THE DEATH OF AL MUNTANABBI STREET

The sea has swallowed the honey
(And love turned to ashes in the roads.)
Hamid Mokhtar, *The Rabble*

Aug. 26, 2005 | BAGHDAD, Iraq

Near the old Jewish quarter of Baghdad, at Al Rasheed Street, there is a meandering alley named after the Iraqi poet Al Mutanabbi. The poet's street branches away from Al Rasheed and heads down through a tissue of dilapidated buildings with thin columns that hold up warped balconies. Bookstores of every description occupy the street-level spaces, selling technical manuals, ornate copies of the Quran and a nice selection of pirated software. Al Mutanabbi then runs downhill toward the mud-brown bend of the Tigris until veering west at a covered market and the high walls of an old mosque school. Right at the bend in the road is Baghdad's legendary literary cafe, the Shabandar, where for decades writers and intellectuals have come to drink tea and smoke tobacco from water pipes. The place is smoke-scarred and dirty. When there is electricity, which is almost never, the fans do not cool the air at all. Literary men in their shirt-sleeves sit and smoke.

On Tuesday, Aug. 2, walking carefully under the white-hot sun, a man carried a bag down Al Mutanabbi Street and walked into Hajji Qais Anni's stationery store, stayed for a short time, then left without his package. When the package exploded a short time later, the blast killed Hajji Qais, who was sitting

near the door where he kept watch over his shop. The bomb set fire to his place, and it is now a blackened shell on bookseller's row.

Hajji Qais had been on Al Mutanabbi street for 10 years and the vendors all knew him. He sold greeting cards for births and anniversaries along with Christmas and Easter gifts, cologne and pens. He wore a beard and was also known as a devout Sunni who had no problem hiring Shia workers or spending time with Christian colleagues. Aside from stocking a few items related to Christian holidays, there was nothing unusual in his shop. He wasn't a known member of any political party, and he was, according to his neighbors on Al Mutanabbi Street, a generous man who often gave money to the poor.

No one in the district will speak openly about who killed him, including his own son.

Ahmed Dulaimi, a young guitarist for Iraq's only heavy metal band, told a story that has been going around Baghdad these last few weeks. There was an ice seller selling ice from a small shop on the sidewalk in the Dora neighborhood. One hot day, a man came up to him with a gun and said, "You shouldn't be selling ice because the Prophet Mohammed didn't have ice in his time." Then the gunman shot the ice seller dead. This story terrifies Iraqis but they often laugh when they recount it, because it is absurd that anyone would get killed for selling ice or shaving a beard. It is also true that the ice-seller anecdote follows a pattern of killings around the capital where Islamic militants have regularly assassinated Iraqis for violating strict, and utterly random, codes of behavior. The point of the ice-seller story is that now, anyone in Iraq can be killed for any reason at all. After Hajji Qais was killed, more than one person mentioned these spontaneous assassinations, and they spoke about them the way they'd describe a sandstorm, an all-encompassing thing that no one can stop.

Baghdad's literary neighborhood has a long history of dissent and a well-practiced tolerance of other ideas. Under Saddam, Al Mutanabbi Street was a center for small anti- regime cells who published illegal copies of their tracts, under fake names. Because the place was known for intellectual resistance to the regime and as a center for liberal ideas, the government hated it.
In the manic days after the fall of Baghdad, a flood of Western journalists came to Al Mutanabbi Street to meet dissident Iraqi writers, and in the cafes and shops there was always the excited roar of conversation. Men clinked their tea glasses on small cups, they gestured, hatched their schemes. English translation was a hot commodity in those early days. I was at the Shabandar cafe in May 2003 when Amir Sayegh, an Iraqi Christian, came over and told me how he worshiped Sidney Sheldon over Joyce and Faulkner as the greatest writer to ever write in English; he had no use for the literary canon, but he took writers in and made them part of the neighborhood.

Amir hatched a million schemes for post-Saddam Iraq. He wrote long advisory letters to President Bush, and he wanted to start an English instruction school for adults, which was reasonable and nearly succeeded. Amir explained to any captive listener that he was working on a manuscript that tracked Baghdad's exploding inventory of graffiti. "Saddam is coming back," he had copied down from a dust-colored wall in the old city right after Baghdad fell. Beneath it was the response, "Yes, but he's coming back through your ass." By June of last year, he had more than 3,000 quotations from the street and he was carefully adding new quotes to his archive. The same walls were rewritten, edited by anonymous authors, the graffiti turning against the U.S. When I left in September 2004, he was kind enough to give me a copy. Amir, compulsive chatterer, couldn't stop talking because he had years of unborn commentary stored for the exact moment when the regime collapsed. When the time had finally come, it was almost more than he could bear. It was Amir, Socratic in his ugliness, ex-radar technician, dis-

sident spokesman, who believed Iraq could survive the occupation to scatter the ashes of the dictatorship.

"This is the real parliament of Iraq," a Shabandar dweller exhorted after the invasion. "This is where the real discussions take place." If the Shabandar was Iraq's parliament, then al-Sayegh was its prime minister. If you were a writer in Baghdad, it did not matter where you came from, you ended up at the Shabandar, because the cafe and the book district received everyone. Amir would find you there. If you were a thief, then your stoop was in Bab Al Sharji. For literary types, it was Al Mutanabbi Street. There happens to be a great symmetry in Arabic that binds the words for "writer" and "book" in a single sound. Book is "kitab," writer, "katib," and the difference is little more than a shift in stress when the words are spoken.

Today, the street where books and writers coexist has become a street of ghosts. After I returned to Iraq in late May this year, I learned that Amir Sayegh had fled to Canada.

Iraqis still shop in the book district, but most of the intellectuals who felt free to say what they thought in public are either in hiding or have fallen silent out of fear that spies for various armed groups will target them for assassination. Iraqi writers are starting to head underground, retreating to protected offices. Because literary culture is so bound to a particular neighborhood of Baghdad, an attack on Al Mutanabbi Street is an attack on Iraqi culture itself. This is a culture once so vibrant that a famous slogan in the Arab world ran, "Cairo writes, Beirut publishes, Baghdad reads."

A mere two and a half years after I met Amir, not a trace of his optimism remains, and in the district where they were once welcomed, many Iraqis shun foreigners. It is extremely dangerous to openly associate with Westerners, particularly Americans, since doing so can lead one to be denounced as a

traitor by an insurgent group. No one wants to be the ice seller. Other Iraqis, who have had family members killed in the uprisings that spread across the country, have moved toward the insurgents or joined them. Those left in the middle, those who have no bad feelings about foreigners, are in a vanishing minority. Trust, always hard to find in Iraq, is extremely rare. This is a sea change, a shift evident in the hard looks and hesitant hand-shakes when we meet people in passing. Foreigners in Iraq experience this social breakdown in a direct way, but Iraqis suffer on a far more intense level. They face exactly the same threats, the evaporation of trust, the ever-present danger of kidnapping and assassination, but they do not have the option of going home to another country. The old ties that bound Iraqis to each other are coming apart.

In the intervening time since the fall of Baghdad, a vast thieves' market of looted machinery, drugs and other illegal business has swallowed Al Rasheed Street, the long once-elegant old boulevard that runs along the Tigris, sending tentacles down into the busy book district. Al Rasheed Street has a long colonnaded stretch that is now closed to traffic while lookouts for armed groups keep a close eye on strangers in the market. Everyone is suspicious and everyone is monitored.

When I first heard about Hajji Qais' death, I was searching for a friend I made in the early days of the occupation, an Iraqi writer named Hamid Mokhtar, who spends a great deal of time on Al Mutanabbi Street. Ahmed Dulaimi went looking for him on Friday the 5th of August but there was no sign of Mokhtar and he found only nervous booksellers and the Shabandar cafe shuttered. The Shabandar is always open, even during Ramadan, and this was another bad sign. What started as a search for a writer became a search for a neighborhood.

A few days later, when I finally met Mokhtar at the Iraqi Writer's Union and told him about the bombing on the bookseller's row, he was not surprised. He had already heard the news and said without any hesitation, "We are all targets for assassination now." Mokhtar, who is well known in Iraq for spending eight years in Abu Ghraib during Saddam's regime, knows the feeling well. While other writers cooperated with the previous government, Mokhtar was one of a small number of intellectuals who continued to work without producing the obligatory paeans for the dictator. Eventually, security men came to his house and arrested his typewriter, and finding that unsatisfactory, eventually returned for the man himself. These days, rail-thin but looking much healthier than he did after his release from prison, the soft-spoken Mokhtar argues for religious tolerance and national unity. In Iraq, now a crucible for at two distinct fundamentalist movements, the act of publicly advocating these principles in Baghdad is flat-out heroic.

"When I appear on television and in magazines, that brings me to the attention of these [armed] groups. Many of my friends have been killed, even my colleagues from prison have been targeted. Before, we were suffering under Saddam, but now there are many Saddams." In the aftermath of the occupation, those loyal to any one of the numerous armed politico- religious gangs are indistinguishable from anyone else in Iraq. The threat is invisible.

Mokhtar is finding himself, along with the other writers who experienced a sudden shock of freedom, under some of the same unpleasant pressures he felt under the regime. Writers and intellectuals are being driven back underground or, at the very least, stymied by the uncertainty and fear of reprisals for advocating forbidden ideas, and an idea acceptable to one faction is heresy to another. Sayegh and Mokhtar's longtime enemy has returned not as a single tyrant, but instead as a creature the occupation has atomized into thousands of gunmen amped on pure hatred and fundamentalist Islam.

“In Saddam’s time I only had one enemy, the dictator; now it is not very clear. He’s disappeared. Saddam has become a ghost, he could be anywhere, “ Mokhtar explained with a shrug.

“Mutanabbi Street is the place where we express our ideas. We don’t have any other place to go and many of the famous Iraqi writers have fled the country. The only way to communicate with them is through the Internet. The others are afraid and they are hiding. I’ve been advised not to go out in public.” Mokhtar said that his old car was easily spotted on the road, so he got a new one that doesn’t stand out quite as much.

On the following Wednesday, five days after I met Mokhtar at his office, I took Ahmed down to Al Mutanabbi Street. We found the Shabandar open. There were a few younger men sitting on the benches keeping an eye on the clientele and they had beards, a new development for the Shabandar. These are newcomers, who come to keep watch on the smokers and tea drinkers. Out in front of the great windows, sitting behind Hajji Mohammed, the owner of the place, is a scribe for those who need to write official letters but do not know how to write. The old man is curled over an ancient Arabic typewriter with a piece of yellowed paper wound through the platen. It looks like he’s been there for a hundred years.

In the Shabandar, Ahmed was sitting next to me trying to figure out what he was supposed to do.

“You want me to go ask the owner, Hajji Mohammed, about the bombing?”

“No.”

“OK. What do you want to do?”

"I don't want to do anything."

Ahmed waited for more information. He was wearing a black T-shirt that said, "Hate the Game, not the Player."

"I just want to sit here and let these guys get used to us for a minute."

There were warning signs. No one spoke in the cafe, and most of the customers were smoking in silence; if they did speak, they kept their voices low so they wouldn't be overheard. Men sitting on benches across the cafe looked away when we glanced in their direction. People were monitoring us, a few were waiting to see what would happen, keeping an iron in the fire with respect to possible future events. When we'd come in, I had seen a man in his 30s wearing a particular kind of beard that the jihadis favor. He was reading a paper and made a show of not looking up. Fighters in the Mahdi Army wear this beard. It also didn't have to mean anything, although those beards were not common two years ago. We sat down next to him.

"Ahmed, look at this guy next to us."

"Sure, man, I see him, no problem." Ahmed speaks in perfect American movie English.

"Ask him about the bombing on Tuesday that killed Hajji Qais."

So Ahmed turned to the man and asked him.

"I know you guys are from the press," the man with the beard whispered. "You are asking very sensitive questions. If you ask Hajji Mohammed about it he might suspect you of something." The man with the beard didn't feel like talking about the bombing. We went to the front of the cafe and

found Hajji Mohammed, who is slightly grizzled and irritable, stuck behind his small desk where he rings up the customers. When we asked him about the bombing he said that he couldn't remember a time when people were killed for absolutely no reason. Hajji Mohammed went on to speak wistfully about the old monarchy, saying Iraq had its best days under the king. We asked him why he'd closed the cafe last Friday on its busiest day of the week.

"Fridays I lose so much money because people buy a tea and sit all day and when it comes time to pay, they come to me and lie about how many teas they had. So I closed the cafe. We also had generator problems," Hajji Mohammed said. It was a massive lie, which he did not expect us to believe. Fridays are the busiest day for the Shabandar, the day that writers from all over the city come to discuss, translate and work on manuscripts; business booms. Mokhtar also makes a point of being at the Shabandar on Friday where he holds court. The real reason Hajji Mohammed closed the cafe, which everyone on the street knows, is that he has been receiving threats from insurgent groups who don't like his clients and their politics. Mokhtar is likely one of the reasons, and there are other dissident groups as well. We would find one such semi-clandestine organization two days later and they would confirm that the Shabandar was receiving threats, but they couldn't say who was behind them. The men never show themselves.

We left the Shabandar and found a man around the corner who said that Hajji Qais' son was not killed in the bombing, and only found out about his father's death on television. He said that Ahmed Qais was working around the corner in another small stationery store, called the Nadeem. The book-seller said we could talk to him if we were interested.

Hajji Qais' son, Ahmed Qais, is in his early 30s, a well-educated Sunni engineer. He's clean-shaven and polite, not an extremist. Ahmed Qais is a little heavy-set from consuming sugary tea and bread. He's well-spoken in Arabic,

and he understood a great deal of spoken English, often responding before the translation came in. For a man whose father had been killed a few days before, Ahmed Qais was pretty calm and focused. It took a little while to convince him to talk to a reporter but he relented after a few minutes. We found a room in the back of the stationery store where we could talk.

"Who do you think killed your father?" I asked him. He leaned forward and lowered his voice.

"Everything is suspected. He worked all day and all night, so there's no way he could be involved in something. The police came and conducted a short investigation and then left, but in a destroyed country like this, they can't investigate anything. There are also some strange people here who think that my father was selling valuables or Easter gifts and some people think that might be the wrong thing to do."

Ahmed Qais talked for an hour about how it was important for his family to move on with their lives, which seemed like an odd comment to make so soon after the killing. Ahmed Qais didn't back any particular theory of the crime. In fact, he stayed away from saying anything specific and wouldn't name anyone he thought was involved. He was obviously extremely frightened and thought that talking about the assassination of his father would only bring him problems. Ahmed Qais asked if I heard what happened to the ice seller in Dora and we said yes, that story was going around and we knew it. I asked him about threats his father might have received and he said that there weren't any, that his father didn't have enemies on the street.

Just as I was leaving, I handed him a piece of paper with my contact information on it. He said, "Even if I had some information, I would keep it to myself." Ahmed Qais told me that he had two families to support and that it was a big responsibility.

"We should just forget it," he said.

I was stunned. "Forget the killing?"

"Yes."

Hajji Qais Anni had only been dead for six days. His blackened store is a monument to the assassination and also a warning to other Al Mutanabbi Street vendors. On Sunday, three days before I met his son, another man selling cassette tapes of the Quran was assassinated by gunmen. He worked in a store a block away from Hajji Qais' place.

Two days later, on Friday, in the faint hope of finding the Shabandar open, we went back to Al Mutanabbi Street to meet Hamid Mokhtar, but the cafe was shuttered. The street was filled with booksellers and book buyers. At 10 in the morning, it was 115 degrees, while street vendors yelled out, "Drinks! Cold! Drinks! Pepsi! Miranda!" It was hard to move in the crowd. There were hundreds of men in the street shopping for books spread out on carpets, buying religious tracts, technical manuals. Copies of pirated software were placed respectfully by ornately bound Qurans.

We found Mokhtar waiting in front of the Shabandar. He said, "We can't stay here." So we walked to a bookstore called Adnan's Library where we drank tea, while Mokhtar scouted for a safe place. He led us through winding streets below Al Rasheed Street, small alleys that branched off Al Mutanabbi, narrow canyons whose walls were white in the sun. Mokhtar was worried that we would be attacked; he'd taken this route many times before, trying to ditch the Mukhabarat (secret police) men in the old regime days. On Rasheed Street, there is a dark pit of a place called Hassan the Foreigner. Men who couldn't get into the Shabandar were there drinking tea and smoking. Students worked at a nearby table taking careful notes. It was impossible

to see what they were working on. The place was ancient, unimprovable and collapsing down into itself in slow motion. A faint rectangle of light came through the windows and died long before the back wall where we found a free bench.

"I discovered that a girl I knew from college was writing reports on me [for the secret police]. I was surprised but this gave me an idea for a new book." I asked him if he was able to write these days. Mokhtar got upset with the question. "No, I can't write under these conditions, I have to calm down. I need some time to think. It's too soon." Like all other Iraqis, Mokhtar has been pushed into the rapidly splintering future without time to cope with the past.

As he was talking, other middle-aged men gathered around us very quietly and sat down after long ritual greetings. They were all poets and former political prisoners; they were all Mokhtar's friends. All the prison men are the same. They talk about prison, how they survived, and they carry pictures of those days like wedding photos. In the photos, taken on the special occasions when their families were allowed to visit, they are hunched in groups and hollow-eyed. Prisoners form tight-knit groups and the photographs showed the circle of men whom Mokhtar trusted. It is a special honor to see these pictures. Mokhtar carries them with him. We were being allowed inside Mokhtar's cell.

One of Mokhtar's friends, a poet, leaned over and said to me, "I have some information. The Shabandar is closed because it got a threat."

"From who?"

"Nobody knows."

The man was going slowly blind from cataracts. He wanted to know where he could go for treatment. “I am a writer. Without my eyes, what can I do?” he asked.

We talked and drank tea until a loud man sidled up from nowhere. I never even saw him coming. He was a loud Arab-American from Indiana in a business-casual shirt who said he worked with the International Republican Institute. (IRI states that no one fitting that description has ever worked with its organization.) We got into a conversation about what he was doing, none of which made a great deal of sense, and then he explained I couldn’t write any of his information because he doesn’t want to be targeted by the resistance. The Indiana man also said all these things at the top of his lungs in English in the depths of a cafe that the insurgents control or at least monitor. It was a terrible mistake in Hassan the Foreigner and there was nothing you could tell him. Mokhtar looked over at me with suffering eyes and left for another appointment.

Minka Nijhuis, a brilliant Dutch journalist, was sitting next to me and said we should go look for some people who she thought might know more about the bombing and the threats to the cafe. It was also safer to keep moving.

We walked out into the crucible sun and found the bookseller street deserted, the vendors packing up. A dwarf passed by us pushing a handcart full of empty boxes.

Minka’s contacts were members of a secular pro-democracy group called the Cultural Gathering. We walked to the end of Al Mutanabbi. Next to a covered market stood a large building with a courtyard. Inside the courtyard were men selling books and pamphlets on tables. The second floor had piles of dead copiers, a graveyard for dead office equipment. We walked to the gates, where Minka spoke to a man who asked us to wait for a moment. That was

when we realized that the group was using observers, who made sure that no one who didn't belong there could get through the gates. If there was a problem, one of the men would run to the group and tell them to scatter. The office is deep off the courtyard, so controlling the gates is not difficult.

Men on the street selling cigarettes, soft drink salesmen, and other people who stay in one place for long periods of time often work as lookouts for underground groups in Iraq. You see it everywhere. The Cultural Gathering was worried about being attacked by insurgents and they had their eyes open.

The leader of the Iraqi Cultural Gathering emerged from the courtyard to greet us, blinking in the harsh light. His name was Mohammed Shakir Mahmoud, and he was happy to see journalists because he wanted to talk about his work and there weren't any foreigners coming around to listen.

In a small, dusty office with a computer and a few chairs, Mahmoud said, "We have the idea that every aspect of Iraqi culture was damaged by the dictatorship, that's why we should rebuild the culture and bring attention back to Iraqi civilization. In the past there was a great deal of damage. We were isolated and alienated from each other. That's why we created this organization."

The organization puts out a journal of essays on democracy and Iraqi civilization, where they promote the values of a secular unified country. Mahmoud was not enthusiastic about religion as the basis of government; he thought the federalism expressed in the draft of the constitution was a simple power grab by armed factions. Four other men quietly came into the room to join the discussion, sat down on the chairs and listened while Mahmoud, who works as a newspaper editor, explained what they were trying to do.

"We organized meetings in the Shabandar of writers who had been forced to leave Iraq during Saddam's time. Our basic idea is that Iraqis should understand themselves." Mahmoud's haven in the Shabandar lasted for two meetings and that was it. After that, Hajji Mohammed told them they weren't welcome, that they were causing trouble because he'd been getting threats from insurgent groups. Mahmoud, whose group has about 120 unofficial members, discussed the Iraqi national identity over tea with his friends. Islam and its effect on civilization was the topic of the second, a subject that may have pushed Hajji Mohammed at the Shabandar over the edge. Thinkers who advocate a secular Iraq are being driven slowly underground because their ideas are a threat to the religious fundamentalists in each armed group.

Jarrar Hassan, a forthright middle-aged man who was sitting next to Mahmoud, said, "Hajji Mohammed thinks the threats have something to do with our meetings. I spoke to him and he told me what happened because we have a good relationship. He said, 'If you guys came on Fridays then someone will drop off a bomb and kill all of you. So I closed the cafe.'"

Minka said, "So you are the troublemakers."

"We are honored to be so," Mahmoud laughed. "We are still a small organization. We can't do much. We have no public membership lists and we have not been threatened individually, but as a group we have been accused of being spies for the U.S. and accused of apostasy. In the newspaper, people printed direct threats against us."

As we were leaving, Mahmoud gave us a copy of the Iraqi Cultural Gathering Journal to take with us. It was difficult to leave the men there. They looked stranded and uncertain about the future. We started to make our way out. In the hall, we passed the carefully stationed lookouts, and as we walked by,

each serious young man joined the group and walked with us down to the street. Not one of them carried a gun. ■