

# Returning exiles struggle to make sense of land of no dreams

Those who have been away for decades are shocked at the decay and gaudiness of Baghdad, which has no electricity, no work and not much hope, writes **Heidi Kingstone**

Iraq's palms seem to grow more majestically than other palms – their trunks higher, their fronds fan out in more perfect circles, somehow in the fertile crescent they are more ancient, and more beautiful. Prior to the 1980s, before the Iran-Iraq war, 40 million palms flourished in Mesopotamia. Since that time the number has slipped to 10 million, due in part to Saddam Hussein's disastrous agricultural policies.

Tamara Daghestani remembers cool summers, not the oppressive heat that now characterises the hot months of June, July and August. The trees, she thinks, helped keep Baghdad fresh and dust-free. Perhaps those are only the dream-like memories of a romantic exile who has spent decades grieving for her homeland.

She remembers the cool house of her childhood in the 1940s. Dried desert gorse would be woven into

chicken wire and suspended in wooden frames that hung on the window frames. Water dripping down their coarse branches acted as an effective form of air-conditioning as the breeze blew through the house. Every street had a stream running down one side and summer nights were spent sleeping on the roof. Now dust blows up in the heat.

There is nothing obviously beautiful or ancient about Baghdad's huge boulevards and urban sprawl, just decay, gaudiness and sometimes behind the dilapidation, an oddly lovely house. Baghdadis are no longer even aware of the ugliness, but returning exiles, like Daghestani, cannot even recognise former family homes or areas.

Those returning and those who stayed make strange pairs. Daghestani, who has worked closely with Iraqi National Congress leader Ahmed Chalabi, now part of the Governing Council set up in mid-

July by Paul Bremer, the US ambassador, has returned after years living in Jordan. "I can't believe it's the same country," she says with dismay.

Along with Chalabi, who seems to have grown into the unsuitable arrogance of a man who thinks he will be king, and many others, she worked from outside the country to get rid of Hussein. In the al-Mansour house in which she now stays there is no generator, unlike those of many former exiles, and the rooms are sweltering, life is chaotic and difficult. During the night you can hear cats wailing, and as the dawn breaks, roosters start a dialogue that goes on until sunset. At five in the morning other people's generators seem to make an awful lot of noise. Iraqis of all sorts meander through looking for advice, to find out what's going on, to see if anyone can help them, to build bridges to what may be useful connections. It's tough and disillusioning.

This is the experience of many because there is no electricity, no work, no security and not much hope. Another disgruntled Iraqi, Hamid Al Ramahy, says: "Bush brings bombs but nothing else. Before the war I said if the Americans brought those exiles to power I would take refuge in another country. Freedom will not come on the back of a tank."

Tanks park on virtually every street corner in the main part of town and it is hard to go for too long without seeing convoys riding around, or soldiers wandering off to get a cool-drink in a local shop. Occasionally you see them wrestling an Iraqi man to the ground, or people wandering up to the Americans to have a chat. There doesn't seem to be much integration but curiosity exists on both sides. Iraqi friends who I had met, sisters Susan and Sarah and their mother Esmaa, talked to a bunch of young soldiers who hadn't yet tried local food but wanted to. So

these very strict Muslim women told them to wait for two hours, at which point they would bring some home-made food for them. "We love Americans," whispered the girls.

Arab hospitality is as exceptional as it is legendary. In their once middle-class home there is no furniture. Nothing. Not a chair, virtually no decoration, no books except for the girls' schoolbooks. The house has no generator, so when the temperature soars to 50°C it is unbearable. Yet these lovely women prepared a meal for the soldiers and took it to them as they promised. And the soldiers ate it. Both sides surprised by the other.

Surprise is an element of Iraqi life. In al-Mutannabi market, named after the most famous Iraqi poet who lived more than 1000 years ago, walking there with two other Iraqi friends, Wisam and Raed, we stopped to look at newspapers, an industry which at this moment is proliferating. Dozens were lined up on the

pavement: *Another Day, Al Muttamar, Iraq Today, The Echo, The Truth, The New Iraq*, and so on, selling for 500 dinars (about 40c). Noticing our interest, the shopkeeper brought out some old copies that had been piled up in the shop window. Raed picked up an issue of *Al Thawra, the Revolution*, the Ba'athist party paper from December 25 1988, which always had a front-page picture of Hussein.

Five hundred dinars is not a lot of money, even in Iraq. That little amount can secure your electricity in certain neighbourhoods. At Raed's home, at night they often sit by the light of an oil lamp. Now people who control the local grid go around to each home and say that if you give them 500 dinars they will guarantee your electricity.

Rumours and lies are a huge feature of life here, and nobody trusts anyone. It will be one the Americans' main problems, of which they have

many, and not much time. Most people give them a year to get the situation up and running so that Iraqis feel they have benefited – patently not the case now. The biggest US failure so far is their inability to have communicated their vision to the Iraqis. Part of that problem is that the US state department and the CIA had one vision of reality and the Pentagon another.

Iraqis are proud people. An officer who served in the Iraqi army for 27 years and made \$15 a month told Wisam that army life was the best thing that had ever happened to him. Once the Americans came and disbanded the military (they are recruiting again) he was unemployed.

"I have no job, no car, no house. Why should I have hope? I must leave my country. Even washing dishes is better than this." "Americans have dreams, said another Iraqi who had returned from years of living in London. "Iraqis have no dreams."