Notes from the Abyss

This piece is a follow-up to the author’s Spring 2014 letter from Iraq, “The Four Who Watch.”

Matthew Schweitzer

One late night in July, Ahmed, a political scientist in Baghdad, anxiously waits for his friend in Mosul to answer a Skype call. When he finally does, the blurry face on the other end of a miraculous yet fading connection is grey, carved by two months of suffering. The mouth droops into a permanent grimace. The lips do not move when the tongue tries to speak. Younis, a professor of international relations at Mosul University and father of three young children, wears these features like a statue. His fixed expression resembles stone more than life. After a few perfunctory greetings, Younis reports in a quivering monotone that “there is a new joke here.” There is no humor in his eyes: “The Islamic State has banned perfume for women. They have asked merchants to destroy their stocks. Now the city’s women have a choice. Either to smell bad, or to be executed.”

Younis, like many Iraqis, has long used dark humor to compartmentalize the terrors in the streets outside his home. It doesn’t work anymore. In June, as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) stormed into Mosul, Younis’s house was hit by a mortar. His youngest daughter, eight years old, was blinded in a subsequent blast as the family fled toward the Kurdish border. After only three days, he was forced to return to his shattered home, now under ISIS rule. The fear, violence, and uncertainty of the last two months have taken their toll. “My young son has seen bodies without heads,” he says.

Over 260 miles away in Baghdad, Ahmed ends the call and shakes his head. “Younis is my dear friend and colleague,” he explains. “We

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is a third-year in the College majoring in History.
were classmates, we studied for our exams together.” Over the last month, these men have exchanged phone calls a few times every week. The purpose, he says, is simple: “to compare tragedies and congratulate each other for staying alive.”

Some of the most difficult narratives of Iraq’s dissolution unfold during such moments, where the monolithic forces reshaping the region have little immediate meaning in the face of the personal experiences of friends. For those living through their own nightmares, reality has contracted. Worlds constructed in times of violence are much smaller than those inhabited during peace. Few have the energy to think of those outside a close-knit social circle. Hope, already in short supply across Iraq, has seemingly disappeared.

Ahmed and Younis are my collaborators on a research project based at the University of Chicago, which studies the impact of war and violence on Iraq’s once-powerful intelligentsia since 1979 and their sufferings through the following three decades of conflict. I am their fellow researcher and mutual friend, and was able to sit in through a separate Skype video connection with Ahmed during these conversations, recording the dialogue and expressions of the participants from my home in Tangier, Morocco. Ahmed and I also discussed his own emotions at length after each call, and he sent many letters describing his impressions. These men, true intellectuals with the courage to endure intimate threats, had worked tirelessly for over a year to collect, archive, and in some cases smuggle testimonies from their cities to our research team in England and the United States. Now they had suddenly become research subjects themselves. As a friend, it was painful to collect these tapes. Yet as a scholar, I knew the importance of the task.

For Younis and Ahmed, late-night conversations, colored by urgency and danger, provide a lifeline for a friendship to endure through Iraq’s daily realities. Each is a window into two unique lives caught amidst general violence sweeping the country into an abyss.

10 JUNE 2014: INVASION, MOSUL
All the doors in the house seemed to be open. The house was alive with soft, quick steps and running voices. The green baize door that led to the kitchen regions swung open and shut with a muffled thud. But the air! If you stopped to notice, was the air always like this?

Younis watches soldiers stream past his home, shedding uniforms and weapons onto the dusty ground. “Maybe one day, when I am out of Iraq, I will tell you what happened here,” he yells into the phone from a road along the Nineveh-Erbil border near Iraqi Kurdistan. “But I am too afraid to say anything right now.”

Today Iraq began a quick slide into a civil war. A rough Sunni coalition, furious at former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s sectarian agenda, formed a dangerous marriage of convenience with Syrian-born ISIS to rout the Iraqi Army from the country’s second largest city of 1.8 million people. The loss of Mosul compounded an unresolved situation in extremist-controlled Fallujah and Ramadi.

That afternoon, Ahmed replies calmly, the government in Baghdad called its citizens to take up arms, “not in defense of the state, but in self-defense. All able-bodied men are being urged to fight in the North.”

“That’s correct,” Younis says. “There’s no law. Everybody has their own law in the form of a gun.”

There is little Ahmed can do from Baghdad, where reports of government defeats filter through the television every minute.
“Normal Iraqis must look to God to save their own lives now, even in the capital. Where do you think this leaves us?” he asks.

Younis stutters as he begins to answer. He starts the next sentence twice, seemingly unable to decide between the word for “I” and “we.” Eventually he takes another line of thought: “My house, my family, my everything, is gone. There are bodies on the roads. I am a refugee in my own home.”

He begins another sentence, but the line cuts out. Ahmed appears unsure what to do next. He sits for a moment by the window. Then with a flourish and quiet laugh, he says, “I think that’s my call to prayer.”

**30 JULY 2014: EID AL-FITR, BAGHDAD**

For some reason Skype is not working, so Ahmed calls his friend on one of his three mobile phones, each of which he carries in a different pocket. The Muslim holy month of Ramadan ends tonight, marking the start of Eid al-Fitr celebrations, and he wants to wish Younis a safe holiday. Iraqis often carry multiple devices, each one configured for a different carrier. Most people have two phones—one from Kurdish provider
Korek, and another from national carrier Asiacell—but Ahmed has a third, from Zain, a nationwide company, “because I never know when I need a backup.” Electricity cuts, infrastructure deficiencies, and corruption cause some networks to periodically fail. Political disputes across provincial boundaries often mean that carriers from different regions are incompatible with each other, especially between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and federal Iraq. While generally reliable, “phone calls can feel like a game,” Ahmed often jokes. This time he uses the Asiacell phone, which he keeps in his right breast shirt pocket, next to the cigarettes. The call goes through on his second attempt, although the line is a bit scratchy. Tonight there must be millions trying to connect via phone, Skype, Viber, or Facebook.

“Please don’t ask what Eid is like here. Actually, I don’t want to talk about it,” Younis begins. “There is no holiday in Mosul. I think everyone is praying in the mosques. It really is funny, because I cannot tell you if they are praying because they believe in God, or because they are scared of the terrorists. We don’t really have much food to celebrate with, in any case.”

The situation in Baghdad is not much better, Ahmed explains. The streets are empty. “People are too afraid to leave their homes,” he says. The Islamic State recently announced plans to attack the capital before the end of Ramadan, and the city is bracing for a siege. Rumors of sleeper cells throughout the city, although unverifiable, have catalyzed panic for many. “It’s always quiet at night here,” Ahmed says, “but tonight feels different. Normally the city feels like it’s sleeping, but now it feels like it’s holding its breath. It’s especially silent.” The light outside Ahmed’s window, powered alternately by the grid and a rusting generator, flutters suddenly to remind residents the electricity has cut out.

In the days leading up to Eid, the capital has come to resemble a prison. Long lines stretch from ticket counters at Baghdad International Airport, and the waiting time for a flight out of the country is said to be around two weeks. Militants control territory to the north and west, and the roads have become treacherous between Iraqi Army, Shia militia, and Islamic State checkpoints. Trains have
not run since Saddam’s time. Ahmed has heard rumors that unknown gunmen across the city are conducting executions in the night. During what is supposed to be one of the happiest times of the year, Baghdadis are trying in vain to escape.

“You sound trapped,” Younis sighs.

Ahmed answers instantly: “You should know. We all are.”

There is not much more to say. The only sound in the room is a choked purring from the generator outside. The threat of an ISIS attack seems very real tonight. Ahmed wishes Younis an “Eid mubarak,” a happy holiday. For the first time in a while, his tone suggests that he is afraid not for Younis’s sake, but for his own. He lives on a sharp bend in the Tigris, from which he can see the Prime Minister’s palace in the city’s Green Zone. Looking across the water, he wonders out loud whether the city will survive the night. The men give odds and make their bets. “We shall see who is rich in the morning,” Ahmed says.

“Mosul has been a prison since June, and I suppose it was only a matter of time before Baghdad became one, too,” Younis replies.

10 AUGUST 2014: LAYERS OF UNCERTAINTY, BAGHDAD

Today Ahmed lost his home. A car bomb exploded just outside his front
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doors, “setting everything on fire.” He does not want to talk to anyone. He sighs, sitting quietly in a relative’s house nearby with his head in his hands. But when Younis calls just after midnight, he does not let the phone ring twice. The connection is awful, and the electricity cuts three times in the first twenty minutes.

Ahmed’s tragedy has played out against the backdrop of a generally uncertain day in the capital. As the sun set, chaotic reports began emerging that Iraqi Army units were deploying to strategic points around the city, sparking rumors that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had been targeted by a car bomb. Now, at 12:46 a.m., special forces loyal to Maliki are patrolling the city’s center, and the Prime Minister is very much alive. There are no facts tonight, only speculation. The ruling Shiite coalition is working to form a new government, and must name a Prime Minister. Maliki seems prepared to keep his position by any means necessary. Attention has turned to Baghdad, where the state seems perched at the precipice of an even greater crisis than the one which has already consumed the nation.

Younis had just heard of these developments when he called his friend, and is surprised by the show of force in the capital. “You don’t think Baghdad is under attack?” he asks breathlessly, fearing the long-rumored ISIS offensive against the city may have begun during the political instability. “This sounds more like a coup or a collapse,” he suggests. It is always dangerous for Younis to share news from Mosul, but the events in the capital have put him in an excited buzz. Uncertainty breeds conspiracy theories, and he is quick to offer a series of unfounded explanations for this tense Baghdad night.

“Listen to me. I swear to God, nothing appears abnormal in my neighborhood,” Ahmed snaps back, “I have no idea about what Maliki plans to do, but my own life is destroyed. Nobody cares about what happens to the Iraqi people. Let me tell you the story.” Younis tells him calmly to go ahead. Ahmed has become hysterical.

“I have become very sad, I do not care about anything anymore. Yesterday I took my youngest son to the barber because his hair was getting very long. After his haircut, he wanted to walk to the bookstore to buy pencils. He loves to paint. He is a very talented painter, even
though he’s so young. He is particularly fond of watercolors, and I know a very good shop nearby to the barber that sells European paints. ‘Come, dad, let’s walk. It is alright,’ my son says. He is too young to know much better, but I go with him because I like to see him happy.

“In the bookstore, another young boy—one of my son’s best schoolmates—runs up the street, shouting my name. I ask him to take a deep breath because I can’t understand any of his words. He finally says in a very distressed voice, ‘Doctor Ahmed, your wife, she is okay; your [other] son, he is okay.’ I still can’t understand, and I ask whatever does he mean. He says, ‘Your house, there was a bomb, your whole flat was destroyed.’

“I rush home with my son. We never had time to buy the paints, but he doesn’t complain even once. I can see, from a few streets away, a dark cloud of smoke over my home. My car is on fire, my home is blackened. The windows are shattered. I live on the first floor of an apartment tower. Someone had put a car bomb just next to my front door. Everything was burning. My books were destroyed.

“I see the terrible damage, and I put my hands over the eyes of my young son. ‘Do not worry, my boy,’ I say to him. It is too late. He is crying. I will not forget the wetness of his tears on my hands.”

Ahmed does not know if he had been targeted specifically, or if his home had fallen on some unmarked sectarian fault line that ruptured. He had received some vague threats a few months earlier regarding his political commentary, but nothing came of them. “I did not take these letters very seriously,” he says, “because there were no bullets in the envelopes or frightening phone calls at night”—the trademarks of serious assassination attempts professors have come to recognize. Since 2003, over five-hundred Iraqi academics have been killed by unknown factions. The universities are dangerous places to work or study, and the Interior Ministry admits that over nine-thousand fake university degrees have been purchased by prominent civil servants.

Younis is unsure how to comfort his friend. He faces an equally potent danger, as the Dean of International Relations at Mosul
University. “It is very difficult to find any words to bring peace because I know there will be no peace, only words,” he confides in his friend. “We all face terrible hardship and threat from every side, and sometimes it is necessary to let the sadness and weariness take over.”

“I thought I had escaped the worst years, but I think they may be just beginning,” Ahmed cries, “and now I don’t know where I will live. Now all I want is to leave Iraq.”

The call must end here. Although he does not explain why, Younis fears someone “unfriendly” might be listening to their conversation.

12 AUGUST 2014: DISPATCHES, BAGHDAD AND MOSUL

Ahmed must travel to the University of Baghdad this afternoon to submit papers for the upcoming academic year. His journey takes him through eight checkpoints and could stretch over two hours. “It all depends on the bombs, shootings, and soldiers—a normal day,”
he jokes.

Younis waits for his colleague to finish. He is staring straight into the camera, something Ahmed just seems to notice with a confused expression. Younis has been mostly silent since Ahmed answered his call. After taking a deep breath, he begins to whisper. “The situation here is very bad,” he breathes, unsure of which words to use. “There are headless seven-year-olds in the streets. The lifeless bodies of women beaten for refusing to wear the niqab are also left for us as a warning.”

Ahmed sits with the remnants of an already-weak smile fading from his lips. The Skype connection is excellent, but neither man can linger very long.

18 AUGUST 2014: WAR COMES TO THE UNIVERSITY, MOSUL

Younis often repeats that, for a long time, his happiness and livelihood, along with those of his friends and neighbors, has been “shattered into a million little pieces that I am only beginning to pick up one by one.” The lightness with which he shares this thought today, though, hides a more painful reality. This morning three armed men burst into his office at Mosul University and forced him to resign his position as Professor and Dean of International Relations. “Now I must begin again,” he sighs. Ahmed sees a confusion in his colleague’s sadness. “It looks as if he wants to cry, but cannot find any more tears,” he notes quietly while covering the receiver tightly.

The ISIS leadership has clamped a firm muzzle on academics already struggling to continue their scholarship at Mosul University. The Ministry of Higher Education in Baghdad has withheld salaries for professors in occupied territory. “There is no way for me to survive,” Younis repeats four times, until he is whispering. Although intellectuals have borne the heaviest weight of their country’s last few violent decades, an academic voice has persisted. Yet even for those who felt a “moral conviction to serve the students,” as Ahmed puts it, the end seems closer than ever before.

Younis says simply, “I have tried very hard. It was not enough.”
He has never left Iraq for more than two weeks at a time. But now he begs God for a way to escape with his family.

“Where does this leave you, and in what way will I help you?” Ahmed asks. Younis’s answer is, for Ahmed, inconsequential. Intellectuals who have managed to survive thirty years of war are members of a rarified community. Within it, interpersonal relationships transcend mere friendship, or perhaps are the purest expressions of it. Professors know that their comrades must survive—the alternative is “too terrible to imagine easily,” Ahmed explains later. He knows that not only are academics faced with incredible danger against their lives, but also with their erasure from memory. “When the books are burned, when the offices go dark and cold, when I am too afraid to write, that is when I disappear. This is the reality we must fight as scholars whose purpose is to enlighten, to publish, and to teach.”

Although both men understand this reality, they must not discuss it. “I am here to force you to survive. I will try hard, because you have done the same for me,” Ahmed tells his friend in a tone that holds more confidence than he feels in his heart.

“I swear to God, I must endure on my own,” Younis replies. “My father’s name was once well-known on the streets here, but now his house is a bombed-out shell, his son is defeated. Did he work so hard for this result? I only wish my sons do not have to experience the shame I feel right now. What can you do to find my pride?”

“You are a good professor, and your mind is alive with powerful ideas,” Ahmed implores. “This is where your pride also resides. You must be a lion where it is hardest to stand against the shame, that is, inside your mind. Remember the words of our prophet: ‘Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave. Those who leave home in search of knowledge walk in the path of God.’ ”

“I understand what you say,” Younis does not sound convinced. “But I hoped not to find my grave so soon on the path from [the cradle]. It is not that I’m afraid of what these terrorist thugs will do to me or my family—we have faced terrible danger before. It is that through all this danger, I have been anchored to my office, to my
home, and to my books. All three are gone. Does that make sense to you?”

“Yes,” Ahmed sighs. “It is too clear. What can we do?”

Neither man has a good answer, and both are quietly eager for this conversation to end.

23 AUGUST 2014: VACATION, BEIRUT, LEBANON

In a clean hotel room with twenty-four-hour electricity, Ahmed sits at his old Dell laptop writing an email to Younis. There is no time for a phone call. He lost his charging cable earlier that day, and the battery only lasts for an hour. He must type fast. “What a beautiful day I had by the ocean,” he notes. Although the demands of the conference he has traveled to attend are rigorous, “it is very important to find time to enjoy one’s life,” he says.

The news reports coming over Iraqi satellite channels are depressing, and Ahmed prefers to ignore the realities of home for a few more hours. Tomorrow he must return to Baghdad for the start of the academic year. “I don’t know if it will be a full and prosperous one. I don’t think it will,” he writes, “but there is no doubt in my mind that I must return to my duties in the classroom.”

He sends his message, switching to another window to check his flight before the battery dies. “It is so unsatisfying to write a letter,” Ahmed complains, “because then I must wait. In Iraq, waiting is the most terrifying thing.”

He sits quietly reading his boarding pass for a moment. “But these days I am more afraid of the answers I will receive when the waiting is over.”