Picturing “My” Iraq

Representation of Iraqi Identity in the Works of Sadik Kwaish Alfraji

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SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

«Painting is a state of being,» affirmed American painter Jackson Pollock in 1956, «Painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is.»[1] Along this line, this thesis investigates how identity can be represented through artistic practice by focusing on the works of Iraqi artist Sadik Kwaish Alfraji. Through the analysis of thirteen artworks produced between 1982 and 2014, I will explore how the artist conceives his Iraqi identity and fashions it within his creations. This work shows how Sadik Alfraji's "Iraqi-ness" evolves throughout time and how it relates to the contemporary history of Iraq. My goal is to demonstrate how the portrayal of crucial events in the history of his homeland reveals what "being Iraqi" means to the artist.

Sadik Alfraji is always part of his artworks and represents Iraq according to his personal view. As he states, «there is always something of me in my works of art. I am in both the ideas and the concepts.»[2] Additionally, Iraq, particularly Baghdad, is constantly present on the canvas, too. «There is always Baghdad in my artworks,» the artist stated.[3] Even when the audience does not visually "see" Iraq, it is part of the artwork. For example, in the series *Elegy of Malik Ibn al-Rayb*, the country is not visible in the artwork because it does not belong to the present, but it exists in different space and time period. As I will explain later, the 2003 US-led occupation and the following civil war has destroyed and transfigured Iraq. The lack of recognition of what Iraq has become makes the artist believe that Iraq has disappeared, and that it is he who can only find it within himself and in his memories.

1 Jackson Pollock quoted in "Revolution in Paint," in Selden Rodman (ed.) *Conversation with Artists*, New York: Capricorn Books, 1957, p. 85.

2 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 22nd February 2016.

3 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th March 2016.

The bond and identification between the artist and Iraq will be highlighted through a narrativist approach to the study of identity. Specifically, I will consider identity as embedded in a narrative which engages with other narratives in a relation that can be of inclusion or exclusion. I will analyse the portrayal of Iraq that makes up Alfraji's individual narrative to understand which relation exists between the artist's narrative and other narratives of contemporary Iraqi history. The correlation between Alfraji's and other narratives determines which position the artist occupies within the broader narrative of Iraqi history. This position, which results from the artist's individual narrative, shows to what extent the artist perceives himself as an Iraqi and part of Iraq, becoming the "benchmark" of Sadik Alfraji's Iraqi-ness.

What this thesis will demonstrate is that Alfraji's position and identity are the result of an interplay of an "inside and outside" of Iraq, both in literal and metaphorical terms. For instance, the artworks created during his life in Iraq reveal how, due to the difficulty to recognize himself inside of the dominant Baathist discourse, the artist was placing himself virtually outside of Iraq. As he recollects, «I was feeling like a stranger when I was living in Iraq.»[4] Conversely, Alfraji's representation of post-US aggression Iraq shows how the artist perceives himself as part of the Iraqi narrative, while being physically outside of the country. For example, in *Born April 9th* the artist projects images of war-torn Iraq on his fragmented body to display how the destruction of Iraq affects him, and how, like the country, his self, too, has been dismembered by the war.

IDENTITY AS A NARRATIVE

For the sake of this thesis it is extremely important to clarify the concept of identity. First of all, identity has to be understood as fluid and evolving over time. Secondly, Alfraji's identity should be read as a story within the larger narrative of contemporary Iraqi history.

The artist's Iraqi identity is not fixed or eternally given. Like all identities, Alfraji's Iraqi-ness has an origin and a history, it undergoes constant transformation, and it is exposed to the

4 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden 24th March 2016.

unceasing influence of history, culture and power.[5] The fluidity of identity and its relentless evolution are evidenced by the different ways the artist understands and represents himself vis-à-vis Iraq, and Iraq vis-à-vis himself. As the artist stated during one of my interviews, «even if the concept I am working on has a documenting way, it is actually very personal. I am always a part of the artwork, even of those works that are somehow not completely related to myself.»[6] Therefore, Alfraji uses artistic representation to express his stance within Iraqi history. The portrayal of Iraq given by the artist becomes a signifier of his Iraqi identity, meant as one of the different ways he is positioned by, and positions himself within, the narrative of Iraq's past.[7] Although the term "position" might suggest the idea of something static, it is on the temporary identification and on the evolution of positions that the focus should be kept. In fact, as Stuart Hall stated, «identities are the… *unstable* points of identification or suture which are made within the discourses of history and culture.»[8]

Although the positioning in a particular point of identification is not permanent, the positions with which the artist identifies leave a "trace" on him. These marks are part of his experience and his memories that, as he explains, play a huge role in the construction of his identity. «Your memory, your experiences, what you have done, what is happening around you…all the phenomena around you and inside of you build your identity,» he stated.[9] A good example of this concept of identity as stratification of positions is Alfraji's representation of freedom under the Baathist regime in *Biography of a Head*, created in Iraq in 1985, and *In Baghdad, Under the*

5 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Indentity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference,* edited by Jonathan Rutherford, London: Lawrence & Wishant: (1990), p. 225.

6 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th March 2016.

7 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Indentity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference,* edited by Jonathan Rutherford, London: Lawrence & Wishant: (1990), p. 225.

8 *Ibidem,* p. 226. My emphasis.

9 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th March 2016.

Freedom Monument, produced in Holland in 2013. Despite nearly thirty years passed between the two productions, both works express the trauma of living under dictatorship and the total absence of freedom. Therefore, one might argue that this traumatic experience is still a vivid memory in the mind of the artist, and that his positioning against the Baathist regime remains part of his identity. «When I made *Under the Freedom Monument* the feeling I had when I was living in Baghdad got to me fresh again. I was questioning the meaning of freedom in time of war and dictatorship, and I still do it now,» he explains.[10]

The perception Alfraji has of Iraq impinges the representation he gives of the country and of himself as an Iraqi. Therefore, within his artworks he creates a narrative whereby he tells not only his personal story, but also his version of Iraq's history. According to Margaret Somers,

> People construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; [their] "experience" is constituted through narratives, [and] people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way integrate these happenings with one or more narratives.[11]

Alfraji's story constitutes only one dimension of the history of Iraq, understood as a "master narrative" which encompasses various stories "told" by different actors. By transforming his experiences into images, the artist creates what Somers would define his *ontological narrative*: his individual story, which recounts not only how the artist perceives himself within a specific spatial and temporal context, but also how he sees that context.[12] This means that by representing himself as historically and spatially contextualized, Alfraji provides the viewer with a "truth," or "knowledge," not only of himself, but also of Iraq. As a result, the position that Alfraji occupies vis-à-vis the narrative of Iraqi history appears as a sort of "sub-narrative." The following chapters, each dealing with pivotal events in the history of Iraq, namely the Iran-Iraq war, the Baathist

10 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 16th March 2016.

11 Margaret R. Somers, "The narrative constitution of identity: A relational and network approach," *Theory and Society*, 23: 1994, p. 614.

12 *Idem.*

dictatorship, the 2003 US aggression and its aftermath, should be read as different episodes of the story of the artist shaped by the story of his country.

However, since Alfraji's story is only one narrative within the master narrative of Iraqi history, it is necessary to take into account a second dimension of sub-narrativity. Therefore, this thesis will also analyse the *public narrative*, «those narratives larger than the single individual,» such as the ones produced by cultural and governmental institutions, or by mainstream media.[13] These include the Baathist discourse, e.g. the rhetoric on the Iran-Iraq war in the state's propaganda campaign.

Despite the Baathist public narrative and Alfraji's individual narrative coexisted within the master-narrative of Iraqi history, the artist's discourse was unable to emerge under Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. As Somers points out, «which kind of narratives will socially predominate is contested politically and will depend in large part on the distribution of power.»[14] In Baathist Iraq, the state's power combined manipulation of reality and creation of truth with coercion. On the one hand, the regime produced, accumulated and circulated its public narrative to maintain unequal relations of power within society.[15] On the other hand, the government ensured the solid prevalence of its official discourse, and the impossibility of alternative discourses challenging it, through increasing use and threat of violence, and a capillary system of control over the population.[16] As Samir al-Khalil explains, fear became the «cement that [held] together the body politic in Iraq…

13 *Ibidem*, p. 619.

14 Margaret R. Somers, "The narrative constitution of identity: A relational and network approach," *Theory and Society,* 23: 1994, p. 619.

15 Michel Foucault, "Lecture Two: 14 January 1976," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1979*, edited by Colin Gordon, New York: Pantheon Books (1980), p. 93.

16 Achim Rohde, *State-Society Relations in Ba'thist Iraq: Facing Dictatorship,* Abingdon: Routledge (2010), p. 24.

people [were] afraid of what the neighbours might say. Parents [were] afraid of speaking in front of their children.»[17]

Nonetheless, despite the danger of countering the official discourse discouraged the emergence of alternative narratives, there was a site in which a different "truth" on Iraq was produced. As Michel Foucault explains, in every society «there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case.»[18] Resistances are in fact an inherent part of the unequal relations of power: they are «inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite.»[19] As I will show later, Alfraji's narrative conveys a knowledge of Iraq that contrasts with the version of Iraqi history sponsored by the Baathist state, and that could be considered as a form of resistance. For example, the analysis of the artworks produced by the artist during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) reveals how the individual and the public narrative provide two radically different images of the conflict: namely despair versus heroism. Furthermore, the way in which the artist pictures Iraq and himself within the artworks created in exile is also significant to understand his positioning outside of the Baathist narrative. The Iraq that emerges from Alfraji's memory refers not only to his home and his family, but also to the Baathist dictatorship. According to the different recollection he is displaying, the artist portrays himself in a different fashion. For instance, his body is clearly defined when associated to the Iraq he feels he belongs to, while it becomes a shadow when portrayed with reference to the Iraq he is unable to identify with. By obscuring his own body the artist seems to further refuse to recognize himself as part of a corrupt and unpopular regime that kept Iraqi society under its iron fist.

The corpus of artworks Alfraji produced on post-2003 Iraq will be analysed with reference to the US discourse on the war, with particular attention on the singular conception of freedom

17 Samir al-Khalil, *The Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq,* University of California Press (1989), p. 275.

18 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, London: Penguin Books (1978), p. 96.

19 *Idem.*

promoted by the Bush administration. I will not, however, examine in depth the other public narratives of post-Hussein Iraq. Public discourses, such as the ones sponsored by the Coalition of Provisional Authority or the mass media, will be excluded in order not to shadow the artist's individual narrative, which is the main focus of this thesis. In addition, the number of discourses in Iraq has multiplied, especially after the US-led invasion and the civil war has broken out.[20] As a result, it would be difficult to recollect all the public narratives in a sufficiently exhaustive way. Lastly, as emerged from the analysis of the artworks, Alfraji does not seem to openly position himself in line or against any specific public narrative. Rather, his representation of the more recent history of the country creates an individual narrative which operates within some of the discourses on the war produced by Iraqi people directly experiencing the 2003 invasion and its aftermath. Consequently, instead of opposing one or more public narratives, Alfraji's version of post- Baath Iraqi history will be considered as one individual narrative among, and aligned with, other individual narratives.

RELEVANCE

As Sadik Alfraji's representation of his Iraqi-ness is deeply embedded in the contemporary history of Iraq, the framework advanced for this thesis not only relates to the broader literature on Iraqi identity, but also to the scholarship on Iraqi history. In fact, the history of the country has a remarkable influence on the artist's construction and depiction of his Iraqi identity. As a consequence, the representation of Iraq that Alfraji creates is to be considered as a way to understand and interpret Iraqi history.

20 As Isakhan explains, «by the middle of 2003, Iraq was home to more than 20 radio stations, around 15 Iraqi-owned television stations, with approximately 200 Iraqi-owned and run newspapers published across the country. Even smaller regional towns such as Najaf bolstered more than 30 newspapers in a city of only 300.000 people. Most of these new television stations, radio stations and newspapers were started by the seemingly countless political parties, religious factions and/or ethnic groups of post-Saddam Iraq, each of them jostling for support and legitimacy in the nation's struggle from despotism to democracy.» Benjamin Isakhan, "Occupation and Democracy in Re-Colonial Iraq," in Benjamin Isakhan (ed.) *Democracy in Iraq: History, Politics, Discourse,* London: Ashgate (2012), p. 96.

The aim of this study is to give more space to the voice of those Iraqis who are not part of the official state narrative, especially during the Baathist era. Seminal studies on the history of Iraq, such as the ones by Charles Tripp, Ofra Bengio, and Joseph Sassoon, keep the focus of analysis mainly on the discourse of the regime authorities and their coercive power. The lack of attention on the formation of Iraqi identity at the grassroots level could be explained, above all, with the extreme difficulty to undergo field research in Iraq, particularly when Saddam Hussein was in power.[21] Nonetheless, as I will illustrate through the analysis of Alfraji's works of art, under the Baathist regime an alternative discourse to the public narrative existed. Unlike what Samir al-Khalil argues in *Republic of Fear,* the Baathist discourse did not accomplish its purpose of indoctrinating and annihilating Iraqi people's minds. In Saddam Hussein's Iraq there was a social fabric that was aware of the injustice perpetrated by the regime, and that was not «more prey than ever to believing the government's most fantastic lies.»[22]

However, the extreme level of violence and social control established by the government compelled the opposition to adopt a way of speaking that was not open and direct, but cryptic and opaque. As Alfraji states, «artists have the power to play with concepts and ideas as long as they are not clear enough for authorities to understand that they are a protest against suffering or that they advocate liberty. Dictators are stupid. They won't necessarily read between the lines.»[23] Therefore,

21 Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, "The Historiography of Modern Iraq," *American Historical Review,* Dec. 1991, p. 1408.

22 Samir al-Khalil, *The Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq,* University of California Press (1989) p. 60.

23 Amelia Smith, "Creating Art out of Iraq's Darkness," *Middle East Monitor* 28th May 2015, accessed 25th April 2016. https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20150528-creating-art-out-of-iraqs-darkness/ The presence of hidden counter discourses in Baathist Iraq has also been underlined by Benjamin Isakhan: «Despite the fact that many Iraqi academics, journalists, artists and poets were commandeered by the state to write about and promote Baathist ideology, some managed to utilize subtle imagery, clever analogies, allegory or double entendre to expose the authoritarian and repressive culture of the Baath and force their fellow Iraqis to ponder alternatives such as democratic rule.» Benjamin Isakhan, "Oppression and Resistance in Post-Colonial Iraq," in Benjamin Isakhan (ed.) *Democracy in Iraq: History, Politics, Discourse.* London: Ashgate (2012), p. 110.

it is necessary to discover these voices of resistance, the «hidden transcripts,» because the Baathist government was not the only reality of Iraq in the past thirty years.[24] As James C. Scott warns, «in the public domain, where the effects of power relations are most manifest, any analysis is likely to conclude that subordinate groups endorse the terms of their subordination and are willing, even enthusiastic, partners in that subordination.»[25] As a result, the ultimate goal of this thesis is to give a small contribution to the new trend of re-reading the contemporary history of Iraq, an effort already initiated by scholars such as Hamit Bozarslan and Nadje al-Ali.

Since the overthrowal of Saddam Hussein the study of Iraq's contemporary history has given more space to the voice of ordinary Iraqis. The publication of blogs, like *Baghdad Burning* by Riverbend, *The Baghdad Blog* by Salam Pax, or of studies on the Iraqi diaspora like Zainab Saleh's *Diminishing Returns*, are just a few examples.[26] The Iraqi people's version of Iraqi history has also emerged through artistic production. Good cases in point are the movie-documentary *Underexposure* by Oday Rasheed, and the collection of stories *The Madman of Freedom Square* by Hassan Blasim. Sadik Alfraji's artworks can be included in the framework of the Iraqi artistic production that is contributing to express a kind of Iraqi-ness and a perception of Iraq that belongs to the population at large. In fact, despite being in exile, therefore living the destruction of the country by the hands of Western armies and sectarian violence "indirectly," Alfraji shares with Iraqi artists in Iraq the idea of the disappearance of the country. For instance, Alfraji's words «Iraq does not exist anymore» echo Rasheed's sentence «there's nothing left except emptiness.»[27]

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24 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, Yale University Press (1990), p. xii. See also Benjamin Isakhan, "Discourses on Democracy," in Benjamin Isakhan (ed.) *Democracy in Iraq: History, Politics, Discourse*, London: Ashgate (2012), p. 36.

25 *Ibidem.* p. 4

26 Zainab Saleh, "Diminishing Returns: An Anthropological Study of Iraqis in the UK," (Phd. Dissertation, Columbia University, 2011).

Finally, this thesis can contribute to the study of another branch of Iraqi history, the one of the diaspora. In fact, not only Alfraji's individual narrative is in line with certain individual narratives of Iraqis living in post-2003 Iraq, but the artist also portrays his discourse from the perspective of an exile. For example, in *Seven Days in Baghdad*, the depiction of the lack of freedom, understood as freedom of movement, due to the absence of security within society mirrors other Iraqis' individual narratives. Yet, the effects of the dearth of safety upon freedom for Iraqis in Iraq and for the artist are different. In fact, for safety reason Iraqi people are either forced to stay at home or to leave their country. Conversely, to the artist and other Iraqi exiles the widespread violence in Iraq means that they are not free to return to their homeland, because that would mean to risk their lives.

STRUCTURE

The thesis will first offer a historical background to better grasp the nature of Saddam Hussein's regime and the socio-political developments occurred in Iraq after the US-led invasion. In this section, I will examine the Baathist public and some Iraqi individual narratives emerged during and after the 2003 war. The following three chapters will focus on specific themes that I observed within Sadik Alfraji's artistic production on Iraq. The first chapter will cover the theme of "war," and will deal with the artist's representation of the Iran-Iraq war, and with the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The second chapter will be dedicated to the analysis of the artist's perception of "freedom," both before and after the fall of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. The last chapter will provide an overview of the artist's way of dealing with the theme of "belonging" to Iraq under the dictatorship and after its demise. There will be ample space given to deconstructive analysis to explore the works of art, combined with the voice of the artist as emerged from my interviews with him. The chapters will be followed by a conclusion and an epilogue whereby I will

27 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th March 2016, and Oday Rasheed, *Underexposure*, Iraq and Germany, 2005.

reflect upon the necessity to include Iraqi voices in the study of Iraqi history, and the position of Sadik Alfraji in the Iraqi diaspora.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

To better understand how Sadik Alfraji fashions his Iraqi identity as an individual narrative positioned within a broader master-narrative, and in relation to other public or individual narratives, it is crucial to explain what the content of these diverse narratives is, and who their agents are. Therefore, this chapter will provide a historical account of the socio-political context in which Alfraji created his pieces of art.

In the first part of the chapter, I will focus on the Baathist period (1979-2003), exploring the nature of the regime and its official discourse on the Iran-Iraq war and the concept of freedom. In the second part, I will deal with the aftermath of the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq (2003 onwards). I will investigate the rhetoric of the war provided by the US, especially concerning the purpose of the war, and the alleged freedom that it was supposed to grant to the Iraqi population. Then, I will concentrate on the US-led war and freedom as lived by the Iraqi people.[28] Due to the impossibility to interview Iraqis who experienced the invasion and its aftermath directly, my analysis of Iraqi individual narratives will be based on blogs, collections of short stories, and movies, written and produced by Iraqis. In addition, I will rely on secondary sources, such as the works of David Baran and Haytham Bahoora.

LIFE IN BAATHIST IRAQ

The nature of the regime: sovereignty and governmentality

The Baathist regime should be analysed in the light of Michel Foucault's theory of governmentality, which deals with the way governments exercise their power over subjects citizens.[29] I would argue that Baathist Iraq belongs to the category of non-liberal state systems distinguished by elements of both «sovereignty» and «governmentality.» Saddam Hussein,

28 By "Iraqi people" I mean civilians: people who are not part of the coalition governments, or of the guerrilla groups.

29 Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (eds.) *The Foucault Effect. Studies in Governmentality.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1991).

president of Iraq from 1979 to 2003, exercised the power of a supreme ruler. As Bozarslan points out, more than a *ra'is,* Hussein appeared as a «*malik…* whose personal sovereignty could not be restricted by any external or internal checks and balances.»[30] The objective of his exercise of power was, like the Foucauldian sovereign, to strengthen and protect his relation with what he owned: territory and subjects.[31] What was at stake for the Baathist government was the preservation of a state of affairs whereby the population was subjected to its rule. The Baathist regime's attention to the individuals, and its direct and indirect agency on the population constituted its feature of «governmentality». [32] Hussein's technique of power targeted the Iraqi population not only through the destruction of autonomous social structures, and the use of violence and terror.[33] The discipline of the population was also unfolded through the control of educational and cultural spaces within society.[34] Moreover, the presence of Hussein's portraits in public space reinforced the control over the population: it was a reminder that every interaction within the public sphere was taking place under the President's eyes.[35]

30 Jordi Tejel, Peter Sluglett, Riccardo Bocco and Hamit Bozarslan (eds.) *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges,* Singapore: World Scientific Publishing (2012), p.147

31 Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (eds.) *The Foucault Effect. Studies in Governmentality.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1991), p. 90.

32 *Ibidem.* p.99

33 Jordi Tejel, Peter Sluglett, Riccardo Bocco and Hamit Bozarslan (eds.) *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges,* Singapore: World Scientific Publishing (2012), p. 173

34 Ofra Bengio, *Saddam's Word. Political Discourse in Iraq.* Oxford: Oxford University Press (1998).

35 Pierre Darle, *Saddam Hussein maitre des mots. Du langage de la tyrannie à la tyrannie du langage.* Paris: L'Harmattan (2003) p. 44. See also Kamyar Abdi, "From Pan-Arabism to Saddam Hussein's cult of personality. Ancient Mesopotamia and Iraqi national ideology," *Journal of Social Archaeology,* vol.18, n.1, 2008, p. 23.

The purpose of this multi-faceted exercise of power was to create and maintain a «pure discourse of domination.»[36] As Pierre Darle explains, the Baathist discourse involved a massive imposition of authority.[37] Its objective was not to create a veritable and credible truth, but to convince the population of «the absolute necessity of an unquestioning and natural obedience.»[38] The apparatuses of coercion, cultural and educational programs, and the omnipresence of symbols of the regime were all government's tools to compel people to obey. «People are not required to believe the 'mystifications' of the regime...They are required to act *as if* they did.»[39]

The Baathist public narrative

One of the strategies of power adopted by the Baathist regime was the deliberate manipulation of reality. The Baathist "truth" was embedded within its official discourse, that circulated within Iraqi society through state's media and institutions. I will now deepen the content of the Baathist public narrative, focusing on the construction of images and rhetoric of the war against Iran (1980-1988) first, and then on the Baathist idea of freedom.

The war according to the regime

The conflict initiated by Iraq with the invasion of Iranian territory on September 22, 1980, was accompanied by an official discourse on the war and its *casus belli*. The purpose of the rhetorical construction operated by the regime was to cover the real motives that pushed Iraq to

36 *Ibidem* p. 20

37 *Ibidem* p. 37

38 Jordi Tejel, Peter Sluglett, Riccardo Bocco and Hamit Bozarslan (eds.) *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges,* Singapore: World Scientific Publishing (2012), p. 150

39 Pierre Darle, *Saddam Hussein maitre des mots. Du langage de la tyrannie à la tyrannie du langage.* Paris: L'Harmattan (2003), p. 38. Here, the author applies to Baathist Iraq Lisa Wedeen's analysis of Syrian society in *Ambiguities of Domination Politics, Rhetorics and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1999).

invade Iran, and give some justifications to the invasion. For instance, the Baathist discourse hid the existence of US interests and support to the conflict.[40] Instead, it fostered Saddam Hussein's goal to make «Iraq a pivotal state with himself as a leader of the Arab world and defender of the Gulf Arab countries» as a necessary move to cope with the Iranian perceived threat in the region.[41] As a result, the Iraqi government engaged in a massive propaganda campaign centred on the ancestral animosity between Iran and Iraq, and on the inevitability of an armed confrontation between the countries.[42] Furthermore, the Baathist regime also used the war against Iran to create and maintain the «state of war» within Iraqi society.[43] In fact, the increasing level of fear, the state of emergency, and the growing need of grassroots support, allowed the government to establish an even stronger control over the population. Nonetheless, the state's discourse covered its real intent by promoting Iraqis' mobilization against the Iranian enemy in the name of national unity. As Rohde explains, «the Baath regime came to see the war against Iran as the pedagogical tool to forge the feeling of national unity among the Iraqi population.»[44] The government's discourse focused on the unification of Iraqi nationalist sentiments through the common opposition to the Iranian enemy, and the identification

40 For the US strategic interests in the Iran-Iraq war see Stevens Hurst, *United States and Iraq Since 1979: Hegemony, Oil and War,* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (2009), p. 29. «[After they lost their precious ally in the Middle East, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi], the US needed other ways to contain the Iranian and Soviet threat in the region…It was in this context that Iraq began to assume a new place in American strategic thinking. ..Both US and Iraq sought a secure Persian Gulf and the administration did not wish to continue the anomalous state of having no diplomatic relations with Baghdad. Further evidence of a shift in US policy was seen when the Department of Commerce approved the sale of turbines for Italian frigates destined for the Iraqi navy. In July 1980, Carter approved the sale of five Boeing airliners to Iraq.»See also Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, "Inventions of the Iran-Iraq War," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies,* Vol.16, N.1, Spring 2007, p. 75.

41 Jordi Tejel, Peter Sluglett, Riccardo Bocco and Hamit Bozarslan (eds.) *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges*, Singapore: World Scientific Publishing (2012), p.269.

42 Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, "Inventions of the Iran-Iraq War," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies,* Vol.16, N.1, Spring 2007, pp. 64-66.

43 Samir al-Khalil, *The Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq,* University of California Press (1989), p. 271.

44 Achim Rohde, *State-Society Relations in Baathist Iraq. Facing Dictatorship,* New York: Routledge (2010), p. 125.

of the Iraqi nation with the person of Saddam Hussein. In fact, the Baathist rhetoric termed the conflict *Qadisiyat Saddam*, as the symbol of the Persian enemy's ancient antagonism. Additionally, this epithet emphasized the centrality of Saddam Hussein to the new [Iraqi] identity as the "banner" under which all Iraqis, regardless of their community of origin, were supposed to gather.[45] However, I would argue that, far from being the real motive behind the conflict, this image of the war as bearer of unity and as the personal battle of Hussein in the name of all Iraqis, was a pure rhetorical construction operated by the regime. In fact, as Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp point out, the war was actually waged with a «distrust of the people around the myth of collective identity: in Iraq, the elusive and ambiguous ideas of specifically Iraqi nationalism had been propagated by the regime.»[46]

Freedom according to the regime

The Baath party's slogan *Unity, Freedom, and Socialism* can be useful to understand the discourse of freedom sponsored by Saddam Hussein's regime. In this motto, the term "freedom" is placed between the words "unity" and "socialism," as if these were the two necessary conditions to reach freedom. The term "unity" refers to the common effort in fulfilling the nation's "true" interests, or "national will", which was articulated by the party.[47] The term "socialism," can be related to the idea of the Iraqi population as a mass that was acting unitarily, and in «harmony and

45 Jordi Tejel, Peter Sluglett, Riccardo Bocco and Hamit Bozarslan (eds.) *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges*, Singapore: World Scientific Publishing (2012), p. 270. The war against Iran was also known as «"Second Qadisiyya," with reference to the battle of Qadisiyya in 636 A.D. during which the Arab Muslims defeated the Persians.» The Baathist rhetoric of the conflict tried to revive and redefine the meaning al-Qadisiyya in «modern, ethnic and nationalist terms… [and the connection of] al-Qadisiyya to Iraq's tension with the Islamic Republic of Iran.» In Gershon D. Lewental, "Saddam's Qadisiyyah:" Religion and History in the Service of State Ideology in Ba'thi Iraq." *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol.50, n.6, 2014, pp. 892-894.

46 Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War,* London: I.B. Tauris (1988), p. 9.

47 Samir al-Khalil, *The Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq,* University of California Press (1989), p. 255.

concurrence» with the party.[48] In its program the Arab Socialist Baath Party declared that «there can be no room for contradictions between the party's concepts and the concepts of the masses.»[49] Therefore, as Samir al-Khalil explains, under the Baathist dictatorship, «the only freedom that was logically possible was the freedom to act *as one* with the mass.»[50].

Under the Baathist regime there were no institutional democratic structures which preserved the freedom to act autonomously and individually. According to the Baathist official policy, democracy and freedom could only exist as long as they did not hinder the party's agenda. The masses' criticism was allowed, provided it did not undermine the national will.[51] Therefore, the "massification" entailed a singular state of mind and unconditional obedience to whatever the regime ordered, that became «the norm against which all deviancy was measured.»[52] Differences and individualities had to be sacrificed for the sake of "freedom:" to be diverse and to "think outside of the crowd," that is to be critical and in opposition towards the regime, became synonym of isolation and powerlessness. Moreover, this feeling of loneliness was compounded by the impossibility to openly withstand the mainstream discourse. As Pierre Darle explains, the control of the state over the population was exercised through a capillary system of surveillance, and through

48 Benjamin Isakhan, "Oppression and Resistance in Post-Colonial Iraq," in Benjamin Isakhan, *Democracy in Iraq: History, Politics, Discourse,* London: Ashgate (2012), p.83.

49 *Idem.*

50 Samir al-Khalil, *The Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq,* University of California Press (1989), p.256, my emphasis.

51 Benjamin Isakhan, "Oppression and Resistance in Post-Colonial Iraq," in Benjamin Isakhan, *Democracy in Iraq: History, Politics, Discourse,* London: Ashgate (2012), p.83.

52 Samir al-Khalil, *The Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq,* University of California Press (1989), p.256.

the diffusion of terror.[53] The fear of speaking out and of being denounced for deviance from the party's will had rendered Iraqi subject citizens silent, and Iraqi society atomized.[54]

In order to pursue the "massification" of the subject citizens, the regime sponsored a «range of social practices in the field of culture and art.»[55] The state's monopolization of artistic practice functioned both in a "positive," or productive, way, and in a "negative," or repressive, way. On the one hand, the creation of monuments, artworks and sculptures became an integral channel for the propagation of the regime's discourse, such as the unification and identification of national identity with the Mesopotamian heritage, or the war propaganda.[56] According to Musawi, the regime's «attention to culture demonstrate recognition of its power and role… Saddam was very attentive to cultural manifestations and tried every means to co-opt intellectuals.»[57] On the other hand, art is a means of expression, and it can become a tool to voice the opposition vis-à-vis the regime. Thus, it needed to be strictly controlled by the government, and, in case of divergence from the mainstream discourse, silenced.

The analysis of Sadik Alfraji's production on freedom should take into account that he was not only an Iraqi citizen, but also an Iraqi artist. As he recollects, «it was not easy to be an artist in

53 Pierre Darle, *Saddam Hussein maitre des mots. Du langage de la tyrannie à la tyrannie du langage.* Paris: L'Harmattan (2003) p. 45. See also

54 Samir al-Khalil, *The Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq,* University of California Press (1989), p.275.

55 Jordi Tejel, Peter Sluglett, Riccardo Bocco and Hamit Bozarslan (eds.) *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges,* Singapore: World Scientific Publishing (2012), p. 270.

56 As Abdi points out, an important aspect of the Baath regime's campaign to promote Iraqi nationalism was to create «a cultural and historical foundation upon which the new national ideology could be constructed.» In Kamyar Abdi, "From Pan-Arabism to Saddam Hussein's cult of personality. Ancient Mesopotamia and Iraqi national ideology," *Journal of Social Archaeology,* vol.18, n.1, 2008, p. 14.

57 Muhsin J. al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq. Culture and Power in Conflict.* London: I.B. Tauris (2006), p. xii. See also Kamyar Abdi, "From Pan-Arabism to Saddam Hussein's cult of personality. Ancient Mesopotamia and Iraqi national ideology," *Journal of Social Archaeology,* vol.18, n.1, 2008, p. 14.

Ocher, Orange, Green, 1987, 15x8 cm. Woodcut.

Iraq, but it was not impossible…You needed to be very careful when you made your art.»[58] Although the Baathist regime considerably reduced the artist's space of autonomy, there was a way for Alfraji to construct what Hamit Bozarslan termed an «internal space of exile,» and preserve his individuality.[59] One of the only solo exhibitions that he had the chance to made in Iraq was a series of seventy abstract woodcut miniatures created during the Iran-Iraq war. As he told me, «those colours and lines expressed my anger and feelings towards the war, the government and the law. Towards what they were doing of me as a soldier.»[60] Since it was impossible to openly voice his opposition, the artist had to find an alternative way to express his criticism.[61] In the artworks the audience sees lines and spots of colour with a thick black contour, but no clear reference to the war or the regime. Furthermore, in order to avoid the government's repercussions, the artist left his artworks untitled. «I could have given the name of the real feelings I had inside of me, like death, anger…saying what I really wanted to say, but this would put me in trouble. Leaving the works untitled would open the door to a lot of questions like 'what do you mean?' 'what do you want to say?' So I made a clever choice and titled the works by the colours themselves.»[62]

58 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 22nd February 2016.

59 Jordi Tejel, Peter Sluglett, Riccardo Bocco and Hamit Bozarslan (eds.) *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges,* Singapore: World Scientific Publishing (2012), p.404.

60 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 22nd February 2016.

61 Marion Farouk-Sluglett, Peter Sluglett and Joe Stork, "Not Quite Armageddon: Impact of the War on Iraq," *MERIP Reports*, n. 125/126, The Strange War in the Gulf, July – September 1984, p. 24.

IRAQ AFTER THE 2003 US-LED INVASION

The US discourse of war and freedom in Iraq

«My fellow citizens, at this hour, American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its people, and to defend the world from great danger.»[63] This statement, pronounced by US President George W. Bush at the dawn of the US-led military campaign in Iraq, contains some keywords that help understand the official reasons behind the invasion. First of all, there was the necessity to disarm Iraq. According to the Bush administration, Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) was threatening the peace and the security not only of the US but of the world at large.[64] Secondly, and more importantly, the threat posed by Hussein was associated to the nature of the regime itself: a dictatorship. In fact, according to the neo-conservative Bush administration, the post 9/11 terrorist threat, originating particularly in the Middle East, was rooted in «the almost complete absence of democracy» in the region.[65] Therefore, because of the alleged necessity to export and spread democracy in the Middle East through military action for the safeguard of world peace, the US presidency promoted the "liberation" of Iraqis from Hussein's iron fist as a primary goal.[66] As John Mearsheimer explains,

62 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 22nd February 2016.

63 George W. Bush, "Address to the Nation. 19th March 2003," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZ8iMwA11TQ

64 *Idem.*

65 John J. Mearsheimer, "Hans Morgenthau and the Iraq war: realism versus neo-conservatism," *OpenDemocracy* 19th May 2005. https://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-americanpower/morgenthau_2522.jsp. See also Benjamin Isakhan, "Occupation and Democracy in Re-Colonial Iraq," in Benjamin Isakhan, *Democracy in Iraq: History, Politics, Discourse*, London: Ashgate (2012), p. 98. «US President Bush's 'War on Terror' had a clear interpretative framework that enabled him to contrast what he saw as the righteous forces of the West against the terrorizing hordes of the non-Western world. As part of the War on Terror, the US government began building their case to attack Iraq based on two central allegations that were later proven to be so abjectly false: that Saddam supported terrorism and had links to al-Qaeda, and that he was harbouring WMDs, which he was likely to use or to supply to others.»

66 This strategy has been later baptized "Bush Doctrine," which, as Isakhan explains, entails that «the US could use its enormous influence and military power to not only pre-emptively attack independent

«Iraq was the first major effort in this endeavour [of spreading democracy], although it could be argued that the war against Afghanistan was the initial step and Iraq was the second one.»[67] Global opinion, however, wondered why it was Iraq, and not for instance, Saudi Arabia which was to be "bestowed" democracy.[68] The unpopularity of the rationale behind the US-led military intervention brought the Bush administration to reconsider the logic of the Iraqi campaign, and present the success of the latter as triggering a "domino effect" of democratization in the region.[69] Finally, the name of the military campaign itself, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, further underlined how the ousting of the regime was much more crucial than its disarmament.

Nonetheless, the American intentions were not as noble and as transparent as Bush maintained. Behind his declaration that the US «have no ambition in Iraq except for remove the threat and to restore control to that country to its own people,» lies a different truth. First of all, Iraq's possession of WMD can be hardly termed as the primary concern of the US.[70] Rather, the fact

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nation-states and overthrow existing regimes, but also to install democratic governments in their place.» Benjamin Isakhan, "Occupation and Democracy in Re-Colonial Iraq," in Benjamin Isakhan (ed.) *Democracy in Iraq: History, Politics, Discourse*, London: Ashgate (2012), p. 94.

67 John J. Mearsheimer, "Hans Morgenthau and the Iraq war: realism versus neo-conservatism," *OpenDemocracy* 19th May 2005. https://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-americanpower/morgenthau_2522.jsp.

68 "Writers, artists and civic leaders on the War" *OpenDemocracy* 12th January 2003 and 6th February 2003. https://www.opendemocracy.net/freeform-tags/writers-artists-and-civic-leaders-on-iraq-war

69 Benjamin Isakhan, "Occupation and Democracy in Re-Colonial Iraq," in Benjamin Isakhan (ed.) *Democracy in Iraq: History, Politics, Discourse*, London: Ashgate(2012), p.94.

70 As John Mearsheimer points out, «it is often argued that Iraq under Saddam was evil because it used chemical weapons against Iran and the Kurds in the 1980s. However, at the time, the US was providing Iraq with overhead satellite imagery so that it could use its chemical weapons more effectively against the Iranian army. When Iraq came in for condemnation for using chemical weapons at the United Nations and in the US Congress, the Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush administrations went to considerable lengths to shield Saddam's regime from criticism.» In John J. Mearsheimer, "Hans Morgenthau and the Iraq war: realism versus neo-conservatism," *OpenDemocracy* 19th May 2005. https://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-americanpower/morgenthau_2522.jsp.

that Saddam Hussein's possession of WMD became to be defined a "real danger," has to be explained taking into account the US strategic interests within the Middle East. In fact, the US' decision to undertake the *Operation Iraqi Freedom* was a sheer neo-imperialistic move. According to John Chapman, at the time of the invasion, «Iraq was swimming in oil.»[71] While Hussein's Iraq in 2003 owned «115bn of oil reserves,… and a capacity second only to Saudi Arabia,» the US, conversely, was the «world's largest net importer of oil.»[72] Therefore, the overthrowal of the Baathist regime remained the paramount goal of the Bush administration, but it had nothing to do with the liberation of the Iraqis and establishment of a democratic government. Rather, what was at stake for the US was the control of Iraq's natural resources. The 2003 US occupation of Iraq, with the creation of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), headed by Paul Bremer, closely resembles the establishment of the British mandate in 1920.[73] The CPA, whose declared purpose was to «create conditions in which the Iraqi people can freely determine their own political future,» was actually established to make Iraq a pro-western free market.[74] As Paul Roger points out, «Bremer's plans were explicitly intended to impose a radical economic model... [that could only be realized by] crushing the Iraqi state and society.»[75]

War and freedom lived in Iraq

71 John Chapman, "The real reasons Bush went to war," *The Guardian*, 28th July 2004. http://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jul/28/iraq.usa

72 *Idem.*

73 As Abdi explains, after the British deliberately created Iraq from the union of the three former Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad and Basrah, they «decided that the new state of Iraq should be ruled, under British mandate, by [pro-British] King Faysal ibn Hussein. [Furthermore,] a treaty with Britain, reluctantly passed by the Iraqi assembly in 1924 allowed the British to maintain their military bases in Iraq and gave them the right to veto legislation passed by the assembly if deemed against British interests.» In Kamyar Abdi, "From Pan-Arabism to Saddam Hussein's cult of personality. Ancient Mesopotamia and Iraqi national ideology," *Journal of Social Archaeology*, vol.18, n.1, 2008, p. 8. See also Tariq Ali, *Bush in Babylon. The Recolonisation of Iraq*, London: Verso (2003), p. 49.

74"Coalition Provisional Authority Regulation Number 1" http://www.iraqcoalition.org/regulations/20030516_CPAREG_1_The_Coalition_Provisional_Authority_.pdf

The American invasion of Iraq and the demise of the Baathist regime were followed by a prolonged military occupation that maintained the disorder, exacerbated violence, and fragmented Iraqi society.[76] Hardly any Iraqi believed that the American war had been conducted for the liberation of Iraqi people. As blogger Salam Pax wrote on May 7th, 2003, «war sucks big time. Don't let yourself ever be talked into having one waged in the name of your freedom. Somehow when the bombs start dropping or you hear the sound of machine guns at the end of your street you don't think about your "imminent liberation" anymore.»[77] Moreover, the US interests in the country's natural resources were clear to most Iraqis.[78] As one Iraqi man interviewed in Laura Poitras' documentary *My country, my country* affirmed, «oil has become a curse on us.»[79]

As long as freedom is concerned, the passage from dictatorship to foreign occupation bore no improvement for the Iraqi population. In the documentary *About Baghdad*, by Sinan Antoon, one man said, «the student is gone, and now the master is here, and the people are the victims.»[80] Similarly, an activist of Women's Will, one Iraqi social justice organization, declared, «we are now living under another dictatorship, you see what kind of democracy we have, seems more like "bloodocracy". You see what kind of liberation they brought: unemployment, murder and

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75 Paul Rogers, "America in Iraq: power, hubris, change," *OpenDemocracy,* 2nd September 2010, https://www.opendemocracy.net/america-in-iraq-2003-10-power-hubris-change

76 David Baran, *Vivre la tyrannie et lui survivre. L'Irak en transition,* Paris: Mille et une nuits (2004), p.279

77 Salam Pax, *Where is Raed?,* 7th May 2003, http://dear_raed.blogspot.nl/search?updated-min=2002-12-31T13:00:00-08:00&updated-max=2003-05-22T14:45:00%2B04:00&max-results=50&start=98&by-date=false

78 David Baran, *Vivre la tyrannie et lui survivre. L'Irak en transition,* Paris: Mille et une nuits (2004), p.276.

79 *My country, my country*, directed by Laura Poitras, USA 2006.

80 *About Baghdad*, directed by Sinan Antoon, Bassam Haddad, Maya Mikdashi, Suzy Salamy and Adam Shapiro, InCounter Productions, 2004.

destruction.»[81] In fact, if the Baathist regime denied the autonomy and freedom of expression to its subject citizens, the US-led invasion deprived the Iraqi people of the right to govern their own country. Due to its tendency to defend its particularistic interests, the occupier aligned himself with the fallen regime under cover of a discourse on the general interest of the nation.[82] As Riverbend wrote, «the whole country and every single Iraqi inside and outside of Iraq is at the mercy of the American politics. [We feel] like a mere chess piece to be moved back and forth at will.»[83] In addition to this, the absence of political freedom was accompanied by a growing lack of freedom in terms of security. The escalation of violence, by the hands of the foreign troops and the guerrilla groups, has rendered precarious the daily survival of the population. For fear of being kidnapped, of falling victim of an explosion, or of being detained, many Iraqis do not dare to exit their houses.[84] Thus, the insecurity divested Iraqi people of their freedom of movement, and pushed them to imprison themselves within their homes. Moreover, with the progression of the occupation and the outbreak of the civil war, even the «modicum of safety» granted by the domestic walls has been deteriorated.[85]

Along with the deprivation of freedom and the creation of chaos, the war has also brought about a systematic destruction of the country. According to Nada Shabout, the *Operation Iraqi Freedom* was followed by an extensive campaign of de-Baathification which entailed the erasure of Iraq's heritage, and the symbols of the previous era, starting from the toppling of Saddam Hussein's

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81 Benjamin Isakhan, "Occupation and Democracy in Re-Colonial Iraq," in Benjamin Isakhan (ed.) *Democracy in Iraq: History, Politics, Discourse*, London: Ashgate (2012), p. 106.

82 David Baran, *Vivre la tyrannie et lui survivre. L'Irak en transition*, Paris: Mille et une nuits (2004), p. 403.

83 Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning*, 5th November 2006, http://riverbendblog.blogspot.nl/

84 *Ibidem*, 29th December 2006.

85 *Ibidem*, 20th February 2007.

statue in Firdos Square.[86] The demolition of the traces of Iraqi past has been accompanied by the devastating effect of the explosions that have escalated since the aftermath of the invasion. The increasing violence and devastation has targeted not only the urban environment, but also the civilian population. The routinely spectacle of death and destruction, the dismemberment of buildings and of bodies have become central in the contemporary Iraqi experience. As Riverbend reports, «a day in the life of the average Iraqi has been reduced to identifying corpses [and] avoiding car bombs.»[87] The traumatic experience of the daily damage towards the city and the civilian population has rendered the Iraqis deeply hopeless and disoriented. Moreover, the exhaustion of the war and the occupation, to which they can hardly see an end, is accompanied by the difficulty to "find" Baghdad in the city they are now dwelling.[88] In fact, the endless bombings have deeply transfigured the Iraqi capital's urban environment and caused in the Iraqi people a sense of bewilderment.

86 Nada Shabout, "The "Free" Art of Occupation: Images for a "New" Iraq," *Arab Studies Quarterly,* Vol.28, N.3/4, Summer/fall 2006, p. 46. See also Jordi Tejel, Peter Sluglett, Riccardo Bocco and Hamit Bozarslan (eds.) *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges,* Singapore: World Scientific Publishing (2012), p. xi.

87 Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning,* 29th December 2006, http://riverbendblog.blogspot.nl/

88 *Ibidem*, 11th July 2006.

WAR

This chapter examines the effects of the Iran-Iraq war, and of the US-led invasion of Iraq upon Sadik Alfraji's individual narrative. The discourse of war that emerges within the works of art related to the two conflicts reveals which position the artist occupies within the master narrative of Iraqi history. As explained in the introduction, the position, determined by the way Alfraji tells and represents a particular event in Iraqi history, can be taken as an indicator of the artist's Iraqi identity.

In the first part of the chapter, I will present two pieces of art that demonstrate how the artist produced a counter-discourse of the Iraqi war against Iran. The interplay of "inside and outside" that characterizes Alfraji's Iraqi identity emerges within his individual narrative. Since Alfraji lived the conflict in first person and dealt with it within his art, his narrative is included in the master-narrative of Iraqi history. Yet, as I will show through the comparison between Alfraji's artworks and the war images published in the state's media, the way he recounts the hostilities and their effect on the population places his individual narrative outside and in opposition to the mainstream Baathist discourse.

Since the beginning, the Iran-Iraq war was accompanied by a strong propaganda campaign and the creation of an official rhetoric of the conflict. The Baathist regime engaged in the construction of images and a visual discourse of the war that did not always coincide with reality. The nature of the Baathist discourse, whose goal was not to create a veritable knowledge, but only to dictate its rule, highlighted the gap between the regime's "actuality" and the Iraqis' experience of the war. The Baathist "truth" was so much far from the reality that it triggered a feeling of disorientation in the Iraqi population who could not believe the official discourse and see it as representative of what they were actually living.[89] For example, as Alfraji recollects «it was never

89 Pierre Darle, *Saddam Hussein maitre des mots. Du langage de la tyrannie à la tyrannie du langage.* Paris: L'Harmattan (2003) p. 26.

easy to reconcile what was happening outside on the streets and in the battlefield, with what I was learning at the Academy.»[90] When the artist speaks about Iraq during the war, he mentions the «madness of the war,» «the stupidity of the press,» and the «lies» of the regime.[91] The disorientation and the impossibility to identify with the Baathist discourse on the war raised in the artist an «imperious need of meaning.»[92] Consequently, the divergence between what the regime wanted him to believe and what he was experiencing, pushed Alfraji to emerge with a narrative of his own that took the shape of a counter-discourse.

In the second part of the chapter, Alfraji's narrative is positioned in line with other narratives Iraqi people living in Iraq under the US-led occupation. Again, the production of a counter-discourse opposed to the American narrative of the war can be explained through the gap between what the US termed "liberation," and what the Iraqi people really experienced: a mere «change of master.» Consequently, Alfraji, as other Iraqis, reacts to the American rhetoric of the war, and produces an individual narrative whereby he gives his interpretation of the US-led aggression of Iraq.

Similar to the Iran-Iraq war production, the way Alfraji represents the US-led invasion and its aftermath reveals how his Iraqi identity is distinguished by a combination of "inside and outside." Despite Alfraji's individual narrative is produced outside of Iraq's borders, its content places the artist virtually inside of the country. As he states, «it was as if what was happening in Iraq was happening to me. I was here, but I felt as if I was in Baghdad.»[93] As I will soon show, in the artworks related to post-2003 Iraq the artist uses his own body as a visual device to virtually

90 *Idem.*

91 Nat Muller ed, *Sadik Kwaish Alfraji*, Rotterdam: Schilt Publishing (2015), p. 79

92 Pierre Darle, *Saddam Hussein maitre des mots. Du langage de la tyrannie à la tyrannie du langage.* Paris: L'Harmattan (2003) , p.26.

93 Nat Muller ed, *Sadik Kwaish Alfraji*, Rotterdam: Schilt Publishing (2015), p.144.

position himself within the country. In addition, Alfraji's individual narrative shares some elements with other discourses on the conflict produced by Iraqis living in Iraq. For instance, both Alfraji's and other Iraqi individual narratives play a sour irony on the term "Freedom" and shed light on the tragedy of the Iraqi people, and condemns the American imperialist mindset.

IRAN- IRAQ WAR IN SADIK ALFRAJI'S ARTWORKS

The Baathist regime grounded extensively its propaganda campaign on visual arts, and began to recruit artists for the creation of official war images.[94] Its public narrative circulated through «regime-sponsored cultural activities and artistic production designed to bolster the war's popularity,…and secure the continued acceptance of the burdens the war put on Iraqi society.»[95] The regime's visual representation of the war emphasized the unity of the Iraqi people and the heroism of the army, the Persian arch-enmity, and the centrality of Saddam Hussein as protagonist of the *Qadisiyya*.[96] The government also propagated its war rhetoric through its channels of information: during the war years, the pages of state-owned daily newspapers, such as *Al-Jumhuriyya* and *Al-Thawra*, were filled with drawings, poems and short stories «eulogising the war effort.» [97]

Unlike other artists, Sadik Alfraji did not put his art at the service of the regime. Instead, he imbued his artworks with an individual narrative and a representation of the Iraqi conflict that constituted a counter-discourse opposed to the official state narrative. In Alfraji's war artworks there

94 Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War,* London: I.B. Tauris (1988), p.53.

95 Achim Rohde, *State-Society Relations in Baathist Iraq. Facing Dictatorship,* New York: Routledge (2010), p. 126.

96Kamyar Abdi, "From Pan-Arabism to Saddam Hussein's cult of personality. Ancient Mesopotamia and Iraqi national ideology," *Journal of Social Archaeology,* vol.18, n.1, 2008, p. 6. See also Gershon D. Lewental, "Saddam's Qadisiyyah:" Religion and History in the Service of State Ideology in Ba'thi Iraq." *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol.50, n.6, 2014, p. 895.

97 Achim Rohde, *State-Society Relations in Baathist Iraq. Facing Dictatorship,* New York: Routledge (2010), p.128.

is no heroism, no animosity towards Iranians, no national unity or mention to Hussein's leadership. The war Alfraji portrayed in *Embroilment* and *Soldier's Rest*, for instance, is made of civilian people destroyed by pain and sorrow, and of helpless and tired soldiers. By picturing death and pain, the artist denied to praise the war. Instead, he gave the floor to a sheer condemnation of its crimes.

Embroilment

When Sadik Alfraji created *Embroilment,* in 1984, he was still a student of the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad, which he attended «only to be away from the war. In fact, as long as I was a student I could not be enlisted as a soldier.»[98] Alfraji portrayed the war as it came to be lived in Baghdad. The focus on the suffering of the civilian people evidences how the artist's individual narrative stood outside and in contrast to the Baathist public narrative. The regime's rhetoric of the war left little space to the civilians, who were represented in art and literature as «deficient supporters» of the heroic Iraqi soldiers.[99] As Rohde explains, the Baathist discourse on the war created a hierarchy «between the front and the home front, between military and civilian life, highlighting the heroism of the male soldier and the endurance and moral support of the civilian population.»[100] Conversely, Alfraji, displayed how the war was not only heroism at the frontline, but also pain and fear at home. The combination of the title, *Embroilment*, with the subject of the artwork, civilian men, seems to suggest that even the home front was involved in the hostilities. Additionally, the way in which the subject is portrayed shows how the war was not heroic, but tragic, and how it negatively affected the population. With this piece of art Alfraji seemed to claim, «this is the real face of war and death

Embroilment, 1984, 49x388cm. Etching.

98 Achim Rohde, *State-Society Relations in Baathist Iraq. Facing Dictatorship,* New York: Routledge (2010), p.128.

99 *Ibidem,* p. 140

100 *Ibidem,* p. 141.

in Iraq.» As he told me, «I made this work in Baghdad, during the war. These faces are the reflection of the daily scenes I witnessed in Baghdad.»[101]

The image portrays six men covering their faces with their hands. The individuals are not entirely visible: of the three men in the foreground the viewer can just see the head, the neck and the shoulders, while the three men in the background appear only with their head. Although only partially evident, the viewer can understand the facial expression of the subjects. Their mouths are shaped in a downward bow, making the men terrified and sad, but also desperate. Their eyes are tightly shut, and their eyebrows are bent with their inner corners joint towards the forehead. The subjects cover their faces with their hands, which have a lighter colour compared to the faces, and are disproportionate and distorted. It is especially the position of the hands that evokes fear and pain. Alfraji pictured these men in the most common and natural gesture that every human being would do when scared: cover his face.

The style of the etching is also relevant, since it makes pain and fear the real protagonists of the artwork. The trait is clear and sharp: the black lines in contrast with lighter shades of brown, grey and white allow the features of the characters - facial expression and hands – to be clearly recognizable. As Alfraji explains, the colour black is «able to give a good contrast and leaves a lot

101 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 5th May 2016.

of space to the emotions.»[102] The artist, then, used the black trait to draw distorted and quivering lines that profile crooked hand fingers with squared and disproportionate fingernails. Likewise, he sketched the eyes, mouths, ears and noses with twisted lines. Small fragmented traits are defining the shadows, the hair and clothes. Shivering and shaking are other manifestations of human fear: when people are afraid they tremble. Similarly, Alfraji's hand delineates shaking traits, lines full of terror and fear.

Self-portrait, 1985, 17x11.5cm. Graphite pencil on paper

Finally, Alfraji was not just an observer and reporter of the traumatic effects of the war on the population. Pain and fear belonged as much to the people around him as to the artist himself. In fact, as he recollects, daily scenes of death and mourning, «the terror of the authorities,…, and the absolute helplessness to see an end to that bloody war… [caused] a heavy, suffocating mixture of feelings that put a constant burden on our spirits.»[103] The men in the etching «could be anyone,» and this does not exclude the artist himself.[104] The painful experience of the conflict Alfraji lived as a civilian is even more evident if we compare the attitude of the men in *Embroilment* with a self-portrait he created one year after. There, too, the artist drew himself covering his face with his hands, eyes shut, and a sad and desperate expression on his mouth. Essential traits, trembling lines and predominance of black left the ground open to the «dark emotions» the artist was feeling.[105]

Soldier's Rest

102 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Amersfoort, 7th February 2016.

103 Nat Muller ed, *Sadik Kwaish Alfraji*, Rotterdam: Schilt Publishing (2015), p. 79.

104 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 5th May 2016.

105 *Idem.*

Soldier's Rest belongs to the corpus of artworks that Sadik Alfraji produced during his experience as a soldier in a military camp in the north of Iraq.[106]In fact, in 1987, after he finished his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts, the artist was required to enter the army. As Jabar points out, «the prolongation of the war made it imperative to call on reserves and mobilize wider sections of the younger generation.»[107] During his soldier's life Alfraji never abandoned artistic production, which served to him as a «talisman.»[108] «Art helped me survive the life of a soldier when I became one in 1987. I used to pour all my worries, fears and anger into countless hours of work. The pockets of my military fatigues were never without a pencil or a paper, which I used for quick sketches,» he remembers.[109]

106 *Idem.*

107 Faleh A. Jabar, "The War Generation in Iraq: A Case of Failed Etatist Nationalism," in Lawrece G. Potter and Gray G. Sick (eds.) *Iran, Iraq and the Legacies of War,* New York: Palgrave Macmillan (2004), p. 126.

108 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Amersfoort, 7th February 2016.

109 Nat Muller ed, *Sadik Kwaish Alfraji*, Rotterdam: Schilt Publishing (2015), p.79

Soldier's Rest, 1988, 10.5x9cm. Fountain pen ink on paper.

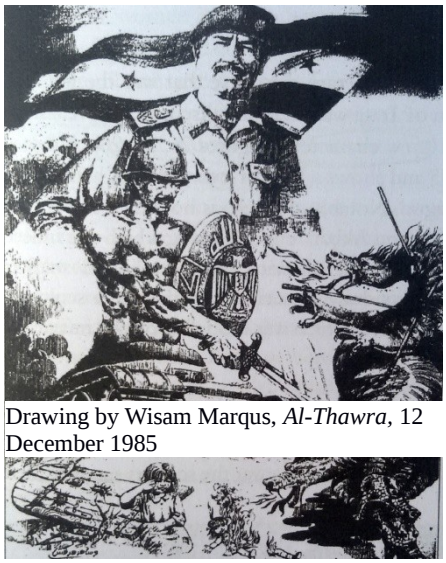
Like *Embroilment*, *Soldier's Rest* is also an instance of Alfraji constructing a counter-discourse of the Iran-Iraq war, opposed to the Baathist rhetoric. The representation of the conflict in the Baathist narrative focussed on the heroism of the Iraqi soldiers, on Iraqi national sentiments, and on the centrality of Saddam as leader.[110] A good example of the war images sponsored by the regime is a drawing from Wisam Marqus published on the newspaper *al-Thawra* on December 12th, 1985.[111] Here, the central figure is a kind of cyborg-warrior: his upper part is a strong and muscular soldier, while his lower part is a tank. The soldier's left hand holds a shield with the Iraqi national emblem, the Eagle of Saladin, and with the right hand he is decapitating a monster with a sword. The monster is a dragon, which symbolizes Iran.[112] Behind the soldier a half-length portrait of Saddam Hussein in military attire, with a waving Iraqi flag stand out in the background. On the contrary, in his artwork Alfraji made no reference to Hussein, but pictured private soldiers. The artist refused to include the portrait of the dictator within his representation of the war, and seemed willing to display the true participants of the conflict.

110 Kamyar Abdi, "From Pan-Arabism to Saddam Hussein's cult of personality. Ancient Mesopotamia and Iraqi national ideology," *Journal of Social Archaeology,* vol.18, n.1, 2008, p. 6.

111 Achim Rohde, *State-Society Relations in Baathist Iraq. Facing Dictatorship,* New York: Routledge (2010), p. 141.

112 *Ibidem.* p.142.

The simplicity in material, traits and colours in the *Soldier's Rest* allows the artist to keep the attention of the viewer on the emotions that triggered the artistic production. This artwork is a sketch that Afraji drew on paper using a black fountain pen. Trembling black lines delineate the shape of three soldiers in military attire, crouched with their elbows on their knees and their heads hidden between their arms. The faces of the soldiers are not visible. In this way the artist leaves the audience space to determine whether the resting soldiers are actually sleeping, dreaming, or simply finding shelter within themselves in order to escape the daily trauma of the war.[113] However, what is at stake here is the attitude of the soldiers. Unlike the Baathist troops, Alfraji's soldiers are not super-heroes fiercely attacking the enemy or driving tanks on the trenches. The artist introduced to the audience a version of military life during the conflict that was never dealt with in the war narrative of the regime. As Alfraji explains, in this work he drew «the soldiers' life,» the situation that private soldiers at the military camp were living: «they are very tired. This is the important point in this work.»[114]



Drawing by Wisam Marqus, *Al-Thawra*, 12 December 1985

Another crucial element that emerges from the analysis of the *Soldier's Rest* is the absence of any sign of national emblem on the military uniform. The title and the helmets worn by the three individuals help the viewer understand that the artwork is about soldiers. Yet, apart from the nationality of the author, there is nothing that could tell the audience that these are *Iraqi* soldiers: no banner, and no Eagle of Saladin. The absence of national symbols in the artwork raises two observations. First of all, the lack of reference to the soldiers' nationality in Alfraji's war artworks

113 In our first interview Alfraji stated, «for me a work of art is like an individual. I make it and then leave it to the audience, open to any kind of understanding. I give people the concept, and they can see it the way they please.»

114 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 5th May 2016.

reveals how the artist is operating outside of the Baathist discourse, which, as shown before, was always fostering nationalist sentiments. Secondly, Alfraji's soldiers are just soldiers: the way he pictured the troops seems to keep the focus on the "human" aspect of the military life, instead of their national belonging. As he explains, «every soldier [independently from his nationality] could be in the same situation.»[115] Unlike the Baathist discourse, Sadik Alfraji's narrative does not leave space neither to the demonization of the Iranian enemy, nor to the supremacy of the Iraqi warrior.

THE 2003 US-LED AGGRESSION IN SADIK ALFRAJI'S ARTWORKS

Sadik Alfraji's individual narrative on the 2003 US-led war can be found in the corpus of artworks that he produced in 2007, after the Baathist regime had been overthrown, and its leader, Saddam Hussein, executed.[116] At that time, the artist had not had the chance to return to Iraq yet, and his representation of the conflict was based on the information he gained from TV news channels, such as CNN, BBC and al-Jazeera, and from his family still living in the country.[117] The three works of art, *In the Name of Freedom*, *Made in U.S.A.*, and *Born April 9th*, contain three pivotal themes in Alfraji's individual narrative: condemnation of the alleged motive of the war, criticism on the American conduction during and after the invasion, and the destruction of the country. These three elements are also present in other individual narratives of Iraqis who were living in Iraq when the 2003 war broke out. For example, Alfraji's criticism towards the reasons behind and the conduct of the invasion mirrors the view of Salam Pax. The Baghdadi blogger wonders, «how could "support democracy in Iraq" become to mean "bomb the hell out of Iraq"? why did it end up that democracy won't happen unless we go thru war? Nobody minded an un-democratic Iraq for a very long time, now people have decided to bomb us to democracy?»

115 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden 5th May 2016.

116 Jordi Tejel, Peter Sluglett, Riccardo Bocco and Hamit Bozarslan (eds.) *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges*, Singapore: World Scientific Publishing (2012), p. 455.

117 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th May 2016.

Instead, the artist's depiction of the violent outcome of the US-led aggression and of the monstrosity of the invader echoes the words of Riverbend, who referred to the occupation forces as «raping the country.»[118]

In the Name of Freedom

In the Name of Freedom is composed of two sketches. In the first sketch there is a black human figure lying on the ground. It has no arms, two straight legs, the torso bent upwards, and the head is oriented towards the sky. The complete blackness of the figure does not allow the viewer to discern the facial expression, but the open mouth could refer to a painful cry. Above the legs of the figure the artist pictured a rain of bullets. In the second sketch, Alfraji drew the same black human shape. This time, however, the legs are not visible because the lower part of the body is being devoured by a multiple-head monster similar to a hydra.

The first element that should be taken into account is the title of the artwork and its association to the subject of the sketches. The artist is connecting the term "freedom" with a dying human figure which is bombed, and then eaten by a monster. As he explains, «I gave this title because when America started the war in 2003 they called it *Operation Iraqi Freedom*. They promised the people that they would have freedom. So this war is happening in the name of freedom. They eat Iraq in the name of freedom.» The artist's critique highlights the mendacious character of the US-led coalition's promise of liberation, and puts the limelight on what actually happened to Iraq and its population. Somewhere else he would define the invasion as a «Plague that filled the air in the name of Freedom.»[119] In the artist's view, far from being the antidote to the «oppressive regime that had poisoned our lives for generations,» the American troops brought in Iraq a sort of new disease that began to infect and kill

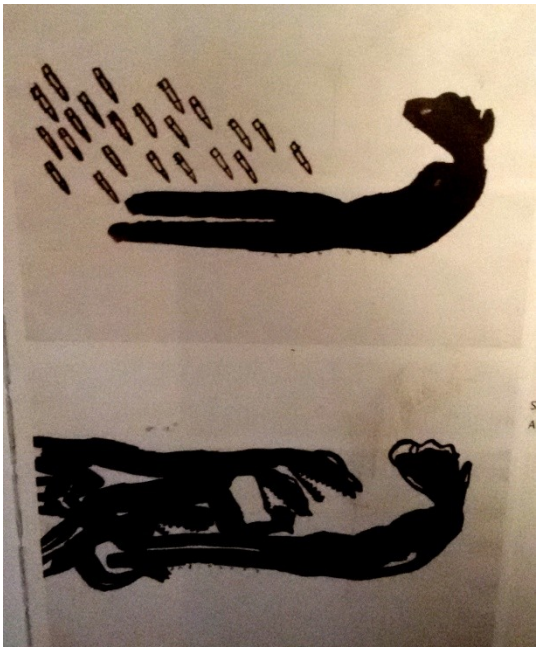
Sketches for *In the Name of Freedom,* 2007, 29.5x21cm. Indian ink on paper

118 Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning,* 11th July 2006, http://riverbendblog.blogspot.nl/

119 Nat Muller ed, *Sadik Kwaish Alfraji*, Rotterdam: Schilt Publishing (2015), p. 145.

Iraq and its population.[120] *In the Name of Freedom* offers to the audience a picture of this disease as the true outcome of the invasion: «this monster represents the army who comes and destroys Iraq.» Furthermore, the multiple heads of the monster reflect the connivance of other international actors: «it was not only America who did this to Iraq, because the rest of the world was silent,» Alfraji stated.

The second element that should be analysed is the black human figure. To better understand what it could represent, we should imagine the black human figure alone. If we consider the title of the work, referring to *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, and the apparently static and stretched position of the legs of the human figure, we could relate it to the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square which was toppled by the US army. It is crucial to observe which meaning the Americans attributed to the falling of the statue, and what it symbolizes for Alfraji.



The moment when the statue of Saddam Hussein was toppled was immediately captured by international journalists and broadcast worldwide as the first symbolic act of victory and "liberation" underwent by the American army. The massive presence of the media was not fortuitous. In fact, the Americans had chosen to drive their tanks to Firdos Square and not elsewhere, because they knew that «a large number of foreign reporters – at least two hundred were [accommodated] at the Palestine Hotel,» which is exactly located in that square.[121] The event of the American entrance in Baghdad was, therefore, carefully orchestrated, and the troops made themselves sure that the global audience was

120 *Ibidem*, p. 144.

121 Peter Maass, "The toppling. How the media inflated a minor moment in a long war," *The Newyorker*, 10th January 2011, accessed 15th July 2016. http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/01/10/the-toppling.

watching. The toppling of the statue was also attentively staged. According to journalist Peter Maass, who was following a US battalion to Baghdad for the *Times Magazine*, it was an American soldier who thought of bringing down the statue, and not the Iraqis. The soldiers were then ordered to provide the Iraqis the necessary instruments, ropes and a sledgehammer, to topple the statue: it was crucial that people worldwide saw the toppling as a moment of triumph and liberation done by the Iraqis.[122] The American presence in the square had to be shown only as support to the Iraqi people, and not as a sign of domination. For instance, when a soldier issued the American flag on the statue's face, he was immediately ordered to remove it, because «an American flag would seem like a symbol of occupation.»[123]

Conversely, in Alfraji's representation, the fallen statue of Saddam Hussein does not symbolize freedom for the Iraqi people. It rather represents the true face of the American "liberation," which is subjugation of the Iraqis to a new master. The toppling of Hussein's statue could be interpreted as representative of the fall of Iraq itself, and, for extension, of its peoples. The black figure, hit by bullets and devoured by a monster, could represent the country, now attacked by a force from which it is unable to defend. The hopelessness of Iraq an Iraqis is rendered by the way Alfraji pictures the upper body of the agonizing figure: with no arms, or with hands tied behind the back, and desperately screaming. Alfraji's narrative focuses on the deception towards the Iraqi people by foreign hands, and condemns the American ambition to bring freedom through war. As he states, «when I watched the fall of Saddam's statue on the TV, at the beginning I was happy, because I thought that Saddam would be gone. But when I saw the American army in the middle of Baghdad, it became very clear to me that that was the way to lose Iraq. It was the starting point of

122 Peter Maass, "The toppling. How the media inflated a minor moment in a long war," *The Newyorker,* 10th January 2011, accessed 15th July 2016. http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/01/10/the-toppling.

123 *Idem.*

the destruction of Iraq. Because this is not the way to make freedom.»[124] Other Iraqi people were welcoming the US intervention, if that meant the fall of Saddam's regime.[125] Yet, as *In the Name of Freedom* shows, what followed the overthrow of the Baathist dictatorship were more tragedies and destruction, rather than salvation.[126] As Alfraji argues, «my fear was legitimate if we consider the disastrous state of the country today; it is in complete chaos and disarray.»[127] Similarly, on the tenth anniversary of the toppling of Saddam's statue, Riverbend commented, «those who didn't know it in 2003 are learning (much too late) that an occupation is *not* the portal to freedom and democracy. The occupiers do not have your best interests at heart.»[128] Along this line, one Iraqi woman interviewed by anthropologist Zainab Saleh voices her disillusion, «we thought we would live a rosy dream after the fall of the regime. We thought that the US, the most advanced country in the world would take care of us. We thought they would bring us democracy.»[129]

Made in USA, 2007, 29.5x21cm. Indian ink on leftover etching

Made in USA

In *Made in USA* Alfraji delineates a black human figure in the act of walking while holding a gun in the left

124 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th May 2016.

125 David Baran, *Vivre la tyrannie et lui survivre. L'Irak en transition*, Paris: Mille et une nuits (2004), p 276.

126 David Baran, *Vivre la tyrannie et lui survivre. L'Irak en transition*, Paris: Mille et une nuits (2004), p. 14.

127 Nat Muller ed, *Sadik Kwaish Alfraji*, Rotterdam: Schilt Publishing (2015), p. 144.

128 Rivebend, *Baghdad Burning*, 9th April 2013, http://riverbendblog.blogspot.nl/

129 Zainab Saleh, "Diminishing Returns: An Anthropological Study of Iraqis in the UK," (Phd. Dissertation, Columbia University, 2011), p. 210.

hand. The artist paints the body with thick and rough lines, and the face is not visible. Differently, the weapon is drawn more precisely, and the audience can understand that it is a pistol. Under the feet of the human the artist wrote “who is next.” Although the artist does not portray any specific symbol or attribute of the national belonging of the human figure, the title specifically refers to the US.

Through this artworks Alfraji criticizes the American foreign policy, in particular its decision to invade Iraq. The phrase “who is next” at the bottom of the canvas is emblematic. I would argue that Alfraji’s words should be read as a condemnation of the American imperialist greed that pushed the Bush administration to cross Iraqi borders and occupy the country. As explained above, the invasion of Iraq had a little to do with the liberation of Iraqis from Saddam Hussein’s yoke. What was really at stake was the control over the country’s oil fields. The protagonist of *Made in U.S.A.* is not an American soldier: the viewer sees no helmet or military attire. As the artist explains, «I was inspired by the Western movies. It is a reference to the culture, to the way of thinking. When I say “made in” it means that there is a mind, a brain behind all these terrible things.»[130] As a result, Alfraji’s criticism spares the American troops who are there, in Iraq, «just for the salary,» and targets the «mind» that intentionally planned the damage of the country.

Although he makes no specific reference to oil, Alfraji’s way of picturing the American invasion and its conduction of the conflict draws him within the Iraqi narrative on the 2003 conflict. Like the artist, other Iraqi people, at least at the beginning of the hostilities did not reverse their hate towards the American soldiers themselves, as much as towards the reason behind their presence on Iraqi soil and what it represented.[131] As Baran reports, no Iraqis believe in the nobility of the

130 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th May 2016.

131 See, for example, Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning. Girl Blog From Iraq*, New York: Feminist Press Edition (2005), p. 14.

American intentions.[132] The US intervention and occupation of the country is only understood as necessary to defend American economic interests in the region, rather than liberating the Iraqi population from the dictatorship.[133] The gun held by the black human figure could be read as embodiment of the military occupation, the exacerbation of violence and the maintenance of disorder in the country, that Iraqi people unanimously interpreted as Washington's strategy to preserve its individualistic profits.[134] What Alfraji's artwork seems to communicate to the audience is that the American way of accomplishing its goal is through war and destruction. Now it is Iraq's turn, "who is next?"

Born April 9th and You Can't Erase the Traces of War

132 David Baran, *Vivre la tyrannie et lui survivre. L'Irak en transition,* Paris: Mille et une nuits (2004), p. 276.

133 *Idem.*

134 *Ibidem,* p. 279.

Born April 9th was part of a group exhibition, titled *Iraqi Artists in Exile*, hosted by the Station Museum of Contemporary Art in Houston, Texas.[135] It consists of eleven channel installations in which a flow of more than forty images of war-torn Iraq is projected on the body of the artist. *You Can't Erase the Traces of War* is a printed version of video stills taken from *Born April 9th*.

*Born April 9th,*2007, video stills

Born April 9th refers to the date when the American troops in Baghdad toppled the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square. By associating the term "born" with the images of war and devastation, Alfraji reiterates how the political death of the dictator, symbolized by the destruction of his icon, has not meant liberation for Iraq. The overthrow of Hussein has not been followed by a re-birth of Iraq and its population. Contrarily, on April 9th, 2003, the foreign intervention has symbolically sealed the birth of a new "disease," and the internecine violence that has, since then, marked the daily life of Iraqis. Therefore, in this artwork "birth" means actually "death and devastation." The latter is represented not only through the images of devastation, but also through the body of the artist itself, which is not displayed as a whole, but fragmented in hands, torso and head.

By projecting war images on his own body, the artist overcomes the physical distance that separates him from Iraq, and positions himself "virtually" within the country. In fact, on the one side, as the title of the second artwork *You Can't Erase the Traces of War* seems to suggest, the marks of the country's destruction become indelible signs on the skin of the artist. «I was sitting in

135 Nat Muller ed, *Sadik Kwaish Alfraji*, Rotterdam: Schilt Publishing (2015), p.150. See also Jordi Tejel, Peter Sluglett, Riccardo Bocco and Hamit Bozarslan (eds.) *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges*, Singapore: World Scientific Publishing (2012), p. 492.

Civil War Series, 2007, 14.5x10cm. Inks, pencils and water colour on paper

front of the TV watching the news and I was feeling as if those images were actually happening in my body. They were everywhere. When I washed my face in the morning I saw those images in my hands and on my face,» Alfraji stated.[136] On the other side, the artist's body, like Iraq, is dismembered and fragmented. This method of representing the war, as a tessellation of images, is not new for Alfraji. For example, he adopted it in *Civil War series*, with blurred and undefined drawings on ripped notebook pages, or in *Diary of a City*, where he pictured a succession of scattered images of feet, hands and broken objects. However, what makes *You Can't Erase the Traces of War* peculiar is the physical presence of the artist within the work of art: it is Alfraji's body, and not anonymous body parts, to be scattered. By so doing, the artist becomes the work of art and embodies its subject: war-torn Iraq. Alfraji's mutilated body is the destruction of the urban landscape of Baghdad. Its fragmentation reflects Iraqi society which has been «broken apart» by sectarian violence.[137]Furthermore, the artist attributes to the body the meaning of his existence. As he told me, «when I deal with the body in my art, I paint and draw existence. So, when the body is dismembered, my existence is also dismembered. The war is far, but my body is there. I feel like as if I am in Baghdad, and all that terrible damage is happening to my body. The pain, death and the war reaches me even if I am in Holland.»[138] With this

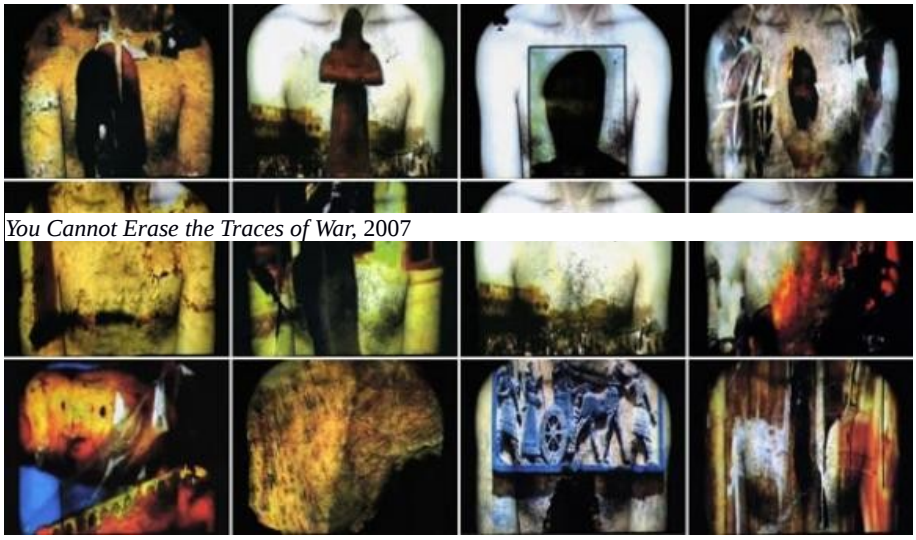
136 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 5th May 2016.

137 Rivebend, *Baghdad Burning,* 26th April 2007, http://riverbendblog.blogspot.nl/

138 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, 22nd February 2016.

representation of the 2003 war, Alfraji “becomes Iraq:” the artist’s self is shredded just like the country.

Alfraji's individual narrative places the artist not only physically within the country, but also in line with other narratives of Iraqis who are subject to daily violence in Iraq. Like Alfraji's individual narrative, the stories of Iraqi people are also imbued with bloody images. As Haytham Bahoora explains, Iraqi war narratives are saturated with scenes «from everyday bombings in Baghdad and their scores of dismembered victims, to brutal sectarian kidnappings whose victims' decapitated bodies litter Baghdad's streets.»[139] However, what connects Alfraji's individual narrative with other Iraqi narratives is the focus on the human body and its use as the site of the multiple forms of violation and mutilation that are devastating Iraq. For instance, the artist's dismembered body reminds Hassan Blasim's *The Market of Stories*, where the author describes the spectacle of human flesh pieces on the ground after the explosion of a car-bomb.[140] Moreover, the fragmented body is also made symbol of post-2003 Iraq in Ahmad Sa'dawi's novel "*Frankenstein in Baghdad*." Here, the Iraqi writer portrays the monster's body as made of «the risen remains of the dismembered Iraqis left behind by blasts of Hellfire and cruise missiles, hotwitzers, grenade launcher and drone strikers.»[141]



You Cannot Erase the Traces of War, 2007

139 Haytham Bahoora, "Writing the Dismembered Nation: The Aesthetics of Horror in Iraqi Narratives of War." *Arab Studies Journal*, vol xxii, n.1, Fall 2015, p. 192.

140 Hassan Blasim, "The Market of Stories," in *The Madman of Freedom Square*, Manchester: Comma Press (2014), p. 60.

141 Ahmad Sa'dawi, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, quoted in Haytham Bahoora "Writing the Dismembered Nation: The Aesthetics of Horror in Iraqi Narratives of War." *Arab Studies Journal*, vol xxii, n.1, Fall 2015, p. 193.

FREEDOM

This chapter explores how Sadik Alfraji articulated the theme of freedom in Iraq before and after the 2003 US-led aggression. The artist's individual narrative, i.e. how he sees and portrays

freedom in Iraq, determines the position he occupies vis-à-vis the master-narrative of Iraqi history. Alfraji's discourse on freedom indicates how the artist fashions his Iraqi identity as an interplay of "inside and outside." For instance, the idea of freedom that Alfraji represented in *Biography of a Head* was opposed to the one promoted by the Baathist public narrative. This shows that his identity was constructed inside of the Iraqi master-narrative, because he was physically in Iraq, while it was shaped outside of Iraq, because Alfraji did not see himself as part of what Iraq was "officially". Conversely, in *Seven Days in Baghdad*, and *Ali's Boat*, the elements of inclusion and exclusion are reversed. Despite Alfraji is living in exile outside of Iraq, he perceives himself as if he was physically within the country and portrays an idea of freedom that is in line with certain individual narratives of Iraqis experiencing the 2003 US-led invasion first-hand.

Alfraji's conceptualization of freedom in Iraq remains constant even though the artworks belong to different time periods. According to the artist «there is no difference between before and after Saddam. It is the same.»[142] As explained in the previous chapter, the overthrow of Hussein's dictatorship has not constituted a tangible change for Iraqi people in terms of freedom, which is still lacking. Consequently, the way Alfraji pictures freedom does not vary from pre- to post-Baathist rule. In all the three artworks, *Biography of a Head*, *Seven Days in Baghdad*, and *Ali's Boat*, Alfraji uses the idea of movement to represent freedom. He, then, portrays body-less heads as a visual device to convey the idea of lack of freedom. In fact, for the artist the body symbolizes movement.[143] What distinguishes the artwork created under Hussein's regime, from the ones produced after its demise is the meaning the artist attributes to the concept of "movement," thus, of freedom.

142 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th May 2016.

143 Nat Muller ed, *Sadik Kwaish Alfraji*, Rotterdam: Schilt Publishing (2015), p. 108.

FREEDOM IN IRAQ IN SADIK ALFRAJI'S INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVE

The artist developed his idea of freedom while living in Iraq under the Baathist regime. As he told me, «I remember I was walking under the Freedom Monument. Imagine this huge monument at the time of dictatorship and war, and all these terrible things. There was absolutely no freedom. So I began to question the meaning of freedom itself.»[144]Through extensive philosophical reading, especially the works of Jean Paul Sartre, which, in his view, «belonged to an era very similar to the times he was experiencing,» he began to conceptualize freedom on two different levels.[145] The first level concerned daily life, the socio-political environment that was surrounding him, where «mechanisms such as the law and the government» were operating.[146] The second level was a «deep and hidden one,» where the physical and psychological mechanisms are dominating every choice that we make.[147] The inability of controlling this second stage of freedom made the artist realize that «freedom is the most beautiful illusion created by man. Deeply we are not free.»[148] In the artist's view the freedom is a condition that no human being is able to achieve, regardless of their nationality or the society in which they are living. «When I think about freedom I do not think just as an Iraqi, but also as a human being,» he affirmed. However, what concerns my analysis here is the first level of freedom, the one that individuals experience in their daily life, and that Alfraji, as other Iraqis, could not accomplish under the Baathist dictatorship.

144 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 16th March 2016.

145 Ipek Ulusoy Akgul, "Existence through the eyes of Sadik Kwaish Alfraji," in *Sadik Alfraji*, Jeddah: Ayyam Gallery (2014)

146 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th May 2016.

147 *Idem.*

148 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden 22nd February 2016.

In the artist's words, «there was absolutely no political freedom in Saddam's Iraq. You cannot say what you like to say. It is the same as every dictatorship.»[149] To better understand this statement, I believe it is useful to consider Alfraji's perception of freedom under Saddam's regime, as a subject citizen, and as an artist. First of all, the concept of freedom propagated by the Baathist official discourse was one of total unity and "massification." There was no space for autonomous and individual narratives, especially if these were challenging or diverging from the "national will" sanctioned by the party. As Alfraji recollects, «they wanted all the people to be the same, and to do the same things.»[150] To go openly against the stream was dangerous, and caused the isolation of the individual who felt excluded from the mass. Secondly, Alfraji's artistic production was under the control of the regime. «I can say I was an artist working within the circumstances of a terrible life. Because there are a lot of things that were conditioning me like the law and the society. Everywhere. I needed to be very careful when I made my art,» he recollects.[151] As Nada Shabout explains, under Saddam Hussein's dictatorship «art was utilized to serve the state. It was considered an essential weapon.»[152] The regime had created a particular role for the individual as an artist, which was encouraged to promote the Baathist ideology. In addition, Alfraji began his artistic career in Baghdad when the hostilities against Iran were underway, and specifically after the 1982 debacle of the Iraqi army had transformed the conflict from invasion to "war of defence." At that time, the regime could not afford to be challenged from its subject citizens, and its control over the population became even stronger.[153] However, Alfraji's artworks demonstrate how the artist resisted

149 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th May 2016.

150 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Amersfoort, 7th February 2016.

151 *Idem.*

152 Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida (2007), p.55

to the regime's «interpellation» and emerged with a discourse of his own.[154] His individual narrative contained a set of meanings that fell outside and reacted against the dominant Baathist discourse «by exposing its ruses in metaphor, challenging it to meet and turn back the claims of a spurious objectivity.»[155] In fact, first of all, Alfraji pictured freedom under Saddam's dictatorship as inexistent. Secondly, by refusing to find freedom within unity with the masses and the common effort towards the fulfilment of the party's interests, the protagonist in Alfraji's work was painted as lonely and isolated.

The second part of the chapter will deal with Alfraji's representation of freedom in post-2003 Iraq. While under Saddam the lack of freedom was meant above all in terms of freedom of expression, now freedom in Iraq is missing also because of lack of security. «After Saddam people lost safety. They lost a safe life, and life itself,» Alfraji told me. In fact, on the one hand, Iraqi people are living under foreign occupiers, who rule Iraq through their "puppets" and prevent the Iraqis to take control of their country.[156] On the other hand, an escalation of violence within society has made the streets of post US-invasion Iraq extremely dangerous. Iraqis are constrained within the walls of their houses for fear of being abducted or killed in a terrorist attack. For example, as Baran reports, even those Iraqis who were not supporters of the regime recognize that

153 *Ibidem*, p.95. Above all, the Baath could not afford to be challenged by the military. The second phase of Sadik Alfraji's artistic production in Iraq is located during the artist's military service. As Blasim underlines, Iraqi soldiers, most of whom were authors of the war stories published on the newspapers, lived in «perpetual fear» of being tried and executed for deviating from the Baathist discourse on the conflict. In Hassan Blasim, "An Army Newspaper," in *The Madman of Freedom Square*, Manchester: Comma Press, (2014) p. 16.

154 Louis Althusser defines «interpellation» the process through which the discursive formation symbolically constitutes individuals as subjects and pushes them to identify with the role and occupy the position established for them. In this case, I use the term «interpellation» as a synonym for the (forced) recruitment of visual artists operated by the Baathist government, that was necessary to give an image to and propagate the Baathist public narrative. In Stuart Hall, "Who needs "identity?," in Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans and Peter Redman (eds.) *Identity: a reader*, London: SAGE Publications, (2000), p. 19.

155 Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, London: Routledge (2002), p.86.

156 Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning*, 26th August 2008, http://riverbendblog.blogspot.nl/

the daily presence of violence and weapons on the street make the current situation worse than the dictatorship. «At least before it was possible to go out on the streets without danger,» they state.[157] Therefore, the deficiency of freedom suffered by the Iraqi people should be understood as a limitation in their physical movement: if they do not want their life to be jeopardized they have no other choice but stay at home.[158] Moreover, the lack of security in present-day Iraqi society results in a restriction of movement not only for Iraqi people in Iraq, but also for those who have left the country before the 2003 hostilities broke out. As Alfraji told me, «after the war started I wanted to go back to Iraq, but not immediately because I did not want to see Baghdad occupied by the American army. I was hoping that it would last just a few months and then the streets would be shining again, and no war, but peace and everyone happy. But I was wrong. After a few months the signs of the civil war started and it became very difficult to go.»[159]

Biography of a Head

رأس مهمل أنا

"I am a neglected Head"

From *Biography of a Head*, Baghdad 1985

Biography of a Head, was initially born in the mind of the artist as a series of linocuts accompanied by a written story. Probably due to its content, the artist did not have the chance to exhibit it in

157 David Baran, *Vivre la tyrannie et lui survivre. L'Irak en transition*, Paris: Mille et une nuits (2004), p. 277.

158 The impossibility of free and safe movement is also fictionally dealt with by other Iraqi artists still living in the country. For example, in Oday Rasheed's movie, *Underexposure*, Maysoon, the protagonist's wife says «I am imprisoned in our home. I barely look outside of the window. I just hear the rockets and bullets. I am tired.» In *Underexposure*, directed by Oday Rasheed, Iraq and Germany, 2005.

159 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th May 2016.

Baghdad, but it was presented for the first time in Beirut in 2014.[160] «I had to be very careful,» he remembers, «I had the feeling that it could be a risk to show it because it is about freedom. I said to myself "Take the risk. It is in the end poetry and maybe it will survive." But the director of the Cinema and Theatre Bureau refused to exhibit it.»[161]

Biography of a Head, as evidenced by the title, tells the story of a life, and, specifically, the life of the artist. «I would like to say that this head was nothing but me,» Alfraji stated.[162] In order to grasp the content of Alfraji's individual narrative opposed to the dominant Baathist discourse, I will divide my analysis according to four different elements I observed in the artwork: the setting, the head, the insects, and the body.

160 *Idem.*

161 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 22nd February 2016.

162 Nat Muller ed, *Sadik Kwaish Alfraji*, Rotterdam: Schilt Publishing (2015), p. 72.

The setting

The animation begins in a quasi-mythological style: «After the earth cooled down…the mountain, valleys and rivers took form.. from the dust a living creature emerged, one which sees, hears, smells, and speaks… and it became a head. It was a huge head covered with rust and soot.» The scene is set in a desert. The simplicity of the image, with black and white colour and very few details of the background landscape, such as the ground, the sky and the moon, keep the attention of the viewer focused on the head. The head, always present in the images, is sometimes occupying the whole visual space, and other times it is only partially visible. Although this artwork tells the story of the artist under Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, within the drawings there are no symbolic references to Iraq or Baghdad. As Alfraji explains, the freedom in this artwork should be understood in both political and philosophical, or universal, terms. «When I was there in Iraq I was living that situation [of lack of freedom under the dictatorial rule]. But the text itself does not have any specific reference of place and time because it is a kind of universe. It could be anywhere and anytime,» he recollects.[163] However, I would argue that the missing reference to a specific time or place is not only due to a "universal" idea of freedom as inexistent. The «terrible circumstances» in which Alfraji was working, under a dictatorship and in time of war, were also crucial to shape the idea of freedom conveyed in *Biography of a Head*.[164] Indeed, as the artist stated, the purpose of the artwork was to «visually document my stand against the authorities and to

Biography of a Head, 2014, video stills.

163 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 5th May 2016.

164 *Idem.*

express the lack of freedom, which we never experienced or practiced in Iraq under dictatorial rule.»[165]

Moreover, Alfraji's individual narrative shows how the artist was resisting the mainstream Baathist discourse. Yet, due to the government's censorship, and for reasons of safety, he could not speak straightforwardly. When he created *Biography of a Head*, in 1985, Iraq was in the second phase of the conflict against Iran. At that time, the already strict control over the population had been intensified, since the government could not afford dissent during the war period. Consequently, the Iraqis' already limited freedom had been further reduced, and their vulnerability vis-à-vis the authorities increased. According to Sassoon, especially during the Iran-Iraq war, «crimes could be committed in deeds, words or thought,» and «influencing the population against the conduct of the party» was met with harsh punishment.[166] Thus, Alfraji's setting of *Biography of a Head* in an unspecified time and place could be interpreted as the artist's need to use a «disguise for making the hidden transcript, [his individual narrative,] speak out against the powerful.»[167] As he recollects, «I was aware of the seriousness of my actions [in challenging the authorities], but I found that the story of that head...best conveyed my despair over freedom.»[168]

The head

«I am a neglected head,» the head states at the beginning of the animation. As the artist explained, «nobody cared about the head. No God, no angels, nothing. Someone brought him to the world and left him alone.» Throughout the development of the animation, the head's only

165 Nat Muller ed, *Sadik Kwaish Alfraji*, Rotterdam: Schilt Publishing (2015), p.55.

166 Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's Baath Party. Inside an Authoritarian Regime*, New York: Cambridge University Press (2012), pp. 216- 219.

167 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, Yale University Press (1990), p. 152

168 Nat Muller ed, *Sadik Kwaish Alfraji*, Rotterdam: Schilt Publishing (2015), p. 108

interaction is with small insects and earth worms that are constantly stinging and irritating it. There is nothing that intervenes to help the head pushing away the pestering animals; the head can only rely on its own strength. «It could only remove them in front of its nose, mouth or face.. he would blow them with his breath, away to the other side of the earth,» the story goes on. Nevertheless, no matter how hard the head tries to repel the insects, they inevitably come back to sting it again. The loneliness and helplessness of the head mirrors the same solitude and powerlessness felt by the artist when he was living under Hussein's dictatorship. On the one side, the helplessness of the head in fighting the insects reflects Alfraji's impossibility to actively challenge the regime's discourse and to autonomously realize himself as an artist. As he told me, he left the country because «the vision I had and my dreams could never be accomplished. So I had to leave to save my life and to pursue my goals.» On the other side, Alfraji's loneliness is the outcome of his positioning "outside of the crowd." According to Samir al-Khalil the high level of terror diffused by the government and its capillary system of control over the population had made «people…afraid of what their neighbours might say, and parents afraid of speaking in front of their children.»[169] No one dared to openly oppose the regime. As a result, «seeing others obey in daily life made each other feel isolated in his/her unbelief [in the regime's mystifications] and thus helpless.»[170] Similarly, Alfraji recollects, «I felt like a stranger when I faced the thinking of the people. When I watched the TV or listened to the radio, when I faced all this propaganda that was around me everywhere.»[171]

The insects

Throughout the animation the head tries to find different solutions to repel the harassing insects. «I would put my jaws downwards and my head backwards, maybe the ground would save

169 Samir al-Khalil, *The Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq,* University of California Press (1989), p.275

170 Pierre Darle, *Saddam Hussein maitre des mots. Du langage de la tyrannie à la tyrannie du langage.* Paris: L'Harmattan (2003) p.40.

171 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, 24th May 2016.

me,» it thinks. But the ground is filled with worms, that similarly to the insects on the surface of the ground, are pestering the head. As soon as it realizes that there is no solution on earth to its suffering, the «suffocating» head starts to roll over towards the sea. Once there, it thinks, «this water will be my arms and legs and I shall float on its algae.» But the head has no body to help it float, and slowly begins to sink, «burdened with its permanent worries.»

This dramatic end of the story shows how in Baathist Iraq it was not possible to escape the control of the authorities «which filled the place like flies.»[172] According to Hamit Bozarslan, «*la construction du pouvoir baathiste s'inscrit dans le registre de la « société secrète opérant a grand jour », et dans celui d'une bureaucratie meurtrière froide, distante, capable d' exercer une coercition a la fois massive et totalement arbitraire.*»[173] As seen before, the hold on subject citizens was not only exercised through the official organs of the regime, but also through the so-called "civil spies," who helped keeping control over the public and spread fear of being denounced by anyone at any moment.[174] Moreover, the feeling of being under constant surveillance was also increased by the regime's massive occupation of the visual landscape, and by the ubiquitous character of its leader. As Sluglett explains, «in Baghdad, Saddam Hussein's picture has been visible on walls and on public buildings…he can be heard and seen nightly on Baghdad radio and television, and his speeches fill the pages of *al-Thawra* and *al-Jumhuriyya.*»[175] Although there is no explicit reference to Hussein, Alfraji's *Biography of a Head* seems to portray this Orwellian

172 Nat Muller ed, *Sadik Kwaish Alfraji*, Rotterdam: Schilt Publishing (2015), p. 108.

173 Hamit Bozarslan, "Pouvoir et Violence Dans L'Irak de Saddam Hussein," in Hosham Dawod and Hamit Bozarslan (eds.) *La Société Irakienne. Communautés, Pouvoirs et violences,* Paris : Karthala (2003), p.40.

174 Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's Baath Party. Inside an Authoritarian Regime,* New York: Cambridge University Press (2012), p. 197.

175 Marion Farouk-Sluglett, Peter Sluglett and Joe Stork, "Not Quite Armageddon: Impact of the War on Iraq," *MERIP Reports,* n. 125/126, The Strange War in the Gulf, July – September 1984, p. 24.

atmosphere that imbued Baathist Iraq.[176] In fact, on the one hand, the insects and earthworms that are relentlessly stinging and crawling on the head's face could represent the omnipresence of the regime within society. On the other hand, the head's inability to reject the insects could symbolize the artist's impossibility to escape the total control of the government.

176 David Baran, *Vivre la tyrannie et lui survivre. L'Irak en transition*, Paris: Mille et une nuits (2004), p. 113.

The body

Biography of a Head, 2014, video stills.

What the head likes the most is to lay on its ear and stare at the sky, dreaming to have a body. «My body… my crystal body made of sunrays,» it states. In *Biography of a Head* the body was pictured as a means to gain freedom, and, in a wider sense, as a symbol of freedom itself.[177] As Alfraji explains, «the body is a good tool to live in this world. Somehow it is a weapon that can protect you. If you don't have this body then you are very alone and anything can hurt you. When you have this tool to defend yourself, this tool will help you to be free.» In this artwork the artist used the concept of movement to express the freedom that the head can accomplish with the body. In fact, when the head dreams of its body, its attention is focused on the legs with which it can stand from the ground and run away. The head needs a body to move freely, far from the insects. It needs hands «to put an end to this dilemma of endless stinginess,» and legs «separating him from the ground.» With the body the head can raise from the ground «like a bird.»[178]

One could object that actually in the end the head manages to move and get away from the small insects and earthworms. Nonetheless, the free movement that the artist has in his mind is different from the one that the head manages to accomplish. «The final movement is very slow and

177 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Amersfoort, 7th February 2016.

178 Here, the combination between the terms «body» and «bird» further conveys Alfraji's idea of freedom as movement. In fact, the body can make the head raise from the ground and fly away like a bird. Moreover, during one of our conversations, Alfraji stated that in other artworks, too, he used the bird as symbol of freedom.

hard. The movement the head was seeking is more smooth and more fast.»[179] I argue that the difference between the two kinds of movement reflects the distinction between passive resistance and actual political freedom. In fact, on the one hand, when Alfraji was in Iraq he was aware of his lack of freedom as a subject citizen, and above all as an artist. He was also conscious of the impossibility to do anything concrete to change the situation, because it was highly dangerous to openly oppose the regime. As a result, he created a narrative that was divergent from the Baathist official discourse, in the sense that he portrayed a different view of Iraqi society. Yet, he did not explicitly criticize the dictatorship: in *Biography of a Head* there is no mention to Baghdad, Saddam Hussein or his capillary channel of surveillance. Therefore, the artist was actually «remaining an autonomous and reflective subject,» and was operating outside of the dominant discourse. [180] Nonetheless, Alfraji's narrative had to be hidden and disguised. Consequently, his movement remained "slow" and limited.

179 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 5th May 2016.

180 Jordi Tejel, Peter Sluglett, Riccardo Bocco and Hamit Bozarslan (eds.) *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges,* Singapore: World Scientific Publishing (2012), p. 404.

On the other hand, the «smooth and fast» movement allowed by the body mirrors the possibility for Alfraji to fully accomplish his goals and vision and to freely express himself through his artistic production. The body and its liberating power remain a dream throughout the story. This means that not only the movement and freedom desired by the head are absent, but also that they are impossible to achieve. By extension, the failure of the head to fulfil its dream and be liberated from its agony could represent Alfraji's helplessness and inability to reach freedom in Iraq under the dictatorship. The narrative contained in this artwork shows not only how Alfraji's idea of freedom falls outside the Baathist dominant discourse, since the artist pictures liberty as autonomy and independence, while the government's public narrative meant freedom as unity and homogenisation. By portraying freedom as a «dream doomed to failure» the artist was also countering the official mainstream discourse by negating the existence of freedom and its possible achievement in the future. In fact, the only solution for the head to escape the harassment is to roll towards the sea. Similarly Alfraji left Iraq. In the end both the head and Alfraji managed to find a kind of freedom, for which, nonetheless, they had to pay a huge price. Indeed, the head loses its life, while Alfraji had to leave his homeland.

Biography of a Head, 2014, video stills.

Seven Days in Baghdad

Seven Days in Baghdad is a short video in which images of present-day Baghdad are projected onto Alfraji's face. The artist created this artwork in 2011 using his own footage he obtained during one visit in Baghdad in 2009. The first encounter with his hometown after more than twenty years of exile was a shocking experience for the artist. «I was feverishly taking photos

and shooting short videos…I felt that what I saw and experienced was Baghdad, but not the Baghdad I used to know.»[181] In fact, the city is unrecognizable and destroyed by the war.

181 Nat Muller ed, *Sadik Kwaish Alfraji*, Rotterdam: Schilt Publishing (2015), p. 108.

I would argue that unlike *Born April 9th* and *You Can't Erase the Traces of the War*, in this artwork the artist's body-less head is not representing the dismemberment of the country. Indeed, if Alfraji conceives the body as the site of movement, then the artist's missing body could be understood as his inability of moving. While in *Biography of a Head* the desired movement was "outward" (the head needed a body to escape, "get out of," the authorities' restrictions), in *Seven Days in Baghdad* the movement should be considered as "inward", which means return to Iraq. In my view, the absence of the body suggests the impossibility for Alfraji to return to Baghdad. In *Seven Days in Baghdad* the body/freedom that the artist is lacking is not due to an authoritarian regime, but to the physical destruction of the country and the escalation of sectarian violence that has followed the US-led invasion. Iraq can not be Alfraji's house any longer: «the meaning of home has changed. Home is where I feel safe, where I can work and create art, where my children can grow up,» he explained.[182] As a result, the «crystal body made of sunrays» coveted by the head to escape the oppression of the dictatorship, now becomes a «very simple dream that was somewhat possible. A dream that one day I will go back to Iraq and Iraq will be normal.»[183]

182 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th March 2016.

183 Rima Chahrour, *Artist in Focus: Sadik Alfraji*, http://intheframe.org/artists_info/artists-in-focus/

Seven Days in Baghdad, 2009, digital sketch.

The shocking experience the artist lived when he visited his hometown was not only due to the destruction of Baghdad's urban landscape, which transfigured the city, but also to the realization that even the dream to return had been destroyed. As the artist explained, «This so called 'liberation' influenced me from all aspects, and not just my artwork. I had a very simple dream that was somewhat possible. The date of 9th April, 2003 marks the birth of the death of this dream. America killed this dream. This was the greatest emotional earthquake within me.»[184] Indeed, besides the foreign presence on Iraqi soil, what makes the return to the city impossible is the high diffusion of violence within Iraqi society that has followed the beginning of the civil war. «We are talking about Baghdad, which is different every day. Every day there is a bomb, and the war, and a lot of damage…there are a lot of different groups of power that can come and kill you anytime if you say something they don't like,» Alfraji stated.[185]

The artist's discourse on the freedom Iraq and its population lost in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion echoes other Iraqis' individual narratives. Their stories, too, revolve around the absence of security and disrespect of human rights. Their voices tell how life in Iraq has become

184 *Idem.*

185 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th May 2016.

precarious and vulnerable. For example, writer Jabar al-Zaydi said, «there is no life in Iraq that one stays to live… There is no security, no respect of human rights, no jobs, no gas, no electricity, no one to listen to your complaints and no vision for what's going to happen tomorrow or even a minute later.»[186] There is no chance for a safe life in Iraq: people are either forced to stay within their houses, or compelled to leave the country for their own survival.[187] Consequently, Alfraji's representation of himself as a body-less head reflects how freedom of movement has become unattainable in Iraq. Just as Iraqis are either held within their house, or forced to leave their land, the artist is unable to stably return to Baghdad. Moreover, the juxtaposition between the static head of the artist, which is fixed in the middle of the black background, and the relentless succession of images on his face, further emphasizes the absence of freedom of movement.

Ali's Boat

Ali's Boat is a production, composed of one animation and three artist's diaries, that Alfraji created in 2014. The artist got the inspiration from a letter his eleven years old nephew Ali gave him when he visited Baghdad in 2009. In the envelop he found a drawing of a «narrow boat, which seemed a bit shoddy and decayed,» and a sentence that Ali had written: «I wish my letter takes me to you.»[188] What the artist found within the letter was the dream of the young boy to leave his country, which is destroyed by the war and in complete chaos. As seen before, like Ali, many other Iraqis have seen themselves forced to abandon Iraq due to the escalating level of violence and lack of security. Taken from despair, untold number of Iraqis have undertaken a dangerous and strenuous journey towards the Jordanian border. Maki al-Nazzal, an Iraqi who fled Iraq in 2006, reported to the weekly *Al Ahram*, of the thousands of Iraqis who attempt to reach Jordan through a

186 Nadje al-Ali and Deborah al-Najjar, *We Are Iraqis. Aesthetics and Politics in a Time of War,* New York: Syracuse University Press, (2013), p. 165.

187 *Ibidem,* p. 161.

188 Nat Muller ed, *Sadik Kwaish Alfraji*, Rotterdam: Schilt Publishing (2015), p. 156.

«600-kilometer desert road…where [they can be caught] by a hotspot of fierce fighting between US troops and insurgents.»[189] As Riverbend wrote, «we are choosing to leave because the other option is simply a continuation of what has been a long nightmare: stay and wait and try to survive.»[190] Similarly, Mohammed, an Iraqi man interviewed by a Guardian's journalist, declared, «all I can think is how to get out of here. Our lives are over in Baghdad.»[191] *Ali's Boat* animation and artist's diary revolve around the young boy's desire to escape Iraq, and his impossibility to achieve this goal.

189 Maki Al Nazzal, quoted in Nadje al-Ali and Deborah al-Najjar, *We Are Iraqis. Aesthetics and Politics in a Time of War*, New York: Syracuse University Press, (2013), p. 163.

190 Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning*, 27th April 2007, http://riverbendblog.blogspot.nl/

191 Justin Marozzi, "Baghdad: the psychological toll of being the world's most attacked city," *The Guardian* 20th June 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/jun/20/baghdad-iraq-psychological-toll-worlds-most-attacked-city

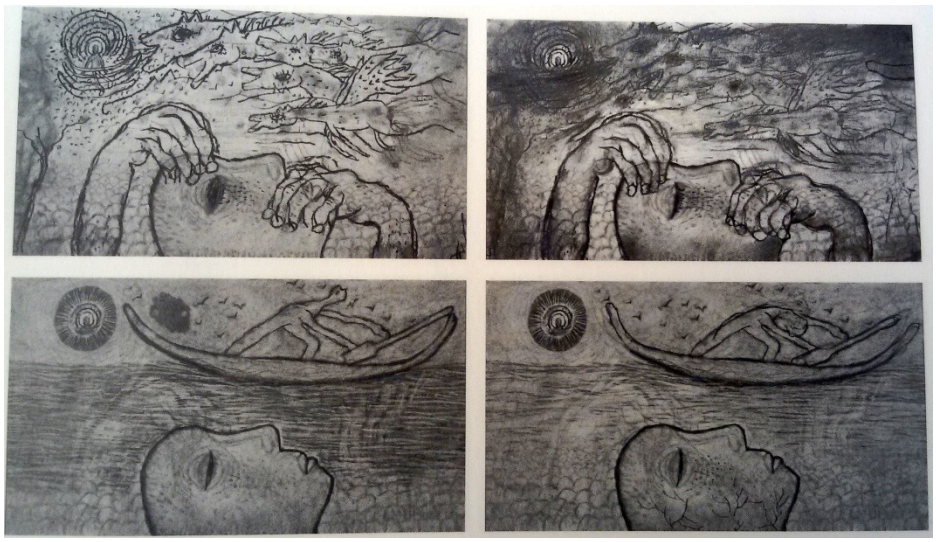
Ali's boat tells the story of an eleven years old boy. To better involve the audience and make them understand how the war is perceived by a child, the artist adopted a language that belongs to the world of childhood. In fact, Alfraji did not draw any explicit sign of the war: neither the animation nor the diary show images of bombs exploding or bleeding corpses. Instead, the dangers of Iraqi society are pictured as if they were seen through the eyes of a boy. For example, since the outset of the story Ali has a sad expression on his face, and in most of the images of the animation and the diaries he is crying. At the beginning of the animation a flock of flying creatures appears in the sky. They are similar to horses and seem to spit black flames. As soon as the evil horses fly above Ali's head, the boy covers his mouth and his forehead with his hands. Ali's hands are the only body parts that Alfraji details. As aforementioned, in *Embroilment* and in Alfraji's self-portraits, the artist pictured the hands in this precise gesture of covering the face as a sign of terror. As a result, the flying horses could symbolize airplanes releasing bombs over Baghdad.

Frame drawings for *Ali's Boat* animation, 2015. Charcoal on paper

Similarly, in one page of *Ali's Boat Diary 3*, Alfraji drew Ali crying while an airplane is flying over him. In the same page, the artist imagines Ali saying «My name is Ali and I want to leave Iraq.»

Ali's Boat Diary 3, 2014, 14x10cm. Graphite pencil on notebook paper.

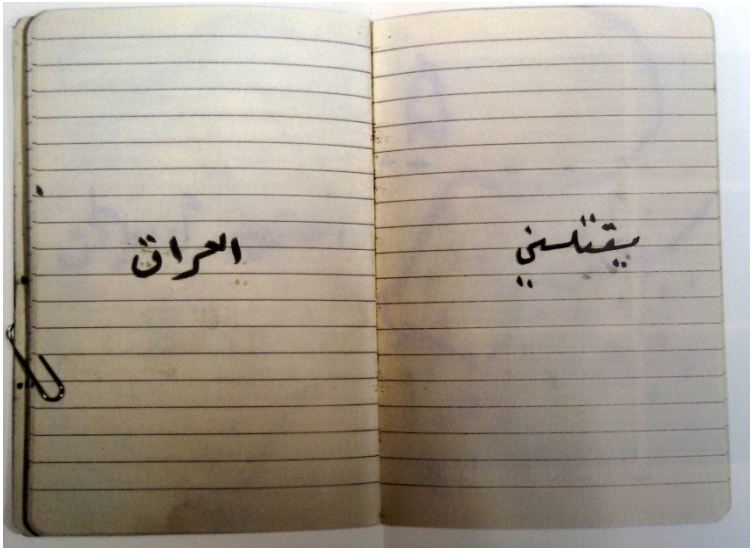
The individual narrative embodied in *Ali's Boat* is very much similar to the one contained in *Biography of a Head*. *Biography* as the artist explains, is still a good real representation of the current situation in Iraq as if nothing has changed over the years.[192] In addition, the two artworks also share some common visual elements. First of all, in both *Biography* and *Ali's Boat* the artist portrayed freedom in terms of freedom of movement, and adopted the same symbolism to represent its absence. In fact, as in *Biography,* in *Ali's Boat*, too, Alfraji constantly pictured Ali as a body-less head. At the beginning of the animation a black line traces the profile of the young boy's face, which remains static at the bottom of the screen until the end. Similarly, in the diaries, Ali's body is never profiled. Like in *Biography,* the only moments in which the body of the boy appears



192 Nat Muller ed, *Sadik Kwaish Alfraji*, Rotterdam: Schilt Publishing (2015), p. 108.

Ali's Boat Diary 3, 2014, 14x10cm. Graphite pencil on notebook paper.

is when he dreams. Here, Alfraji paints Ali rowing on a boat and flying away from the country. Secondly, both Ali and the head are relentlessly harassed by external agents. In the head's case the agony comes from the small insects and earthworms that represent the regime's authorities and "civil spies." In Ali's case the torment comes from the city of Baghdad and the violence widespread in Iraqi society. In the second half of *Ali's Boat* animation, the artist pictures a series of buildings around Ali's head. These buildings, that are eventually almost burying the boy's head, could represent Baghdad. In addition, in one of the diaries Ali plainly states, «Iraq is killing me.» Third, both Ali and the head are dreaming of something that could grant them freedom: a boat, in the child's case, and a body, for the head. What distinguishes Ali from the head is the kind of liberty they are longing for. Ali desires a safe place. In fact, towards the end of the animation, while the young boy is dreaming of himself on the boat, a small house in a quiet open field surrounded by palm trees appears on his face. As Alfraji told me, «that house represents any dream house.» Differently, the head is dreaming of a body that could help it run away from the stinging insects. Finally, like the head, Ali is also unable to accomplish his dream. In the end his boat becomes a bird and flies away, while the child wakes up and comes back to reality.



The narrative contained in *Ali's Boat* can be considered as another instance of Alfraji shaping his identity with reference to the master-narrative of Iraqi contemporary history. In fact, the artist appropriated Ali's narrative and transformed it in his own individual narrative. As he told me, in the diary «it is me speaking actually. I am imagining that Ali is saying this, but actually I am saying it. This is also Sadik.» The artist's personal story is very close to Ali's experience. On the

one hand, Ali's boat also belonged to Alfraji's dreams in Baathist Iraq: «a boat that I could take to leave my family and my homeland…and escape the misery.»[193] On the other hand, the artist is still dreaming of a boat to carry him back to Iraq where, as explained above, he is unable to stably return.[194]

193 Nat Muller ed, *Sadik Kwaish Alfraji*, Rotterdam: Schilt Publishing (2015), p. 156.

194 *Idem.*

My Passport Photo, 2005, 120x120cm. Lambda print.

BELONGING

This chapter will explore how Alfraji understands his sense of belonging to Iraq, both under Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, and after the US-led invasion, and represents it in his artworks. My analysis will focus on the effects of the 2003 war upon the artist's identity. My contention is that, because of the destruction of Iraq by the hands of foreign invaders and the civil war, the artist has re-considered and re-fashioned his

Iraqi-ness. In turn, this "new" sense of belonging to Iraq has also influenced Alfraji's idea of return to his homeland, which the artist, now, deems unattainable.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF IRAQ

The damage that the 2003 conflict has provoked to the urban landscape of Baghdad has made it impossible for the artist to recognize the city as his birthplace. As he recollects, during his week-long visit to Baghdad in 2009, «I was looking in every corner of the city I had left twenty years ago, but I failed to find it. What I found were the remains, mutilated and ravaged by wars, death, starvation and time.»[195] This inability to understand what Iraq has become makes the artist question his belonging to his homeland. «I can't say that I am a hundred per cent Iraqi, because Iraq has changed. It doesn't exist anymore.»[196] The effect of the country's disappearance upon Alfraji's identity is visually rendered, for example, in *My Passport Photo*, whereby the artist pictures a grid with a repetition of his photographic portrait, whose face has been deleted by a black stain. The association of the term "passport," which is something that identifies the citizenship of a person, with the erasure of Alfraji's face, seems to suggest that his Iraqi identity, too, has been deleted.

However, the fact that the artist does not feel to belong to the Iraq he sees "out there", does not mean that he is not Iraqi at all. In fact, Alfraji understands his Iraqi-ness not in reference to the present, but in reference to the past. «I can say I am very Iraqi, but the Iraq I mean is the Iraq I know, not the one out there. The Iraq I remember and I hold inside of me in my memories.»[197] Therefore, in order to make sense of his own identity as an Iraqi, the artist has to resort to his memories. For Alfraji Iraq has shifted from the sphere of reality into his "inner" realm: in his view Iraq exists, but it exists in a different time (in the past) and place (inside of him).

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195 Nat Muller ed, *Sadik Kwaish Alfraji*, Rotterdam: Schilt Publishing (2015), p. 144.

196 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th March 2016.

197 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden 24th March 2016.

The transition of Iraq to a different place and time influences not only Alfraji's sense of belonging to the country, but it also makes the exiled artist's return to his homeland unattainable. Alfraji can not return to "his" Iraq because it no longer exists. Return to Iraq today would mean go to a country that is only geographically and politically considered Iraq, but that is not understood as Iraq by the artist. As Madawi al-Rasheed argues, «the discourse relating return almost always entails a process whereby the construction of the homeland takes shape and content. The meaning [the exile] ascribes to the territory is constructed. Consequently, the reference to the "homeland"… is not only to a physical location from which [he] claims to have come, but the whole concept is endowed with symbolism.»[198] The impossibility to actually return to what he considers Iraq is portrayed in the series *Elegy of Malik ibn al-Rayb*. Here, the artist gives a visual interpretation of al-Rayb's poem, which revolves around the pain of being far from the motherland and the longing to return. Moreover, although Alfraji is not physically present within the artwork, he recognizes himself and his experience in the words of the poet.[199]

The way Alfraji describes the disappearance of Iraq and its effects on his sense of belonging within his individual narrative reveals how his identity is framed within the master-narrative of contemporary Iraqi history. The disappearance of the country due to the war's devastation has made it impossible for the artist to recognize his land. Consequently, Alfraji has questioned and re-fashioned his Iraqi-ness, which is now grounded on the memories he has of the country. Additionally, the artist's discourse shares some elements with other individual narratives of Iraqis who directly lived the US-led invasion and its aftermath. It seems that for both Alfraji and Iraqi people still residing in Iraq, the country has shifted from the realm of reality to the realm of memory. For example, in Oday Rasheed's *Underexposure*, the protagonist says «I've lost Baghdad

198 Madawi Al- Rasheed, "The Myth of Return: Iraqi Arab and Assyrian Refugees in London," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol.7, No.2/3, 1994, p. 211.

199 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th March 2016.

from my hands. Baghdad is not a city. It is an idea divided by two rivers. I go back to what *I know* about Baghdad.»[200] This is a further evidence of the artist constructing and representing his identity as an interplay of "inside and outside." Despite Alfraji is physically outside Iraq, he places himself virtually within the country and constructs his individual narrative in line with the stories of other Iraqis who lived the demise of Saddam's dictatorship and its aftermath directly.

SADIK ALFRAJI'S IRAQ

According to Alfraji, «memory is something we live with every day. But how we deal with memories, and the meaning memories have for us, this is different.»[201] As a result, Alfraji is not merely locating his belonging to Iraq in any kind of memory he has of the country. Rather, the artist's belonging to Iraq should be understood with reference to a *specific* past. The precise selection of memories the artist operates is pictured within his artistic production. Visually, the distinction of memories and the diverse values they have for Alfraji is evidenced by the way he pictures himself according to the memory of Iraq he is depicting. When Alfraji portrays himself with reference to the Iraq he felt he was belonging to, the viewer can clearly see his body and his facial features. Conversely, in the artworks dealing with the Iraq he could not identify with, his body becomes a black shadow.

Unlike what has been shown in the previous chapters, the individual narrative that Alfraji constructs with his memories may not be perceived as a counter-discourse opposed to the Baathist narrative. Yet, the narrative that emerges from these artworks, which is how Alfraji pictures himself in relation to his memories, shows how the artist understands his Iraqi identity, and positions himself, vis-à-vis Baathist Iraq. As Paul Gilroy explains, «why we remember a place and how [are] important questions for how we construct the places themselves and ourselves as subjects.»[202] Therefore, the lack belonging to the memories related to the regime, expressed by making his body

200 *Underexposure*, directed by Oday Rasheed, Iraq and Germany, 2005. My emphasis.

201 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 16th March 2016.

a shadow, should be seen as a further instance of the artist positioning himself outside of the Baathist public narrative.

ID Sketch

ID Sketch is a series composed of three different sketches. Each of them has a text printed on a white page which is scattered with huge spots of black Indian ink. The artist, then, completed the artwork with his name and the year of creation.

When I first approached this artwork, my immediate instinct was to try to understand which text had been covered by the ink. I was able to read only a few lines in the first sketch, and I found out that it was the speech that Iraqi writer and art critic May Muzaffar gave when renown Iraqi artist Ismail Fattah passed away.[203] I thought that the meaning of the work was somehow related to this speech, and, perhaps, to the meaning that the death of one of the pillars of Iraqi contemporary art had for the artist.[204] However, as Alfraji explained, this work «is not about a specific person, Ismail or any other. It is just a text. It doesn't matter which one. The important thing is that it is unreadable.»[205] Therefore, the artist did not choose the text in this artwork because of the meaning it contains, but because of the meaning he gives to the concept of "text". In *ID Sketch* the text symbolizes the idea of identity. To better understand the reason behind Alfraji's decision to represent identity through the visual element of the text, it is necessary to linger on the artist's philosophic idea of identity, which has been deeply influenced by the existentialist

202 Michael Rossington and Anne Withehead (eds), *Theories of Memory: a Reader*, Edinburgh: University Press (2007), p. 274.

203 Review, Virtual Gallery, http://virtualgallery.birzeit.edu/p/ps?url=exhibition/ismailfattah/review

204 Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida (2007), p.122.

205 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 16th March 2016.

thought.[206] According to the existentialists, in order to make sense of one's identity the individual has to collect his memories and experiences, and knit them together to create a narrative of the self, that is a story, or, by extension, a text.[207] However, what concerns my analysis is the way the text is presented, and what it symbolizes vis-à-vis Alfraji's sense of belonging to Iraq.

The text is visible, in the sense that the viewer can see that there is a text in the artwork, yet it is blurred and hardly decipherable. This could mean that the artist is not devoid of identity, but that he is not able to understand it, therefore to picture it. The fact that the artist possesses an identity, yet he is incapable of giving it a clear shape is also evidenced by the presence of his name and the date of creation: "Sadik 2006." Indeed, unlike the lines of the text that are unreadable, the name and the date are clearly distinguishable. It seems as if Alfraji can only picture his first name because it is the only element of his identity that he is certain of. As a result, one might understand the message behind this artwork as the artist affirming, «I know I am Sadik, but I am not able to picture what this means.»

ID Sketch, 2006, 29.5x21cm. Indian ink on printed paper.

According to Alfraji, the difficulty he encounters in the definition of his identity is due to his experience as an exile. As he told me during one of our interviews, «I lived the experience of the exile twice. I left first to Jordan, and then to Holland. When you leave your country and meet another culture, another land, another language, your identity becomes much richer. At the same time it becomes unclear and very complicated to define. It is something like a mixed identity with

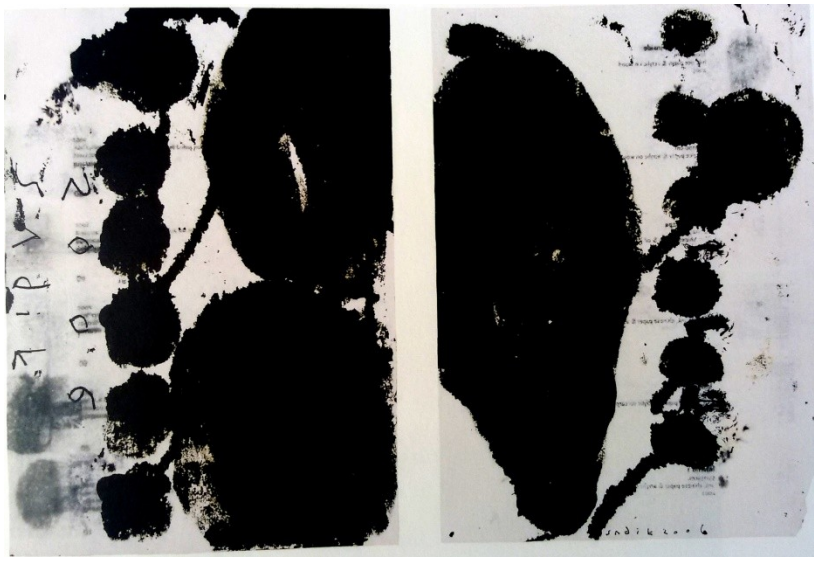
206 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 16th March 2016.

207 Lior Levy, "Reflection Memory and Selfhood in Jean-Paul Sartre's Early Philosophy", *Sartre Studies International*, Vol.19, Issue 2, 2013, p. 104.

ID Sketch, 2006, 29.5x21cm. Indian ink on printed paper.

multiple layers.»[208] However, I would argue that in *ID Sketch* Alfraji is not picturing his identity as something multi-layered. Indeed, if, as mentioned above, we take the text as the visual representation of Alfraji's identity, then the multiple facets that make up the artist's identity should be represented as a stratification of texts. Yet, in *ID Sketch* instead of stratifying different texts, the artist is partially covering *one single* text. In my view, this representation shows that Alfraji's incapability of understanding his identity is not due to the complexity in grasping its several components, being it Iraqi or Dutch. Contrarily, the difficulty of making sense of his own identity lays in the erasure of one single text, that could symbolize Alfraji's Iraqi-ness.

If we take the text as Alfraji's Iraqi identity, the erasure of the page could symbolize the artist's inability to perceive his belonging to present-day Iraq. As he told me, «it doesn't matter where I am now. Even if I go back to Iraq I cannot be a hundred percent Iraqi. It is more than twenty years that I am in exile, and twenty years in exile add a lot of things to you. At the same time, not only am I different, but Iraq is also different. I can't see the Iraq I know.»[209] The Iraq he knows is the one he left behind when he fled the country: Baghdad with its «cafés, theatres, cinemas, the river Tigris, and a lot of streets, but also all the propaganda symbols and Saddam's images.»[210] The devastation provoked by the foreign invasion and the internecine wars, combined with the process of de-Baathification initiated by the American troops, has profoundly transfigured



208 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 16th March 2016.

209 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th March 2016.

210 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th May 2016.

the urban landscape of the country. Moreover, the war and the occupation has not only affected the physical environment, but also the Iraqi people. «Everything is damaged, and the damage is not only in the buildings or the places, but also in the people themselves,» the artist affirmed.[211]

When Alfraji created this artwork, he had not returned to Iraq yet. Nonetheless, as explained in the first chapter, he was facing the destruction and transfiguration of his birthplace on the TV. Despite his absence from the country, and the indirect experience of the war, the scenes of the conflict and the devastation triggered in the artist a sense of bewilderment. As Jenna Pitchford-Hyde explains, the Iraqi exiles who witness the war via television experience a feeling of disorientation and dichotomy of perception between the memories they have of their motherland, and what they actually see on the screen.[212] In fact, the disorientation derives from the fact that due to the transfiguration of Baghdad's landscape Alfraji was seeing his city disappearing. As a result, the artist becomes unable to identify himself with something that, in his eyes, does not exist anymore. The artist's bemusement is visually rendered in *ID Sketch,* where he blurred and partially deleted the text: as Iraq has been erased, Alfraji's Iraqi-ness, too, has become indefinable.

Finally, although the text is not readable, it is visible: the viewer can perceive that there is something written on the page beneath the black stains of ink. This shows that, although Alfraji's Iraqi-ness is difficult to read, it is nonetheless still there. In addition to this, the fact that *now* the text is obfuscated does not exclude that it was *once* plainly readable. This could evidence that the artist can hardly define his belonging to Iraq with reference to the present, but he understands his Iraqi-ness with reference to the past. As he told me, «when I say I am very Iraqi, the Iraq I mean is the one I remember.»[213] As a result, the presence and the visibility of the text could indicate that

211 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 5th May 2016.

212 Jenna Pitchford-Hyde, "When the "homeland" is a warzone: technology, exile and writing the Iraq war," *Critical Studies on Security,* vol.1, n.2, 2013, p. 177.

213 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th March 2016.

Alfraji's belonging to Iraq exists. Yet, the way the artist presents the text, blurred and partially erased, may suggest that Alfraji's belonging to Iraq has left the realm of the present and now can only be found the past.

Elegy of Malik Ibn al-Rayb

Created in 2010, *Elegy of Malik Ibn al-Rayb* is a series of seven lambda prints whereby the artist superimposed a black human shape on a written text. In the first three prints, the poem in the background, taken from a printed book page, becomes gradually more visible, as if the focus was panning out. There are handwritten notes on the lines of the text, and the latter is never entirely visible, because always partially covered by the black human shape. The artist only portrays the essential features (head, face, arms, legs) to make the viewer understand that the black shape is a human being. The black figure is drawn in a static position: the head, seen from the profile is slightly bent forward, the legs are semi-straight, and the arm is kept behind the back. Nonetheless, the position of the figure vis-à-vis the ground rotates with the progression of the series: in the first image it seems to be lying, while in the successive ones it is gradually standing. In the last four prints the text with handwritten notes still functions as a background. The human figure becomes gradually more blurred, while the artist limits himself to sketching only its basic features, such as legs, head and arms.

The printed text is the elegy that Malik ibn al-Rayb wrote for himself.[214] Unlike *ID Sketch*, here, the text has not been selected to visually represent the concept of identity, but because its content is relevant vis-à-vis the personal experience of the artist, and his idea of return. In fact, the elegy deals with the theme of exile, and the nostalgia for the homeland.

Elegy of Malik Ibn Ar-Rayb Series, 2010, 3 pieces, each 200x125cm. Lambda print.

214 Nayef Ali Al- Joulan, "Aesthetic Dying: The Arab's Heroic Encounter with Death," *Canadian Social Science*, Vol.6, No.6, 2010, p.33.

As al-Jouani explains, «in his self-elegy, Ibn al-Rayb conceives his own death and, under fear that he will inevitably cease to be…he invokes his poetry to help him visit his far-away home to meet his family, kinsfolk, beloved and people.»[215] The awareness of the incumbent death and the impossibility to see his home and his folks one last time trigger in the poet a deep feeling of nostalgia. The poet is aware that his return is not possible because of the spatial distance that separates him from his motherland, and because of the limited time that he has to live. Consequently, since Ibn al-Rayb's desire to return is unattainable in the realm of reality, he «resorts to the conceived and achieved, the past, which is recalled with utter pleasure in face of the inevitable death.»[216] Therefore, the return of the poet is rendered possible, but only within the realm of imagination.

In *Elegy of Malik Ibn al-Rayb*, Alfraji did not include any visual reference to himself. In fact, the artwork is about the elegy and, unlike previous artworks analysed, there is no clue, such as the personal name or the body of the artist, that could make the viewer guess that Alfraji is within the work. Nonetheless, what emerged from my interviews with the artist is that he feels a certain affinity with the poet, and can recognize himself within the content of the poem, that is the impossibility to return.[217] Therefore, I would like to interpret Alfraji's presence in the artwork as the artist's identification with the experience of the poet. Since the artist shares with the poet a similar experience and destiny, the artwork could be related as much to the unattainable return of Malik to his homeland, as to the impossible return of Alfraji to "his" Iraq. Additionally, the printed text of the elegy in the background of the artwork is not plain, but has been annotated. The handwritten notes could be a sign of Alfraji's presence in his creation, that takes the shape of a comment on, and a

215 *Ibidem,* p. 34.

216 Nayef Ali Al- Joulan, "Aesthetic Dying: The Arab's Heroic Encounter with Death," *Canadian Social Science,* Vol.6, No.6, 2010, p.34.

217 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 16th March 2016.

re-interpretation of the poem in light of his personal experience. In fact, as I explained before, even when the audience does not visually "see" Alfraji, the artist is always part of the ideas and concepts contained in his artworks, that is the cause behind the realization of the work, and the aspect it takes.

In my view, what equates Alfraji and Malik is the desperate longing for return to the homeland, and the awareness of the impossibility to achieve their goal in the sphere of reality. In fact, although, unlike Malik, Alfraji is not about to die, both the artist and the poet desire to return to a land which is absent and unreachable. On the one hand, for Malik the return is rendered impossible due to the physical distance and the imminent death. On the other hand, Alfraji is unable to go back to his motherland because he does not belong to it anymore. The destruction of Baghdad's urban landscape that has followed the foreign occupation and the outbreak of the civil war, combined with the psychological marks left on the Iraqi population, has rendered impossible for Alfraji to recognize the city. The lack of recognition of present-day Iraq makes the artist question his belonging to the country and wonder, «am I Iraqi or what?»[218] Consequently, the absence of belonging to what Iraq is now makes the artist's return to the country actually unattainable. In fact, for him to return to present-day Iraq would not be to return to Iraq, because for him, «this is not Iraq».[219] Therefore, what is at stake is not return *per se*, but Iraq, the one Alfraji knows, which becomes the symbol of return.[220] As seen before, according to the artist, Iraq exists, but only within his memory and within himself, and it is there that Alfraji places his belonging and his desire to return. Like Malik, Alfraji can only go back to his Iraq through his imagination and

218 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 16th March 2016.

219 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th March 2016.

220 Joseph Sassoon, "Return and Returnees," in Joseph Sassoon (ed.) *The Iraqi Refugees: The New Crisis in the Middle East,* London: I.B. Tauris, (2009), p. 154.

artistic production. Therefore, in my view, as Malik evoked poetry to imaginatively reach his homeland one last time, the artist created *Elegy of Malik ibn al-Rayb* to go back to “his” Iraq.

Alfraji's impossibility to return to Iraq in the real life, but only through his memories and imagination reminds Stuart Hall's discussion on the return of Caribbean people to Africa. As Hall explains, the "original Africa", from which thousands of slaves had been deported to the Caribbeans, has been irreversibly transformed by history, and nowadays "is no longer there."[221] As a consequence, the absence of Africa (the one Caribbean people believe they belong to) in reality becomes presence of Africa within Caribbean people's identities through their imaginary. Therefore, «Africa must be reckoned by Caribbean people, but it cannot in any simple sense be merely recovered. It belongs to… an imaginative geography and history…To *this* "Africa," which is necessarily part of the Caribbean imaginary, we can't literally go home again.»[222] Similarly, Alfraji's encounter with his birthplace during his visit to Baghdad, one year before the creation of *Elegy of Malik ibn al-Rayb*, made the artist realize that the transfiguration his country had undergone was irreversible, and that with Iraq his belonging to the country had "disappeared," too. Nonetheless, the absence of Iraq in the sphere of reality, means its presence within the memories of the artist. As a result, Alfraji's belonging to Iraq has also changed in terms of time and space: the artist does not belong to the Iraq he sees *now* and *out there*, but he belongs to the Iraq that was there *once* and that now is *inside of him*. This means that for the artist Iraq is now part of an imaginative geography and history, and that to "his Iraq," the one he feels to belong to, the artist is literally unable to return.

221 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Indentity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference,* edited by Jonathan Rutherford, London: Lawrence & Wishant: (1990), p. 231.

222 *Ibidem,* p. 232.

Elegy of Malik Ibn Ar-Rayb Series, 2010, 4 pieces, each 180x125cm. Lambda print.

However, the artist's return to the Iraq he belongs to is possible through imagination and artistic production. According to the artist, the reason why the black human figure is gradually blurred and fading away is that the subject «is dying.»[223] However, I believe that it is the idea of return, more than the one of death, that is shown in the work of art. First of all, as mentioned before, in the poem Malik does not describe his departure to afterlife; instead he envisages his return to his homeland and his folks. Secondly, the movement of the black figure, first supine and then gradually standing, seems to suggest that the subject is raising and slowly walking away. This movement could represent the departure from the world of reality to the world of memory and imagination. Third, because of the identification of the artist with the poet and the content of the poem, instead of Malik, the black figure could represent the artist returning to the Iraq he feels to belong to. As seen before, since in the artist's view Iraq has disappeared in the world of reality and now is only alive in his memories, his sense of belonging has also shifted from the sphere of reality to the realm of memory. This means that Alfraji's recognition of Iraq as his homeland is not interpreted as a real interaction with the geographic place, but it is rather attained through imagination.[224] As a consequence, Alfraji can only imagine to overcome the spatial and temporal gap that separates him

223 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th March 2016.

224 Ernst van Alphen, "Imagined Homelands. Re-mapping Cultural Identity," *Thamrys/Intersecting*, n,9, 2002, p. 56.

from his Iraq and go back to the country. Therefore, the increasingly blurred traits that delineate the human figure could be seen as Alfraji representing himself leaving the sphere of reality to enter the realm of imagination, thus accomplishing his desire to return to his homeland.

Hold On To Your Memory

Hold on To Your Memory, produced in 2006, can be considered an example of Alfraji trying to define his belonging to Iraq by resorting to his memories. In this series of lambda prints the viewer sees four repetitions of the same photograph of the artist, in black and white, standing, and physically holding four different coloured portraits. The photographs display Imam Ali, Bint al-Mu'aydi (known as the "Iraqi Monalisa"), and the portraits of Alfraji's father and mother in their middle age.[225] As Alfraji explained, he used to see these photographs hanged on the walls of his parents' house. «They belong to my memory,» he stated.[226]

As Alfraji told me during our first interview, like the concept of identity, his idea of memory, too, is influenced by the existentialist thought. According to the existentialists, the function of memory is to create a narrative of the self, a story, that makes sense of who we are by connecting past, present and future.[227] However, as Lior Levy explains, the narrative of the self is not merely made of a collection of memories. Rather, the act of remembering «assigns meaning to

225 There are not many sources dealing with the Iraqi Monalisa. She is known also as Kchi Kafrosh. There are different legends related to her. Some claim she was Iraqi, and others claim she was Kurdish. Nonetheless every witness recollects the same story. During the British occupation, a British officer fell in love with this beautiful young girl, but he did not have the permission of her father to marry her. He decided, then, to kidnap her and to bring her to Europe. Years later the portrait of a beautiful young lady, adorned with jewellery and fine clothes, was found in Iraq, and everyone recognized that the lady in the painting was Kchi Kafrosh. Since that moment the portrait of Bint al-Mu'aydi has been present in the houses of the Iraqi people. Some relate it to the importance of remembering the British invasion, and take her as a symbol of the

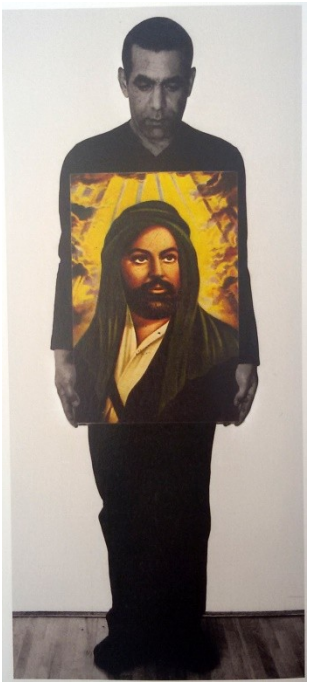
Hold on to Your Memory Series, 2006, 80x35cm. Lambda print.

aji, Bint al-Mu'aydi seems to represent his daily life. As he told me, «You can qi house.»

226 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Amersfoort, 7th February 2016.

227 Lior Levy, "Reflection Memory and Selfhood in Jean-Paul Sartre's Early Philosophy", *Sartre Studies International*, Vol.19, Issue 2, 2013, p. 106.

Hold on to Your Memory Series, 2006, 80x35cm. Lambda print.



past facts, locating them in relation to the self, to one's loves, hatred, desires, actions.»[228] Likewise, Alfraji understands his identity as composed by the different memories he has, and attributes to each memory a specific meaning vis-à-vis himself.[229]

Hold on To Your Memory is an evidence of Alfraji representing his identity by operating a selection of his memories. In fact, although he claims that «"Hold on" at the beginning of the title refers to the fact that my memory is inside of me and I have no other choice but holding it,» the artist is actually choosing which memories to hold in the artwork. The photographs/ memories he shows refer to a specific place, his parents' house in Baghdad, and time, his life in Iraq before he fled. As a result, since the artist understands his identity as composed by his memories, the choice of holding these precise memories could be interpreted as the artist making them representative of his identity. In fact, although the artist acknowledges that the experience of the exile has made it difficult for him to define his identity, because «when you go and flee this means that you are going to start from zero, and this means new memories, which make your identity multiple,» he is not holding any photograph of Jordan or Holland in his hands. The photographs that Alfraji is holding represent part of what the artist defines as "his" Iraq.

«My Iraq means a lot of places where I found myself, like cafés, theatres, my room with my books. It is the city where I did my studies and I had my first experiences, like my first love, my first kiss and the first movie I watched. But my Iraq also means the Iraq where I felt a stranger and I

228 *Ibidem*, p. 105.

229 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 16th March 2016.

couldn't identify with. It is all together,» the artist told me.[230] As explained above, the images that we see in the artwork are the photographs that the artist used to see in his parents' house. This shows that Alfraji operates another selection of his memories, and chooses to picture the ones that are related to the Iraq where he could find himself and identify with. As a result, I argue that if memory for the artist means identity, and these memories are related to a specific aspect of "his" Iraq, their presence in the artwork could symbolize the artist's Iraqi identity and his belonging in the country. On the one hand, Alfraji grounds his belonging to Iraq with reference to the past of the country: the Iraq he keeps in his memories and not to the one he sees "out there." On the other hand, the artist represents his Iraqi-ness only through the Iraq he was identifying with.

230 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 24th May 2016.

Moreover, if one compares *Hold On To Your Memories* with *In Baghdad. Under The Freedom Monument*, created in 2013, one sees that the artist makes use of his memory of Iraq in a totally different way. In the second artwork, the memory of the feeling that the artist had when walking under the monumental sculpture by Jawad Selim in Baghdad triggers the artistic production. As Alfraji explained, «if you look at the painting you actually don't see the sculpture, but what I tried to visualize was the meaning that monument had for me. Imagine a monument dedicated to freedom in a time of dictatorship. What would you think? It's like a joke.»[231] As seen before, the Baathist government had established a high level of state control over the subject citizens, and of censorship on the population's behaviour and speech.[232] What Alfraji represents in this artwork is the way he perceived freedom in Saddam's Iraq, which, as explained in the previous chapter, was inexistent. However, what concerns my analysis here is the way the artist pictures himself within the artwork. His body is portrayed as a long black shadow with no arms and no feet, and his present-day portrait photograph has been pasted on his face. Unlike *Hold on To Your Memories*, here the body of the artist is incomplete. This could be related to the fact that the memory he is evoking is part of his Iraq, yet it is part of an Iraq with which he could not identify. As a result, since the artist fashions his Iraqi identity availing himself of his memories, the choice of picturing this memory could mean that it is still part of the artist's identity. However, Alfraji's inability to completely visualize and portray himself could be taken as an

Hold on to Your Memory Series, 2006, 80x25cm. Lambda print.

Hold on to Your Memory Series, 2006, 80x35cm. Lambda print.

231 Interview with Sadik Alfraji, Leiden, 16th March 2016.

232 Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida (2007), p.55.

indicator of his lack of belonging to what this memory embodies: Baathist Iraq.

public narrative, and other individual narratives of Iraqis living in Iraq in the post-Hussein era, as a landmark to detect Alfraji's position.

What I observed through my analysis and from the interviews I had with the artist is that both Alfraji and Iraq, especially Baghdad, are constantly present within the artworks. The presence of the artist within the works can be detected either because he displays his body, for example in *You Can't Erase The Traces of War*, or because the artist openly states that he is the protagonist of the artwork, although the viewer does not visually see him, for example in *Biography of a Head*. Furthermore, as Alfraji explained, he is always present in the ideas behind and concepts within his artworks. In addition to this, the country, too is also constantly part of the artworks. Iraq is either visually displayed through images of war, or through the effects that its historical developments have upon the artist's representation of himself. For example, in *ID Sketch*, the destruction of Iraq influences Alfraji's understanding of his sense of belonging and makes it impossible for the artist to picture his own identity.

The comparison with other discourses on Iraq shows which position the artist occupies within the master-narrative of Iraqi contemporary history, and demonstrates how Alfraji's Iraqi identity is distinguished by an interplay of "inside and outside". As long as the Baathist period is concerned, the individual narrative that emerges within Alfraji's artworks creates a counter-discourse opposed to the Baathist public narrative. The artist is within the Iraqi master-narrative, in the sense that he lives in Iraq and deals with its socio-political circumstances, such as the war and the dictatorship. Yet, the version of the story that he reproduces is different from the Baathist reality. Therefore, his Iraqi-ness is constructed within the master-narrative of Iraqi history, because he pictures himself as part of it, but outside the official story, to which he is unable to identify. Conversely, the individual narrative Alfraji pictures in his post-2003 artworks shows how, despite he is living outside of the country, he shapes his identity with reference to the master-narrative of contemporary Iraqi history. In addition to this, the discourse on Iraq that Alfraji

creates echoes certain individual narratives of Iraqi people living in Iraq during the American war and its aftermath. Therefore, the artist is not only operating within the master-narrative of contemporary Iraqi history, by picturing present-day Iraq and the effects that the socio-political developments occurring in the country have on his self-understanding. The consonance between Alfraji's and other Iraqis' individual narratives also shows how the artist positions himself within and in line with their discourse. Through his ability to visually and imaginatively overcome the physical distance, Alfraji managed to place himself "virtually" in Iraq.

EPILOGUE

"Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. "

[E. W. Said][233]

My decision to adopt a theoretical framework that allowed me to underline the link between Alfraji's Iraqi identity and the history of the country was driven by the need to reconsider Iraqi history by giving more space to the voice of Iraqi people. This concerns not only Saddam Hussein's era, but also the aftermath of the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. In fact, on the

233 Edward W. Said, "Reflection on Exile," in Edward W. Said (ed.) *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, p. 173, Cambridge, Massachussets: Harvard University Press, 2000.

one hand, the restriction of the Baathist regime had prevented the stories of ordinary Iraqis to emerge. On the other hand, the US-led invasion of Iraq has been combined with a media strategy to assimilate Iraq to Hussein's dictatorship, at the expense of the Iraqi people.[234] As Maysoon Pachachi explains, «Iraqi people had a million stories to tell, but it seemed that no one wanted to hear them… The real lived experience of the people, in all its complexity, was somehow absent from the whole account [of Iraqi history]. The Iraqi people, themselves, were invisible. It was as if the whole country…was reduced to just one man, Saddam Hussein – and he was "bad."»[235] Now that the dictatorial regime has been ousted Iraqi people have the chance to re-appropriate their history and make their stories emerge. However, the demise of Saddam Hussein has not allowed the Iraqis' individual narratives of post-2003 Iraq to surface thoroughly. In fact, as Nadje al-Ali explains, «in general it is the exception, not the rule to hear from an Iraqi about Iraq…We have heard few Iraqi voices, limiting our ability to digest the enormity of loss and to properly mourn these losses. The trauma of these wars, including the Iran-Iraq war, is yet to be accessed.»[236]

The individual narrative that Alfraji portrays is also his version of the story of Iraq. As a result, it could be used to understand and re-interpret the history of the country and show that the Baathist version of the story was not the only truth about Iraq. Additionally, the analysis of Alfraji's discourse could be a contribution to the need to hear Iraqi voices and understand how the trauma of the recent developments occurring in the country, namely the occupation and civil war, are dealt with and articulated within Iraqis' individual narratives. As Baghdadi blogger Salam Pax wrote on April 23rd, 2003, «in this big media festival called Iraqi war there is not a single Iraqi voice.»[237] Moreover, as David Baran points out, the media coverage has distorted the crucial steps of the

234 Nadje al-Ali and Deborah al-Najjar, *We Are Iraqis. Aesthetics and Politics in a Time of War,* New York: Syracuse University Press, (2013), p. xxxiii.

235 *Ibidem,* p. 205.

236 *Ibidem,* p. xxxiv.

transition process from the Baathist dictatorship to its demise; one among all is, as I showed, the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue. [238] Therefore, it is necessary to further study Iraqi individual narratives, and allow this population to finally take possession of their own past and their own future.

Furthermore, the individual narrative Sadik Alfraji pictures within the artworks he created after he fled Iraq resonates with other Iraqi exiles' individual narratives. For example, his idea of the disappearance of Iraq due to the civil war and the invasion echoes Sinan Antoon's *A Barbarian in Rome*. «I cannot help but think about what has become of Baghdad. In a way, it does not exist anymore. Not in the simplistic sense that denies change, but as a holistic unity,» the Iraqi writer states.[239] Additionally, Alfraji also shares with other Iraqi exiles the idea of the (unachievable) return to Iraq. As aforementioned, due to the US-led invasion of the country and its violent aftermath, «for those who had left the country when Saddam was still in power the perspective of a return began to vanish.»[240] The impossibility to return is not only caused by the physical destruction of the country and the lack of security. As an Iraqi exile, Alfraji is unable to actually go back to his homeland because he does not recognize as Iraq what the country has become. For him, return to Iraq would only mean going back to the Iraq that he knows; a country that now only belongs to the past. Similarly, in her research on Iraqi exiles in the UK, Zainab Saleh observed that «Iraqis yearn

237 Salam Pax, *Where is Raed?*, 23rd April 2003, http://dear_raed.blogspot.nl/search?updated-max=2003-09-13T14:42:00%2B04:00&max-results=50&reverse-paginate=true.

238 David Baran, *Vivre la tyrannie et lui survivre. L'Irak en transition,* Paris: Mille et une nuits (2004), p.421.

239 Nadje al-Ali and Deborah al-Najjar, *We Are Iraqis. Aesthetics and Politics in a Time of War,* New York: Syracuse University Press, (2013), p. 30.

240 Nada M. Shabout, "In Between, Fragmented, Disoriented. Art Making in Iraq." *Middle East Report*, n. 263, The Art & Culture of the Arab Revolts, Summer 2012, p. 41.

for a certain time, place and experience, for a past that has only existed at best.»[241] Finally, the shocking experience of watching Iraq being destroyed and fading, first indirectly through a television screen, and then directly during his brief visit to Baghdad, has made the artist question his belonging to the country. Alfraji has, then, re-fashioned his Iraqi-ness resorting to the memories he has of Iraq. The bewilderment caused by the scene of Iraq vanishing under the bombings and its effect on Iraqis' sense of belonging and identity is also reflected in Iqbal al-Qazwini's novel *Zubaida's Window: A Novel of an Iraqi Exile.*[242] Like Alfraji, Zubaida, the protagonist, also relies on her memories to cope with the feeling of disorientation provoked by the disappearance of Iraq.

The analysis of Alfraji's and other Iraqi exiles' individual narratives demonstrates how displacement and crossing a border does not implicate complete detachment from the country of origin. As Edward Said explains, «to be in exile is [not] to be totally cut off, isolated, hopelessly separated from your place of origin.»[243] In my view, a narrativist approach to the study of identity, which underlines the bond between the exiles and the history of their homeland, could be used for further research in the field of the Iraqi diaspora, which is constantly growing. In fact, the flow of Iraqis towards neighbouring countries and Europe has gradually increased since the 2003 American invasion, and has escalated after the so-called Islamic State has taken ground in Iraq.[244] I believe that studies on the Iraqi diaspora that analyse how Iraqi exiles understand their identity and highlight the connection with the socio-political developments occurring in their homeland, should be used for the creation and implementation of integration policies in the countries of destination.

241 Zainab Saleh, "Diminishing Returns: An Anthropological Study of Iraqis in the UK," (Phd. Dissertation, Columbia University, 2011), p. 233.

242 Jenna Pitchford-Hyde, "When the "homeland" is a warzone: technology, exile and writing the Iraq war," *Critical Studies on Security*, vol.1, n.2, 2013, p. 183.

243 Edward W. Said, "Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals," *Grand Street*, n.47, 1993, p. 114.

244Dahr Jamail, "Iraq's invisible refugee crisis." *Al-Jazeera*, 12th May 2013. Accessed 15th July 2016. http://www.aljazeera.com/humanrights/2013/05/201351094138062l7.html\

Moreover, the publication and diffusion of these studies should also reach outside of the, sometimes, narrow academic environments, and involve a broader and non-specialized audience. In my view it is more than ever necessary to sensitize the public on the question of the Iraqi diaspora. War and destruction have compelled Iraqis to flee their land for more than a decade, and, at least for now, it is not possible to foresee an end.

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