told me, one that would begin to flourish as the American military withdrew the rest of its troops by 2012. 'In a year from now, roughly, they're all going to be gone and what's going to be left behind, we hope, is a strong civilian partnership with a lot of Americans of a variety of stripes involved in every sector of Iraq, whether it's agriculture, whether it's education,

culture, energy, all those things,' he said. 'Over the course of time, those are the impressions that are going to be, I think, burned into the minds of Iraqis.'

Diplomats, especially in Baghdad, have a way of speaking with authority that is often infectious. It is earnest and righteous, like a graduate-school seminar. Ranz and Quinn sounded committed – no doubt, they are, serving in one of the grimmest assignments in the history of American diplomacy – but as I listened, I felt that most Iraqis I had met only rarely shared their assumptions, that their contexts were too often different. Both diplomats were newcomers to Iraq, and their comparisons to experiences in Egypt, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, while sometimes insightful, still felt, in Iraq at least, as thin as dry pitta bread. And while they spoke about ending isolation, I wondered how you would go about treating Iraq's near destruction – 100,000 and probably many more dead, millions having fled the carnage, a society's fabric tattered in wars, the last one so seminal to today's image of America abroad. It is hard to have a flourishing exchange when the same mission issues warnings like this every so often: 'The US Embassy has learned that Westerners travelling in Southern Iraq, including those using Personal Security Detachments (PSDs), are at increased risk of being targeted for kidnapping operations.'

Most diplomats spend a year or so in Iraq, and they tend to treat the country as a tabula rasa. They espouse benevolence when many Iraqis see arrogance. They still talk in blacks and whites, when most Iraqis are stranded in the greys of a new era. Eight years on, fundamental mistakes about Iraq's recent past are still routinely committed. In the meeting at the embassy, reference was made repeatedly to Iraq's isolation beginning in the 1970s, as Saddam Hussein ascended to power. For many Iraqis, the 1970s were an oil-propelled golden age; the society was devastated in the 1990s by sanctions the United States crucially supported. For the Americans, the problem is still Saddam and his immiserating legacy inflicted on a generation. For Iraqis, the problem was always Saddam *and* the

America that this generation has come to know. Often the harshest indictment is from those Baghdad College alumni who knew an older America most intimately. ‘Arrogance and hubris,’ Dave Nona told me. ‘It’s a hubris and arrogance that comes with power, that we know best, that we have the mightiest army, the money, the psychology. That we know best, even if events have shown otherwise.’

I asked Ranz and Quinn what the goals of their initiatives were, of public diplomacy itself, in an age where America is burdened by the memories of its past. ‘We want their views to be broadened about the United States so they can understand what the United States really is about, as a culture and as a society,’ Quinn told me. I suggested that in my time in the Middle East I had never really found all that much antipathy for Americans themselves, but rather for their policies, the agenda of a superpower – be it wars of their choosing, support for Arab dictators or double standards in, say, the respective right of Iran and Israel to possess nuclear weapons. Only zealots denounce American-celebrated liberties and rights; virtually every Arab disagrees with America’s lavish support for Israel. Wounds have become scars, though, and the scars remain. ‘Even if there isn’t antipathy,’ Ranz answered, ‘what there is is a broad lack of understanding about what the United States is really about.’

I wasn’t so sure. Nona and Tikriti, schooled by Americans, living in North America, certainly understood America. In fact, I thought, the problem the embassy faces might not be a lack of understanding, but rather too much of it.

Of the names the Iraqis have given the Americans, none is more popular than *khawalna*, our uncles. The word suggests intimacy, the intonation bitterness, like a family joined by marriage, but riven by the grudges and slights of too much time too close together. Alaa Saadoun, a young sculptor whom I met at the Fine Arts College, smiled at the mention of the name. ‘Even someone who hates them will call them that,’ he confessed.

I met Saadoun and his friends a few days after visiting the

embassy. Their campus felt a little like a harbour, offering rare shelter.

At least here, no one seemed to notice the blast walls and barbed wire outside the college's entrances, barricaded by tree trunks and barrels filled with cement. (The fortifications are as utilitarian as they are ugly. Across the street, in the old British cemetery, built to bury occupiers of another age, blast after blast has toppled scores of tombstones with names like P. Riley, J. A. Grant and F. F. Marshall.) Conversations are often hurried in Baghdad – no one wants to stay somewhere too long – but the talk here was idle, as I asked them about the legacy of *our uncles*. 'There is no question the Americans are going to leave behind *athar*,' Ali Zaid, a twenty-three-year-old film-maker, told me.

There are still the *athar* of another American age in Iraq. At the Campion Center in Boston, Father Linden showed me pictures of Baghdad still hanging in the hallway, a sort of memorial. 'Fred Kelly's BB team', one caption read. 'Leo Guay's church', another said. At the former American School for Girls, around the corner from Chalabi's house, the Honor Board remains after all these years, alongside clocks no longer keeping time. Nearly all of the forty shelves in the Baghdad College library are empty, save the remnants of an older education – *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* and *The World Almanac, 1965*. Plumes of dust billow from the yellowed pages of *Anna Karenina* when opened. The library at the girls' school is similarly frozen in time, books turned upside down, dust on the shelves undisturbed by fingertips. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was last checked out in 1991. No one has read *Charlotte's Web* since 1985. *They Live in Bible Lands* was checked out all of once, by Mae Abdel-Karim in 1978. 'Are you wondering what happened to Babylon and the other great cities of Bible times?' the book asks. 'Through the centuries, their walls were broken down and the sands of the desert drifted over the cities.'

Today's *athar* are a more crass sort, the stuff of a collision. It only takes a little while of living in Baghdad to see how the city has

been transformed by the forces that are the very antithesis of Jesuit-inspired cosmopolitanism. Like other great Arab capitals, Cairo and Beirut among them, Baghdad has lost its tolerance, receding behind those walls – the abundance of concrete here deprives the phrase of any metaphor – that demarcate now-familiar sect, ethnicity and class. Identity has become less malleable, life far less convivial. The Green Zone has become a lesson that even in democracy, or some notion of it, a divide, yawning and unbridgeable, remains between ruler and ruled. The old have a nostalgia for the past, circa Baghdad College – the imagined grace and civility of a black-and-white Egyptian movie. The younger bear the stamp of forces the invasion unleashed in 2003, the dawn of a new American militarism, and the civil war that extinguished the last ethos of that bygone era.

The *athar* of this American age are tattoos and piercings, frosted facial hair and Skoal tobacco, diffused by soldiers and what Iraqis call the *infitah*, or opening, which has brought the Internet, satellite television and cellphones. There is a martial bent to the imported words. ‘Hummer’ means armoured jeeps; ‘mister’ is an American soldier. A popular haircut is called ‘Marines’. Grandmothers warn their children that if they misbehave: ‘I’ll tell the Americans to come and get you.’ Fittingly, the Iraqi Army bears the most indelible stamp of this modern conjecture of America. Iraqi soldiers don sunglasses once deemed effeminate, gloves, suede-coloured boots, flak jackets and the khaki camouflage of the decade’s wars.

As I stood with the students, they offered their own examples, from haircuts (‘spiky’ and ‘cut’) to fashion, from words (*terps* for interpreters) to obscene gestures. Even a child can belt out a string of English expletives worthy of an audition for a Tarantino movie. ‘My opinion?’ asked Baqr Jassem, film-maker (and part-time barber). ‘What people say? We saw the Americans only by war, of war, and what they left us were the remnants from war.’

I thought back to a conversation I had with Ahmed Chalabi, who enjoyed talking about that notion of estranged intimacy. ‘It’s alien,’ he said in describing America today. ‘How many Americans have

been in Iraq in the past seven years? Two million? Iraqis don't know Americans now. Can you believe it? They just don't know! They don't know!' His aide, Entifadh Qanbar, put it another way. 'All boots, dogs and tattoos,' he said. Estranged, though, never felt like the right word to me, and comparisons between yesterday's Jesuits and today's soldiers are unfair. This was rather the intimacy between a new America and new Iraq, so bound by the miseries of conflicts, breeding fear and cynicism as they do, that each can no longer idealize the other. Each has become anonymous and menacing to the other, like a clichéd enemy in a straight-to-DVD action movie. Reeling from wars, adrift in the most painful nostalgia, Iraq had changed far more than Americans ever realized. In these days, America seems only to lend the crass commercialism of its globalized self.

Other than the embassy, the only other locale that carries America's name in Baghdad is the American Market, a rough-and-tumble souk that has grown like a tree's roots around the concrete barriers originally meant to protect it. Under tarps and umbrellas, Massari blasts from three-foot-high speakers, which sometimes share space with the soundtrack to Sylvester Stallone's *The Expendables*, a mercenary flick offering a character named Hale Caesar. (Another movie on sale: *A-plus College Girls*.) Mannequins adorned in bandanas, camouflage shorts and parachute pants wear goatees. Shirts are emblazoned with Snoop Dogg. 'Paid the Cost to Be Da Boss', one reads. The fashion is *banki*, perhaps a derivation of the word Yankee, though no one seems to know for sure. 'It's the American style,' one of the vendors, Thaer Abdullah, told me simply.

Perhaps all of it – Dave Batista and Tupac, Motörhead and Metallica – is a fad, the equivalent of Aram Gabriel's comparison to Charles Atlas in the Baghdad College yearbook all those years ago. It felt more entrenched, though. These are the artefacts of war, and war is America's legacy today, the intimacy of violence. I asked the students – one of whom lost five relatives to the conflict, another whose friend had his left hand severed – when they thought their generation might forget.

‘We can’t forget,’ Osama Amer, a painter with a faint beard, told me.

‘We haven’t forgotten the British yet,’ Jassem, the part-time barber, said.

‘It’s history, our history, and it has to be remembered,’ Amer went on. He smiled at me as he smoked, but there was an edge in his voice. ‘Iraqis don’t forget anything.’

At 10.53 a.m., the detonation of a car bomb cracked about a hundred yards away. Staccato bursts of gunfire followed, in an attack that would leave twelve people dead that day. I flinched. No one else moved. They may have blinked, but I didn’t see it.

**I**n September, I finally talked to Father Solomon Sara, who was inspired by his education at Baghdad College to become a Jesuit. For weeks, I had tried to reach him at Georgetown University, where he has taught for more than four decades, but calls from Baghdad to anywhere are not all that easy. When we finally did talk, the phone felt fitting to me, as we spoke between two worlds over a bad line on the verge of disconnecting.

‘We gave a different image not only to their society, but to our society,’ he told me. The words struck me. The college did not represent simply an intersection, I thought, but perhaps something more, what Father Sara would describe to me as noble. It incarnated an age when all the rhetoric and the promises – those pledges that Iraqis have heard since 19 March 1917, the date Major General Sir Stanley Maude defeated the Ottomans, marched into Baghdad and declared his troops liberators – were made possible.

I asked Father Sara if that kind of intersection would ever be realized again. He paused, but only for a moment. ‘It will take time, of course, because everything has become toxic there. Ethnicity has become toxic, religion has become toxic, even geography has become toxic. Everything is negative. Nobody says we’re just Iraqis – and that was our attitude, that everybody is Iraqi, that everybody is on an equal basis.’ Father Sara mixed the first-person plural; for a while, *we* were the Iraqis of his birth; at other times, the Americans of his

home. 'We divided the country into three pieces. We're telling them in practice the country is not one. It's the foundation for American policy: the north is Kurdish, the south is Shiite and the centre is a government that is not representative. We emphasize the differences and identities. Can you imagine doing that here, in the States? I can't imagine doing that and surviving. But that's exactly what we did there. Even before the war, ten years of an embargo. To succeed you have to have allies, and to have allies, you have to divide. To conquer, you have to fragment. The more you divide, the more you control. There's confusion, therefore you control.' Father Sara's voice was too gentle and weary to be angry, but I could hear the hurt as he listed the chapters of America's engagement, from American troops occupying Saddam Hussein's palaces as they conquered Baghdad to the war crimes of Abu Ghraib. 'Do they think that is noble?' he asked me. 'My goodness.' He stopped. 'What happened to us?' He repeated the question again. 'Somebody like me lost two countries at the same time. Who do you cheer for, America or Iraq? The two countries I love best, I love most, and here they are, tearing each other apart.'

Not so long ago, I rebuilt my family's ancestral home in Lebanon. It paled before the stately villa it once was, perched in a backwater no longer at the intersection of trade, languages and culture. Still, I had managed to make sure it would be more than an archaeological footnote, abandoned and crumbling like so many other stone mansions in the town. That didn't matter to my cousin, who told me he would never visit the house again. Why would he want to see it, he asked me, when he could remember it as it was? Father Sara was of the same idea. The country is in shambles, he said, 'and I don't want to see that'. Chalabi echoed this sentiment. He never wanted to go back to see Baghdad College, its walls now scrawled with swastikas and graffiti that read GANGSTER and THE PLAYER. 'I don't want to see the shit they did to it,' he told me. Memories would be their *athar*, those fragments of an older American legacy that manages to perhaps live on abroad, in exile, among that diaspora that

no longer recognizes America or, more painfully, Iraq. Nor does it want to. 'I know the old Baghdad, I know the old Iraq. We have gone through three wars and Iraq is not Iraq any more,' said Muwaffaq Tikriti, speaking to me from Montreal. 'It's . . .' He paused. 'To go back to what Iraq was would take a miracle.' Father Sara's words were the most haunting I heard, though. 'Baghdad is dead for most of us.'

'The atmosphere is so poisonous that if you opened Baghdad College today, you wouldn't survive. We wouldn't survive.' I could hear his voice quiver, then tremble, his *we* still interchangeable. 'The symbiosis was perfect, we loved them, and they loved us. They welcomed us, and we welcomed them. It was completely mutual.'

'When we entered the gate,' he told me, 'we entered a new world.'

And, as he put it, those worlds are gone. Even the Jesuits, as Father Sara himself acknowledged, would fail today. Hardly any common ground is left.

Before I hung up the phone, I promised to have coffee with him when I visited Washington. Soon after, I tucked away a page I had copied from one of the yearbooks to bring with me when I saw him. It might not mean that much, but the words felt right to me. The passage was written by Aram Seropian in 1945, the year Father Sara entered Baghdad College. 'Baghdad changes with the time of the time,' it went.

*Her people march with the tempos of civilization. She weeps when the Tigris is stained with the blood of her sons, when her hearths are smouldering in chaos. Yet she smiles when the Tigris is rippling with joy and her halls are echoing with laughter. Destiny may change her emotions, but her classic beauty, her historical pride always remains the same. She is a gem that may lose her brilliance under the dust of time . . . ■*