



## Ruinination in Wounded Baghdad: Visualizing and Problematizing the Spatialization of Destruction

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<p><b>Abstract:</b> Considering Baghdadi urbanity today translates into contending with spatial destruction and what that leaves behind as far as the spirit of the wounded city. Going beyond the mere physical, pain that is exacted onto space is imprinted upon the psyche of streets and alleyways so much so that the relationship becomes a perplexing one. Place and people alike are beckoned into attempting to reckon and engage with the wound. It has become part of the spatial fabric and so must be looked at as such. History and historiography have additionally illustrated topological ruin that had been visited upon the capital since its founding. Journeying through the recent past and present requires addressing this accumulated spatial confusion. It means taking in the place-based nuances that are as psychogeographical as they are arbitrary. Iraqi creatives have done this repeatedly by rendering the hurt and settling it into their outputs. The problematization of space in this sense is an opportunity to, as the city fell into a new pattern of being, migrate the politics of the situation into a poetics. Disastrous violence essentially fashions a different character. It is only in this way that the cycle of devastation may physically cease to arrest and interrupt existence when it is allowed into the fold of the spatial everyday. It is then that urban life may find a new tone and tenor not merely surviving but allowing woundedness to have potentiality.</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Baghdad, Space and Place, Urbanity, Arts, Wounded Identity, War, Ruination, Dystopia.</p>	<p><b>Review Paper</b></p> <p><b>*Corresponding Author:</b>  <i>Farah Al-Shamali</i>        Kuwait University, College of Arts, Safat 1320, Kuwait</p> <p><b>Article History:</b>          <b>Submit:</b> 22.06.2024            <b>Accepted:</b> 23.07.2024            <b>Published:</b> 25.07.2024  </p>
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“Baghdad is a silent path, and a dome over a shrine  
 A fly in the summer, which is not shaken by a gust of wind  
 A river that after the passing of many years did not flood  
 And sad songs  
 Sadness in it remains, it cannot be shaken!  
 And it is dead, the skeleton of an ancient human...”  
 – Ahmed Abdel Muti Hijazi

The city of Baghdad is today a place where the fragments try to imagine the whole. The sphere of the imaginary, it can be said, is the only refuge where residents are able to conjure up the real-world impossibility of peace. In true Yeatsian mode, “things fall apart, the center cannot hold.” Part of the tragic irony of what is plainly a wounded space is just how much the present image can be separated from where it began quite some time ago. Looking out at rich bazaars and lush palm groves, rulers and their subjects alike hundreds of years before could not have pictured their wondrous capital a

byword for death. Erratic episodes of violence appeared but nothing more. The city has devolved greatly and what was once the hub of intellectual pursuits, and a cultural milestone, is nowadays where “a suicide driver blows up his automobile in the middle of a crowd” (Cavarero 1). Scenes of carnage would become the new normal. The question around spatial identity and how best to negotiate it presents itself when the physical demolition is dealt with and over time is hidden from view. That is, until the next crippling bout of instability. Beyond rightly mourning the victims of these massacres, their dismembered corpses, scores of disoriented families, ruin done to buildings reduced to rubble and a sky that is black with smoke, the residents are left with this predicament. The city of Baghdad must be trying to understand that sharp descent that took it from utopic bliss to being the most attacked and brutalized area in the world. With such grim dystopia that has no signs of deliverance from this unreality, the capital is thrust into a position where there must be a reckoning. Violence has

tragically become part of its urban character and it has been rendered weak with any attempts at resisting ineffectual.

### **The Origin of This Woundedness and Where to Go from Here**

Beginning to understand the urgency of this matter warrants a look at the extent of just how wounded the city is, why it is so broken that nothing short of an overhaul of spatial character seems to be the plausible answer. There are essentially two that play off of one another and can be explored to reveal what it has devolved into at present. The first is most definitely the Iraq War as a pivotal stage in its deterioration and the years of deprivation and weakening leading up to it. This internationally-recognized fiasco would paint "...a riveting portrait of cultural hubris and tell a cautionary tale of what happens when too much power is vested in those with little experience of the world outside the United States" (Preston 802). Every geopolitical blunder exacted upon Baghdad, and Iraq more broadly, since the end of the First World War would culminate in this tragic episode. Urbanity had suffered periodic disturbances before but was inflicted with an open wound from then on because this period would mark a shift in savagery, the cheapening of human life, unimaginable terror and an inability to contain the situation. It is woefully wounded since the destructive incursion has confused life and death. The average Baghdadi will lose himself trying to understand the difference any longer. What this person would be forced to see on a daily basis is inconceivable. From the terribly high frequency of terrorist attacks, often multiple ones in the span of a day, to what turned into the commonplace sight of the dead and dying, the city ceased to be a place "where citizens are able to imagine and perform their identities in relation to each other" (Shabout 163) as the exact opposite happened. The pain endured by conventional public spaces ran so deep, physically and psychologically, that the quite normal expectation of societal functioning came to a screeching halt. This war left a wound seismic enough that it confronted the spatial fabric with a choice. It either swims against the tide or attempts to reimagine itself in light of an inescapable reality. The city is so hurt that woundedness is now part of urban disposition.

The second answer is related to history or the unique relationship that the city has had with destruction stretching back as far as its very inception. Often and understandably so, those who inspect the current damage that has wreaked havoc across Baghdadi space hold it up as a separate moment in time that has taken it down an even more convoluted path. This is correct but there still cannot be a metaphysical wall placed disconnecting the chaos of today and what has become a tradition of violence from the past. This is when the throbbing wound can possibly be conceptualized when historicized. In this way, the sadly fragmented capital can begin to take the critical step of negotiating and, at the end of it all, making sense of its ruin. Woundedness is sedimented

consequently and it is vital to understand the wider context. So it cannot be seen as a standalone event for "it has persisted throughout the centuries, brought various peoples into its orbit, and left individual lives in ruins" (Ibraheem). In effect, it is the perpetual return to ruin. This is what must be acknowledged. It needs to be recognized that Baghdad has a full-blown culture of bloodshed that has been absorbed into its being. The reason why the 2003 invasion created such an arresting reaction is its unapologetic physical force. It had not gone through such a harrowing experience since the siege of 1258 almost eight hundred years ago. In addition, the human cost made those of other momentous historical chapters pale in comparison and the public had to grapple with death as a commonality. Eighteen years after the start of this gory war, one must not forget technologies of the information age that have made the massacre all the more accessible heightening the severity of what Iraq has faced in the twenty first century. Nevertheless, it is part of a continuum of pain so engrained in space that it can and is regarded as just another spatial form. This is the truth of where this place stands today mournfully embodying the wound it bears.

As it is supremely important as a state of being, it is critical to pay particular attention to comprehending the destruction that has been born out of the Iraq War insofar as engaging with it so that a new urban identity can begin to form. It is never a profitable idea to push away the prospect of repurposing ruin towards that end. However, there must also be the intention to dig into the historiographic past of the fallen city to track and communicate the association it has always had with instability. Literature, both prose and poetry, as well as artwork by Iraqi creators over centuries not only document the agony that has been felt but have championed renegotiating it. Within their own troubled minds seeing what had happened to their home, they needed to reconcile this constant regression with the futurity of the Baghdadi space. Creative output from these individuals has meant that the reader and viewer would not simply take in a heart-wrenching lament. These authors, poets and artists have given their innovation free rein to reshape the ethos of the city in the wake of so much ache. Given the perspective of historical distance, as experts and laymen alike look upon and walk among the ruins of Baghdad today, it is empirically factual that wars waged in the past one hundred odd years alone have left a deep psychological wound. It is not just a physical one. Friedrich Nietzsche famously proclaimed that "man, the bravest animal and most prone to suffer, does not deny suffering as such: he wills it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a meaning for it, a purpose for suffering" (120). Even as this context does not fit the Iraqi experience, it speaks to a universal truth no doubt. To live is invariably to suffer and greatly at that. Though to appreciate the misery of the Baghdadi space is to introduce it as a singularly unique kind, no other place on earth having ever encountered such brutality on this scale.

Its woundedness is so central melting into the everyday that it passes unnoticed and so incredibly merciless in asserting itself as the spirit of urbanity that to suffer is to live. Reckoning with a spatiality of ruin most prominently for Iraqi creatives has meant settling it into an artistic space. When this pain is rendered creatively, be it by page or canvas, the individual is bringing to it and wants the public to recognize the incongruity at work allowing a reactionary bitterness to come through far more than a search for meaning. There is always this fickle interplay. Suffering is not manageable, dare one say romantic in the Nietzschean tradition. It is primal and bloody taking more of its share of the everyday so it follows that frustration would permeate. In response to a deeply corporeal wound, not only disrupting life but replacing it with death, emotionality must and does lead without a doubt. What adds intrigue to the entire process is how there is yet an attempt at arriving at a sense of and connotation to destruction. The arts are not simply staged and do not simply stay in the realm of the imaginary contributing to the creation of a poetics that is adopted by actual space. It must be remembered that they are addressing a matter of literal survival and so the stakes are much higher because of the seriousness of the situation. Thus the meaning that is produced moves beyond the page and canvas teaching survivors of a culture of carnage how to accept death. A greater necessity exists for the Iraqi creator because of the dissent into anarchy.

### **Capturing and Visualizing a Topography of Ruin**

Almost immediately after the start of the Iraq War, marking a watershed moment in the deterioration that had been stewing for some time more so than any other, the damage visited upon Baghdad moved it into a new plane of existence. The ruin sunk it to a new topographical low not thought possible after the tragic decades that had passed. Simply put, “the war plan was seriously flawed and incomplete...it was in fact unconscionable” (O’Hanlon). This would amount to a different level of urban regression unlike what it had encountered before. It would be a continuation, when the aerial bombardment and crippling sanctions were aided by a devastating physical incursion. It is critical to remember that what came to pass pre-2003 primed the city for immediate devastation with the George H. W. Bush and Clinton administrations targeting its infrastructure after the Gulf War. Unreservedly, “they destroyed water resources, they destroyed the means for purifying water, they destroyed the health care system, the educational system” (Surlis 601). This would be the last stage of a drawn-out process that reduced the country to Third World status. Many devastating scenes depicted Iraqis inspecting the demolition left behind by many a suicide bombing whether in main districts or poor alleyways where infrastructure was violently defaced. There was a shattering melancholy to the landscape. As celebrated architect and activist Rifat Chadirji stated, “the building is one of the most important tools for social dialogue. If the building was depressing, society will

conduct itself in a depressing environment and become depressing communally” (“Iraqis Interview with Rifat Chadirji”). This was the toxic symbiosis that came to dominate the Baghdadi space from then on and an aura it could not escape.

It is as if negative energy emanates off of the buildings and the frustrating violence that caused it is literally punctured into and then in plain sight on the walls sustaining itself beyond the moment of impact. Sadly, ruin has evolved into a culture in the spatiality of the city. There is also the fragmentation of Baghdad that took shape as sectarian tensions boiled over beginning in 2006 with manned checkpoints peppering primary neighborhoods and creating an odd rhythm to ordinary life. This would have a disturbing effect reconfiguring urban existence and “leaving very limited communal – ethnic, religious and sectarian – heterogeneous spaces” (Ali) going even further to spin the narrative of the essentiality of sectarian politics in the everyday. Though it was promulgated, in admittedly orientalist fashion, as the way society conducts itself, all one would need to do is go back to the relatively recent past to find that “it was not uncommon to write Iraqi history entirely without resort to sectarian labels.” There was a rejection of “sectarian interpretations” which only rarely transmuted “into ideology in Baghdad politics” (Visser 84) and so sectarianization was imposed upon the Baghdadi fabric. Conspiracy theories are no strangers to the conversation on post-2003 Iraq and this is surely one of them, that innate animosity exists between the sects. It has been colloquially discounted as fabrication since and what is left physically is a walled community. It is the outcome of a politically motivated choice, largely because the country has many oil reserves, and hence has no merit in a historiographic sense. Limitation, sectarian profiling and tragic murder destroying many innocent lives that took place for years upon years after the invasion was the material extension of an abstract fallacy.

This imposition of sectarianism was accelerated due to the building of the Baghdad Wall by a division of the United States Army, a five-kilometer structure that began to be erected in April of 2007 around the largely Sunni district of Al-Adhamiyah. According to Claire Kyndt, it represents an orchestrated geopolitical divide aiming to instill “civil pacification” (17) but this would backfire and frustration was naturally expressed. It would therefore not pacify enforcing a strict physical barrier to further an ideological one imported into the public sphere. The experience of the now-dismantled daunting wall which was located in the northeastern part of the city was a jarring one visible from a distance for those approaching it. It dominated the landscape entirely. Indian British critic Homi Bhabha would, upon considering this reality, most probably address its potential for the production of a thirdspace, that “cultural statements and systems are constructed in the contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation...” (37). This is in fact the spatial language that is being

spoken that truly comes into being when the surrounding environment into which this new urban form has intruded tries to resist. The idea is to not remain under the mercy of a binary opposition society had no hand in creating. Certainly, that was the sentiment shared across the Baghdadi population. The consequences say as much what with the “ugly gray slabs” slicing up the capital. There were “at least eleven de facto ghettos both Sunni and Shia” created and they were instrumental in “dividing neighbor from neighbor, choking off all normal communications” (“Baghdad City of Walls”) and this would have a disastrous effect on everyday life. Defeating its purpose, the wall never created peace by containing violence instead sustaining an insincere attempt at it as militias continued to breach closed off areas and kill. This has tragically been maintained over twenty years after the war and is sadly impossible to contain.

In addition, a prevalent feature that has overwhelmed Baghdadi urbanity since the start of this grinding war is the ethnically motivated stratification pitting local against foreign. This is most signified in the fortified Green Zone hosting international presence in the city. Never before had there been such pockets of secured perimeters effectively isolating the Iraqi people from certain buildings like the Coalition Provisional Authority and Embassy of the United States. This was a message of a spatiality of privilege unappreciated by the wider public who suffered at the hands of corrupt forces. That corruption unsurprisingly stemmed from those entities in this location whom they had no access to. Walking through the wounded space, Nabil Salih captures this spatial demarcation and the animosity it has inspired as he comes upon Abu Nawas Street. He acknowledges that “the plastic litter occupying the eastern bank of the Tigris irritates me. But not as much as the corrupt politicians occupying luxurious palaces in the notorious Green Zone on the other confiscated bank of the Tigris” (Salih). His symbolizes the native voice sorely missing and not often heard as part of this narrative. Anyone who looks upon this spatial injustice can witness just how dramatic said urbanity appears such as when Iraqi demonstrators tried to storm the area on October 1, 2019, the first date of the October Revolution calling for the dismantling of the political system. What this urban feature is also indicative of is precisely how different the experience of Baghdad is for the foreigner when compared to the citizen. A popular refrain, but also reflective of the truth of the matter, it is common knowledge and thus an irritation that foreigners are given far more safety and security in this isolated haven which buttresses a kleptocratic political elite.

Despite the fact that it has been deemed the worst city in the world, private businessman Raoul Henri Alcalá leads a life that manages to boast some nuance though everyday Baghdadis would scoff at the idea. He operates a consulting firm over a decade into the American-led invasion living “...in the Green Zone and

says that while choice of location is safer than the outside city, the Red Zone, his location provides its own difficulties” (Taylor). The grievances he goes on to list come off as trivial against the death and destruction faced by those on the outside, everything from where he does his grocery shopping to the inaccessibility of minor comfort items. He and others like him will always encounter a spatiality divorced from the surrounding chaos understanding the extent of what happens on the other side but not ethnographically. The physical divide has ultimately formed an ideological one. Central to this thought process is that those within the protected zone shared in the collective suffering but this was not entirely true. They could sympathize with the plight of Iraqis but theirs was a space drilling into them the precariousness of their own situation. Enraged Baghdadis trying to scale the impenetrable walls were terrorists never people who call this land home and are deprived of basic services. It can be seen in wider society today how they have been dealt a severe blow and recurrent humiliation, sinking so deep into poverty that they sift through garbage to survive. Similarly, any missile attack that targets a military base run by the United States is viewed “as an escalation of its confrontation with Iran” (Jackson) not a development that is part of a proxy war taking the lives of hundreds of locals who must pay the price. Nor does this secluded spatiality take into account why they are angered in the first place. There is a refusal to come to terms with the tragic outcomes of the war that have plunged the city and country into an endless blackhole from which there has yet to be salvation.

### **The Problematic of Baghdadi Urbanity**

Haidar Al-Saaidy, in his consideration of the configuration and essence of the city of Baghdad, calls direct attention to the struggle between “old fabric as a traditional pattern and modern thoughts” as the two trends that have dominated the conversation on urbanism. He names it as one of the main concerns of its morphology and transformation. Nevertheless, this is the dualistic viewpoint that purposefully evades a third urban feature so that focus is only given to the antiquated measured against the modern. It is expected and hardly objectionable that a scholarly work should select a stream of knowledge to follow but the Baghdadi milieu is incomplete without the discussion around violence as normality. After all, “political unrest and wars have played a crucial role in its development” (Al-Saaidy) so the narrative stretches beyond the spatiotemporal changes of the modern and brings into the fold the very devastating effects of modernity. An important distinction, they both figure into the storied present of the capital. So it today houses the tripartite structure of history, the advancements of life in the modern world and the regressive setbacks brought on by destruction. The third aspect, though intrusive, is prevalent to the extent that it no longer stands outside of lived experience and the question on identity. This phenomenology of the ruined space therefore leaves transformative pieces of itself in the first two constructs. They have become

inextricably linked. Consequently, there is nothing for the politics of the matter but to evolve into the poetics. The citizenry eventually finds itself having to critically engage with violence. This is separate from the moment of impact when concern is, rightly so, given to the physical and what that leaves behind of dismembered corpses and pools of blood. They see, feel and are swallowed whole by the grotesque then. It is there in corporal form. Later it is hidden from view but metaphysically sensed. Violence in other words becomes a spatial trend unto itself and unwitting survivors will over time enter into negotiation with this brutish force.

This is the problematic that plagues the Baghdadi space and it represents an entirely new level the world over as far as, although against their will, beginning to allow violence and ruin in quick succession to penetrate and signify the everyday. The spatialization of destruction, as Caroline Croser posits in her study intersecting the literatures of critical security studies and material semiotics to explore the operation of the American military, "...may ultimately be reterritorialised by power, but it is our duty to make sure that we encourage its operation as a force that promotes our sense of the good." It is not so much a discussion that disturbingly welcomes violence as a final good but in the wake of its irreversible interference one can start to embrace the productive potential lying within it. There is simply no other choice for a collective mental state that suffers the physical ramifications. Trying to afterwards engage with it is a sign of life and steadfast will to not have this ruination colonize the mind hoping to suffocate it. She additionally invokes Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari who argue that "violence is an integral part of the politically vital assemblages in which we operate" (279) however there is something in the experimental nature it holds when the state has lost control of the war machine and bloodshed is chaotic beyond what they allude to around the political workings of the potentiality of violence.

It essentially comes down to the politics of a revolutionary tradition. A violence that presupposes itself, that has broken away from the legal justifications that would have otherwise cushioned it and "that is characterized by a circular or tautological structure" can only be dealt with by constructing "a space of exteriority" yet the two philosophers envisage that it would continue to be comprised of a streak of physical forcefulness albeit a revolutionary one. It would not be combative from the start and only becomes so when it enters into conflict with the state. To Deleuze and Guattari, even Walter Benjamin who also proposed a solution to the problem of violence, the goal is "to think of a revolutionary violence that could escape the circle of violence of the state" (Milisavljević). But even as they sought to have their suggestions transcend state aggression, it remains reliant on the use of force and there must be a space of exteriority that does not perpetuate an endless cycle. For the Baghdadi space that suffers

psychologically, there are already multiple manifestations of revolutionary violence. None have brokered peace, all have increased the tally of unnecessary deaths and widespread destruction. Creatively and critically engaging with never-ending ruin is the exterior place, that outside attempting to reform it into something with basic meaning instead of creating more of it. It is what is actually revolutionary for the harnessing of creative energy, in whatever art form, that is surely angered, disgusted and tormented by violence seeks to make sense of it in the national context. It is much simpler to retaliate militaristically or speak the language of fierce action though the dynamic, even cathartic, remedy for the general public is innovatively contending with the spatial operation of violence. It is a process that is especially crucial in a war zone if people still wish to feel a sense of belonging to their city after it no longer resembles what it once was. Isil Kaymaz emphasizes how place attachment is "crucial in order to establish an emotional or cognitive bond with a place" (Kaymaz) yet it is virtually impossible for the wounded space if there is no critical encounter with its ruin.

On the other end of that negotiation, there exists a possibility to move on from ruination as a purely physical phenomenon by using destruction as the start of the creative process and arrive at a metaphysical understanding once the space in between them is explored. The issue with urbanity and how sociality unfolds in the capital essentially hinges upon the liminality barring it from reevaluating its relationship with ruin. If it would, there would perhaps cease to be the intellectual opinion that the Baghdadi spatial reality is neither one thing nor the other. Violence needs to be thought of differently if this were to happen. Along those lines, it is incorrect to assume that rethinking that symbiosis will and can ever reinstate a utopic feeling like that which existed in the past. It might very well be that the city now, in its marked difference from the past as a presently dystopic nightmare and always challenging previously held notions about it, is brimming with heterotopic spaces in the Foucauldian tradition. As French philosopher Michel Foucault argues, "...there is no inevitable relationship with spaces of hope. It is about conceiving space outside, or against, any utopian framework or impulse" (Johnson 84). The city must locate an alternative to the supposedly real typically seen as the inescapable blackhole of being trapped in the middle. These arguments are peddled by Western exceptionalism that, politically or otherwise, seek to entrench the entire country let alone Baghdad in a narrative of lasting binarism. Judith Yaphe states as much when she criticizes most studies on Iraq as "an artificiality" with most analyses just a series of red herrings and moving the reader away from a wholeness proving that "Iraq was and is more than Saddam Hussein" (122). As far as ruin is concerned which has disturbed, transformed and contradicted any hope for spatial clarity, it is not an obstacle but an opportunity. It can be approached with a mind to consider it critically.

This problem attributed to the urban center that has it hanging in the balance today ought to be looked upon from a sociocultural perspective. Destroyed matter, and whatever likely meaning it has, must be reconciled. In this way, the collective can begin to move towards a resolution onto space.

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