

To Accelerate Time: Reflections on Artmaking in Post-invasion Iraq

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Nearly fifteen years ago, I embarked on what would become an arts and education project in Baghdad: *Sada*. The Arabic word *sada* translates to “echo”; the use of sound to calculate the distance between two points was how I initially conceptualized what *Sada* could do. At the time, I knew Baghdad through my family, writing it down as my birth city on passport applications and official paperwork. I knew it through visits as a child and teenager, having flown there on an otherwise empty plane in the late 80s and having driven alongside massive semitrucks on a route from Amman in the late 90s, when a post-Gulf War no-fly zone had made it the only way we could get in. In 2010, seven years after the second US-led war against Iraq, I went to Baghdad again, this time on a direct flight packed with men in suits and military gear. The idea of closing the distance between Baghdad and a part of the world warring against this capital city, I could see in this plane, was redundant. Here there was no distance; this flight was full of people from all over the world coming to Iraq to profit, to contract, to labor, to kill.

The first US-led war on Iraq, two decades prior to that flight, flooded television screens and instructed the world, through its images of high-tech bombardment, that Iraqis no longer held a right to life. The shuttering of Iraq by the global coalition created a bizarre situation for all Iraqis, perhaps most of all those living in its storied and devastated capital. They could reside in the center of the world’s attention, and in its crosshairs, but remain, above all, isolated and shut out of its consciousness.

Tired of this dichotomy, I wanted to work with artists in that center, not those circulating or producing outside of it. In 2011, I began working with emerging art-

ists and art students in Baghdad—some from the Institute of Fine Arts, some from the Baghdad University College of Art, some unaffiliated—in order to find ways to connect material to production, and to make space for critical conversations on work and experience.

The project was small in scale. I was based for the most part in Amman, then Beirut, nearby cities from which I could engage and recruit Arabic-speaking artist-teachers. The artists in Baghdad weren't attending dual-language schools, as the previously excellent education system in Iraq had been heavily impacted since the early 90s. Moreover, they didn't have multiple passports and access to art programs overseas, unlike the vast majority of artists presented on the Middle East global arts circuit. Sada was meant to meet the artists in Baghdad in the extraordinary place where they were. The majority of our workshops were taught online, via Skype, before COVID mainstreamed distance-learning technology and terminology; the wars had already made this a necessity for us, with the distinction that, in our case, the at-risk population was targeted. Within five years, we had encountered issues with students unable to travel to workshops due to car bombs, political infiltrators, and, finally, the encroachment of ISIS into Baghdad. Our programs ended in 2015, and since then several of the original members of Sada, like so much of the population, have come to reside outside Iraq's borders.

In the fall of 2021, I was approached by documenta fifteen to conceive of a project that could somehow activate or engage Sada once again. I knew that it wouldn't make sense to try and do a one-off program, or anything temporary for that matter. I still received questions about Sada, about what was happening with the arts in Baghdad, if it was safe enough to visit, if there were any artists I could rec-

ommend for this or that exhibition. Sometimes I played along, thinking I should be helpful, thinking maybe some incremental change was possible. But incremental change, even when possible, is rarely beneficial. It allows for stagnant, self-congratulatory thinking, when slightly moving the needle is nothing to be proud of.

I wanted to find a way to take those questions I was asked and turn them around. Because if there was any sense of what artists—in fact, most residents—went through under and after occupation, it might recenter the entire conversation. I never wanted to be asked if there were any “good” artists left in Baghdad. I wanted those curators, funders, and program directors to ask themselves who *they* were. Did they know there was a thirty-year war the countries where they lived most likely played a role in? Did they know the violations, the genocides, and the everyday horrors these wars wrought? This project came out of the idea of situating the terrain that had informed the participants' own emergence as artists. We had the same number of years, seven, between the start of the invasion of Baghdad (2003) and the start of Sada (2010) as we did between the end of Sada (2015) and the start of this process (2022). The same number of years to find the space to remember.

Our goal of documenting what unfolded in that time span led us to film. Though we had never worked in film, its promise as a personal, historical, visual record that by nature enabled free circulation (no visa procurement or MFA needed) convinced us it was the right medium for our project. I knew I didn't want to be flying around the world with a camera, asking interview questions about what was or what could have been. Each artist had material only they could excavate, to understand more of what it was they went through as Iraqis, as

artists, and as young people during this world-shattering period they lived in. Of course, the reality is in the thousands of small and big ways worlds begin to unravel and become sewn into another daily life, traversing omnipresent death, targeting, and the sounds, feelings, and smells that live alongside life's demise. Also living alongside it is the artists' own force—to create a life and practice with unflinching articulation. I asked these artists if they would be interested in making films, because (re)activating Sada required their own words and images. To know more about that time, in that place, I had to ask if this project would be useful to explore, similar to the questions I first asked them years before. The result was an anthology film, *Sada [regroup]* (2022), comprising five short films, each made by a different artist, including one by me.

Just as we were about to reunite after so many years apart, to meet together again in Germany, we were forced to contend with yet another violence. For the 12th Berlin Biennale, taking place simultaneously with documenta in Germany, several works by former Sada members had been included, part of a sprawling edition that claimed to be centered on a decolonial notion of “repair.” Contrary to any hope of repair, the works by Sada members were razed by their positioning next to an installation by a French artist. This “artwork” consisted of a maze built from reproductions, enlarged to life-size, of the leaked images of Iraqis being raped and tortured by US soldiers at Abu Ghraib. Each of us had agreed to participate in this biennale; none of us had been told that a work exploiting and using the torture of Iraqi civilians unjustly incarcerated would be included in the exhibition, let alone that the work of Iraqi artists would be positioned and separated into parts by it. While heading to Kassel to

install and present the films we had devoted our time and experience to, we had to navigate our own shock and betrayal by the curators to whom we had entrusted our work and knowledge—only to have it used to do exactly what our films were created to work against.

For this and other reasons, I am grateful we have this opportunity to speak together about Sada and the films we made. When I was asked to write about *Sada [regroup]*, I knew that, like the film, such a reflection would require multiple authorship. The following roundtable is assembled from a series of conversations with each contributing artist/filmmaker: Sajjad Abbas, Ali Eyal, Sarah Munaf, and Bassim Al Shaker. Their remarks have been edited for clarity and brevity.

Sajjad Abbas

For me it is really important to show what we did, because we made art in a time that was not easy to live. Making art, in Baghdad, each of us had a lot to say because we had been through so much. I was lucky that I recorded many of those moments in my life. And we have the same memories, so when I saw the films at documenta, I felt like we were continuing each other's ideas, because of all we shared through our art and in our life, as friends, as teachers, as students. Finally, we regrouped for this festival, which was amazing for me. Making something was easy because I have been taking videos since the time of Sada and wondering what I should do with the footage.

At the same time, I was upset in Germany, to see documenta and the Biennale not happen in Iraq. I was upset about that because I was hoping that Sada would continue in Baghdad, that it would continue to educate people. In Baghdad, there is always a new generation that wants to learn, to make art, to live. I want to show our films in Baghdad. To show what we

had, what we learned, and what we went through there, in that moment.

When I saw the films, I was really proud of us—as individuals and as a people. I was proud because each of us had something to tell, a difficult moment that made us artists and changed our lives. We were really young at that time, students. And at documenta we became friends all over again, as adults, laughing and spending time together. It was a really happy moment for me, sharing our experience, because it had been hidden for a long time—and this was an opportunity to show what was hidden. Hidden by time. Hidden by struggle. Still, every time I entered our screening room, I couldn't rewatch the films. It was difficult for me to see all the history of what we had been through. Each of us now has a different life; we are all busy trying to make a life somewhere else. And our history is buried under the dust of time. So this was a way to excavate it, to make it visible.

Making this film was the first moment I felt I could connect with an idea and speak from it, in my own visual language. Filmmaking is one of the tools that I can use to speak; it is one of my languages. I can use the picture as my tongue, to feel and to express. I've worked on fiction and short films, but this film was very different. I put everything I've learned into it. And everything that I have been through—life itself in Baghdad—is expressed in these images.

There's a moment in the film when I'm in France, and I show a life where things are easy: people are dancing, playing music, having fun. Even the police seem like nice police. When I'm in a place like that, it's like I'm in a dream. It's a time that is not my reality. My reality is something different. And it is my responsibility to change this reality, because I belong to the place I have memories in.

I learned art from my family. I learned from the violence that impacted us, the financial situation, and how my mom and my brothers reacted to all of it. I was trying to learn oil painting during the time of Saddam and the sanctions. We're from Sadr City, a long way from wealthy areas like Mansour, where there were art classes. My brother took me to Mansour one day, and I had never seen a place like it, with that much wealth. Each class was nine dollars; it would take three months of working to get that kind of money under sanctions. I told my brother I couldn't go again. I learned on my own instead.

Where I come from is important to me. I want to stay in Baghdad to share my knowledge with the generation coming up now. If no one stays, how can there be change? In documenta, we were showing the films and celebrating together, and it was beautiful, but how beautiful would it be if this moment could happen in Baghdad? We haven't had a chance to voice our history from the inside, because the violence has never ended. If you leave Iraq, who will write the history? Politicians? No, I will not accept it. This is the way America manipulates people in the lands it occupies, by forcing them to flee to other places, to emigrate, and using that to its benefit, to retain control.

Ali Eyal

The idea for our participation in documenta was to capture where we are at this point in our lives and careers, many years after working together at Sada. Sometimes it's good to have distance. In my video, I mention a question that was posed to me about Karbala. A foreign professor asked, "What would you do if you were an artist in the historic battle of Karbala?" For me, there are people I lost not thousands of years ago, but recently. So to hear this theoretical question about the historic

battle of Karbala, well, how can we represent that battle when we have normalized our own contemporary battle? One needs distance to see that reality. We are living inside a tragedy that is ongoing. If you are living in Baghdad, you will not recognize the things around you, but when you travel abroad, you understand different realities. In Baghdad, we were living in a battle, and we had to travel through the conflict as a part of day-to-day life. You pass car explosions, bombs, and then you arrive at lecture and you hear this question. The distance of six years enabled me to answer this question. The video investigation is my answer, or a set of answers.

When you invited me to make a film, I started with empty white paper. I come to my works as fragments, and I don't believe in research. I started with a short story, as I always do, and then I translated it into an object. This process took me to the most intimate object in any Iraqi house: the wardrobe. The wardrobe is like a small house in itself, a small world. I think of my parents putting their clothes inside. They appear to me like countries on a map, as if I were seeing them from a bird's-eye view. At the end of the film, the wardrobe becomes the artist, the author of the story. The wardrobe is the real Ali, open. I turned the wardrobe into myself because I lost Ali back home, and what I carry with me now is different. Here, I'm a witness to my own life, with the wardrobe as a placeholder, a proxy for myself. The sound of the wood cracking and creaking—I carry all this with me. I carry the multiple works in the wardrobe, small fragments, based on memories, which I introduce in each piece, as if I'm fertilizing my imaginary land. And by moving my imaginary land in each corner of the wardrobe, I'm telling a different story, fertilizing the grounds of my memory.

Each work I produce haunts other works. When I start a new project, the previous one will haunt it. That's why I read the letter written in 2022 of an artist thinking about his past and future, a letter written by the farm insects from another project. I found the insects eating the letter. It's a kind of autobiography: I'm just the medium, or the assistant of Ali in that work. There were real events that happened to me personally, that are behind me as memories, and which I hold on to for the future. To keep that Iraq alive, and to keep those stories alive, I have to keep feeding it with my imagination. So I'm using this farm that I lost as a metaphor, a way of keeping my strong memories of Iraq alive.

If before the invasion we could say, "The walls have ears," after the invasion, there are no ears, no walls. I think about the keys my father bought, to protect us from the marines, from militias—but they can just break down any door. So we are all born in the struggle; it is part of us. There is no rest. When you travel abroad, you focus even more on Iraq. You look for it. When you wake up, you find yourself in the past, and already the news has passed. Imagine one day we will forget our faces, what we look like.

Years ago, when we moved from Mahmoudiya to Baghdad, the only thing in the empty house was a mirror. We looked at our faces and we were surprised, because of the intense time we had in Mahmoudiya. Even when the electricity would go out, I thought the darkness was more beautiful in Baghdad. We felt the house in Mahmoudiya was haunted. The bed would shake on its own at midnight. I would tell my mother, but the same thing would happen to her. I would see things. Steps on the ceiling. This is why, as a kid, when we moved to Baghdad, the darkness was beautiful for me. These were such

crazy days. At 2 a.m. the marines would come to search our homes. And we experienced all these things when we were only twelve years old. When we travel abroad, this critical distance channels our experience into a clear vision. But when we go back to Baghdad and get busy with everyday life, and with its intimacies, we forget it.

Sarah Munaf

When we first talked about the film project, I knew I wanted to frame my past in Baghdad and my current life in Turkey. But I had to narrow that down. At the same time, I had forgotten so much of what happened, and it was only through the process of creating the narrative for the film—through talking with my sister and Brian Conley, one of my mentors, about the project—that I began to remember who I was before. I had to get back to that person who existed before.

I didn't forget who I was because so much time had passed. I forgot because I was navigating a new life: a new country, a new language, new people. When you have to do that from scratch, alone, your mind can't focus on the old, and you have to forget. I even forgot the years I lived with my family. It was the same with Sada. I had to talk about it again to remember our work together, our trips together. For the film, I used social media because it helped me remember at the same time as I was telling the story. It also communicated how fast my life was going. Maybe I also wanted to accelerate time, because what was happening was so painful.

Sada changed many things within us. In Baghdad, there was not a lot of movement, because we had no exchange with people outside Iraq, and there were not many artists left in the generation before us. With Sada, we were able to meet artists

in different countries, including Iraqis living abroad like Sinan Antoon, and to learn about different ideas and schools of thought. We were able to see new work, explore new possibilities, and talk among one another. Sada opened things up for us, and this film project, years later, was a new form that opened something up for me. I changed through making the film. It was a way for me to see myself, to ask myself, What's next? Will I have a life after this, and what will it be?

It was very hard to get the footage for my film from Baghdad. I couldn't go myself because of the restrictions of my residency in Turkey. The friends I asked in Baghdad were scared, because taking video is not allowed. In the end, the person who shot the video was able to do it without anyone noticing. But everything is restricted. It's like you're a prisoner.

It's not easy for those of us who moved, either. It's been six years since I've seen my father. My brother got married and has kids, who are growing, and I haven't been able to see them. My parents were living for a few years in Ukraine. After the war started there, they left for Scotland to join my sister. No one knows how long they will stay; maybe they will have to go back after the war. I want to go to Scotland and maybe work with my father, who is a ceramicist, but visas don't come easily. My parents and I are trying to find a way for us all to see each other. Maybe it will happen, maybe it won't.

There is more I want to say, since I wasn't given a visa to be in Germany for documenta. My film is just one small part of what has happened. There are so many Iraqis who experienced much darker things. There are even things that happened to me that I couldn't bring myself to talk about. It's hard to say it all. But I want to say there are forces bigger than us Iraqis that caused this. We had to live

the upheaval, but we didn't decide any of this; it wasn't in our hands. People in other countries think we are the problem, but it's not us, and it's so hard to live after what we have gone through. I want to ask viewers, Did you get the film? What did you think after you saw it? Do you understand what people are living through in Baghdad? I hope there will be a chance to talk about the film with others one day, and I hope there will be another chance to say the things I want to say.

For my generation, it wasn't a hard year or two; all the years were hard. When I was little, it was the Iran-Iraq War, then the first Gulf War. I remember wanting to go to the University of Art during the time of sanctions, and thinking about how much it cost to ride the bus. Then in 2003 it became even harder; there was so much killing. I had a classmate who played guitar. When the Americans first came, the soldiers thought he was carrying a gun, and they shot him. That was my first memory from that school. So I knew we were all targets and we might all die at any moment. The problems got bigger and bigger: 2006, 2007, so much killing. No film can convey how bad it was; nothing can. You'd wake up in the morning and go outside and see bodies on the street. Those who lived before us only lived with a dictator; they didn't see death the way we did. I don't know if anyone has. Every week, I would see at least two or three dead. Neighbors, others, dead. If you see that every week, how do you make art? Then, by the time I finished my master's degree, all the corruption, and the Islamic State. At one point the university closed, explaining that, since we were artists, we were going to be targeted. If you live all of this, I don't think you can make art, or really live. So we all wanted to leave.

Then, when you move, you have no friends, no money, no connections, and

so you want to go back home and work, to support Baghdad and be with family and friends again. But we are getting older, and we can't see each other, and we can't go back. If we were all together, we could do something again, like Sada. We could teach the next generation. It's so hard. They want to ruin Baghdad, and us. It's hard to say, hard to write, hard to make a film about. And unless you go to Baghdad and live there, you'll never know what's happening.

Bassim Al Shaker

When I heard everyone's voice at our first meetings about documenta, I felt like I had gone back home again. When we started Sada, we didn't really know what we were doing; our thinking was all over the place. When Sada came, it helped us to harness our energy into a place we could work from. So coming back together also took us back to that time when we were starting to feel things out. We're all very different after eight years. It's like not being able to see your family for years. Then you do, and everyone has grown; they're all different, and you are too. It was a shock, but in a good way.

You know when you have a dream, and some parts are familiar and some not at all? That's how this felt, because we started out together in Baghdad, during the heaviest of times. We were all in college, or recent graduates of the art school, and then, boom, Sada came. It was like a hurricane, because everything we were learning was completely new and different from what we'd learned in school, which was only technical skills. On the one hand, we were laughing: What is all this? Is it really art? On the other hand, we took it really seriously, once we understood we could think outside the box of traditional artmaking. Sada gave us so much of what we know now, what we continued with, all

in different ways and on different paths. So it's fascinating to remember how we started, to see where we went with it, and to think about what we know now. It was wild. It is wild.

Shakir Hassan al Sayyid was the first artist who really shifted art in Iraq, through abstraction. But the main difference between the artists working during the 70s and 80s and my generation, I believe, is the fear. The fear is different. The generation before mine had more fear, because they lived through one war after another as adults: the Iran-Iraq War and both Gulf Wars. My generation has its own distinct fear, because we grew up between Saddam's regime and the militias and today's government. Under Saddam, you had to look behind you; you couldn't say anything, even in your own home, because someone might report you. The fear was everywhere. My generation lived only a small part of that. But when Saddam was gone we had a new kind of fear: of militias, of bombs. The generation born after mine, in 2000 or later, has much less fear than we did. For them, the militias are still there but in a different way, and the government is weak. So they are less afraid and their voices are louder than ours were. Technology, too, is helping this generation speak up, which is amazing. You can see the changes starting with the Tishreen [October] movement. I never imagined a movement like that could take place.

Initially, working on the documenta films was a serious challenge for everyone, because we are not filmmakers. The prospect of creating and sharing films at one of the largest art events in the world, having never worked in this medium, was a nightmare. But we used our materials—the materials we use to paint, to perform—to make film. For example, I used my drawing skills to do animation, so it

was still in my world. The process opened up new ways to use moving images; prior to this I didn't think I could use film in the ways that I did.

I didn't see all the films together until we got to documenta. I was curious what I would see. Would it make sense in the context of documenta? Are we good enough? I had all these questions. But when I saw the exhibition, I was very happy. And every time I watch the films, I find more and more in them.

Someone asked me why I mixed stop-motion and hand-drawn animation, because usually people do one or the other. It's because when the militia took me and beat me, I couldn't do anything, but this time I could control them and move them and talk to them. I cried several times when I made the figures of the men in the militia. I was talking to them, holding them, and moving them around while making the stop-motion, and I was happy, because I was the one in charge of them. I realized this at documenta as I watched the film over and over again and stepped outside of myself. This film exposed only a small snapshot of my experience. At some point I want to make a longer, more detailed film. But that is for another time.