

**FROM BERLIN
TO BAGHDAD:
They Stole You, Iraq**

Arab World's Memory in the Mirror of Cinema and Testimony

From Berlin to Baghdad: They Stole You, Iraq
“The first Iraqi film documenting the looting of the National Museum and
the burning of the National Library, Baghdad 2003.”

A film produced by Amal Al-Jubouri
Directed by Jawad Al-Hattab & Amal Al-Jubouri

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National Museum and the burning of the National
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Amal Al-Jubouri

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*dedicated to the martyrs of truth - in Iraq
and everywhere*

Acknowledgments

“When memory is burned, history does not die - it returns as witness, carrying the ashes of truth.”

- Amal Al-Jubouri

My deepest gratitude goes to the distinguished poet **Jawad Al-Hatab**, the vigilant guardian of this journey, who worked beside me day and night advising, editing, writing, and standing with me through every stage of filming and montage. His devotion and artistic intuition shaped the soul of this documentary.

I extend this dedication also to our mutual friend, the martyr of Iraqi journalism, **Atwar Bahjat**, whose courage equalled the magnitude of our grief at seeing our beloved Baghdad looted and burned, our sky darkened, our soil desecrated by the occupier. It was Atwar who facilitated my contact with **Dr. Jaber Khalil**, then Director-General of Antiquities, whose rare consent allowed me to enter and film inside the Iraqi Museum.

In the midst of chaos, as ministries, archives, and private institutions were set ablaze, we ventured together: Atwar, Jawad, their cameraman (who also filmed for Arab networks after Iraqi national television had fallen silent), and I. Often, I borrowed that same cameraman to document testimonies that would later become the film you now hold.

Atwar guided me to the home of **Professor Osama AlNaqshbandi** and his wife, the late **Dr. Dhumaya Mohammed Abbas Al-Samarra'i**, a leading conservator of manuscripts whose life was later claimed by the merciless pandemic while she was still at the height of her scholarly brilliance. Atwar - the journalist, poet, writer, and luminous human being - risked her life repeatedly, as she later did in her final assignment covering the bombing of the Al-Askari shrine in Samarra in 2006, where she was killed and where sectarian war was reborn in blood.

Through her bravery, these testimonies were preserved - testimonies I never imagined would one day become a film and a historical document.

To **Jawad Al-Hatab** again I owe special thanks for his guidance in editing and directing decisions. Every shot was dear to my heart; I resisted cutting even a second.

Yet his artistic insight and experience persuaded me toward the final form the film ultimately took.

My gratitude also extends to the renowned Lebanese journalist **Ibrahim Al-Khiyyat**, who managed *AlHayat* newspaper and the *LBC* television office in Baghdad. He generously shared archival footage he himself had filmed, completing the missing visual record of provincial museums I could not reach, also ravaged by destruction.

I also thank **Falah Zaki**, the Iraqi journalist who collaborated with German media outlets; and **Safaa Sankur**, Iraqi film critic and journalist, who came to me at the Al-Meridien Hotel, heartbroken, to tell me that the National Library and Archives had been looted before being set on fire. At that time, he worked for the BBC.

My gratitude extends to **Riyadh Al-Salem**, another devoted journalist, who rushed - with his colleagues - to the burning library after we informed them, risking his life to rescue what remained of the microfilm collection. He delivered it to **Mr. Mahdi**, the owner of **Samir Aamees Art Production**, where our film was later edited. The company occupied an entire floor of the Sheraton Hotel in Baghdad - by then transformed into a press compound shared with

segments of the American command, the Meridien, and returning Iraqis who had accompanied the occupation forces.

Tragically, the rescued archive was later lost - perhaps misplaced, perhaps stolen. According to Mr. Mahdi, it had been entrusted to the Sheraton administration for safekeeping until the occupation ended. Yet, when I later inquired, hotel staff denied all knowledge. Some claim parts of it were taken by foreign media correspondents present during the looting.

Its fate remains one more wound in the chain of vanished memory.

My gratitude also goes to the film's photographer, **Fawzi Al- Hindi**, who accompanied me throughout this journey with courage and devotion.

I also thank **Hikmat Studio**, and all the Iraqis who appeared in the film and gave their living testimonies: the late archaeologist **Dr. Mu'ayyad Sa'id**, **Dr. Jaber Khalil**, the manuscript expert **Osama Al-Naqshbandi**, and the late **Dr. Dhumaya Al-Samarra'i**; as well as **Sheikh Dr. Ahmed Al-Kubaisi**, whose moral presence enlightened the film's closing dialogue.

My gratitude to the family of the late theatre director **Dr. Awni Kroomi**, who cared for my young daughter in Berlin so that I could return to Baghdad only days after the invasion in 2003.

And to **Dr. Mohammed Al-Quwaizi** and his generous family, whom I met on the journey from Damascus to Baghdad, and who later accompanied me through dangerous streets and sites you will see in this film - risking his life more than once, in moments I will never forget.

I also honour the memory of **Sheikh Sabah**, one of the imams of the Abu Hanifa Mosque, who was killed in the sectarian violence of 2006, and to all the unseen souls, the anonymous soldiers of truth who contributed to this film in ways large and small. Thanks to all Iraqis who shared their testimonies and contributed to the making of this unforgettable journey

Forgive me if memory fails to name you all. The wars of my homeland have eaten away at memory itself, leaving behind only fragments of pain and an unhealed wound that still writes.

Introduction

I have written elsewhere, in my memoirs, the details of my return to Baghdad from exile in Germany two days after the American invasion of my country. But this book is not about my exile, nor my return.

It is devoted to one story only: the story behind the making of *From Berlin to Baghdad*, the first Iraqi documentary to bear witness to the looting of the National Museum and the burning of the National Archives in the spring of 2003.

In these pages, I record the testimonies of those I met along that perilous journey: archaeologists, librarians, poets, journalists, and ordinary Iraqis who became, for a moment, the guardians of memory in a city aflame. What you will read here are their voices preserved in writing, lest they vanish like the archives they tried to save.

The film exists online on my YouTube channel and other platforms and may continue to live there after me.

Yet I know how fragile digital memory is, how easily the world can erase what it does not wish to

remember. I have therefore gathered these testimonies here, in the permanence of ink, against the erasures of time and power.

I confess: this book is not complete.

It is a fragment of grief, an unfinished hymn written from the edge of ruin. I have written my emotions as I felt them raw, unfiltered, without the pretense of closure because I believe that memory must remain alive, not embalmed.

When I write today, I cannot help but see Gaza. The devastation I witnessed in Baghdad twenty-two years ago, its burning libraries, shattered museums, and violated skies seems, in retrospect, like a prelude, a rehearsal in the theatre of destruction. What I once called “the madness of power” in Iraq has now matured into a genocide performed daily before the world’s unblinking eyes.

Wars are not merely the defeat of armies.

They are the annihilation of meaning of human dignity, of nature, of ethics. Every bomb dropped on a city is also dropped upon the conscience of humanity.

Weapons are the enemies of civilization; empires that build their glory upon domination and hegemony ultimately find themselves buried in the refuse of history.

What endures always are the peoples who carry within them civilizations as deep and luminous as the rivers of Mesopotamia.

From the clay tablets of Sumer to the ziggurats of Babylon, from the chants of Assyria to the laments of the Abbasid poets, the heritage of Iraq, and of all the sister civilizations of the ancient world Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, the Maghreb, and Arabia remains indestructible.

Empires may collapse, archives may burn, but the memory of creation cannot be erased.

For civilizations born from the earth never truly die, they only return, in new forms, through those who dare to remember.

Amal Al-Jubouri
London, 13/1/2026

Chapter One:

From Berlin to Baghdad

The Story of the First Iraqi Film Documenting the Looting of the National Museum and the Burning of the National Archives

“Every civilization is measured not by what it builds, but by how it mourns what has been destroyed.”

- Amal Al-Jubouri

From Berlin to Baghdad was never conceived as a planned artistic project; it was an *immediate human and intellectual response* to an open wound, one that cut through both Iraqi and universal memory.

In the spring of 2003, as bombs tore through Baghdad’s sky, I was in Germany, following from Berlin and from the halls of the Leipzig International Book Fair, the end of a homeland and the beginning of a terrifying historical void.

The world was celebrating literature while my country was burning.

I moved between the exhibition's pavilions and the screens of war, between the poem that the German Minister of Culture had chosen to open the fair and the trembling voice of my mother over the phone, breaking through the static of air raids and silence.

From Europe, I could already see what was coming. This war was unlike any other: it was not merely a war on land or power, it was a *war on memory*, on the museum, on the library, on the very meaning of Iraq itself.

From Berlin, I kept calling my family, begging them to leave Baghdad, but the lines kept breaking, the living and the dead crossing each other's voices on the wires. In one call, the connection with my mother was lost, and, by chance, another woman's voice came through, from a neighbourhood I did not know in Baghdad.

We exchanged a few words, fear, hope and then the line went silent forever.

That call was not an accident; it was a *prophecy* of the film that would later rise from the ashes.

After the fall of Baghdad on April 9, German newspapers filled their front pages with headlines:

“Baghdad Falls... Civilization Looted.”

My German poet friends, those with whom I had spoken endlessly about Iraq's delicacy, its art, its beauty, called me in disbelief: "Are these the Iraqis you used to tell us about?"

Their words were a dagger to the heart. They awakened in me the conscience of the witness and the responsibility of memory.

That was the moment I decided to return not only as a witness, but as someone who would carry the *camera as a conscience*.

I left my young daughter, barely ten years old with my dear friend, the Iraqi play director Dr. **Awni Karrouni**, in Berlin. I told him: "Those who fear now are those who have done wrong. As for us, our only guilt is that we loved Iraq."

And so began my journey back to Baghdad through Damascus, in a long convoy of Iraqis returning home, passing through the road of *Sayyida Zainab*, then across a border that was no longer truly Iraqi.

No state, no police, no army.

Only American soldiers stood there, their metallic silence announcing the birth of a new age of chaos.

When I set foot on Baghdad's soil, the city was no longer a city, it was the wreckage of memory.

The **National Museum** was looted, the **National Library and Archives** lay in ashes, and people wandered their streets like survivors emerging from the depths of a shattered history.

It was then I understood that I must document -not only as a poet, but as a rescuer and witness to a memory being burned alive.

Thus was born *From Berlin to Baghdad*, the first Iraqi– Arab documentary to record, through the lens rather than the pen, the crime of the looting of the **Iraqi Museum** and the burning of the **National Archive**, not as isolated incidents in an unlawful war, but as a turning point in the very history of human consciousness.

For the civilization that once gave the world its first letter and its first law was set aflame in broad daylight, before the eyes of a watching world.

Chapter Two: The Complete Dialogue of the Film

“The camera became my conscience, the only weapon left to defend what the world chose to forget.”

- Amal Al-Jubouri

*A Journey Undertaken by Amal Al-Jubouri and Directed by
Jawad Al-Hattab & Amal Al-Jubouri.*

Accompanying the filmmakers on this journey were:

* **Fawzi Al-Hindi** - Cinematographer

* **Ahmad Al-Khafaji** - Film Editor

Eyewitnesses featured in the film:

* **Dr. Mo'id Saeed**, renowned Iraqi archaeologist

* **Dr. Dhamia Abbas**, manuscript conservator, 2003

* **Osama Al-Naqshbandi**, former Director-General of the Iraqi Manuscripts House until 2003

* **Dr. Jabir Khalil**, Director-General of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, 2003

* **Dr. Ahmad Al-Kubaisi**, eminent Islamic scholar and Head of the Association of Muslim Scholars, 2003.

Music:

Original compositions and oud performance by **Naseer Shamma**,

with additional selections from traditional Iraqi music. **Production:**

Executed by **Samiramis Art Production Company – Iraq**

Amal Al-Jubouri stands before the gate of the Iraqi Museum, bombed by U.S. forces, and speaks:

“Through this gate, I return to my memory - here, and there -to the Gate of Ishar in the Pergamon Museum.

These new Mongols, yes, these invaders -have unleashed yet another onslaught upon my civilization and my homeland.

Look at this shell, aimed not only to destroy walls, but to erase memory itself, to annihilate an entire history.

Yet can a missile, or even this devastation, erase a memory that stretches back more than ten thousand years?”

Standing beside her are researchers in the field of cultural heritage, discussing what she calls “*the new Tatar campaign*” -a campaign to obliterate the history of a nation.

“We do not yet know who carried it out,” she says, “but we seek to uncover the truth through voices such as that of Dr. Mo’id Saeed - the distinguished Iraqi archaeologist.”

Minute 3:55 - Dr. Mo’id Saeed, Iraqi Archaeologist

“In truth, we have been following the course of events in all their fine details, collecting information to piece together a full picture of what has happened.

The incident unfolded in stages, and even now, the reverberations heard around the world do not yet give us a clear understanding of what truly occurred - or of what is still unfolding.

There are, in fact, two main axes to discuss: first, the **Iraqi Museum and the antiquities of Iraq**; second, the **cultural infrastructure of the country as a whole**.

Before the war began, we tried to anticipate the future to foresee what might happen and how.

We worked tirelessly to implement all the international standards required for the protection of Iraq's archaeological, cultural, and heritage sites.

We marked every relevant institution with the emblem of *World Heritage Protection*, even on rooftops - including public libraries and archives.

Together with many journalists who came to Iraq, we explained the archaeological and cultural realities, recounting what had taken place during the second Gulf War in 1991, the looting, the theft, the destruction.

Back then, we succeeded in safeguarding the Iraqi Museum, because we refused to abandon it.

We carried weapons, we slept inside its halls; we never left the museum, and thus it was never looted.

We also accomplished something unprecedented - an act acknowledged by international experts and archaeologists as unique in the history of war.

Even while Iraq itself was under bombardment, **we protected the museums of the other side**, the National Museum of Kuwait and the House of Islamic Antiquities in Kuwait.

We catalogued, preserved, and secured their entire collections with scientific precision - index cards, registers, files, slides, photographs, libraries - and later returned them intact, with nothing missing except a few minor items.

Despite the political propaganda of the time, despite claims of theft, UNESCO was officially informed by us on **13 September 1990**¹ of our intention to relocate and protect these museums.

What happened now is the complete opposite. Under the occupation plan for Baghdad, we were cut off,

¹ According to **Hamid Al-Shammari**, citing the testimony of the late **Dr. Donny George**, former Director of the Iraqi Museum, Iraq was **never a looting state**. On the contrary, during Iraq's occupation of Kuwait, and in accordance with **international conventions**, Iraq considered itself legally responsible for the protection of archaeological sites and museums in occupied territories. On this basis, Iraqi authorities transferred the contents of the **Kuwait National Museum** to Baghdad for safekeeping. These materials were subsequently returned **in full** to Kuwait **under United Nations supervision** following the end of the war. Official documentation confirming their restitution exists and bears the signatures of UN representatives, Iraqi officials, and the former Director-General of Antiquities, **Dr. Mu'ayyad Sa'id**. Dr. George further noted that, after 2003, Iraq was nevertheless compelled to repurchase antiquities from international auctions—objects originating from various Iraqi archaeological sites, including **Iraqi ceramics from the ancient city of Samarra**—in an attempt to recover its dispersed cultural heritage. (Hamid Al-Shammari, *Sariqat Haḍāra: al-Ṭīn wa-l-Ḥajar* [*The Theft of a Civilization: Clay and Stone*] (2019), 225.

divided, and confined - unable even to reach the museum, though it was only streets away.

A battle took place at the Assyrian Gate - you can see the traces of shelling there - near the Children's Museum, one of the first of its kind in the region.

It was struck by a missile, allegedly because a sniper had taken position in the building, a claim we could never verify.

Then the tanks arrived, halting at the museum's very gate, while looters swept in behind them, stealing, vandalizing, burning the scientific foundation upon which our future work depended.

They destroyed eighty years of documented archaeological research: the entire scholarly base of excavation records, compiled by both Iraqi and international missions.

They set fire to the archive of our collective scientific memory.”

Continuation - Dr. Mo'id Saeed, Iraqi archaeologist “I tried to enter the museum, but the American forces prevented us.

Then-so it was said-they opened the doors for the looters.

I do not know the full truth of that claim, nor did I witness it myself.

What I do know is this: a few museum staff were still inside.

One of them lived in the museum compound with his family.

He told us that he went out waving a white flag toward the American tanks stationed nearby, asking for help.

Another man-the driver of a vehicle-also approached them, shouting:

'Help! Help! This is a museum!'

Yet no one responded.

The soldiers told him they had 'special orders' and offered no assistance whatsoever.

What happened afterward makes it clear that those who entered the museum knew exactly what they were doing.

They were familiar with the layout-the corridors, the underground vaults, the access routes to the storerooms.

They broke through the reinforced doors we had fortified with brick and cement, and they stole systematically.

They looted a vast number of artifacts, museum furniture, and, most devastatingly, the scientific records: the primary documentation, excavation files, and archival papers.

Whatever they could not carry, they destroyed completely, leaving nothing that could be used again.

We could not obtain assistance from the American army until three days later-yes, this is the third day after the looting-whereas the thefts had already taken place a week earlier and continued for two consecutive days, perhaps longer.

During that entire period, we were unable to reach the building.

According to eyewitnesses, the first groups to enter were armed.

They moved through all the museum wings, vandalizing the scientific departments, the documentation centers, the photographic archives, and the library of archaeological sites.

They ravaged the central scientific archive and the great library of the Iraqi Museum itself.

It seems they intended to end their work by setting the museum on fire-just as had been done to the **National Library**, the **Awqaf Library**, the **faculty libraries of the scientific colleges**, the **Central Library of Baghdad University**, and the **Museum of Pioneer Artists** as well as the **Museum of Modern Art** and the **National Museum of Fine Arts**.

All these institutions were looted and then burned some of them twice.

The pattern was the same: first the theft, then, a day or two later, a second visit to complete the destruction.

They would throw a grenade-a hand bomb-to ensure total incineration.

That is what happened, for example, at the Ministry of Housing, which was burned again the night before last.

Such was the logic of that time: to obliterate not only the memory of a nation, but its means of remembering.”

Amal Al-Jubouri:

“We have heard that a committee is to be formed soon to manage the museum. Is that true?”

Dr. Mo’id Saeed:

“Yes, we heard today that such a committee is being formed in the United States.”

(He takes a folded paper from his pocket and continues)

“It is said to be composed of **antique dealers, private collectors, and a few American archaeologists**, joined by specialists from the **Metropolitan Museum of Art**. They call themselves the **Council of Cultural Policy**.

This council advocates two main objectives. Its members are reportedly connected to the **Pentagon**, to which they have been giving advice concerning Iraqi antiquities.

First, they wish to *relax the Iraqi Antiquities Law*, which they describe as rigid because it prohibits the trade or export of antiquities.

Second, they call for the *dismantling of the existing archaeological administration in Iraq* and for replacing it with new personnel-what they term:

“Dismantling the administration in the field of archaeology.”

In essence, they intend to bring in external figures to run Iraq’s archaeological activities under their supervision.

However, a large group of American archaeologists has already **challenged this initiative**. They contacted international bodies and declared that the Iraqi archaeologists currently working inside the country represent **a community of world-class expertise** individuals of outstanding competence and integrity whose knowledge cannot be replaced.

The field archaeologists are here, in Iraq.

You cannot simply import others, especially those now in their sixties who have never known the terrain, the language, or the rhythm of our scientific work.

Such outsiders would be pliant to the new administration’s aims: to weaken the law, dismantle the institutional safeguards, and open the way for the removal of Iraq’s heritage beyond its borders **in every conceivable form.**”

Amal Al-Jubouri:

“We hope that, if indeed a new government will emerge-as the American side has claimed-that it will represent the Iraqi people and respond to such violations and measures.”

Dr. Mo'id Saeed:

“Yes, it is imperative that a **Ministry of Culture** be formed swiftly, to protect what little remains of Iraq’s cultural foundations-its infrastructure, the remnants of its libraries and archives-and to begin gathering and restoring them.

Iraq is a nation of culture, known throughout history for its intellectual legacy and its central role in shaping **both Arab and human civilization.**

It must not be left to this **new Tatar–Mongol age**, a second wave of destruction that threatens to erase Iraqi culture entirely and replace it with a culture of a single voice-perhaps even the culture of *hamburgers and Mickey Mouse.*”

Amal Al-Jubouri:

“The Germans, it must be said, have taken a principled and courageous stand in defending Iraq’s

antiquities and cultural heritage against this assault—they condemned it unequivocally.”

Dr. Mo’id Saeed:

“Indeed, we extend our deepest thanks to them for their noble and humane stance—something we had expected from the very beginning.

Yet we had hoped that this solidarity would move beyond **sympathy and lamentation** to the stage of **direct action**.

We call upon them now to come and stand with us, not as observers, but as **a new form of human shield** to protect Iraq’s cultural heritage.

Not in a military capacity, but through human, practical, and field-based cooperation, an international act of conscience in defense of civilization itself.”

Minute 16:20 - Inside the Iraqi Museum

Narration by Amal Al-Jubouri:

“The museum’s director is speaking with the Iraqi journalist and television filmmaker **Falah Zaki**, who at the time was working with a German television channel.

He accompanied me during one of the interviews I conducted for this film with **ZDF Television**, which was producing reports on Iraq - and later expressed interest in making a documentary about my return from German exile to Baghdad.”

Museum Director:

“The displayed antiquities had been removed for safekeeping,

but here - in this room - we had stored some particularly valuable pieces. None of them remain.

The storerooms as well - nothing is left in them either.”

Falah Zaki:

“Approximately how many pieces are we talking about?”

Museum Director:

“Thousands... thousands of artifacts.”

(A staff member interrupts - later identified as one of the museum guards.)

Museum Guard:

“Tens of thousands - more than one hundred thousand, perhaps!”

Museum Director:

“Was it one hundred and fifty thousand pieces?”

Museum Guard:

“Around one hundred and seventy thousand artifacts were stolen - almost everything.”

Minute 16:44 - Dr. Jabir Khalil

(At the time of filming, he was the last DirectorGeneral of the State Board of Antiquities under the previous Iraqi administration. Later, it was reported that he suffered a heart attack brought on by the shock of the museum’s looting.)

Dr. Jabir Khalil:

“All of this-” *(he gestures toward the shattered statues strewn across the museum floor)* “-has been destroyed.”

(He walks with Amal Al-Jubouri into another hall.)

“And here-this is the **Cuneiform Library**, the most renowned private collection of cuneiform studies in the world.

Look at this card-most of the books have been damaged, many stolen.

Printed editions from the last century are gone.

For scholars of Assyriology, whether in America or Europe, this library was a fundamental reference, yet nothing has survived, except for a small group of books that we managed to evacuate before the war.

There were also files on **the Palace of Sennacherib**, one of the royal complexes of Nineveh. Not a single page of them remains.”

Amal Al-Jubouri (voice trembling):

“I am silent... I do not know what to say. I can only call this a **massacre**- though even that word feels too small for what I see before me.

Truly, language itself seems to flee from me now.”

Dr. Jabir Khalil:

“What you have seen here is only a fraction of the loss. We can no longer even reach the storerooms, nor the artifacts they once held.

We must begin to count every missing piece.

Even the **inventory records**-many of those have vanished.

This is a catastrophe, especially the loss of the catalogue cards, the very system by which our archaeological memory was preserved.”

Amal Al-Jubouri:

“Were these artifacts not documented elsewhere - in other records?”

Dr. Jabir Khalil:

“We had duplicate records stored in other locations - we only hope they remain intact.

Yet I fear even those may have been reached by the looters.

This section of the museum, the administrative wing - if you enter it now, you will see something horrifying.

And if you go down into the museum's basement, you will literally walk upon the fragments, the broken remains of the artifacts that were smashed.

This hall once contained some of the **most valuable heritage pieces in Iraq** - traditional furniture, historical furnishings, and cultural objects.

What you see now are merely the **remnants** of that wealth.

Yes, among those who entered were ordinary people, but many were professional's experts.

I have no hesitation in saying: it was **planned and systematic**, carried out with precision.

There is not a single room, not a single corner they did not enter, vandalize, and destroy.”

Amal Al-Jubouri:

“Doctor, did you attempt to recover any of the stolen pieces?

I heard that some citizens began returning artifacts after appeals were made by the imams of the mosques?”

Dr. Jabir Khalil:

“Yes, we coordinated with community leaders, with the imams of the mosques and the *husayniyyas*.

They truly exerted admirable efforts, urging the public to return whatever state property they possessed including antiquities and items from the Iraqi Museum.

In fact, this very morning, a few pieces were returned to us.

Their arrival brought us joy and hope.

We pray that more will follow, though we fear that many objects have already **left Iraq**.

Once abroad, some may find their way to **Israel**, others to the **West**, eventually disappearing into private collections.

These thefts could not have been carried out without equipment, many of the perpetrators possessed **hand tools and power drills**, even **Hummer-type vehicles** to break open safes and strongrooms.

Even the coins, the museum’s numismatic collections, **all of them were stolen.**”

Minute 22:08 - Outside the Iraqi Museum

A handmade sign on yellow paper reads: “**The Museum under Protection**” (i.e., under American protection).

Amal Al-Jubouri approaches a passerby standing at the museum gate and asks whether he can introduce her to another eyewitness who used to work at the museum. The man interrupts: **Witness (retired museum employee):**

“No - I retired in the 1990s. But even in retirement I feel for my country, because these antiquities are my heritage, they are my nation.

An American may be two hundred years old as a nation, but my history is thousands of years old.

The same American who occupies me now once spent ten thousand dollars from his ledger just to photograph our antiquities to record our relics. Yet he is also angry, because he has no antiquities of his own and I do; so, he comes to erase my history.

Even if he steals my artifacts, my history remains. I still have plaster casts, models - these will remain my history. But he is left with no history.

He is an occupier.”

Amal Al-Jubouri:

“I want to know the truth - and the world, through this film, will know it too. We have heard many people say that the American forces either participated, to some extent, in the thefts of antiquities, or failed to protect the museum. Is that true?”

Witness (retired employee):

“I did not actually see them stealing, but I saw that the Americans **cleared the way** for people, ordinary civilians and professional looters alike, to enter and take things. The tanks were right here,” (*he gestures toward the gate, very near the museum entrance*), “and people went in before their eyes. Some Iraqis even went up to the American forces and told them: ‘This is a museum and it is being looted.’”

The soldiers answered: ‘That is not our duty, we are here to occupy. Our duty is to engage, to fire upon anyone who resists.’ That, essentially, is what the American soldier told them.

In their view, their mission was occupation, not to protect the museum.”

Minute 23:47 - Amid the Ruins of the Library

Amal Al-Jubouri:

“If this is what they have done to the relics of Iraq - out of vengeance against history and geography, then what of the relics of the mind?

What of the book?”

Minute 24:01 - Standing in the Ruins

Amal Al-Jubouri speaks to a journalist as filmmaker **Falah Zaki** records the scene.

He asks: “*What do you feel, Amal? How would you describe what has happened?*”

Her eyes, brimming with tears, answer first.

Amal Al-Jubouri:

“You can hear my answer in my eyes.”

Then, in German and Arabic, her voice trembling amidst the charred remains of thousands of books:

“This is a massacre, a massacre against humanity.

Is this freedom?

Is this what they call liberation?

What is this?

Tell me - what is this?

Is this the freedom they promised us?

We used to come here every day to this very place with our colleagues and friends.

Even under the old regime, this place was a paradise for us.

But now, what do we see?

Only ruins.

Only ashes.

These were not random acts. These were **organized operations** systematic acts of theft, plunder, and then fire.

This is not only my opinion, it is the belief of most Iraqis.

Here there were no weapons of mass destruction, no missiles, no tanks, no soldiers.

There were only **words**, words that, at times, are sharper than knives.

Even without the hand that holds them, they can still cut through the world.

I believe that those who made this possible, who allowed the burning of the library and the looting of

the museum wanted nothing less than to **erase our memory**. Nothing more and nothing less.”

Minute 25:57 - Interview with Falah Zaki

Falah Zaki:

“Amal, tell us - what is the difference between this invasion and Hulegu’s? (referring to the Mongol conqueror who destroyed Baghdad centuries ago).”

Amal Al-Jubouri:

“This is not liberation - it is an invasion.

They are barbarians - the **new barbarians**.

What you see now is the face of barbarism itself.”

(She lifts one of the few unburned books from the ashes and holds it in her hands.)

“Tell me, what difference is there between **Hulagu** and **George W. Bush**?

The only difference is this: Hulagu destroyed Baghdad with the sword,

Bush destroyed it with tanks and Apache helicopters.

Otherwise, there is no difference in the cruelty.”

Amal bends down and picks up a soot-stained book - a volume of **Mahmoud Darwish’s poetry** - from

beneath the rubble. She turns toward the journalists and television crew accompanying her, both Arab and German, and says:

Amal Al-Jubouri:

“Thank God... I have found **Mahmoud Darwish**, he has not burned, nor has he been stolen. Thank God.

And here - these fragments from the volumes of *The History of the Arabs*, perhaps this is the only part of the library that the looters had no time to steal or burn.

But as I was told, the criminals have stolen and destroyed the most important archival collections, the documents that record the era **before the founding of the modern Iraqi state**.

Most of the newspapers published in the last century in the 1920s and 1950s were either **stolen or burned.**”

Minute 27:58 - Outside the Burned Library

The camera captures a group of **teenagers and children** carrying soot-covered books, the remnants that survived the fire, loading them onto a **large yellow truck** under the supervision of a **religious scholar** wearing a black turban and robe.

Amal Al-Jubouri approaches him; her colleague manages to record part of their exchange.

Minute 28:02 - Dialogue Between Amal Al-Jubouri and the Imam of Al-Haqq Mosque Amal Al-Jubouri:

“Sayyidna, a few minutes ago I asked whether you are taking these books to the *hawza* (the seminary) or to another place?”

Imam of Al-Haqq Mosque (wearing a black turban):

“Yes.”

Amal Al-Jubouri:

“There is a rumour circulating - that you intend to conceal these books, books that represent the dawn of Iraq’s intellectual and cultural awakening at the beginning of the last century, and across the ages. Is that true?”

Imam of Al-Haqq Mosque:

“No, not at all.

I was informed by the Director-General of the Library”

*(referring to the poet **Ra'ad Bandar**, the last DirectorGeneral of the National Library before the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003), "that the library had been looted and burned.*

Therefore, I agreed with him to transfer what remains of the collection to the **Al-Haqq Mosque** to preserve it until security is restored.

Once stability returns, we will return everything, God willing.

For now, they will be safe in our care. All the books - scientific, heritage, cultural, and intellectual will be **protected**, God willing."

Minute 29:00 - Journey to the Manuscripts House (Formerly Saddam Center for Manuscripts)

The camera follows **Amal Al-Jubouri**, accompanied by the late journalist **Atwar Bahjat** - who would later be killed while covering the bombing of the Al-Askari Shrine in Samarra in 2006.

Atwar had assisted Amal throughout several stages of the film's production, facilitating access and logistics during a time of great danger.

Together, they drive toward **Haifa Street** in **old Al-**

Shawaka, Baghdad, a neighbourhood of stately heritage houses. During the 1980s, the former regime had converted many of these historic homes into cultural or academic institutions.

One such building was once the residence of **Naji Al-Suwaidi**, a prime minister during Iraq's monarchy, which was later transformed into the **Iraqi Manuscripts House** (known before 2003 as the *Saddam Center for Manuscripts*).

Amal Al-Jubouri (voice-over):

“When God created darkness, He wished to open for us a window of hope and so He created the day.

The daylight now is the safety of Iraq's manuscripts preserved from fire and ruin.”

Amal gestures toward the historic building:

“This is the *Saddam Center for Manuscripts*, as it was still called at the time of filming, less than a week after the fall of Baghdad.

This Baghdadi house is one of many in this district, built in the early nineteenth century, in what later came to be known as **Haifa Street**.

As you can see,” (*she points toward the façade*), “the sign bearing the name of the center has been removed.

This was once the headquarters of Iraq’s most precious intellectual heritage, the center that safeguarded our manuscripts.”

The scene shows Amal entering the building, accompanied by a young boy **the son of the center’s guard** - who leads her through the courtyard.

Standing nearby is **Dr. Osama Al-Naqshbandi**, the Director-General of the Manuscripts Center at the time. His **gray car** is visible parked beside the entrance, as the camera slowly pans upward toward the building’s damaged façade.

Minute 29:49 - Inside the Iraqi Manuscripts

Center Amal Al-Jubouri (voice-over):

“And these are the ruins, the remnants of what once were the display cabinets and glass vitrines, once overflowing with manuscripts.

Now, as you can see, they stand completely empty, hollowed of memory.”

**Minute 30:18 - At the Home of Osama
AlNaqshbandi and Dr. Dhamia Abbas Al-
Samarrā'ī**

The camera follows Amal into the home of **Osama AlNaqshbandi**, former Director-General of the *Iraqi Manuscripts Center*, and his wife, **Dr. Dhamia Abbas Al-Samarrā'ī**, a specialist in manuscript restoration.

Books, papers, and rolled parchments are scattered neatly across a large wooden table, the silent witnesses of a cultural war.

Amal Al-Jubouri:

“I remember, years ago - in 1997, before I left Iraq, six years before this moment I met Osama Al-Naqshbandi, a distinguished scholar of manuscripts.

And now, after all these years, after this new Tatar campaign after the entry of the American forces into Baghdad what has become of this heritage, of Iraq's manuscripts, its culture, its intellectual memory?

As both a specialist and an eyewitness to the looting of these treasures, could you tell us what happened?”

Osama Al-Naqshbandi:

“When the American aggression against Iraq began, we did everything in our power to save this great heritage, the heritage that embodies Iraq’s history and the memory of the nation through the ages.

We managed to evacuate about **fifty thousand manuscripts** and transport them to a safe location, methodically, and in coordination with our staff.

During the bombardment, I went to the **Iraqi Museum** myself. I saw the chaos the looters, the vandals, while the American tanks stood idly across the street, watching.

I entered the museum. Hundreds of vandals were already inside, breaking open the rooms and cabinets, stealing, destroying all under the eyes of the occupation.”

Amal Al-Jubouri:

“You succeeded in saving the manuscripts of your institution, but what about the others, the collections in Iraq’s provincial libraries and archives?”

Osama Al-Naqshbandi:

“Before speaking of the manuscripts in the provinces, let me first address those preserved in the **cultural and scholarly centers of Baghdad** in the **Iraqi Academy of Sciences**, the universities, and related institutions.

We managed to transfer **all the manuscripts** housed there to a safe location before the war, with one tragic exception: the manuscripts of the **Ministry of Awqaf**, which were set ablaze, more than **six thousand manuscripts** consumed by fire.

The **National Archives** also suffered the same fate, its documents and printed collections burned and plundered. Other manuscripts, scattered across smaller libraries in Baghdad, too, were stolen, mutilated, or destroyed.”

“As for the provinces,” he continues, “the **Awqaf Library in Mosul** was burned, looted, and devastated and the same tragedy was repeated in other cities: looting, theft, fire.

It was a coordinated act of obliteration, a war not only against matter, but against memory itself.”

Amal Al-Jubouri:

“Is there any hope, any possibility in the future of recovering even a part of the stolen manuscripts? And do you have a record, an inventory of the manuscripts that were taken and where they might now be?”

Osama Al-Naqshbandi:

“Yes, we do possess the records. Every manuscript had been **catalogued and photographed**, preserved both on **microfilm** and **digitally**, some of the rarest pieces even transferred to **CD** for safekeeping.

Yet the collection stolen in **1991** has still not been returned. It consisted of **364 manuscripts**, for which we continue to appeal through **UNESCO**, through international organizations, through every possible channel.

But there has been no response. No assistance.

It is clear to us now, this was **no accident**, but a plan long prepared, executed to erase the written soul of Iraq.”

Scene Caption - Inside the Home of the Family Who Saved the Manuscripts

Amal Al-Jubouri (voice-over):

“We are still here, inside the home of an Iraqi family, the family that rescued the manuscripts belonging to the *Saddam Center for Manuscripts*.

With me now is **Dr. Dhamia Mohammed Abbas (Dr. Dhamia Al-Samarra’i)**, a specialist in the art of manuscript preservation and restoration.

Welcome, Doctor.”

Dr. Dhamia Mohammed Abbas:

“Welcome...”

(Her voice trembles, heavy with pain at the loss, the looting, the burning of institutions - especially the cultural ones.)

Amal Al-Jubouri:

“You’ve always spoken of the manuscripts as though they were your children.

I remember our meetings back in 1996 or 1997, you used to tell me about them with the tenderness of a mother.”

Dr. Dhamia (through tears):

“This department in particular the **Manuscript Restoration Section**, I helped to establish it myself.

Since 1993 we had prepared it, with all the necessary tools and materials to preserve and restore the **Arabic manuscript**, this legacy that has come down to us through thousands of years.

And it is not Iraq’s heritage alone; it is a heritage belonging to **all humanity**.

Our Arab-Islamic civilization has always been -”

(she breaks into sobs, unable to continue) “- has always been for humanity, not for the individual.

So why this destruction? Why?”

(Amal Al-Jubouri embraces Dr. Dhamia gently, trying to console her, as the camera lingers on the fragments of burnt parchment and the silent books stacked behind them.)

Scene - The Veil of Paul Celan

On the way back from visiting **Dr. Dhamia Al-Samarra’i** and **Osama Al-Naqshbandi**, the streets of Baghdad still echoed with the chaos of looting and destruction. Smoke hung like mourning cloth above the rooftops.

As Amal Al-Jubouri's car approached the square near the **Academy of Fine Arts** and **Al-Zawra Park**, she caught sight of the great **statue of Saddam Hussein**¹, the same one that once dominated the square, now being dismantled piece by piece by the crowd.

Amal cried out to the driver to stop. She turned to her cameraman and those accompanying her, saying: "Now is the moment. Now I will read the poem I wrote in my German exile, the poem about fear.

Today, I will read it here, beside the fallen statue of Saddam and I will not be afraid. For fear has become a thing of the past."

The camera steadies. Dust drifts. Her voice rises - calm, defiant, and trembling with the clarity of release.

¹ During the chaotic days following the fall of Baghdad, looters dismantled the bronze statue of Saddam Hussein piece by piece until it disappeared completely. A few years later, in its place, the *Monument to the Guardians of Iraqi Culture* was erected — one of the final works of the renowned Iraqi sculptor **Mohammed Ghani Hikmat**. The statue now stands on the same site where Saddam's monument once rose, symbolizing the endurance of cultural memory over tyranny and loss.

The looters were colloquially called "*Al-Hawasim*", a term that entered popular Iraqi vocabulary after 2003, derived from Saddam Hussein's naming of his final confrontation with the Americans as the "*Battle of AlHawasim*" ("The Decisive Battle").

The Veil of Paul Celan

Amal Al-Jubouri

Fear was the sovereign in my
country, while Death reigned in
yours. You loved the enemies until
You burst into poetry and the
enemies loved me until they burst
into themselves.

In your dying
You planted the seeds of your bitter
history; your absence grew tall a forest of
exiled verses, migratory, winged,
hastening now now toward you.¹

When she finished reading, silence settled around
her, a silence deeper than sound, as if the city itself
were listening. The statue loomed half-toppled

¹ “*The Veil of Paul Celan*” is one of the poems from my fourth collection, *Ninety-Nine Veils* (Dar Al-Saqi, Beirut, 2003), which received the **Best Arabic Poetry Collection Award** in 2003 from *Le Club de l’Arabe* in Paris.

behind her, its bronze face cracked open to the sun. Amal lowered the paper in her hand and whispered, almost to herself:

“This time, poetry does not fear power. Power fears poetry.”

The screen fades to black, the echo of her words lingering over the ruins of Baghdad.

Minute 33:17 - Return to the University of Baghdad

The camera follows **Amal Al-Jubouri** as she walks through the gates of **the College of Arts, University of Baghdad**.

It is the same college where she once studied **English Literature** in the mid-1980s, a space of memory now shadowed by war.

She has heard of a gathering of Iraqi intellectuals in the **Idrisi Hall**, a reunion of voices long silenced. She enters quietly, then speaks in voice-over:

The prize was dedicated to the memory of the distinguished Yemeni poet **Dr. Abdulaziz Al-Maqaleh**, in whose honor the award was named.

Amal Al-Jubouri (voice-over):

“Writers and thinkers, whose voices had been buried for decades, tried once more to taste the sweetness of speech, even if it meant speaking loudly, after so many years of silence.”

The shot widens. Amal steps onto the platform of the lecture hall, facing an audience of weary faces poets, professors, journalists, each carrying the fatigue of survival.

She begins to speak:

Amal Al-Jubouri (addressing the hall):

“I went to the Americans, I spoke with a representative of the Coalition Forces.

I told him: *‘This National Library is our inheritance; it holds the most vital documents of Iraq’s history. Please, I beg you, help us.*

We cannot stop the burning, the armed men will kill us, we are unarmed.

Come with us, help us.’

He replied:

‘No, we have instructions from the American command: every Iraqi must protect himself.’

I said to him: *'How can that be? I have seen you on AlJazeera, speaking of security, promising stability. Before I even returned from Germany, I heard your words.'*

And then they left us. They left us and what happened, happened.”

(The camera cuts to silent footage of the burned National Library - pages of charred archives fluttering in the wind, smoke still rising from the ruins.)

Minute 36:45 - The Courtyard of Abu Hanifa Mosque, Al-A‘zamiyya

Less than twenty-four hours after a fierce battle between American forces accompanied by local informants - and Iraqi fighters in **Al-A‘zamiyya**, near the historic **Abu Hanifa Al-Nu‘man Mosque**, Amal Al-Jubouri and her crew arrive on site.

The *American narrative*, repeated by various media outlets, had claimed that **Saddam Hussein** was hiding in this neighbourhood, a rumour confirmed by some eyewitnesses Amal would later interview.

Among them was **Dr. Dhafer Al-Ani**, whom she met by coincidence and recognized from his frequent appearances on Al-Jazeera.

He told her that he had personally seen Saddam **carrying an RPG-7 launcher on his shoulder**, fighting in the streets of Al-A‘zamiyya.

Indeed, this was to be **Saddam Hussein’s last appearance in Baghdad** before his disappearance after the city’s fall he had been seen bidding farewell to residents, many of whom Amal later met as eyewitnesses, some still remembering his handshake, “perhaps the first and the last.”

Entering the Mosque

Accompanied by the **German television channel ZDF**, Amal enters the courtyard of the mosque.

She remembers the German journalist beside her - a young woman who had respectfully covered her head with a scarf upon entering the sacred space - and with them was also the Iraqi journalist and filmmaker **Falah Zaki**, working with the same crew.

They were met by **Sheikh Sabah**, one of the mosque’s imams, his face still flushed with anger and exhaustion.

Amal would later learn that he was **killed during the sectarian war of 2006–2008**.

Amal Al-Jubouri (voice-over):

“Throughout history, religions and their sanctuaries were revered, even by the Mongols, even by the most barbaric tribes.

But the *technological tribes*, the armies of modern machines, have shown no such reverence.”

The Interview - Inside Abu Hanifa Mosque

The German press begins asking questions about the rumors that Saddam Hussein had sought refuge in the mosque.

Sheikh Sabah:

“The target was not Saddam Hussein - the target was **Islam** itself.

They knew his movements - where he went, where he came from, and yet they did not strike him.

They knew he had been here on Wednesday, and still they did not attack.

But on Thursday, they bombed the mosque instead.

Yes, the battle began on Thursday, it lasted for more than **five hours**, a fierce and relentless fight.”

Amal Al-Jubouri:

“Did the Americans enter the mosque itself?”

Sheikh Sabah:

“Yes. They entered with their **boots** still on, desecrating the sanctuary.

They struck the mosque with a **missile**, the blast shattered the famous **clock tower**, the historic clock that stood above the entrance of the mosque.

The **tomb of Imam Abu Hanifa** remained untouched, but the doors and adjoining structures were damaged.

They even set fire inside the mosque, yet, by the mercy of God, the flames did not spread.

The carpeted floor is made from petroleum-based material; had the fire continued for only a few more minutes, the entire place would have been consumed.” **Falah Zaki (off-camera):**

“To whom do you appeal, Sheikh?”

Sheikh Sabah:

“I appeal to all **honorable people of the world**, not only to Muslims.

Where is the human conscience?

Where is the living heart of humanity?

Why this cruelty?

Why such unrestrained power?"

The German Journalist (through an interpreter):

“But as we hear from coalition forces, the Iraqi leadership - perhaps Saddam Hussein himself took refuge here in the mosque. Is that true?”

Sheikh Sabah (responding with measured indignation):

“I understand your question -but tell me, is it reasonable to imagine that Iraq’s leadership would seek shelter beneath a ceiling of plaster and brick? Does that sound believable to you? There are massive underground bunkers like the ones in Al-‘Amiriyya”.

Let us assume, for argument’s sake, that Saddam was indeed here inside the mosque. Then why did the Americans **bomb the clock**? That clock, a **heritage masterpiece** built by a craftsman from Al-A‘zamiyya in **1913**, entirely hand-made, dedicated to **Imam AlA‘zam, Abu Hanifa Al-Nu‘man**.

Why destroy what is sacred, what belongs to all?”

The camera lingers on the broken clock tower, its bronze hands frozen, the time of impact forever marked. Smoke curls upward from the minaret; inside, sunlight filters through shattered stained glass, illuminating a floor strewn with prayer beads, fragments of tile, and torn pages of Qur'anic verses.

Amal's voice returns, quiet but unwavering:

Amal Al-Jubouri (voice-over):

“When the barbarians of the past came, they burned the libraries and left the mosques standing.

The barbarians of today, they burn both. And call it freedom.”

Final Interview in the Film - with the Eminent Scholar Dr. Ahmad al-Kubaisi

Dr. Ahmad al-Kubaisi:

“All civilization in the world today has its roots in Iraq. Ask these foreigners,” *(he gestures lightly toward the German journalists accompanying the crew)*, “they know: Sumer and Babylon and Akkad and Baghdad, Kufa, Ur, Basra, these are the origins of civilization on earth. A civilization whose roots are so deep cannot be uprooted by a single onslaught.

Therefore, the Iraqis - Shi‘a, Sunni, Kurd, Arab - are necessarily one body.

The scale of this assault is unprecedented in history; no record exists of a comparable onslaught. Yet the Iraqis are original people, of one origin: they are Iraqi before all other labels.”

Amal Al-Jubouri:

“What of sectarianism?”

Dr. Ahmad al-Kubaisi:

“It is finished. Yes, all forces encouraged it, but that was not now, this issue goes back a thousand years; the West and many other powers have at times stoked sectarian divisions. But that has been dispersed to the winds.

Look at the evidence: Friday prayers shared between Sunnis and Shi‘a - a sign that sectarianism has ended. This, in my view, is one of the great gains of this military defeat. A disaster may yet yield a blessing.

How else could Basra fight for twenty days, and Najaf for twenty days, and Nasiriyah likewise - while Baghdad fell in two hours? These are the Shi‘a who, in 1920, chased out the British with the *falāh*,” (*he references the popular uprising of 1920 against*

British occupation), “so you must explain to these foreigners what a *falāh* is”, (*he smiles, explaining to the German crew*), “a simple iron implement used by Iraqis in fishing and in ploughing.

If the Americans are indeed the liberators they claim to be, the reality does not reflect that. The Iraqis know now that they are occupiers; the people are pragmatic, and they treat this incoming force as a colonial presence. If their rule is just, it will have its place; but if they oppress and humiliate the people, then events will show the reality.

There are small incidents now, which we do not yet call a phenomenon; but if they spread, if people are beaten, restrained, harassed in the streets, and Iraqi will is stolen in forming a government that imposes rulers whom the Iraqi people would not even tolerate a single spit from, then no one will accept that. If a government acceptable to the people emerges, one that satisfies the nation in all its sects and shared values, I believe Iraqis will accept a foreign base just as they once accepted the British presence for forty-three years. The British had interests, yes, but their rule did not strip the Iraqi of his honour or his dignity.

What we see today on the streets is unacceptable. We do acknowledge that we face exceptional

circumstances, and we know why the troop concentration exists; people understand that. But if occupation becomes a lasting habit, the Iraqis will not be so easily subdued.

The treasures of Iraq must return, the manuscripts and the antiquities. There are objects of such value that no American museum could rival them. They must come back, and God willing, they will return.”

Falah Zaki:

“What do you say about these new Iraqi political parties?”

Dr. Ahmad al-Kubaisi:

“It is wonderful - a magnificent phenomenon. It is a gift: the enthusiasm of Iraqis to try freedom again after decades in which political life was monopolized by one party, the Ba‘th, which prevented the formation of others.

Falah Zaki:

“The Americans say they brought democracy; others claim Iraq is not ready for democracy.”

Dr. Ahmad al-Kubaisi:

“They lie. I lived through the monarchy; there were parties and a parliament until the unblessed revolution of 1958 brought an end to the monarchy. In truth, Iraq once practiced a more vibrant democracy than England. There were genuine nationalist parties, you know them well, the Independence Party, the National Party, the Unity and the Democratic parties, men of sincerity. The Iraqi people elected deputies truly; the prime minister did not arrive through sectarian calculation alone. Through demonstrations one could topple a ministry the Portsmouth Treaty was defeated by demonstrators; the 1941 war is an example. Democracy is natural to the Iraqi temperament.

In Islamic jurisprudence a single imam may have fifty dissenters, and he welcomes them. Imam Abu Hanifa spoke and other imams spoke; this is the nature of our civil discourse. Genuine, homegrown democracy is one thing; democracy imposed from outside is another. So let these political parties form; they will be sifted and refined. After forty years of darkness, when light appears, confusion is natural. But I am confident that from this period will emerge men of calibre, doctors, engineers, intellectuals,

scholars, and senior former officers and you will see a successful democratic life, provided the ruler wishes for a true democracy. With God's help, it will happen.

We will not allow anyone to deceive us again. We will form a council of *fatwa* - scholars of both Shi'a and Sunni - and the public will link itself to this committee: if it declares a government good, support it; if it declares it bad, boycott it. When civil disobedience is called for, as Imam Khomeini or Gandhi did, we will not fight; officials will not go to their offices; the government will fall, as it must. No one will be allowed to claim divine authority over us any longer. We are tired of that.”

Minute 45:12 - The Question

After the sequence of devastation, streets turned to rubble, faces dazed with grief, charred walls, hollowed buildings, the slow pan of the camera across the ruins of Baghdad, Amal Al-Jubouri appears once more, standing before a soot-stained wall of the **Iraqi National Library and Archive**.

On the wall, in large black letters scorched into the plaster, a phrase reads:

“Oh vengeance for Kuwait!”

She turns to the German journalists beside her, translating the words quietly, her voice trembling not with fear but with disbelief.

Amal Al-Jubouri:

“After all that you have seen, after all that you are asked - indeed, obliged - to condemn aloud, we have the right to ask:

Why did all this happen?

Why this vengeance, this deliberate annihilation of memory and meaning?”

Her hand touches the wall.

The smoke residue darkens her fingertips.

Behind her, the burned shelves of the archive gape like broken ribs.

Voice-over (Amal):

“It was written here - *‘Oh vengeance for Kuwait.’* These words appeared during the chaos, when Baghdad fell and was occupied in 2003.

Many acts of revenge followed in those hours of collapse.

Most of the American forces had entered from **Kuwaiti soil**, the borders between Iraq and Kuwait flung open as the invasion advanced northward.”

She pauses the camera slowly tightens on her face.

Amal Al-Jubouri (continuing):

“But for the sake of historical truth,

I must tell you what I later learned, years after this film was made.

One Iraqi man told me, it was *he* who had written those words on this wall.

He said he did it out of rage and confusion, for he too had confronted looters and arsonists, people whose speech, he told me, was not the speech of Iraq. And in that chaos, he wrote as if to leave a mark of explanation upon the ruins.”

(The camera lingers on the blackened wall, the words barely legible through smoke and shadow.

Amal stands motionless, the wind carrying ash and torn paper through the open doorway of the burned library.)

Final Scene - April 2003, Firdos Square

The final moments of the film.

Amal Al-Jubouri stands in **Firdos Square**, the very place where, before the eyes of the world, the American forces pulled down the statue of Saddam Hussein.

It was **April 9, 2003**, the day that became an image, a symbol of the war's choreography.

The footage had circled the globe: a U.S. soldier climbing the towering statue, draping the **American flag** over Saddam's face, then, hurriedly, an Iraqi man, apparently accompanying the U.S. troops, rushes forward to remove that flag and replaces it with the **old Iraqi flag**, the one with **three green stars**, but *without* the later addition of the words "*Allāhu Akbar*" which Saddam himself had written by hand in 1990, during his so-called "Faith Campaign," an ideological gesture meant to fuse Islam with the secular creed of the Ba'ath Party.

Now, **Amal Al-Jubouri**, dressed entirely in black, stands in the same square, days after that symbolic toppling.

Behind her, the barrel of an American tank glints under the pale Baghdad sun.

Her face is solemn - exhausted, yet luminous with the gravity of witness.

Amal Al-Jubouri (on camera):

“With the fall of this statue,
Baghdad too has fallen.

The fall of the statue became the emblem of the fall
of a political order -

but also, the fall of a city, a civilization’s heart laid
bare.

No one imagined that Baghdad, the city of books, of
prophets, of poets -

would collapse so easily, with such strange
choreography, in a script whose authorship remains
unknown even today.

Behind me stands the American soldier; before me,
the shattered image of a nation.

I look at this scene, alien, hybrid, foreign to my
soul, to my self,

even to my memory.”

*(The camera holds her face in close-up - a stillness
of grief.*

*The hum of military engines fades beneath a thin,
trembling note of oud.)*

Voice-over (Amal):

“Baghdad, the mother of books, is now the daughter of ash.

Yet from her ruins, a thousand pens will rise again.”

(Fade to black.)

On screen:

“To the martyrs of truth - in Iraq and everywhere.”

Music:

A lament composed and performed by Naseer Shamma.

End credits:

A film by Amal Al-Jubouri and Jawad Al-Hattab

From Berlin to Baghdad: They Stole You, Iraq

Produced independently, Iraq–Germany, 2003

Final Sequence - “Baghdad and the Suicide of the Question”

The film closes with the roar of American airstrikes over Baghdad - streams of fire falling through a sky without resistance.

The capital burns alone, the heavens belong to the invader.

The visual inferno finds its echo in words, a poem written by **Amal Al-Jubouri** on the very day Baghdad fell,

April 9th, 2003.

She began it in Berlin and finished it while entering her abandoned city, a city ablaze, haunted by looters, strangers, and ghosts of war.

Poem: “Baghdad and the Suicide of the Question”

(Written April 9, 2003 - from the collection

Hagar Before the Occupation / Hagar After the Occupation, 2007)

O goddess of sorrow,

O goddess of wounds,

O goddess of patience- Abandoned,

broken, you bleed. Dust veils your days,

and the fires extinguish your mournful

face.

Baghdad... O Baghdad,

your people loved you with a barbaric love. And because you were both tyrant and victim, they traded their own deaths for the departure of tyrants. No, the war was not *there*; the war was *here*, in the hearts of mothers,

in the melancholy of children, in your fall, in your prisons, in the suicide of the question.

Your people loved you with a barbaric love, and because you were both tyrant and victim, they traded their deaths for the exile of despots. Until you became, for the conquerors, not far enough, for the lovers, far, far too distant.

Baghdad...

Ah, Baghdad...

(Baghdad, 2003)

Musical Coda:

*“Baghdad and the Suicide of the Question” - composed and sung by Lebanese artist **Jahida Wehbe**, with performance by Iraqi musician **Omar Bashir** and the ensemble “Al-Asdiqā’.”*

Final fade-out:

“From Berlin to Baghdad”

Failure of Protection and Complicity at the Iraqi Museum

(after al-Shammari, 2013, pp. 222–223)

What is particularly striking here is the **astonishment** provoked by the conduct of coalition forces at the main gate of the Iraqi Museum. According to the account cited by al-Shammari, American forces—accompanied by individuals speaking in Iraqi, Kuwaiti, and Gulf dialects—were stationed at the museum’s entrance. Despite repeated appeals by **Dr. Ibrahim Khalil Jaber**, the museum’s director at the time, neither the American forces intervened nor took any action to secure the building.

The same inaction was noted by the late **Dr. Donny George**, former Director of the Iraqi Museum, and by **Muhsin Kazem Abbas**, as well as **Sayyid Qais**

Hussein Rashid, who together appealed to an American officer to position a tank near the museum gate in order to deter looters. This request was explicitly refused. As a result, organised looting gangs were given free access to the museum. No measures were taken to protect the building, nor were any steps adopted to prevent the random, destructive vandalism that followed.

The museum remained entirely unprotected until **16 April 2003**, after looters had already completed their operations. It has been reported that the looting was carried out by organised groups arriving from impoverished neighbourhoods, allegedly under the direction of an American officer—identified in *Jahina Magazine* (issue 27, 1 March 2007) as a Jewish American officer. According to the same source, this officer reportedly stated, on the eve of the events of 11 September, that “Iraq would have to pay the price.”

(See also: Muhammad Hassanein Heikal, *The American Assault on Iraq*.)

The American academic **William Polk** likewise observed that intense fighting surrounded the museum from the 9th until the 12th of April. Yet, during this period, the museum’s doors remained

open to looters until the tenth day, when it was finally placed under American protection. Polk also notes that **American soldiers themselves looted certain artefacts**, removing statues and other objects from the museum and transporting them to the United States.

The American officer assigned to track the stolen artefacts, **Matthew Bogdanos**, later described the looting of the Iraqi Museum as a tragedy without precedent in modern history. He argued that the scale of the theft was comparable to the looting of the Louvre Museum during the French Revolution, and that it was equivalent to the combined looting of all museums in the United States (*Casualties of War: The Looting of the Iraq Museum*).

In parallel, the British Secretary of State for Culture declared that **coalition forces bore full responsibility** for what had happened to the Iraqi Museum and its antiquities, stressing that both Iraq and the world had been impoverished by this loss. A subsequent British Secretary of State for Culture further asserted that it was imperative to dismantle any market dealing in stolen Iraqi antiquities, and that the **United Kingdom must not serve as a**

marketplace for the circulation or promotion of looted Iraqi cultural property.



This photograph, taken by an Iraqi photographer for one of the international news agencies, depicts the **main gate of the Iraqi Museum in Baghdad**, known as the **Nebuchadnezzar Gate**, after it was **struck by an American shell**. Beside it stands a **U.S. tank**, positioned there in the aftermath of the **museum's looting and plunder**

Chapter Three: The Iconic Image

“They thought they were stealing objects; but what they took was the soul of time itself.”

- Amal Al-Jubouri

After the public outcry that followed the looting of the Iraqi Museum, the American occupation authorities sought to repair their damaged image by staging a spectacle for the international media—an attempt to rebrand themselves not as destroyers but as

“protectors” of civilization. Yet everyone knew that the same tanks now guarding the gates of the Ministry of Oil had stood idle while Baghdad’s heritage burned. The only building the invaders had truly defended was the one that held the keys to Iraq’s petroleum future—the very resource that had drawn them there in the first place.

The invasion was, in essence, a modernized version of colonial plunder: the subjugation of a nation’s

sovereignty through the rhetoric of “freedom” and “reconstruction,” and the re-enslavement of its natural wealth to the same foreign corporations that Iraq had liberated itself from in the early 1970s. The colonial empires had changed their vocabulary, but not their hunger.

To counter the international condemnation that followed the museum’s destruction, the Coalition Provisional Authority organized a theatrical “reopening” event centered on the rediscovery of the **Treasure of Nimrud**-a hoard of exquisite Assyrian gold jewellery unearthed in the 1980s and long enveloped in rumour. Western media and certain exiled opposition newspapers had, before 2003, propagated the story that Saddam Hussein’s wife had stolen the treasure and smuggled it abroad. I, too, once believed this narrative.

In truth, as I later confirmed through conversations with Iraqi archaeologists-Dr. Mu’ayyad Sa’id, Dr. Donny George, and Dr. Behnam Abu al-Şoof-the treasure had been secretly placed in reinforced vaults beneath the Central Bank of Iraq during the 1990 Gulf War, for safekeeping against the anticipated bombings and uprisings that followed the 1991

defeat. For more than a decade, it had remained there, sealed in darkness, a silent hostage to history.

When news reached me in 2003 that the Americans intended to “reopen” the museum barely two months after its pillage, I took my camera and went. At the museum gate I found a crowd of journalists, former exiles, and self-proclaimed “reconstruction experts” working under the U.S.-led Coalition. The guards refused me entry because I lacked a formal invitation.

By coincidence I recognized the Iraqi journalist **Ibrahim al-Zubaidi**, one of the returning intellectuals recruited by the occupation to reorganize the Ministry of Culture and Information, which Paul Bremer had dissolved. With him was **Dr. Mowaffaq al-Tikriti**, a pharmacist newly appointed by the Americans to supervise the Ministry of Health. When they learned that I was a poet and filmmaker recently returned from exile, they introduced me to the U.S. soldiers as a “press delegate.” Both men carried American-issued identification badges that granted them unimpeded access, and I entered with them.

Inside the main hall, where a small chamber had been prepared for the media unveiling of Nimrud’s

treasure, we waited for **Paul Bremer**, the so-called “Civil Administrator of Iraq,” to arrive and perform his public ritual of redemption. Ibrahim and Dr. al-Tikriti introduced me to **Stefano Cordone**, the Italian diplomat temporarily placed in charge of the Ministry of Culture. He was polite, perhaps genuinely interested, and when he learned I had returned from Germany intending to establish a cultural center dedicated to literature and poetry, he handed me his card. Later he signed the founding approval for *Diwan East–West*, the first registered civil-society organization in Iraq after the regime’s fall.

But as Bremer entered the room, escorted by cameras and a throng of Iraqi onlookers eager to be seen near power, I felt an overwhelming nausea. Here was the man who had presided over thirteen years of our collective starvation under sanctions, now greeted as a saviour by those who had suffered most. The air crackled with flashbulbs and applause, but for me the noise resounded like the echo of bombardment. Images from 1991 flooded my mind—the burning of Baghdad, the ruins of my city, the ghosts that had never left.

I stood motionless, unable to join the swarm following Bremer. A tall American officer, introduced by Cordone as a general, turned to me with a smile that filled his entire face and asked, “*Aren't you happy we're here?*”

I looked at him with the contained fury of a wounded nation.

“My answer,” I said, “is not one you will expect.

Who told you that all Iraqis would welcome you? They lied to you.

I have grieved twice in my life: once when my father died in 1990, and once when you occupied my country. The first wound time could not heal; the second never will.”

The officer fell silent perhaps in comprehension, perhaps in shame and quietly stepped aside.

Not far from us, Dr. al-Tikriti and I stood before the **head of an Assyrian king**, severed cleanly in two. My heart, too, seemed to split along the same invisible fault line. We both began to weep. It was not merely sentiment; it was the grief of an entire civilization condensed into a single moment of recognition. We cried for Iraq-he, despite standing with the occupiers, and I, despite my refusal to be

complicit. Beneath every political difference, there remains in every Iraqi a hidden tenderness for the land's wounded body. Only those who profited from the looting-the corrupt parties and opportunists of the new order-could remain untouched.

In that unbearable silence, the photographer from **Reuters**¹ captured us: two Iraqis weeping before the shattered visage of a king. The image was later published worldwide and circulated through traditional media as an emblem of mourning, long before social media existed. I forgot the photograph, but never the moment.

Years later, Dr. Donny George explained to me the true story of that broken sculpture: during the early 1990s, a smuggling ring had attempted to steal and sell the statue's head by cutting it in two with industrial saws to make it easier to transport across

¹ According to a Reuters dispatch, the photograph was taken on **3 July 2003** by **Radu Sighet**, during the short-lived ceremonial reopening of the **Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad**, where the **Treasures of Nimrud** were temporarily displayed. These Assyrian artefacts, dating to around **900 BCE**, comprise intricate gold jewelry and precious stones of exceptional archaeological value. See: *Reuters*, as cited in *The Logical Indian*, "**Iraqi Poet Amal Al-Jubouri Caught On Camera Crying In Front Of Looted Artefacts At Baghdad Museum**," available at <https://thelogicalindian.com/iraqi-poet-museum/>.

the Jordanian border. The thieves were caught, the piece recovered, and Saddam Hussein-upon hearing of the incident ordered their execution and decreed that the statue remain unrestored as a warning to anyone who would betray their heritage for profit. Decades afterward, when social media emerged, the same photograph resurfaced. Someone-anonymous, perhaps well-intentioned-posted it with the caption:

“They Stole You, Iraq.”

The text claimed that I was standing in the **Berlin Museum**, mourning Iraq’s artifacts there. Soon another user reposted it, asserting it was taken in the **British Museum**. The image spread across platforms, copied thousands of times, stripped of truth.

Even prominent writers and public figures, some of them friends, shared the image with incorrect information. I tried repeatedly-through my own posts, through interviews on *Al-Arabiya*¹, and through dialogues with Naseer Al-Ajeeli to clarify the real context: that the photograph was taken in Baghdad,

¹ See: *Al Arabiya*, “صاحب الصورة المؤثرة بمتاحف بغداد: انهرت باكياً لهذا السبب”, published 29 July 2019, available at <https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-andworld/iraq/2019/07/29/-/صاحب-الصورة-المؤثرة-بمتاحف-بغداد-انهرت-باكي-ا-لهذا-السبب>.

not in London or Berlin; that the man beside me was Dr. al-Tikriti, not an anonymous stranger; that our tears were for the looting of our own museum, not a foreign one. But the correction never caught up with the myth.

And then I realized: if my own photograph—a moment I lived, a grief I can still feel in my bones—could be falsified and reinterpreted by strangers, what hope does historical truth have after a thousand years of distortion?

This, then, is the lesson of that image: that in every age, history is rewritten not only by the victors but also by the careless, and that a single miscaptioned photograph can wound truth as deeply as war itself.

In This Face

**“From the ashes of memory, the poem is born;
from the wound of looting, the conscience
awakens.”**

In this face - time

kneels, astonished.

The dust remembers the pulse of its maker.

A civilization breathes again through the crack

of stone and flame. Here, the story of Man is

carved - not in letters, but in veins of basalt,

where grief is older than alphabets, and light

was still a rumour on the lips of clay. In this

face - gold was still earth, and the word

“possession” had not yet been born.

Paper had not betrayed the soul

by trading thought for currency.

No war could shatter this face.

No earthquake could grind it into silence. It was
History itself that fractured - splitting open across
the brow of its own reflection. And from that
wound, you rose,
your eyes becoming the twin rivers,
Tigris and Euphrates, their tears, the
first language of mankind. Your beard, a
scroll of prophecy, each curl a
constellation foretelling a race that
would one day worship fire, forgetting
who first held the flame. In this face that
once ruled the horizons, kingdoms were
only shadows at your feet.

Nineveh - the pulse of the world,
Babylon: its dreaming heart, and
Uruk - its trembling side. In this
face, hatred vanished, a mere echo
swallowed by creation. Only the
artist remained,- chiselling eternity

into gesture, and coaxing from grief
a blossom of stone. Your empire
spoke not the tongue of conquest,
but of exaltation, a language the
mountains understood, and the
rivers answered at dawn. They
broke your face when your land
was lost. They climbed your
winged bulls and silenced your
palaces.

They thought ruin was an ending.

But the blow was the resurrection.

The fracture became your halo.

The wound, your immortality. You were not
buried, you were reborn in the dust, and every
crack became a syllable of your return.

Now the mourners chant in forgotten tongues:

“O Ashur, father of dawn! Your
absence is an empire of echo,

your silence, a kingdom of stars.”
I do not mourn you.
I raise you.
I crown your ashes with the light of
verses, with psalms older than sorrow.
Rise, gather the winged bulls of the
cosmos, those guardians of vanished
skies. Stand once more at the gate of
beginnings. Let your face - cracked but
eternal,
be the last word of empire,
the first whisper of eternity.
For even shattered gods
refuse to die.



This photograph — the heart of this chapter — has since become an enduring icon.

It captures a moment of shared mourning: myself beside Dr. Mowaffaq al-Tikriti, a pharmacist, inside the Baghdad Museum in 2003, photographed by Reuters photojournalist Radu Sighet.



This photograph was taken with my own camera inside the **Iraqi Museum in 2003**, during its brief **half-hour “reopening”** staged by the **American forces**, two months after its looting and devastation. Before me stands the very **statue whose story I have told**, the one to whom I later dedicated my poem *“In That Face”*— for every feature of its broken visage was a line from which the poem was born.

Chapter Four:

The Film's Reception Worldwide

“When a museum is looted, it is not only the artifacts that are stolen- it is the heart that once shaped them.”

Amal Al-Jubouri

My goal was, first and foremost, to convey my message to the German people, especially my friends among writers, thinkers, and the German media and, through them, to the world.

For that reason, the first screening of the film took place at the **Pergamon Museum** in Berlin, inside its main hall that houses one of humanity's most iconic archaeological masterpieces: **the Ishtar Gate** and the treasures of Mesopotamian civilization.

In an unprecedented gesture, the museum's administration worked for days to prepare for the screening: they draped the museum's vast glass dome, the very sky and ceiling of the hall in **black fabric**, so that sunlight would not interfere with the clarity of the projection. They even **removed the ancient artefacts** from the space and replaced them

with rows of chairs for an audience that overflowed the hall, in a symbolic act of reverence for Iraq.

The Germans¹, along with archaeologists, academics, and people of conscience across the world, were deeply shaken by what had happened. They regarded the **looting of the Iraqi Museum** not merely as a crime against Iraq, but as a **crime against human heritage itself—a war crime against civilization**.

The film was later screened in **New York**, at the **International Book Fair**, and at the **Manuscripts Conference** held at the **Bibliotheca Alexandrina** in Egypt, where the audience's emotional response reached such intensity—tears, outcries, and stunned silence—that **Dr. Ismail Serageldin**, the Library's Director at the time, turned to me afterward and said in his Egyptian dialect:

¹ For the **Deutsche Welle (DW TV)** feature on *Amal Al-Jubouri* and her documentary *From Berlin to Baghdad*,

see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RwFDsvJTbjg>.

In this segment, **Aktham Salman**, the German translator of the film, reflects on its emotional depth, observing that “*pain itself becomes a narrative force, for Amal is not merely a filmmaker—she is part of the story she tells.*”

“What have you done, Professor Amal? You’ve made people fall ill from grief because of this film!”

The documentary went on to be shown in many world capitals. Yet, **to this day**, it has never been screened in my own country.

Those to whom I spoke about it often showed little interest in presenting it forgetting that the generations born after the invasion deserve to know what happened to their homeland.

When I later uploaded the film to **YouTube**, my intention was to make it accessible to a wider Iraqi and Arab audience, especially since the original version had been subtitled only in German.

Soon after, many **content creators** began to excerpt short segments from the documentary and circulate them across **social media platforms**. At times, my family or friends would send me links to these clips/fragments of the film that had taken on lives of their own.

Reading through the viewers’ comments, I found a chorus of **grief and lamentation**, a collective sorrow over the devastation that had befallen Iraq’s cultural heritage in the aftermath of the American invasion.

Yet, amid this pain, something remarkable began to unfold:

A new awareness was taking root among the younger generation in Iraq, an awakening to the importance of protecting their country's **archaeological legacy and civilizational memory**, especially after the catastrophic destruction and looting carried out by ISIS and its backers during the fall of Mosul.

Thus, what began as a document of mourning gradually became a **tool of remembrance and resistance**, inspiring a renewed sense of cultural guardianship among those born long after the fires of 2003.

For me, this film was never merely a record of destruction; it was, and remains, a **moral document**, a call for Iraqis to safeguard their cultural heritage, and a reminder that no power on earth should be allowed to erase, loot, or commodify the memory of a civilization that once taught the world how to write.

Additional Testimonies on the Looting of Iraqi Cultural Heritage

(Loss, Rescue, and the Politics of Memory)

According to the testimony of the late Iraqi archaeologist Dr. Lamia al-Gailani, as stated in numerous interviews conducted in both Arabic and English, it is possible to add further critical details concerning some of the most significant objects looted from the Iraqi Museum in 2003.

Among the most important stolen materials were rare gold coins, the number of which exceeded one hundred thousand, in addition to a collection of cylinder seals. Approximately one thousand gold coins and around ten cylinder seals had been stored in the large underground vault located beneath the museum floor. Tragically, the majority of these seals—many of which had been uncovered during archaeological excavations in the 1920s, particularly from Sumerian sites and from Nimrud—were stolen and subsequently disappeared.

Only one third of these seals had previously been published and studied; another third had never been studied or scientifically documented, and today we possess only photographic records of them. Their physical absence represents an irreparable loss to the archaeological and intellectual record.

On the other hand and according to Matthew Bogdanos, *Thieves of Baghdad* that the above-ground storage rooms of the Iraqi Museum told a markedly different story. It was here that looters struck most visibly, gaining access through a door reportedly left open by Iraqi soldiers who, as they fled, discarded their uniforms along the way. The looters indiscriminately swept entire shelves of artefacts into bags, resulting in the disappearance of **3,138 registered objects**, including jars, vessels, and ceramic fragments.²

By contrast, the subterranean storage areas revealed a far more troubling pattern. On **2 May 2003**, Colonel **Matthew Bogdanos**, leading the U.S. investigation into the museum's looting, descended with a companion through a concealed stairwell toward the basement vaults. They found the heavy metal door standing wide open, with no evidence of forced entry—an indication that someone with prior knowledge had accessed the area before them.

¹ Matthew Bogdanos, *Thieves of Baghdad: One Marine's Passion for Ancient Civilizations and the Journey to Recover the World's Greatest Stolen Treasures* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005). Bogdanos served as head of the U.S. investigative team tasked with assessing and recovering artefacts looted from the Iraqi

² *The Independent*. "Revealed: The Real Story Behind the Great Iraq Museum Thefts." <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/revealed-the-real-story-behind-the-great-iraq-museum-thefts-515067.html>

Bogdanos described the scene as one of calculated devastation rather than random chaos:

“The chaos was shocking: 103 fishing-tackle-sized plastic boxes, originally containing thousands of cylinder seals, beads, amulets, and items of jewellery, were randomly thrown in all directions. Amid the devastation, hundreds of larger, empty boxes surrounding them remained untouched. It was immediately clear that these thieves knew exactly what they were looking for—and where to find it.”

Investigators initially feared the worst. Yet, remarkably, **thirty cabinets** containing part of the world’s finest collections of **cylinder seals** and **tens of thousands of gold and silver coins** remained unopened. Bogdanos later surmised that the perpetrators likely possessed the correct keys but had dropped them in the unlit basement and, lacking torches, were unable to retrieve them.

Nevertheless, the losses were immense. Missing items included **4,795 cylinder seals**, **5,542 coins**, as well as glass vessels, beads, amulets, and jewellery. As Bogdanos concluded:

“It is simply inconceivable that this area had been found, breached, and entered by anyone who did not have an intimate insider’s knowledge of the museum.”

In the aftermath, Bogdanos fingerprinted all **twenty-three museum staff members** who returned after the invasion and were known to have access to the storage facilities. However, many key employees never returned, including **Jassim Muhammad**, the museum's former head of security. Compounding the investigation was the dire condition of the museum's documentation. Years of underfunding meant that thousands of excavated artefacts stored in the vaults had never been formally catalogued. No comprehensive inventory existed, and Bogdanos estimated that compiling one would take many years. As a result, recovery of missing artefacts had to take precedence over full documentation.

A detailed and authoritative account of these events is provided in **Thieves of Baghdad**, written by **Matthew Bogdanos**, who served as a U.S. Marine officer during the 2003 invasion. Notably, Bogdanos donated **all royalties from the book to the Iraqi Museum**, underscoring the ethical dimension of his engagement with Iraq's cultural heritage.

The Torah Manuscripts and the Intelligence Archives Regarding the widely circulated story of the theft of the oldest Torah manuscript and its alleged transfer to Israel, Dr. al-Gailani¹ adds the following testimony:

¹ <https://youtu.be/cyIzgfRmnV8>

“I believe what I am about to say may sound unbelievable, but I was a direct witness to the events concerning the Torah manuscripts. After these materials were discovered in the intelligence services’ holdings, an official letter was sent to the Department of Antiquities requesting that they be taken away and discarded, allegedly because they were rotten and damaged. I asked: why were these manuscripts kept in intelligence archives rather than in the museum? These materials were part of Iraq’s heritage, originating from Basra and its synagogues. These Torah scrolls date back to the 1990s.

Many antiquities were stolen from archaeological sites during the years of sanctions and state weakness. At that time, if someone brought antiquities back, the authorities would sometimes reward them financially. Intelligence officers possessed a large quantity of Jewish archival material and would periodically bring items forward in exchange for rewards.

After 2003, the American forces discovered these materials in the intelligence building. They requested to remove them for conservation purposes, claiming that no functioning scientific laboratory remained in Iraq due to looting, and that no Iraqi staff possessed passports. The Americans offered to take Iraqi staff to the United States for training. It was therefore insisted

that the manuscripts be transferred to the U.S. in order to ‘save’ them.”

The signature of the Director of Antiquities, approving the removal of the archive, constituted legal proof that the archive was the property of the Iraqi state. However, the damage inflicted upon the archive—including fungal decay, humidity, and sewage water caused by the destruction of water pipes in the intelligence basement during U.S. bombardment—resulted in severe deterioration. According to experts, these materials would require up to twenty years of conservation work.

Subsequently, rumors emerged that the archive had been smuggled to Israel. Dr. al-Gailani stressed that the archive did not contain politically “dangerous” material, but rather documents of immense social and historical value, documenting the everyday life of the Iraqi Jewish community—its true importance often misunderstood or exaggerated in public discourse.

Nevertheless, reports emerging from Israel indicated that one ancient Torah scroll, written with pomegranate-based ink, had indeed reached Israel, where a public celebration was reportedly held upon the completion of its restoration. Israeli authorities refused to disclose how the manuscript arrived there. Based on academic sources, I have also noted that—according to the testimony of a Lebanese-born

interpreter who accompanied U.S. forces during the removal of the archive—the oldest Torah, identified as a Babylonian Talmud Torah, was initially found but later disappeared from both the archive and from the official inventories recorded in U.S. military documents. A copy of these official records is included in the appendix of this book.

Furthermore, a former Iraqi intelligence officer, whom I interviewed privately during my doctoral research¹ and who requested anonymity, confirmed that the archive indeed contained the oldest Torah manuscript. He stated that only the director of the intelligence service and the head of the so-called “Israel and Espionage Division” possessed the keys to the basement vault. According to his account, the officer responsible for that division handed the archive to Dr. Ahmad Chalabi, who subsequently informed the American forces.

When I attended the opening of the Iraqi Jewish Archive exhibition at the Library of Congress in 2013, one of the American researchers who had accompanied the U.S. forces during the extraction of the archive stated publicly that Chalabi had provided the metal containers in which not only Jewish Iraqi archival materials were packed, but also sensitive

¹ Amal, Al-jubouri: Iraqi Jews :Memory, Identity and Citizenship, (1950-2023), PhD thesis, SOAS, University of London.

Iraqi state documents, as acknowledged in U.S. reports.

Despite repeated Iraqi demands, the archive has not been returned. According to multiple sources I interviewed during my doctoral research, the U.S. State Department has no intention of returning the archive, due to pressure from Iraqi-American Jewish lobbying groups. To maintain diplomatic relations, U.S. officials repeatedly respond that the archive is still under restoration or will be returned “within two years.” Twenty-three years have now passed, and the archive has not been returned—nor is it likely ever to be returned to its rightful owner, Iraq.

Acts of Courage and Rescue Not all stories from this period are stories of loss.

In a dialogue between Dr. al-Gailani and journalist Ibrahim al-Sharqiya, she recounts how a votive vessel stolen from the museum ended up in the possession of a young Iraqi man who attempted to sell it without understanding its value. Upon learning of its significance, his sister insisted that it be returned to the museum—and it was.

Equally heroic is the story of the Director of the Nasiriyah Museum, who hid antiquities in her own home and refused to surrender them to any authority until she personally delivered them to the competent authorities in Baghdad—placing her life at grave risk.

A similar act of courage was performed by a female librarian in Basra, who protected the public library with extraordinary dedication, preventing its looting and burning. This story became the subject of films, articles, and books in the West, while remaining largely unknown in Iraq itself—an illustration of the bitter proverb: “*the singer of the neighborhood is not heard.*”

The renowned archaeologist Dr. Mu’ayyad Sa‘id attempted to buy looted paintings from thieves near Haifa Street, close to what was then known as the Saddam Center for the Arts (now the Ministry of Culture). He succeeded in saving several works. He often told me: “When will you record your testimony for history?” Sadly, death overtook him before I was able to conduct the long interviews I had promised.

I myself purchased cylinder seals from street sellers and brought them to Dr. Donny George, who informed me that they were replicas produced by the museum. Although disappointed, I handed them over nonetheless, and he assured me that even replicas were valuable for documentation. He later apologized for not recording this episode in his writings due to the overwhelming chaos of the time. Death, once again, intervened before further testimony could be documented.

Banks, Betrayal, and Broken Trust American soldiers and officers also confiscated valuables brought to them by Iraqis who believed **these items would be safeguarded and returned to a future Iraqi government.** After I appeared on television discussing the looting, a group of young men from al-A‘zamiyya approached me. They had protected the local bank from looters, armed themselves to defend it, and asked whether they should hand over the money and gold to U.S. forces.

Naively, I advised them to do so. They complied, handing the assets to an American officer who threatened them and promised a receipt and a reward. They received neither.

Iraqi Voices Silenced: A First-Hand Testimony on the Destruction of the Saddam Art Centre (2003)

After I published a post discussing *From Berlin to Baghdad* prior to its release, one of the responses came from the Iraqi artist **Ali Al-Dulaimi**, former Director of the **Saddam Art Centre**—one of the most significant institutions of modern art in Iraq before the 2003 invasion. In his comment, Al-Dulaimi urged me to include the story of the destruction of the Art Centre, a catastrophe largely absent from dominant English-language narratives of cultural loss in Iraq.

Shortly thereafter, he sent me the following testimony, first published in Arabic in 2016 and later reiterated in 2019, accompanied by photographs from his personal archive. This testimony is of exceptional importance: it restores an Iraqi voice that was either suppressed or marginalised due to the hegemony of English-language publication and the prioritisation of external narratives. What follows is Al-Dulaimi's account—an internal, eyewitness testimony of the systematic destruction of Iraq's modern artistic memory.

Testimony of Ali Al-Dulaimi

(Former Director of the Saddam Art Centre)

Ali Al-Dulaimi, an artist and senior employee at the Saddam Art Centre—one of the largest and most important art museums in Iraq during the former regime—was unable to hold back his tears as he recalled the details of what he described as the **largest act of looting and destruction** to which the Centre was subjected on **10 April 2003**, one day after the occupation forces entered Baghdad and the regime collapsed.

Despite extensive precautionary measures undertaken prior to the invasion—measures that required Al-Dulaimi and his colleagues to relocate the most valuable artworks into vast, reinforced underground

vaults after carefully wrapping and sealing them—the Centre was devastated.

In testimony first published by *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper on Friday, 29 April 2016, Al-Dulaimi revealed previously undisclosed details concerning the looting of the museum, the burning of its archive, and the role of organised criminal groups that had prepared for the theft **two days before the fall of Baghdad**. These revelations were made public on the occasion of the thirteenth anniversary of the crime, which specialists described as a “*crime of the century*.”

Speaking to *Asharq Al-Awsat*, Al-Dulaimi—who currently serves as Director of the National Museum of Modern Art within Iraq’s Ministry of Culture—stated:

“Before the announcement of ‘Hour Zero’ for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, most Iraqi official and semi-official institutions, as well as mass organisations, took precautionary measures to protect their buildings and movable assets. The Saddam Art Centre, as it was then known, was located in central Baghdad, in the Allawi district, and housed thousands of rare and museum-grade artworks: oil paintings, graphic works, drawings, watercolours, Arabic calligraphy and ornamentation, sculptures in all materials, and ceramics. These works represented all the major

names in Iraqi art, from the first generation of pioneers up to the beginning of the occupation.

Given the sheer volume of works—exceeding **8,000 artworks** of varying sizes and exceptional artistic value—some displayed across the Centre’s five floors and others stored in ground-level warehouses, there was no secure location capable of protecting them except the building’s vast and heavily fortified basement. It was practically impossible to move this enormous collection outside the museum. Many works could not even be removed from their frames due to their age and fragility; attempting to do so would have resulted in total destruction. Moreover, even if we had relocated them elsewhere, they would have been looted, as all official institutions and their alternative locations were subjected to rampant theft and vandalism.

I was tasked by the artist Mukhlid Al-Mukhtar, then Director General of the Directorate of Plastic Arts, with forming a committee of staff members to prioritise the protection of the works of pioneering artists. We wrapped them in plastic and rope and lowered them into the secure corners of the vast basement vault.”

Al-Dulaimi continued:

“We acted swiftly and succeeded in safeguarding a large number of works. The basement doors were

tightly sealed. However, many artworks remained on display across the Centre's floors, as well as in the main storage areas, which contained thousands of significant works. Security forces from the army and police were deployed across Baghdad, including the area around the museum on Haifa Street, and staff members maintained round-the-clock guard duties—despite the mass exodus of residents from the city as military operations intensified.

Baghdad became a ghost city—gripped by fear, hunger, exhaustion, and the collapse of daily life. Transportation ceased, shops and restaurants closed, and only armed security and military groups roamed the streets.”

Museum staff rotated shifts in order to check on their families and procure minimal food supplies. Al-Dulaimi recounts:

“Two days before what became known as the ‘fall of Baghdad,’ I walked on foot from Haifa Street to Baghdad Al-Jadida to check on my family, intending to return the next morning with food for my colleagues. Instead, we were confronted with an explosion of chaos: looters and saboteurs appeared everywhere, stealing valuables and burning institutions—ministries, schools, universities, hospitals, banks—despite all emergency plans and

security reinforcements. It was a sudden and total collapse that none of us had anticipated.”

When Al-Dulaimi finally managed to return to the Art Centre days later, the devastation was overwhelming: “What I saw was unbearable. I still cannot process it to this day. In a moment of senseless madness, this immense Iraqi artistic heritage—created by honest, dedicated national hands—was destroyed. Everything was gone: what could be stolen was stolen, what could be burned was burned. Paintings were slashed, frames torn from stolen works, and the museum’s documentation registers—records listing each artwork by name, material, date, subject, and year—were lost. These were records we had worked on for years to archive, classify, and preserve digitally.

All archival files documenting the history of Iraq’s modern art movement—meticulously catalogued—were burned, along with the specialised library containing the most important Arabic and international references. Nothing survived.”

According to administrative records, the Centre housed **more than 8,000 artworks**. Al-Dulaimi explains:

“These works fell victim to organised theft, deliberate vandalism, and acts of extreme destruction. Many were intentionally mutilated beyond repair, suffering

damage reaching **100 per cent**, rendering them entirely unsuitable for exhibition or restoration. Fewer than **1,000 works** survived in any condition. These remnants were transferred temporarily to the Iraqi Museum for safekeeping, as it was afforded special protection.

We formally requested protection from the American forces present at the site for what remained of the Art Centre building, but they refused. Meanwhile, **Al-Rasheed Bank**, located directly opposite the museum, was provided with armed protection and even an armoured military vehicle guarding its entrance.”

Despite the catastrophe, Al-Dulaimi insists that the museum staff refused to surrender to despair:

“We rolled up our sleeves and began again, painstakingly gathering what remained—shattered, torn, and scattered across the floors—and attempted, within our limited means, to restore the museum’s educational and cultural mission.”

During these efforts, staff discovered that many stolen works had been taken by professional art thieves and dealers who understood their market value. Al-Dulaimi recounts:

“Many came to me offering to sell the stolen works back to the museum, claiming they had purchased them in the markets. I refused—I had no authority to

negotiate—and urged them to hand the works over to the Ministry of Culture. But the ministry itself was consumed by financial corruption. Eventually, the works were smuggled out of Iraq and sold abroad for exorbitant prices, disappearing permanently, despite our appeals to **UNESCO**, **Interpol**, and art institutions inside and outside Iraq.”

This testimony stands as a crucial corrective to dominant narratives of cultural loss in Iraq. It documents not only destruction, but also **professional ethics, resistance, and abandonment**—and exposes the asymmetry between what was protected (banks) and what was allowed to perish (memory, art, and identity). Above all, it restores the Iraqi voice to the historical record.

Manuscripts, Memory, and Disappearance: Iraqi Testimonies Beyond the Archive

I also came across a book by the Iraqi visual artist **Hamed al-Shammari**, entitled *The Theft of a Civilization: Clay and Stone*. In this work, al-Shammari states that the information he presents concerning stolen manuscripts is drawn from an article by the late manuscript scholar **Osama al-Naqshbandi**, who had earlier given testimony in my documentary *From Berlin to Baghdad*. According to

al-Shammari, al-Naqshbandi published this article in Egypt in **2006**—a text that I cite in the footnotes of this book.

What follows is a reconstructed inventory of **major stolen manuscripts** mentioned by al-Naqshbandi and cited by al-Shammari. However, this written record must be read alongside **oral testimony and lived archival encounters**, which complicate and deepen the narrative.

Bell's Letters: From Archive to Market

While researching the correspondence of **Gertrude Bell** with **Anastas al-Karmali**, I encountered a Baghdad bookseller who told me that a private collector had once brought him a *bundle of Bell's letters*. The bookseller purchased them and later sold them to the **Abbasid Shrine (al-ʿAtaba al-ʿAbbāsiyya)** in Karbala.

Separately, during my research on al-Karmali's correspondence at the **Iraqi Manuscripts House** in Baghdad, several long-serving female and male employees informed me that *all Gertrude Bell letters* once held in the House's archive had been **stolen in 1991**, following the Gulf War. According to their testimony, the then Director-General of Antiquities, **Dr. Mu'ayyad Sa'id**, had ordered that several boxes of manuscripts—including Bell's correspondence—be transferred to a fortified site (the "Citadel") in

Kirkuk, where the Department of Antiquities maintained a branch.

Like many Iraqis at the time, Dr. Mu'ayyad Sa'id believed the danger of American aerial bombardment would be confined to Baghdad. What followed instead was a widespread popular uprising after the war, accompanied by mass looting across nearly all Iraqi provinces—**with the exception of Baghdad and three other governorates that remained under state control**. As a result, materials transferred to Kirkuk, including manuscripts and Bell's letters, were looted. It is therefore possible—though not yet definitively proven—that some or all of these letters are now held by the **Abbasid Shrine**.

This brings us back to the **inventory of stolen manuscripts** compiled by al-Naqshbandi, who served for many years as Director-General of the Iraqi Manuscripts House prior to the fall of the regime.

Inventory of Stolen Manuscripts

(Based on Osama al-Naqshbandi¹, cited by Hamed al-Shammari)

The following cases illustrate long-term, systematic manuscript theft from Iraq, spanning the Ottoman

¹ Osama al-Naqshbandi, "The Theft and Smuggling of Manuscripts in Iraq, Past and Present," *Turathiyyat* (Cairo), no. 8 (July 2006).

period, colonial diplomacy, the twentieth century, and the post-1991 era:

1. **A rare Arabic manuscript** was stolen in the mid-nineteenth century by a French diplomat and orientalist, **Nicolas Siouffi**, from Mosul. The manuscript—later identified as a *forged copy* of Dioscorides’ *Materia Medica*—was smuggled to Paris. The original was returned to the French National Library, while the forged copy circulated among private collectors.
2. In the **mid-twentieth century**, Jewish traffickers smuggled **twenty rare manuscripts** to **Princeton University**, as well as **six manuscripts** from the same period to other Western institutions. One manuscript alone was reportedly sold in the United States for **\$72,000**.
3. At the end of the twentieth century, the **British archaeologist Seton Lloyd** oversaw the transfer of **more than 1,200 manuscripts** from Iraq to the library of the **British Museum**. Despite repeated Iraqi requests for restitution, these manuscripts were not returned.
4. An Iraqi individual known as “**Mankana**” smuggled **3,000 manuscripts** from the city of **Zakho**, including **606 Arabic manuscripts** and **2,317 Syriac manuscripts**, to the **Chester**

- Beatty Library** and other European collections.
5. The Vatican Library acquired a significant collection of manuscripts originally belonging to **the Mosuli scholar Ignatius (Aghnatius)**.
 6. During the final years of Ottoman rule, **large quantities of precious Iraqi manuscripts** were transferred to **Istanbul**.
 7. In the 1960s, the Egyptian writer '**Abd al-Raḥman** transported and sold a valuable group of Iraqi manuscripts to Western orientalists.
 8. A large number of manuscripts were stolen from the **Awqaf Library in Mosul**; although the Iraqi state later recovered **416 manuscripts**, many remain missing.
 9. In the **1980s**, a British antiquities dealer, **Wilfred Thesiger**, offered for sale a Qur'anic manuscript attributed to the famous Baghdadi calligrapher **Yāqūt al-Musta'ṣimī** (d. 1298). Although Iraqi authorities attempted to acquire it through Interpol and the Antiquities Police, it was ultimately sold in the United States for **\$500,000**.
 10. After **1991**, the manuscript خزائن الروضة الحسينية (Husayni Shrine Library) was burned and looted. **More than 20,000 manuscripts** were

- transferred to Kirkuk, of which **364 rare manuscripts** were later confirmed missing.
11. A Lebanese passport-holding agent attempted to steal an early Qur'anic manuscript from the **Ḥaydarī Shrine**, intending to smuggle it abroad for **five million dollars**. Iraqi security forces intervened and arrested the trafficking network.
 12. An Iranian individual named "**Sha'ram**", serving as a supervisor, attempted to smuggle manuscripts from the **Abbasid Shrine** to Iran. The manuscripts were recovered, though another attempt followed later.
 13. **339 Indian-language manuscripts** were rescued and transferred to the **Manuscripts House in Karbala**.
 14. An Iranian trafficker named **Miyān (or Mayān)** smuggled **296 manuscripts**, including rare Hijri seventh-century texts, from **Hamdān**.
 15. In **1973**, an individual known as **al-Barmaqī** arrived in Najaf from Iran with **2,374 manuscripts**, including texts attributed to **Imam 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib**, Qur'anic manuscripts, and boxed printed volumes falsely marked with the Qur'anic phrase "*None*

shall touch it except the purified” to facilitate concealment.

16. An Iranian trafficker known as **al-Qummī** smuggled manuscripts from the **al-‘Askarī Library in Samarra**; the materials were later seized and transferred to the Iraqi Manuscripts House.
17. According to the former Israeli Knesset member **Mordechai Ben-Porat**, Israel acquired a *large number of Iraqi manuscripts* during and after the invasion of Iraq, including manuscripts belonging to the **Iraqi Academy of Sciences**.

Based on a rapid quantitative assessment of the above cases, the estimated number of smuggled Iraqi manuscripts cited by al-Naqshbandi reaches **approximately 30,000 manuscripts**.¹

¹ Regarding the manuscripts of the Ministry of Awqaf referenced by Osama al-Naqshbandi in his testimony in the film *From Berlin to Baghdad*, in which he affirmed that all the manuscripts held there had been looted or destroyed, I encountered an alternative account in 2014. During that year, I met a bookseller specializing in rare and first-edition volumes. In the course of our conversation about the events following 2003, he recounted that an Iraqi individual had approached him seeking mediation with the Sunni Endowment (al-Waqf al-Sunni), after the Ministry of Awqaf had been dissolved and restructured along sectarian lines.

According to the bookseller, this individual claimed to have purchased the entirety of the former Ministry’s manuscript collection for approximately \$50,000, ostensibly in order to safeguard it. He further alleged that the

This material demonstrates that the looting of Iraqi manuscripts is **not an episodic phenomenon linked solely to 2003**, but a long historical process involving colonial appropriation, diplomatic immunity, market trafficking, war-time collapse, and post-war religious and institutional re-containment. Crucially, much of this knowledge survives **outside official English-language archives**, preserved instead through Iraqi scholarly memory, oral testimony, and fragmentary documentation.

To ignore these voices is not merely an archival failure—it is an epistemic one.

A Necessary Correction: Encountering Evidence Beyond the Dominant Narrative

What struck me most forcefully—both as a surprise and as a moment of intellectual reckoning—was my accidental discovery, through an online search, of a substantial book published under the name of the Iraqi visual artist **Hamed al-Shammari**. The volume, extensive in scope, addresses Iraqi civilisation, the

manuscripts had been concealed in a room, behind a brick wall constructed specifically to prevent their theft. The individual reportedly sought to sell the collection to the Sunni Endowment for \$150,000. However, when approached, the Endowment declined to pay the requested sum.

When I asked the bookseller whether it might be possible to contact this individual directly, he responded that he no longer knew his whereabouts.

archaeology of Mesopotamia, the history of its discovery, and the long trajectory of **systematic looting**, culminating in the events that followed 2003. What renders this work particularly significant is al-Shammari's candid self-critique. He acknowledges that, prior to 2013, he himself had been biased—largely out of ignorance—and had uncritically accepted many media reports that later proved exaggerated or false. This position shifted decisively after 2013, when the Iraqi Museum was preparing for its reopening and al-Shammari met a retired museum director who shared with him first-hand information. This individual affirmed that he had personally seen many of the artefacts that were widely reported as having been destroyed or irretrievably looted.

Revisiting the Iraqi Museum, 2013¹

According to this testimony, artist Hameed Al-Shamari visited the Iraqi Museum **four times** between late March and mid-April 2013. At that time, the museum was functioning as a large workshop, engaged in intensive preparations for its anticipated reopening. He was granted permission to photograph and document the collections and carried with him hundreds of printed pages from al-Shammari's book

¹ Hamid Al-Shammari, *Sariqat Ḥaḍāra: al-Ṭīn wa-l-Ḥajar* [*The Theft of a Civilization: Clay and Stone*] (2019), Pp.228- 229.

in draft form, comparing its claims with what he observed on site.

Contrary to prevailing narratives, he discovered that **all the artefacts he had previously believed—on the basis of widely circulated reports—to have been looted or destroyed were, in fact, present.**

These included prehistory artefacts, objects from before the invention of writing, royal tomb material from Ur, and sculptures from the Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Persian, Hellenistic, Parthian, and Islamic periods. Many of these works were ones he knew intimately, having memorised them over decades of professional engagement.

Al-Shamari further confirmed that **both large and small artefacts were preserved**, including internationally renowned pieces such as the head attributed to **Sargon of Akkad**, the so-called “Mona Lisa of Nimrud” (the ivory plaque), and a substantial number of gold artefacts returned from international exhibitions. The royal tomb materials from Ur and Nimrud were also intact, as were numerous items previously reported as lost.

Pre-Invasion Protective Measures

According to **Muhsin Hassan ‘Ali**, a retired museum employee who was permanently present at the

museum and formerly served as one of its directors, a **five-member committee** had been formed several months before the invasion. He himself was a member of this committee. With the assistance of selected senior staff, they supervised the inventorying of museum halls, hall by hall, and placed artefacts into **independent, sealed storage containers**.

These artefacts—including ivory objects and other sensitive materials—were then transferred to **secure, undisclosed locations**. All items were carefully documented, and knowledge of their locations was restricted exclusively to the five committee members, who formally pledged to maintain secrecy. The doors of these locations were reinforced and secured. After the invasion, once a degree of relative stability returned and security decisions were taken, the artefacts were restored to the museum **fully intact**. According to this testimony, **no artefacts from the exhibition halls were lost**.

Where the Looting Occurred

Looting, however, did take place—but primarily in **museum storage areas**, not exhibition halls. These storage spaces contained artefacts that were either not yet prepared for display, newly excavated materials from archaeological missions, items from foreign and Iraqi expeditions, gifts, confiscated objects, and artefacts awaiting rotation as part of the museum's

periodic exhibition-exchange system. Objects sent abroad for temporary exhibitions were normally replaced by alternatives, while returned items were stored in what was known as the **temporary storage hall**.

It was within these storage areas that looters gained access. Among the stolen objects were **ivories, clay tablets, seals, and a limited number of statues**. By contrast, many of the museum's glass display cases—whose images circulated globally as symbols of destruction—were in fact already empty. Their contents had been removed earlier by the aforementioned committee for safekeeping.

Clarifying Iconic Claims of Destruction

Regarding the widely circulated claim that the heads of **eleven large Hatra statues** had been destroyed, Muhsin Hassan 'Ali confirmed that this was misleading. The heads of these statues had originally been **separate elements**, detached at the time of excavation and stored independently in secure locations. The committee responsible for preservation had removed them as a precautionary measure. He personally witnessed several large Hatra statues after their heads had been reattached, confirming that they were intact.

Nonetheless, one statue from Hatra—a seated female figure—had indeed been damaged, and its head stolen.

Similarly, bronze statues of Greek deities, including **Nike, Poseidon, Apollo, and Hecate**, were damaged and decapitated because of their immense weight, which made their relocation to secret storage impossible. The well-known **ivory lioness devouring a man** was reported missing; according to testimony, it was in the possession of a person who considered himself a trustee and claimed he would return it to the museum upon his return to Iraq.

Coins, Seals, and the Myth of Total Loss

It had been widely rumoured that **480,000 cylinder seals** were stolen from the museum. According to Muhsin Hassan 'Ali, this claim was false. These seals were stored in **secure boxes** that looters were unable to move. In reality, the museum's most valuable coin collections survived the looting. **Thirty iron safes** and **sealed rooms** containing thousands of precious coins, small artefacts, and rare objects remained untouched.

Evidence of Targeted Theft and Military Involvement

By contrast, looters forcibly removed several heavy artefacts, including marble funerary stelae with inscriptions and carved stone elements from the

Islamic gallery walls. Extremely heavy pieces—such as the marble statue of **Entemena**, the copper statue of **Naram-Sin**, the Black Obelisk, the stele of **Dadusha**, and the stele of **Shalmaneser**—were left in place due to their weight, though some were damaged during attempted removal.

Conclusive evidence established that the **statue of Entemena** was stolen by individuals connected to foreign forces and later recovered. The statue of **Naram-Sin** was taken and subsequently returned by the American commander **David Petraeus**, who personally transported it back to Iraq aboard his private aircraft. The bronze statue was later found discarded near Baghdad, having been rolled down from the museum's upper floor.

Other artefacts—such as the marble statue of **Queen Shub-Ad**, as well as additional ivories including the predatory lioness—were preserved in temporary storage. Some items were later discovered buried beneath heavy water tanks in residential areas near Baghdad.

Toward a More Accurate Historical Record

This testimony does not deny the reality of looting. Rather, it **corrects its scale, geography, and mechanisms**, challenging the dominant narrative of total annihilation. It demonstrates that systematic pre-invasion preservation efforts saved the core of Iraq's

museum heritage, while losses were concentrated in specific storage contexts, exacerbated by chaos, insider access, and selective intervention.

Placed here—before the Epilogue—this account serves as a necessary recalibration of memory, reminding us that the history of Iraq’s cultural loss is more complex than the binaries of destruction and survival allow.

Final Question

Why is Iraq continuously looted?

Why is its memory violated, its heritage desecrated, its history stolen, and its identity fractured?

Chapter V

Guardians of Memory: Iraqi Acts of Courage in the Face of Cultural Collapse

Among the figures who deserve to be inscribed into Iraq's cultural history is the **Director of the Nasiriyah Museum**, whose actions were recounted by the late archaeologist **Dr. Lamia al-Gailani**. According to her testimony, the museum director categorically refused to hand over the museum's contents to any authority after the collapse of the regime in 2003. Fully aware of the mortal danger involved, she chose instead to protect the collection personally. With the assistance of her family, she undertook the perilous task of transporting **the entire contents of the Nasiriyah Museum** from Nasiriyah to Baghdad, thereby ensuring their survival at a moment when institutional protection had all but vanished. Her actions stand as a rare example of ethical custodianship carried out at extreme personal risk.

A similarly emblematic act of courage took place in Basrah, where the chief librarian of the Basrah Central Library, **Alia Muhammad Baker**,

confronted armed looters determined to destroy the library. Despite explicit threats and the presence of weapons, she resisted them with nothing but her moral authority, love for books, and loyalty to her country. When institutional protection failed, she mobilised neighbours and friends to smuggle thousands of books out of the library and hide them in private homes and restaurants. Her defiance—placing cultural memory above personal safety—transformed her into a symbol of intellectual resistance and has since been documented internationally. Yet within Iraq, her story remains insufficiently integrated into the national historiography of survival.

Equally deserving of historical documentation is the testimony of **Dr. Ahmed al-‘Alaiyyawi**, who defended the **Library of the College of Arts at the University of Kufa** during the chaotic days following the fall of the regime. His account, which he later shared with me as a recollection from the past, exemplifies the fragility of **oral history in Iraq**, where such testimonies are too often dismissed, forgotten, or never formally archived.

Dr. al-‘Alaiyyawi recalls that military aircraft circled overhead while sporadic gunfire echoed through the city, punctuated by rising columns of distant smoke. Party affiliates, he notes, vanished without firing a

single shot, abandoning their shelters, uniforms, and rotting food supplies. Believing the city would not fall so quickly, few anticipated the total collapse that followed.

On the morning in question, he left his home to meet a friend, Haitham, and together they set out on what was meant to be a brief mission. Navigating backstreets to avoid advancing American forces, they encountered a city emptied of order and flooded instead with looters—men and boys carrying furniture, electrical appliances, carpets, and office equipment stripped from government buildings. As they drew closer to their destination, the looting intensified, accompanied by violent disputes over newly acquired computers that had been supplied to Iraqi institutions through international agreements during the sanctions period.

Determined to reach the **Library of the College of Arts**, Dr. al-‘Alaiyyawi urged his hesitant companion onward despite the mortal danger. They parked across the street from the building, waiting for the looters to leave. When it became clear that the crowd intended to break into the library, he exited the vehicle and approached the door alone.

A group of young men had gathered, peering through the glass windows. Amid shouting and applause, they decided to force the door open, convinced the

building must contain valuables. Dr. al-‘Alaiyyawi intervened, declaring calmly but firmly that the building contained nothing but books—books he knew well, having studied there himself only two years earlier. The response was brutal: if the library held only books, they said, then it would be burned.

As some began searching for tools to break in, he returned to the car, seized the rifle his friend was carrying, and walked back toward the entrance. The sight of a man advancing with a weapon caused many to flee, though a few remained, prepared for confrontation. With explosions echoing in the distance and news of American troops approaching the city, the situation grew increasingly volatile.

Holding the rifle, Dr. al-‘Alaiyyawi ordered the looters to retreat, threatening to fire if they advanced. One of them accused him of protecting something valuable. He replied with fury and despair: *“This is a library, you fool. Leave, or I will shoot—and no one will ever know who killed you.”* The tears in his eyes, he later reflected, were more frightening to them than the weapon itself. The looters withdrew and disappeared among the trees and corridors.

The danger did not end there. Fearing the looters’ return, a group of friends later moved the library’s collection to the home of a nearby student, where it remained hidden until gunfire and chaos subsided.

Months later, when the College of Arts relocated, the books were transported in reused sacks of flour and rice, piled carelessly into trucks meant for bricks and sand. Their final whereabouts became uncertain; some said they were stored in an abandoned building, buried under dust, nesting pigeons, and spider webs.

Dr. al-‘Alaiyyawi concludes his testimony with a quiet irony. To this day, he avoids telling Haitham the full fate of the library. When asked, he simply says: *“You were a hero.”* And Haitham replies: *“By your honour—if we had been killed that day, who would have believed we died protecting a library?”*

These stories—of museum directors, librarians, academics, neighbours, and families—demonstrate that Iraq’s cultural survival did not depend solely on institutions or international interventions. It depended, above all, on **individual moral courage** exercised in moments when the state collapsed and memory itself stood on the brink of erasure. Documenting these acts is not an act of nostalgia; it is a historical obligation.

Conflicting Testimonies and the Problem of Documentation: Reading *The Theft of Civilization: Mud and Stone*

The Votive Vessel: Divergent Narratives

Al-Shammari's account of the fate of the **votive vessel** differs markedly from that provided by the late archaeologist **Lamia al-Gailani**, and at present it remains unclear which version is accurate.

According to al-Shammari, the votive vessel was **completely shattered** when looters entered the museum. However, he reports that a group of young university students living near the museum managed to enter the building during the chaos and **rescued nearly all the fragments** of the vessel, along with fragments of a statue of **King Shalmaneser III**. These materials were taken to their homes for safekeeping and later returned to the museum once security conditions stabilised. The students reportedly **refused any financial reward**, and the artefacts were subsequently restored (al-Shammari, 2013, pp. 187–189).

This account contrasts with al-Gailani's version, which emphasises a more intact survival of the object. The discrepancy illustrates a broader methodological problem: in the absence of complete inventories and

contemporaneous documentation, **oral testimony becomes both indispensable and contested.**

Unrecovered Losses: Gold, Coins, and Clay Tablets

Another key testimony cited by al-Shammari is that of **Amira Eidan**, then Director of Museums, whom he thanks explicitly in the book's preface. According to her statement, entire collections were stolen and have **not yet been recovered**, including:

- a group of gold artefacts known in the media as the "**Gold of the City of Hatra**," consisting of approximately **191 gold dinars**;
- silver and gold coin groups from **al-Anbar**, numbering **430 coins**;
- collections of **precious gold jewellery** from the historic city of **Hatra**;
- and extensive collections of **clay tablets**.

These losses, according to Eidan's testimony, remain unresolved to this day (al-Shammari, 2013, p. 224).

Cylinder Seals and Pre-Invasion Protection

Al-Shammari further clarifies a widely circulated claim concerning the alleged theft of **4,800 cylinder seals**. He states unequivocally that these seals were **not stolen**. Citing **Ahmed Kamel**, Director of Investigations, and **Muhsin Ali Hassan**, then Deputy Director of Iraqi Museums—and one of five trusted officials selected prior to the 2003 war to oversee

emergency protection measures—al-Shammari explains that the seals were **transferred before the invasion** to a secure and secret location. Only these five individuals possessed the necessary codes to open certain safes, and they successfully preserved not only this box but others as well (al-Shammari, 2014, p. 224).

According to a later statement by Amira Eidan dated **20 May 2012**, Iraqi authorities had managed to recover **121,000 archaeological objects** from the total number looted since 2003 (al-Shammari, 2013, p. 226).

The Missing Report and the Absence of Inventories

One of the most troubling revelations in al-Shammari's book concerns a **two-hundred-page official report** prepared by **Abdul Aziz Hamid**, former head of the State Board of Antiquities. This report reportedly documented in detail the circumstances preceding, accompanying, and following the looting of the Iraqi Museum. Yet, as al-Shammari notes, the report was **never presented for public or institutional discussion** (al-Shammari, 2013, p. 228).

The catastrophe, however, runs deeper. Complete museum inventories **did not exist**, and those that once did were either stolen or destroyed. As one former

Iraqi Minister of Culture confided to me in a telephone conversation after 2003, upon assuming office he discovered that **no comprehensive register of museum holdings** was available within the ministry. When I responded that this constituted a catastrophe, he simply repeated the word: “*Yes—this is a catastrophe.*”

The absence of a complete inventory not only compounded the chaos after 2003, but may also have **facilitated theft on a massive scale**, allowing objects to disappear without detection or accountability.

Concluding Analytical Note

What emerges from this material is not a single, coherent narrative of loss, but a **fractured historiography** shaped by partial records, suppressed reports, conflicting testimonies, and institutional silence. Al-Shammari’s book—despite its inconsistencies—remains a crucial intervention precisely because it exposes these fractures. It demonstrates that the destruction of Iraq’s heritage was not only physical, but also **archival and epistemic**: a collapse of documentation, memory, and the mechanisms through which truth itself can be verified.

Methodological Reflection: Oral History, Missing Archives, and the Ethics of Testimony

The preceding chapters have relied on a heterogeneous body of sources: official reports, journalistic investigations, institutional statements, personal correspondence, eyewitness testimonies, and oral recollections. This methodological diversity is not accidental, nor does it reflect a lack of archival rigour. Rather, it is a direct consequence of the historical conditions under which Iraq's cultural heritage has been documented, displaced, silenced, or destroyed.

In contexts where archives are intact, institutional memory stable, and documentation continuous, oral testimony often occupies a supplementary role. In Iraq, however, the archive itself has been repeatedly fractured—through war, sanctions, occupation, looting, bureaucratic neglect, and political interference. Entire collections were destroyed, removed, or rendered inaccessible; inventories were incomplete, lost, or never compiled; and key reports were suppressed or left unpublished. Under such conditions, oral history does not merely complement the archive—it frequently **substitutes for it**.

This substitution presents methodological challenges, but it also reveals a critical truth: **the absence of written records is itself a historical fact**,

one that must be analysed rather than circumvented. The gaps, contradictions, and silences encountered in this study are not signs of analytical failure; they are evidence of systemic rupture. When former museum directors, librarians, archaeologists, guards, students, and local residents offer divergent accounts of the same event, these discrepancies reflect not personal unreliability but the collapse of shared documentation and the fragmentation of institutional authority.

Oral testimony, in this sense, operates as a form of **residual archive**—a living repository of memory preserved within individuals when material traces have been erased. Such testimony is necessarily partial, shaped by trauma, fear, hindsight, and ethical positioning. Yet it remains indispensable, particularly when those who speak were not merely observers but custodians, defenders, or reluctant witnesses to destruction. Their voices document not only what was lost or saved, but also how decisions were made under conditions of extreme uncertainty, moral pressure, and personal risk.

This study therefore approaches oral history neither with romanticisation nor with scepticism, but with **methodological responsibility**. Testimonies are cross-read rather than harmonised; contradictions are preserved rather than resolved prematurely; and

uncertainty is acknowledged as an analytical category. Where written sources conflict with oral accounts, neither is granted automatic epistemic priority. Instead, the divergence itself becomes meaningful, pointing to the politics of representation, the hierarchies of credibility, and the privileging of external narratives over local knowledge.

The hegemony of English-language publication has further compounded these distortions. Many Iraqi testimonies—especially those articulated in Arabic and circulated locally—have remained excluded from global heritage discourse. As a result, international narratives have often relied disproportionately on foreign observers, military investigators, or external institutions, while marginalising Iraqi voices as anecdotal, emotional, or unreliable. This study resists that hierarchy. It insists that Iraqi oral testimony is not merely illustrative, but **constitutive of historical knowledge**.

Finally, the methodological choice to foreground oral history is also an ethical one. To write about loss without listening to those who lived it is to reproduce the very erasure this work seeks to challenge. Oral testimony restores agency to those rendered invisible by archival destruction and geopolitical asymmetry. It acknowledges that memory survives even when paper does not—and that history, in contexts like

Iraq, must sometimes be reconstructed from voices that speak where the archive has fallen silent. It is from this methodological position—attentive to absence, resistant to closure, and accountable to lived experience—that the Epilogue now proceeds.

Epilogue

What the Ruins Remember

“Nothing perishes completely; even the looted stone remembers the hand that carved it.”

— Amal Al-Jubouri

When I watch the film today, the anger, sorrow, and grief that once overwhelmed me no longer paralyze my vision. They have transformed into a space of reflection—an attempt to understand not only **what** happened to Iraq, but **how** it was allowed to happen, and **who** bore the cost.

How, as the great Iraqi poet **Badr Shakir al-Sayyab** once asked, can a human being betray his own country?

Yet this question, painful as it is, is incomplete.

For what unfolded in Iraq after 2003 cannot be reduced to betrayal alone. It was also the consequence of collapse: the collapse of the state, the collapse of law, the collapse of ethical boundaries under occupation, hunger, fear, and the sudden

intrusion of global markets into the ruins of memory. Between survival and conscience, many were pushed into impossible choices. Between chaos and silence, others rose—quietly, without medals—to protect what could still be saved.

The looting of museums, libraries, archives, and art centers was not merely criminal. It was **structural**. It was enabled by war, by the dismantling of institutions, by the suspension of sovereignty, and by an international system that treats heritage as commodity and culture as collateral damage. To ask why Iraq was looted is therefore also to ask why some civilizations are deemed expendable, while others are insured.

In Western discourse, nationalism is often equated with fanaticism.

But in our cultural tradition, **patriotism (al-waṭāniyya)** means something else entirely. It means *love*: love for the soil that bore us, for the dead whose names we carry, for the voices that still echo in our language. And love, by its very nature, implies **loyalty**—a loyalty that forbids us from selling what we claim to cherish, from burning what shaped us, from trading memory for survival or profit.

Yet this book has shown that alongside destruction there was another story—one rarely told.

There were museum directors who hid antiquities in their homes.

Librarians who smuggled books under fire.
Scholars who refused to surrender archives.
Students who rescued fragments and returned them without reward.

Families who became vaults when the state ceased to exist.

These people were not heroes in the theatrical sense. They were something rarer: **guardians of memory**. They understood—often instinctively—that artifacts, manuscripts, and ruins are not objects. They are **origins**. They are not coins to be spent and discarded, but roots from which rebirth becomes possible. To protect them is not nostalgia; it is an ethical act directed toward the future.

Will the new generation of Iraqis—whether in Baghdad, Basra, Berlin, London, Detroit, or Sydney—learn that to be truly human is to become such a guardian?

To protect the traces of civilization as one protects a heartbeat?

To understand that memory is not inherited automatically, but entrusted—fragile, vulnerable, demanding care?

Nations that possess civilizations as ancient as ours—**Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Yemen, Sudan, the Maghreb, and the Arabian Peninsula**—are not merely political entities. They are **living archives**. They may stumble. They may be wounded. Their cities may be reduced to ash. But their memory does not die.

It resists erasure.

It survives fragmentation.

It endures displacement.

Because memory does not live only in stone or paper.

It lives in testimony, in language, in refusal, in the quiet insistence that *this mattered*.

To remember, in such contexts, is not a passive act.

It is resistance.

It is repair.

It is the first step toward justice.

And so this book does not end with closure. It ends with responsibility.

For to remember is not simply to look back.

To remember is to rise again.

Biographical Notes

Jawad Al-Hattab

Born in **Basra in 1950**, **Jawad Al-Hattab** is one of the most prominent voices of the **1970s generation of Iraqi poetry**-a group that redefined modern Arabic poetics through its engagement with existential struggle and national tragedy.

A poet, journalist, and cultural figure, Al-Hattab chose to remain in Iraq through decades of conflict and transition, refusing exile both before and after 2003.

As **Director of Al-Arabiya TV in Baghdad** during the height of the **2006 sectarian war**, he survived an assassination attempt - an ordeal that further deepened his poetic voice and his moral commitment to truth.

He has published several poetry collections and a celebrated memoir reflecting on his experiences as a soldier during the **Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988)**.

Jawad Al-Hattab continues to live and write in **Baghdad**, where his steadfast presence stands as a

testament to the endurance of art and conscience in times of devastation.

Amal Al-Jubouri

Born in **Baghdad in 1967**, **Amal Al-Jubouri** is an award-winning **poet, scholar, journalist, translator, and filmmaker**. Her body of work bridges poetry, politics, and philosophy, exploring exile, identity, and the endurance of memory amid destruction.

She is the author of several acclaimed poetry collections and documentary projects that examine the moral and cultural dimensions of war and survival - among them *Hagar Before the Occupation*, *Hagar After the Occupation* and *From Berlin to Baghdad: They Stole You, Iraq*, the first Iraqi film documenting the looting of the National Museum and the burning of the National Archives in 2003.

Her writings have been translated into multiple languages and recognized internationally for their contribution to world literature and the dialogue between East and West.

Al-Jubouri currently lives in **London**, where she serves as a **Research Fellow at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London**.

Yes — you are broadly using **Harvard style**, but the formatting is inconsistent (capitalisation, dates, italics, access dates, ordering, missing details).

Below is your **restructured reference list in consistent Harvard style**, alphabetised and standardised.

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Final Note

From Berlin to Baghdad - The Film

Dear readers around the world,

You may watch *From Berlin to Baghdad* on both my official YouTube channel and on **Soutuna's** channel.

- **Short version:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6y12TcW-hzc>

- **Full version:**

<https://youtu.be/3RkCs-An0LI>

To explore more of my books, articles, and ongoing projects, please visit my official website:

www.amalaljubouri.com

I have chosen to make all my intellectual and creative work freely accessible to readers, researchers, and students across the globe.

This decision arises from my deep belief in the **right to free and open access to knowledge and culture**—as an act of resistance against the capitalist systems that continue to commodify learning, art, and human thought.

Let knowledge remain a shared light,
not a privilege.

Amal Al-Jubouri, 2026, London

