

Foreword:

In Sami Abdul Rahman Park

Gardening is cheaper than therapy, and it produces flowers and vegetables. A love of highly gardened public parks was one of the many dispositions that Sami Abdul Rahman acquired in England, and that he took back to his homeland. Archeologists suggest that his homeland may have been one of the first places on the planet where people started steering water to garden on a large scale. A graduate of the University of Manchester, in that wet city of the north of England, Sami lived much of his life as an exile from his homeland, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Sentenced to death *in absentia* by Saddam Hussein's regime, Sami and his wife, Fawzia, lived out their exile in Syria, Turkey, Iran, and England. He and his family eventually found an ordinary family home in Chislehurst in Kent, which overlooked green fields where horses grazed. In his younger years Sami had been an officer in the guerrilla army of the legendary Mulla Mustafa Barzani, the Pershmerga—"those who face death." In that role he had planned and led a daring raid on the Kirkuk oil fields in 1969.

"Sami's Park," as it is known in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region, was named after Sami Abdul Rahman. After all, he had initiated it. Its opening was delayed to let the trees within grow taller, and stronger, before Kurdish children clambered all over them. Trees and flowers are now in abundance in the manicured park, and so are fountains and artificial lakes. Kurdistan has always been rich in rivers and water if not in other ways. Aside from the high pollen count, there is now an abundance of children's climbing frames, playground challenges, and toys. Old couples in Western clothes walk by toward evening. Young couples follow later, sometimes in more traditional clothes, though the women wear the bright colors and make-up frowned upon by puritanical mullahs. Most promenade in their Friday best, but the occasional jogger, skateboarder, and huckster can be seen, though we saw no beggars. Students can be seen looking at their books, in between looking at each other. It is but a short walk to the Parliament, the Kurdistan National Assembly, and to the Council of Ministers behind it, where Sami once had his offices. He was the deputy prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government until February 1, 2004.

As well as landscape gardening, Sami Abdul Rahman was determined to bring parliamentary democracy to Kurdistan and federalism to Iraq. I recall watching him instruct young Kurdish civil servants on how to take notes: to be unob-

trusive during meetings with citizens and foreign dignitaries while remaining polite and attentive to the needs of strangers. I can see him presiding over a public seminar in the Parliament after a foreign professor had presented a talk on models of federalism, engaging the audience of Kurdish civil society, and restraining himself from doing their thinking for them. I also remember the twinkle in his eye as he laughed at US and British ambassadors, past and present, who were unable to restrain their arrogant presumptions; or him smiling at the tale of an officious Welsh diplomat telling Kurdish women that they should just be “Iraqis,” when he, as a Londoner, knew that she was both Welsh and British.

I was last in the garden in 2009, and I knew he’d be pleased to see what had become of it. The city of Erbil has become not only normally modernized, but elegantly so. It is attracting its own citizens to a public life, as well as attracting curious Arab tourists from the Gulf and also al-Iraq al-Arabi—Arabs from Iraq, as those who are called the Kurds of Iraq typically put it. The Arab tourists have to get through Kurdistan’s security rim, and they have to be willing to leave their weapons behind.

Brand new hotels are now present near Sami’s park, both the classy and ultra-classy. The reason is simple. Erbil is the capital of the Kurdistan Region, and the Kurdistan Region is experiencing a gold rush, a black-gold rush. Now it has much more than wealth in water. The Kurdistan Region is now known, for certain, to be fabulously rich in oil and gas. Not just in disputed Kirkuk, where one of the world’s largest set of fields has been exploited since 1927, but throughout undisputed Kurdistan. Direct flights to Erbil are available from Amsterdam, Athens, Munich, Stockholm, and Vienna, as well as from Istanbul, Dubai, Cairo, Abu Dhabi, and Beirut.

Just six years earlier on my way to consider Sami’s request that I become one of his advisers, I had flown from Amman through Baghdad on NGO planes, as a nominal member of Archeologists for Human Rights. The alternative route, which I had also taken, involved an eleven-hour car journey from Diyarbakir in Turkey—with no pleasantries exchanged with the Turkish border guards, whose government then still officially denied the existence of Kurds and of a Kurdistan Region. Today Turkish businesses are the largest foreign investors in the non-oil sector and are major partners in many oil and gas exploration companies, and today Erbil has an international airport where 747s can land. I have photographs of it when it was a muddy field with two temporary cabins.

I distinctly recall Sami’s worries in January 2004 about the forthcoming negotiation of Iraq’s Transitional Administrative Law, expected to begin within the week. He was recovering from back surgery, which was obvious when he took my friend Khaled Salih and me around the incipient garden. The surgery had gone well, but it would take time for Sami to walk with ease. He feared that any future constitution of Iraq might be dictated by its Arab (and Shiite Arab) majority, and he wanted to be sure that Kurdistan’s leaders made no more mistakes. Jalal Talabani, the leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), had made a nearly fatal error in November 2003, signing a

letter placed before him by the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority that appeared to countenance an Iraq in which there would be no Kurdistan Region. At least, Talabani claimed that it had been an error, but that was not a view widely held within the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), of which Sami was secretary-general. He was preparing to lead the KDP negotiating team, and he was determined to avoid bickering among Kurds, especially among Kurdish parties. He had once been the leader of his own party, but had made peace with the KDP's historic leading family of nationalists, the Barzanis. Sami was now the key councilor of the KDP. He was the judicious and well-read mentor of Nechirvan Barzani, prime minister of the Kurdistan Region and the grandson of Mulla Mustafa.

The Parliament and Council of Ministers where Sami worked are not far from the Citadel. Believed to have been settled for at least 6,000 (and perhaps as many as 9,000) years, the Citadel looks over Erbil. In 2004 it was a mess of ruined late-Ottoman buildings and impoverished refugees. The Citadel looks as if it is built on a volcanic outcrop, but it is in fact built up from the debris of the cities that have been built successively on it over the millennia. It contains in its bowels and ancient sewers the leftovers from the time of Sargon, Assyria, Akkadia, Babylonia, and the first great Persian Empire. Many temples, churches, and mosques lie in its layers. In 2009 it was being improved. Today it is beginning to match its history: Umberto Eco might add it to his tours in hyper-reality. The Citadel is not far from where in 331 BCE Alexander defeated Darius III to take over the Persian Empire. The battle was named Arbela because, according to some Greek historians, that was the name of the nearest city. The battle was also called "Gaugamela," the Camel's House, which is likely located on the road from the Citadel toward Mosul.

Arbela became Arbil in Turkish and Erbil in Arabic and English. Today its mostly Kurdish citizens call the city Hawler (pronounced Haul-er). The ancestors of the Kurds, a topic worth time, words, and research on another occasion, may have been the Medes, according to today's Kurds. If so, and it is as good a surmise as many, the ancestors of the Kurds likely fought with Darius III against Alexander, that is, for the Orient and against the Occident.* In 2003, however, the Kurdish Peshmerga fought with the Occident's greatest power, the United States, to remove the forces of modern-day Oriental despot Saddam Hussein from all of Kurdish territory in Iraq. Sami and his colleagues already administered the parts of Kurdistan from which Saddam had withdrawn in a failed attempt to starve the Kurds into submission in 1991. In 2003 the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan led the assault on Kirkuk, and the KDP liberated Mosul

*The Kurds' ancestors may also have been the "Carduchians," who "dwelled throughout the mountains, . . . were warlike, [and] did not obey the King," and harassed the Greek mercenaries of Xenophon in 401 BCE. Xenophon, *The Anabasis of Cyrus, with an Introduction by Eric Buzzetti*. Translated by W. Ambler (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 120.

from the Baathists. Shortly afterward, Kurdish intelligence helped track down the fugitive dictator to his spider-hole near Tikrit.

This book, the product of the fine mind of Sherko Kirmanj, is the best available analysis of Iraq as it came to be just before Saddam was ousted from power, and it also provides an initial and fair-minded appraisal of developments through mid-2012. The book is a powerful and dispassionate analysis of Iraq's "principal components," as Iraqis refer to their three major communities—Sunni Arabs, Shiite Arabs, and Kurds—and it does not forget Iraq's many micro-minorities. The three communities are not presented as monoliths; their internal tensions and contradictions are registered; nuances are respected. The book owes its special timbre to its remarkable angle of vision. Its author, a Kurd from the city of Erbil, was determined to avoid a history of grievances and to provide instead an anatomy of the Iraqi state that Winston Churchill, then the British Empire's colonial secretary, had put together. That empire was at the time attempting to pacify revolts in Ireland, India, and soon Iraq.

Sherko Kirmanj's work can profitably be compared with Hanna Batatu's *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba'athists and Free Officers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). The latter, widely regarded as the foundational political sociology of modern Iraq, ends just before Saddam's ascent to the presidency. None of its readers could have predicted the horrors to follow. Strangely, its Palestinian Arab author, though aware of Iraq's internal ethnic and sectarian differences, still felt able to write an account roughly centered on the theme of nation building (and the failure of communism). Dr. Kirmanj has the advantage of hindsight, but he does not fall into the trap of arguing that catastrophe was necessarily inscribed into Iraq's formation. He also offers tempered hopes for the future, though no reader of his book will assume the permanency of either Iraq's federation or of its nascent democratic institutions: breakup and a Shiite Arab rather than a Sunni Arab dictatorship remain genuine possibilities. Kirmanj's work is the product of reflection in exile, but unlike many exiles' work it avoids sentimentalizing or romanticizing aspects of the past, or attributing all that has been most foul in Iraq to Saddam or to the Baath Party.

I was in Sami's Park in 2009 because I had work to do, helping to advise on the Kurdistan Region's own constitution, which is still not issued. I was also having a quiet personal moment with Khaled Salih, paying tribute to Sami by drinking, talking, and walking in the park named after him, where previously there had been one of the gruesome detention centers of Baathist Iraq. A large black-stoned monument graces the park, listing ninety-eight names. It is the Martyrs Memorial. The named persons were killed when suicide bombers exploded themselves at parties being held in Erbil, at the city headquarters of the KDP and the PUK. About two hundred people suffered serious injuries.

Sami is on the list. So is one of his sons, Salah, who had come to visit him from London just after we had last seen his father. Salah was a businessman,

with a young family. The parties were being held on February 1, 2004, because it was the day of the Eid al-Adha, the Festival of Sacrifice, a day on which Muslims recall Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Ismael as proof of his obedience to Allah, before Allah intervened to stop him and provided a sheep as a substitute. Sami had lived long enough after the blast to learn that his son had been killed. He had certainly not wanted his son, a sports enthusiast, to be sacrificed in the Kurdish struggle. Franso Hariri Stadium is where Sami's son would have preferred to have been spending his time. It is where Iraq's international soccer games are now played. The stadium too, however, is named after a martyr; in this case, an Assyrian Christian, a leading light in the KDP, and a governor of Erbil. Franso Hariri was assassinated in 2001 by Kurdish Islamists, members of Ansar al-Islam and confederates of al-Qaeda. Franso, like Sami, was a firm advocate of the beautification of Erbil and Kurdistan.

Khaled and I had been invited to the KDP's 2004 Eid al-Adha party; we also had an invitation to the PUK's party. One of us, however, had a visit to make to his mother in Suleimaniya. The other had to be at a court in London. We were lucky not to be immolated in Sami's sacrifice. Life has generally been good to us since. It is easier to sketch what Sami's country, Kurdistan, has become in the decade since Sami and his son Salah were sacrificed, and since Saddam Hussein's Baathists ceased to rule any part of Iraq. It is far more difficult to describe the horror that has unfolded in Arab Iraq. As Sami would have wished, Dr. Kirmanj writes the truth about Iraq, both when it was grim and when it was better. It is an honor to write a foreword to this pioneering book in the new scholarship of Iraq that is sorely needed, both to puncture past propaganda and to offer a realistic appraisal of feasible futures.

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