

Bullets in Envelopes

“These life stories of academics from around the globe tell a vivid, inspiring and sometimes poetic history of modern Iraq.”

—miriam cooke, Braxton Craven Professor of Arab Cultures,
Duke University

“Searing! The American assault aimed to ‘end’ the Iraqi state and shatter the culture that sustained it. Yako retrieves the stories of some sixty displaced Iraqi academics. Distillations of their experiences read as if written on shards of glass that penetrate the skin and wound the heart.”

—Raymond W. Baker, Board Director, International Council
for Middle East Studies, Washington, DC

“Luis Yako’s thinking is as compelling as his writing. *Bullets in Envelopes* persuasively shifts the politics of argumentation. He uses anthropology to convey the existential turbulence of academics in exile after the US invasion, instead of using academics to advance the discipline.”

—Walter D. Mignolo, author of *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*

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Iraqi Academics in Exile

Louis Yako

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Preface

In what I call “the genealogy of loss,” this book traces the losses of Iraq and its people through the eyes of academics, one of the country’s most educated demographics, to show the extent to which wars, sanctions, and the 2003 invasion have damaged Iraqi society. The invasion had an enormous impact on education and educators. It not only destroyed many achievements Iraqis had built for decades but also erased and forced out some of the country’s brightest minds that had helped train Iraqis and shape the skills essential for running and preserving the entire society. Academics are the engineers of the society in the sense that they train almost everyone else to contribute to it, whether doctors, engineers, professors, workers, lawyers, and many other professions. The destruction and restructuring of Iraqi academia and the killing and/or forcing out of many of its academics can only be seen as a political tactic aimed at restructuring and disabling Iraqi society.

While most Iraqi people I know from different walks of life are politically savvy because their lives have been determined by politics, I wanted to research a population that is as close to politics and the centers of power as possible, yet also one that can critically examine and interrogate power from multiple perspectives. Academics are uniquely positioned to do so. They can look critically at their lives in Iraq before the invasion, while equally critically articulate and analyze the consequences of Iraq’s invasion and the current regimes of power. As a cultural anthropologist deeply committed to the Middle East and Iraq, I wanted to select a population that is near and dear to my heart. Looking back at my own life in Iraq, from primary school all the way to graduating from Baghdad University, few groups have influenced and shaped my vision as much as Iraqi educators have. Many of the educators who taught me were deeply committed to Iraqi society—to creating knowledgeable students and citizens who see themselves as equal to rather than superior or inferior to anyone else in the world. And because most of these educators simultaneously influenced and were affected by wars and politics, I knew that their voices could add nuance to the story I was trying to tell.

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Furthermore, having closely studied much of Western scholarship on Iraq and the Middle East, I saw that the stories of the region and its people are seldom told through the lenses of its most educated populations. If we consider that the former Ba'ath regime made education available for free to every Iraqi citizen from kindergarten all the way to the PhD level, then it follows that Iraq's most educated people are as diverse in gender, class, and politics as the society itself. Iraqi education was a basic human right available to all—not the privilege of a chosen few—and the diversity of voices in Iraqi academia reflects that reality, not that of a privileged group only. There are many important works that paint a picture of the region from the viewpoint of its refugees, gender issues, dissidents, and other important populations, but few are the works that examine the region through the eyes of its academics, who, since the beginnings of the pan-Arabist project, have been key actors in building their societies.

Telling Iraq's story through the eyes of its academics challenges the stereotypical images of war-torn countries as destroyed places with people in tents and in need of humanitarian aid in the form of basic foods and blankets: children with worn out clothes, and countless other such images whether propagated through certain types of scholarship, humanitarian organizations raising funds, or mainstream media. I am not suggesting that these stories are not important. I am instead suggesting that such narratives only tell us how things are at present, not *how they became that way*. I wanted to choose a group that could trace the genealogy of events. Thus, it is my hope that the testimonies in this book will not just be projected as sad stories from “that part of the world,” but rather considered as expert and experienced voices that can make cultural, political, and epistemic contributions to how we understand the region's challenges.

STARTING FROM THE END: RETURNING TO IRAQ AFTER A DECADE IN EXILE

Once upon a time, I was born and raised in a place I used to know only as “home.” Once upon a lonely night in 2005, I had to leave Iraq to save my life after receiving a death threat for working as a Linguist/Interpreter with the occupying forces. I wanted to leave with my dignity intact, so I chose to leave as a scholar to pursue higher education rather than live in refugee camps. My love and passion for learning helped me do that, but little did I know

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that the more education I received in Western institutions, the more I would realize how subjugated and indoctrinated one can become when trying to learn under the grip of age-old colonial and imperial institutions. Nevertheless, as a scholar, I was determined to gain and use every critical tool possible, including tools and ammunition from the imperial universities, to understand what was done to Iraq, to my beloved home that was lost forever.

After one decade in exile, I returned to Iraq to take stock, to have a better understanding of what happened, how it happened, and why it happened. I returned this time as a trained cultural anthropologist from Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, to conduct fieldwork on a population that has had a lasting impact on my life—Iraq's academics. In them, I saw some of the most well-positioned people to testify not only to the destruction of Iraq's once solid education system but also to the intentional destruction, erasure, and dismantling of Iraq's culture, society, and memory. This book tells that painful story through one of Iraq's most well-educated populations—its post-2003 exiled academics.

After two previous summers of field research in the UK and Jordan, 2013 and 2014 respectively, I decided to spend one academic year in Iraq because I knew that the internally displaced academics trapped inside—those not “successful” or “fortunate” enough to escape through the bottleneck—had so much to say about what had happened. After all, I am a child of wars, sanctions, and political upheavals. I know what it means to be trapped inside and what it means to squeeze through the bottleneck, without ever truly recovering from the wounds inflicted upon us. I opened my eyes to this world in the 1980s, to the then ongoing Iran–Iraq War. I witnessed much violence and destruction. I saw countless dead bodies during the First Gulf War. The 13 years of UN sanctions robbed me of some of the most beautiful childhood and teenage years. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq barely allowed me to finish my undergraduate studies at Baghdad University, before forcing me to leave Iraq in 2005 to escape death and violence. By the end of my first week back in Iraq in 2015, my personal observations and experiences started to paint a picture about the story this book was going to draw. What I experienced between the first moments of being at the airport in Sweden on my way to Iraq in September 2015 and the end of the first week in Iraq confirmed the intertwinement of the personal, the political, and the anthropological.

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In that first week back after one decade in exile, I learned that the only way I could tell this story as sincerely as possible was to keep alive every bit of it that is personal—personal not just for me but also for each of my interlocutors. I learned that the biggest epistemological scam produced in history is the notion that one can be fully “objective.” Like the proverbial writing on the wall, I saw that the word “objectivity” had been the most vicious disguise to hide subjectivity. Indeed, it can also be the perfect guise to hide the malice and prejudice of those who claim to have it. At that defining moment in my scholarship, I understood Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s words, “I can promise to be sincere, but not to be impartial” (Goethe 2014: 91). I understood that scholarship, or indeed any type of writing and thinking, is powerful when it is sincere without hiding behind the vain guise of “objectivity.” I understood that to be human automatically disqualifies us from being “objective,” but it does not disqualify us from being sincere.

After ten years in exile, I was in Stockholm in September 2015 packing my bag to go back to Iraq. I could not believe it was going to happen in less than 24 hours. I was anxious that entire day; I could not sleep or do anything. I went out roaming the streets. I greeted a stranger and had a short conversation. He turned out to be an Armenian in his twenties, thirsty for warm human connection after many lonely, long, and cold Scandinavian winters. He was delighted to meet an Assyrian from Iraq. He invited me for a meal at a nearby Middle Eastern restaurant followed by a walk. It was an ideal way to spend those few hours before heading to the airport. I spoke little. He spent most of the time talking about how much he hated Turkey and the Turks; how racist the Swedes are toward immigrants, no matter how much they like to sugarcoat this fact and claim otherwise.

Toward the end of the evening, the Armenian stranger, who was no longer a stranger, asked what I thought about “home” and “exile” because he had been struggling for years with those notions in Sweden. I told him that life had taught me that it is possible that things, ideas, concepts, and feelings can mean the opposite of what might seem apparent. It was possible for people to be the opposite of what they claimed. It was possible for “home” to signify “exile” and vice versa. Laughter may be tears in disguise. Revolutions could be about oppressive powers pulling the carpet from under the feet of other oppressors. Climbing to the top might not really mean “going up,” it could in fact be a harsh form of falling; reaching the pinnacle of fame, surrounded by camera flashes has led to the demise of countless souls on this planet. In

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brief, it was possible that everything we are told and taught is the opposite of what we think, or that it might be outright false. I told him that I go through life remembering my mom's earliest advice that "succeeding in an unjust world is the first sign of failure because it means we're cooperating with injustice." I told him that I carry like a talisman around my neck André Gide's words: "Fish die belly upward and rise to the surface. It's their way of falling." My Armenian acquaintance took an interest in these reflections and asked that we stay in touch. He walked with me to the door of the apartment building, we said goodbye like two old friends, and he vanished in the crowd as though the whole encounter had been nothing but a dream. I thought that my year of fieldwork—wrestling with home, exile, and displacement as some of the most political and politicized concepts of our time—had already started in Stockholm.

The day was September 11, 2015. The place was Arlanda Airport in Stockholm. The time was an early hour in the morning. I was waiting in line to check in my luggage on a flight headed to Erbil, the capital city of Iraq's northern Kurdistan region. After an entire decade, I was going back to see how the many people, places, and things I left behind had continued their lives (and gone to their deaths) in my absence. I reminded myself that just as I was changing in exile, so were all the people and things I had left in Iraq. I reminded myself that it was going to be an encounter between two changed and constantly changing worlds. I had to be prepared for the fact that some (or many) images of what Iraq used to be in my head may no longer exist.

The check-in line was long. I started watching the faces of the people waiting, their look, their clothes, their luggage. The guy behind me had his headphones on blasting a traditional Turkman folk song from Kirkuk. I could hear the song oozing out of his headphones. It was a song that many of our Turkmen neighbors and friends in Kirkuk used to play at weddings. My ears immediately recognized the words: "Beyaz gül kırmızı gül güller arasından gelir ..." ("White rose, red rose, she comes through roses ..."). I hadn't particularly liked the song as a child but, in that moment, I did because it was much more than a song. Time had transformed it into fossilized moments and faces of distant people, places, and moments that I may never see again, except in my daydreams. In front of me in the line, there were two Kurdish families. They seemed to have just met at the airport. They were speaking in two different Kurdish dialects (Kurmanji and Sorani). These two groups usually do not like each other, particularly since the intra-Kurdish struggle

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in the 1990s, which continues by other means to this day. But I thought to myself, in exile, people have no choice. They simply learn how absurd their differences at home are compared to what they endure in foreign lands. They learn how to love the remotest things, scents, and traces that remind them of a lost home and a lost life. The husbands were talking about how convenient it was to have a direct flight from Stockholm to Erbil, although they complained about its early-morning hour. The wives were discussing the “right” age for children to start articulating their first words. Further down the line, I saw a few guys joking and laughing loudly in a Baghdadi Arabic dialect. They were making sarcastic remarks without taking notice of anyone around them. I already felt like I was in a small version of the Iraq I knew and missed so much, though I realized this might not be the case when I arrived. Perhaps, the Iraq I had known was now more accessible in exile than at home.

Most passengers in the check-in line were Iraqis. Many were Kurds. Some were Arabs. I spotted a few Christian families. I heard two ladies speaking neo-Aramaic with a golden cross hanging around the neck of one. I overheard one talking about how a relative, a refugee in Lebanon, had just been accepted to immigrate to Australia. These conversations were hardly strange to my ears. Before I left Iraq, many people were either talking about leaving or celebrating that some of their friends or relatives had managed to leave, hoping they would be next. Most people want to leave, even without knowing whether they would ever arrive somewhere. After living in the West for one decade and witnessing the gradual rise of hate, racism, and prejudice against anyone and anything from the Middle East, I felt uncertain at that moment about which was the safer option: to stay in war-torn countries or to escape to increasingly hateful and systemically racist Western ones. This question would only get harder to answer in the coming decades.

Ironically—or maybe not—all the passengers had foreign passports in their hands, myself included. I spotted Swedish, Danish, German, and other EU passports. This, too, did not come as a surprise. Because of the wars and devastation of the last few decades, the only way an Iraqi could be treated with dignity, whether in Iraq or elsewhere, was to hold a foreign—meaning Western—passport. A “good” or a “fortunate” Iraqi is almost by definition one who holds a Western passport. An Iraqi passport is paralyzing. It is “suspect” at every airport, checkpoint, or point of entry. As an Iraqi, one is unwelcome almost everywhere. One is questioned almost to death before

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being allowed entry to any country, and one is always welcome to exit with no questions asked. Every authority and official thinks they have the right to interrogate an Iraqi without a second thought. Iraqis know well that holding that useless document called an “Iraqi passport” is a curse at this point in history. But, of course, this is hardly the only such case. Most passport holders who come from nations whose people count as, using Frantz Fanon’s words, “the wretched of the earth,” experience different forms of discrimination and exclusion. Some experiences are harsher than others. It is all about power, or lack thereof. Your passport has power. It is not just a document that helps you pass; it can become a symbol of humiliation that prevents you from passing. Many Iraqis I know joke about the words on the inside cover of Iraqi passports: “All competent authorities are requested to accord the bearer of this passport protection to allow him/her all possible assistance in case of need.” Every place an Iraqi goes to, they experience the opposite of this statement. These words are just one more example of how things can have the exact opposite meaning of their appearance as with “home” and “exile,” “peace” and “war,” “honesty” and “dishonesty,” and countless other words in different languages. I had become irritated about my first language, my second language, my third language, and all the languages I speak. Words increasingly do not mean what they are supposed to mean in all these languages. Languages are increasingly becoming tools for disguising ideas and reality rather than disclosing them. It suddenly crossed my mind that perhaps one day I will be forced to put every single word I write inside quotation marks. Nothing means what it is supposed to mean. I dreamt of a world in which everyone means what they say and say what they mean.

When my turn came, the cordial, blond female Swedish airline employee checking passports and handing boarding passes looked at my American passport and said, “I see that you were born in Iraq. Do you have an Iraqi passport?” I answered that it had expired. She went on, “You know people over there are not crazy about American passports. Let me see your Iraqi passport, even if it’s expired.” She took a quick look, checked in my bag, and directed me to the appropriate gate.

I arrived in Erbil shortly after 10.30am. I greeted the friendly Kurd female officer at the passport control in Kurdish, she stamped my passport, and there I was, officially in Iraq. As I walked over to the baggage claim area in the modest but clean airport, I remembered that no one from my blood family or relatives was coming to meet me. My immediate family members

had all left Iraq over the last ten years because of the war. My remaining relatives, on both parents' sides, do not live in the city and I had not let them know that I was coming. I wanted to land in the airport *for real* before I could tell anyone with certainty that I was in Iraq.

The only person who was waiting for me at the airport was my American brother-in-law! I wondered what the Swede who checked my passport at Arlanda would have thought about that. My American brother-in-law came to Iraq after 2003, fell in love with the country, and decided that he would rather live in Erbil than in the USA. He says he feels "freer" in Iraq, and he is not alone. Many expats I know love so-called Third World countries. Many do not mind settling and getting married there, while the locals in those countries are escaping in all directions. The reason is simple: expats are treated better than local citizens in such countries, and even better than in their own so-called industrialized countries in the "developed" world. Despite my gratitude that he had come to pick me up, I still found this ironic and painful. An American is the only one at the airport to pick me up in my own country. It felt as though that complex line between "home" and "exile" was being challenged from the moment I landed in Iraq. I decided, however, that it was not helpful to dwell on this thought. I didn't want anything to spoil my first intimate moments of embracing Iraq's skies, lands, trees, roses, buildings, streets, faces, scents, and everyone and everything that had been living and growing in my imagination during the past decade.

I spent the first couple of days in Erbil, mostly with my brother-in-law and some of his foreign expat friends who gave me some tips about life there. They shared things they knew better than me because they had been there and I had not. I soon learned about the new malls, the best hotels, the residential buildings where many expats and rich locals live in places with names like the "English village" or the "Italian village." I thought about how in every "Third World" country that gets "liberated" from its dictators, the first things that go up are luxury hotels and residential areas for Western expats and gated communities from which to administer the newly formed governments in places like Baghdad's Green Zone. The expats in Erbil also told me about things as simple as where to get a local phone sim card, the best haircut, and the cost of basic foods.

I felt alienated on my first night. The feeling was identical to how I felt on my first night in the United States in 2006. In the evening, I went out into the well-known Christian district of Ankawa on the outskirts of Erbil to buy a

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sim card. It was a hot September evening. As I greeted the salesperson at the random shop I entered, he paused, stared at me, and asked: "Are you Louis?" "Yes, I am. Wait, don't tell me who you are. I think I also recognize your face, but I have to add ten years to it." I recognized him. He was one of our old neighbors in Kirkuk. They had to move to Erbil as security deteriorated after 2003. That was a comforting first connection. It made me feel I am less of a stranger. I am still remembered, I thought. I still exist. But that was not enough. I wanted more closeness than an old neighbor to feel at home again. I immediately activated my sim card and called my aunt in Duhok, two and half hours north of Erbil. She could sense how sad my tone was on the phone and said, "I will be waiting for you tomorrow. Come here. Come start your fieldwork here and by the time you finish with Duhok, your sister will be back from the USA in Erbil and then you could head back there." I went to the bus and taxi station in Erbil the next day to get a taxi and headed to Duhok, a beautiful town sandwiched between two mountains, where I spent the early years of my childhood.

At around 1.30pm, in the shared taxi heading to Duhok, the passengers were all friendly Kurds. I greeted the driver and the passengers in Kurdish and then started looking out the window to check out the scenery. I heard the two guys next to me saying: "thank God there are no Arab passengers in the taxi. Arab passengers always cause delays at the checkpoints." As the taxi moved, I started checking out all the new buildings and streets. It was clear that whereas some people had become better off, others were worse off or had simply stagnated. Infrastructure reveals so much about a place and its culture, politics, and people. The disparities between the poor and the rich neighborhoods in Erbil, in a sense, show that "time" was not ticking at the same pace for everyone. Time was not moving favorably for everyone. Even time is like power in that it moves some people forward, some backward, and some to the sides and the margins. Time also buries some people under the ground. I noticed many unfinished construction and apartment buildings. It looked as though there had been an investment boom that had been abruptly halted by an unexpected economic crisis that made other parts of the city look like dilapidated ghost towns. As we were exiting Erbil, at every traffic light we stopped at, there were poor Syrian or Yazidi women and children begging drivers to buy gum, tissues, and other simple items. Some of these women, ranging from 11 to 30 in age, were so beautiful that

it would not be surprising if they were forced to sell other things to get their meals for the day.

Over time, I discovered that many of the women living in tents and dilapidated buildings had been selling their bodies to make a living. Talking with taxi drivers in Ankawa, I found out that many beauty salons had been turned into places where customers (men) parked their cars and waited to pick up internally displaced women doing sex work. Some people told me that some high-ranking officials obtained sex in return of favors such as renewing the residency cards of displaced women from places like then ISIS-occupied Mosul, and other war-torn parts of Iraq and Syria. These women choose to be in this Christian district away from conservative Kurdish neighborhoods where such practices would not be tolerated. One taxi driver literally said: “Christians are cool, open-minded people. They do not make any judgments. We can come here to drink alcohol and fuck women then go back to our closeted neighborhoods.” It seems like the Christian district is turned into a place where an encounter between mainly Muslim sex workers and their Muslim customers takes place in an environment seen as “open-minded.”

The driver taking us to Duhok was talking to the front seat passenger about how bad the economy was, saying that public sector employees weren't being paid, and so on. I understood that the Kurdistan region was being crippled by a bad economy. Consequently, public sector employees, who make up most of the employed, were only getting their salaries once every few months due to deep divisions and disagreements over oil revenues between Kurdistan and Baghdad. Baghdad had been withholding Kurdistan's 17 percent share of oil revenues because the Kurds have been drilling, extracting, and selling oil through illegal contracts with foreign companies without Baghdad's permission. Iraqi officials in Baghdad, the passengers explained, told the Kurds that if they want to get their share, they must share what they are selling from their region with the central government. The refusal of the Kurdish officials to abide by this, and the fact that much of Kurdistan's oil exploration had been less successful than originally anticipated, caused a serious economic problem in the region. This was the main topic the passengers discussed during most of the trip.

As the taxi continued on its way, I kept looking out of the window to check out the many villages and small towns we passed through, as we left Erbil behind. Not much had changed in these villages and little towns, except one could see more “fancy” houses at least by village standards. Some individuals

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had clearly been making plenty of money to renovate or build all these new houses. They looked expensive but also indicated recently acquired financial wherewithal. Many places that had been beautiful verdant agricultural lands on the way had been turned into depressing, half-finished cement buildings. There was a clear disparity between how extravagant many individual houses looked versus the poor state of public services like sewage and roads that were mostly unchanged from the Ba'ath era. During its 35 years in power, the Ba'ath regime had made serious efforts to modernize Iraq's infrastructure in cities and villages. The road from Erbil to Duhok was the same: the only thing that had changed since the Saddam Hussein years was that it has become even narrower, dangerous, and the potholes had only worsened over the years. I saw a clear pattern of how most wealth was being used for individual rather than communal interests. These images reminded me of the anthropological literature we studied on "development." Here, development looked so much like destruction and impoverishment.

My thoughts were interrupted when we stopped at a checkpoint—there were so many of them—and the officer asked everyone to present their IDs. I presented the only valid ID I had on me, my American passport. As soon as he looked at it, he asked me to get out of the car. He said to the officer next to him in Kurdish, "We need to check this to make sure it's an authentic passport." The checkpoint looked like a kiosk, with barely a wooden cover on top to protect against Iraq's unforgiving summer sun. I wondered how they were going to check the passport's authenticity when they did not seem to have any equipment or machines in place. I decided to just talk to them. I spoke in Kurdish and told the officer that I was from the region and had just returned after ten years in the United States, which is why I did not have a valid local ID. My IDs had expired. As soon as I spoke in Kurdish and he heard my name, his tone changed 180 degrees, "Welcome home, my dear brother!" I got back into the taxi and it drove away.

I told the driver the same brief story about why I had no valid local IDs, so this helped for the rest of the trip. He did the talking on my behalf at the other checkpoints and everything went smoothly. I realized that the first task before I could even begin my ethnographic work was to renew my local IDs. I could only imagine how a non-Kurd would feel and be treated when going through all these checkpoints where one could pass just by simply speaking Kurdish or be stranded if they did not speak the language, even if their IDs were valid. In many ways, the language, the sect, and the ethnicity are the IDs

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in post-US occupation Iraq—the “new Iraq.” In fact, at many checkpoints, I observed that they would not even ask for an ID. The first thing they would do is profile the person based on their face and language. If it became clear that they did not speak Kurdish, they would be stranded and interrogated. I noticed over time that some displaced Arabs had learned what one might call “basic checkpoint Kurdish.” But even that was no guarantee for being allowed to “pass.” The officers could recognize faces. Arabs or Arab-looking people were to be interrogated. Further, sometimes they would prolong the conversation and by the second or third question, the Arab’s “checkpoint Kurdish” would fail, causing serious difficulties for them.

My impressions from the first day, and even before reaching Duhok, was that the region functioned on an ethno-nationalist system where language acted as a metonym for power (and disempowerment) and residency cards were a prerequisite for the existence of non-Kurds, especially Arabs. What all these elements have in common is their incredible resemblance to the pan-Arabist project. In fact, Kurdish ethno-nationalism seemed like an amplified and more intense version of pan-Arabism, which seemed to be over and done with. But it was not over: it had simply been passed on from Arabs to Kurds to implement this new project called “the new Iraq” or “the new Middle East” imposed and facilitated by the American invasion. There was such a deep anti-Arab sentiment that it was a blessing not to be an Arab then and there. Little did I know that these first observations and encounters from the early days were going to be central for understanding the lives of the exiled and internally displaced academics and, in turn, to understanding what had happened to Iraq and how things *became that way*.