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NAVIGATING (UN)SAFE SPACES: ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN THE DIASPORA

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This paper will discuss the complex and often challenging circumstances that each one of the writers has faced while doing research in and about the Arab world. We live in North America, either because we migrated to it or because we were born there as part of a diasporic community of scholars and activists. I am grateful to the organizers for bringing us together. We will be speaking about our experiences, so I will keep the introductions to a minimum.

Suad Joseph and I are retired academics from the University of California at Davis and George Washington University, respectively. We have, at different times, led the Middle East Studies Association, the main scholarly organization of Middle East scholars in North America. Suad played a pioneering role in the development of Middle East women's studies in the US and was a founding member and editor of the Journal of Middle East Women's Studies.

Louis Yako obtained his doctorate in anthropology from Duke University and writes often in *Counterpunch*. He teaches, and consults on educational projects for a variety of organizations. His book, *Bullets in Envelopes: Iraqi Academics in Exile*, was published by Pluto Press in 2021 and will bring into the discussion the experience of displaced scholars forced into exile by war, an experience that many scholars from Yemen, Syria, Libya, and Sudan share.

Fahima Hashim is a feminist activist from Sudan who was the founder and director of Salamah Women's Resource Center in Khartoum, which she led from 2005 to 2014, when she was forced into exile in Canada. She brings to this discussion the perspective of someone whose activism seeks to affect policy, as she does, and the experience of conducting research on women's lives, research that undergirded attempts to change politics.

I will begin with brief remarks on my experience in the US academy. I am a Lebanese historian who was born and raised in Kuwait and who completed much of my secondary and undergraduate education in Lebanon.

While my experience might be somewhat typical of my generation of diasporic scholars, it is shaped mostly by my fateful choice to research and write on Iraq, a country that became the laboratory of the US new world order, and for the experimentations and the missionary zeal that informed the imperial logic of liberal democracy. I will talk a little bit about what it means to be a non-Iraqi diasporic scholar trying to do research and write about a country that shaped US foreign policy in the region for more than twenty years. I want to talk primarily about the challenges of conducting research and writing about Iraq and conclude with a few words about the politics of diasporic scholarship in the U.S.

I began teaching at George Washington University in 1991, just after the conclusion of the First Gulf War, and continued to teach and write about Iraq through the 2003 invasion. I conducted research for my dissertation in Iraq in 1985. I planned to go back in 1990 to finish the research for a book but could not do so because of the war.

In practical terms, Iraq became closed to US-based researchers, a situation that continued after 2003 because of the war, the insurgency, and civil war that ensued, the looting of the archives, and the disintegration of the infrastructure of research and knowledge production. This is a situation that Iraq shares with other countries that have experienced war.

Only in the past ten years have researchers been able to access archives and libraries. In places like Mosul and Basra, the research institutes and the libraries that had existed under the Ba'th are only a shadow of what they had been.

Young historians continue to depend primarily on archives outside Iraq, with some making short research visits to the country over the past three years to reinforce research undertaken elsewhere. This is not due to their lack of trying. Navigating the new bureaucracy of Iraq, understanding the needs of the various stakeholders that hold the key to access, the ever-changing rules imposed on access, and the disorganization of the archive make it difficult for those with limited time and resources to conduct research. You really need deep local knowledge, access to private libraries, basically, a longtime residency of the type we used to have as researchers in places like Egypt and Syria, but which is no longer available. Much of the research on the modern history of Iraq takes place in Britain, the US, Israel, and Istanbul. This results in written histories of Iraq in which location becomes peripheral to the production of knowledge.

Equally important are presentist concerns that govern US policy and the funding for research projects on Iraq that focus on the recent past or the current crisis. These concerns also inform the work of scholars like me. My first book was on Iraq under Ottoman rule, but the invasion of Iraq in 2003 compelled me to write a book on Iraq before the invasion. Presentist concerns focus on violence, sectarianism, tribalism, state formation, diasporic politics, urban studies, and feminist studies. All these research projects have secured funding and resulted in several excellent books and dissertations produced by social scientists. The overall result, however, has been that Iraq appears as an ungovernable space plagued by conflict, a trope that carries deep implications for scholars trying to produce scholarship outside paradigms set

by 19th-century European scholarship that informed the politics of the Eastern Question and continues to shape US policies in the region.

The availability of the archives of the Iraqi Ba'th party and of the Iraqi state to researchers in the U.S. and Europe has not made a meaningful dent in this view of Iraq. The archives were looted by the US occupying forces and by one of its contractors, the Iraq Memory Foundation. As one of the first scholars to use these archives, I can speak to the politics and ethics of using them. What interests me here is the impact on the kind of scholarship that the archives have produced in the U.S. With several notable exceptions, most of the scholarship has focused on authoritarianism, Islamism, sectarianism, tribalism, and Saddam Hussain, all questions of great interest to US policy makers.

When scholars, particularly diasporic scholars, seek to decolonize knowledge of Iraq, they face the difficulty of needing to reproduce this knowledge in order to challenge it. The conundrum of much of what we do lies in our inability to completely bracket the whole edifice that has shaped scholarship on the region and move on. As a historian, I envy my colleagues who work on Russian and Chinese history, who do not have to write long introductions to their books or articles that begin with how they challenge Western paradigms of their region.

I want to conclude with a few words about diasporic politics in the US. It is important not to view an Arab diaspora as a block that is immune to rivalries about the kind of truth claims they make about the scholarship of the region. These rivalries are to be expected in any vibrant intellectual community. But in cases of countries like Iraq, Palestine, and—to a lesser degree—Syria, where the US has played a prominent role in shaping conflict in the region, the rivalries often center around who has the right to make truth claims about Iraq in the U.S, and who speaks for the country. Do Iraqis, by virtue of their national origin, speak a more authentic truth than other members of the diaspora? Do Palestinians and Lebanese do the same for their countries of origin? I often ask myself this question because an Arab friend who worked on Jewish communities in Ottoman Syria raised it more than thirty years ago. Can non-Jews write Jewish history? What sort of truth claims are they authorized to make?