Iraqi Odyssey opens in the US

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The important documentary, Iraqi Odyssey, *directed by the Iraqi-Swiss filmmaker, Samir, opens in New York and Los Angeles on November 27. It will arrive in other theaters in the US in the New Year. The film has its limitations, but it is highly unusual in the light it sheds on the social and political development of Iraq in the twentieth century.*

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Iraqi Odyssey is an elegantly composed documentary, directed by Iraqi-Swiss filmmaker Samir, which attempts to interweave the complex saga of the director's own family with the larger history of Iraq over the past half-century or more. The project is ambitious—and shot in 3D no less.

Samir has directed some 40 short and full-length fiction films, videos and documentaries, as well as theater productions. I thought his *Forget Baghdad* (2002), an account of the experiences of former members of the Iraqi Communist Party, now living in Israel, was a fascinating film.

To summarize the individual lives and events covered in Samir's two and three-quarter hour work would be a daunting undertaking. *Iraqi Odyssey* focuses on a number of aunts and uncles, a half-sister and the story of the director's own immediate family—his Iraqi father and Swiss mother.

The director, who was born in Baghdad in 1955 and whose family emigrated to Switzerland in the 1960s, interviews relatives in Auckland, New Zealand, London, Moscow, Buffalo, New York, Paris and elsewhere. Through the use of sophisticated graphics, extensive and remarkable archive footage and probing conversations, Samir builds up a comprehensive picture of a social layer and an entire era.

As he explains in his director's note, "I spent my childhood in the Baghdad of the 1950s and the early 1960s. The whole family, my parents, my grandparents, all my aunts and uncles lived all together in a big house in a new residential quarter, like a typical middle class family at the time.

"My grandfather was an expert in Islamic law and he worked as a judge. My grandmother went to the mosque very often and took me along with her. However, I grew up with Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Shakespeare and the modern sciences and of the course the Arab classics and the singers Fairuz and Umm Kulthum. …

"Now, my family lives scattered all over the world … we belong to the 4-5 million Iraqis who do not live in their home country anymore. Like many other Iraqi middle-class families, we've become a globalized family that has become integrated into the western society without any difficulty." His film is an effort to explain, "How did it come to this, that all our dreams of a renaissance in the Arab world and the wish for a transformation into a modern, just society were so abruptly and brutally destroyed?"

The film, which the director narrates, is loosely organized into three acts, the first treating the life and times of Samir's grandfather, who participated in the struggle against British colonial rule. The documentary makes clear the great appeal of Iraq to the imperial powers over the course of the last century, including in the present day, has lain in its abundance of oil.

The second portion of *Iraqi Odyssey*, perhaps its most compelling, concerns the tumultuous events in Iraq in the late 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. What emerges strikingly is the centrality of the Iraqi Communist Party in the country's post-World War II history.

Several of the filmmaker's aunts and uncles, as well as his own father, joined the Communist Party. Samir asserts at one point that "the Communists were the strongest party in Iraq" in the postwar period. In 1958, at the time of the 14 July Revolution against King Faisal II, a British puppet, crowds in the streets of Baghdad chanted, "Long live the Communist Party."

Later, Samir describes how the party was "paralyzed" as reactionary forces prepared the coup of February 1963, which brought the Baath Party to power. The Stalinists were posed with the problem, the filmmaker asserts, to "assume power or not"? Of course, their counter-revolutionary, nationalist-opportunist development over the course of decades determined the tragic outcome. Samir also makes clear that at the time the Soviet Stalinists "didn't want a conflict with the US after the Cuban missile crisis [of October 1962]."

The policy of the Iraqi Communist Party, and this, the film relatively clearly spells out, was to subordinate the working class and the oppressed at every point to one section or another of the Iraqi elite and military, up to and including Saddam Hussein and the Baathists, with catastrophic results. It is impossible to understand the current role of communalist politics and Islamic fundamentalism in Iraq without an appreciation of the political vacuum produced by the betrayals by Stalinism.

The "third act" of the documentary takes place in the present, in the aftermath of the US invasion and occupation, which has triggered a new mass exodus. Interestingly, perhaps the bleakest and most desolate sequence in the film takes place in Buffalo, where Samir's half-sister has found refuge.

Iraqi Odyssey traces, in effect, the abject failure of Iraq (along with other Arab nations) to develop as a "modern and just" society, that is, a bourgeois democracy out from under the thumb of the Great Powers, and the devastation of the urban middle classes, members of the Communist Party or otherwise, which devoted itself to building such a social order and its dispersion around the globe.

Samir notes in the film that he participated in radical movements in Zurich as a student, including anarchist groups. In our conversation, he explained that he had never been drawn to Trotskyism. His orientation to the professional classes and their fate is not simply a matter of personal or family history.

Iraqi Odyssey is honest and detailed. As a touching, poetic personal and family memoir, as an evocation of Iraqi life at different moments in the 20th century, it has considerable value.

Whatever the filmmaker's views, however, for us, the film has a more profound meaning. *Iraqi Odyssey*, in its own way, substantiates Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution. This theory explains the impossibility of achieving democracy and genuine national emancipation in the colonial or semi-colonial countries except through the coming to power of the working class at the head of the oppressed in a socialist revolution. The history presented in the documentary is nothing but a powerful and tragic "negative" confirmation of this conception.

This trailer provides some indication of Samir's general approach and

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the sort of archive material he has incorporated.

A conversation with Samir

I spoke to Samir in Toronto during the film festival in early September, as the Obama administration was gearing up for a new invasion of Iraq.

David Walsh: What would you say is the balance-sheet of America's encounter with Iraq over the last several decades?

Samir: I hope that's obvious in my film. Even from the standpoint of imperial logic, they have done stupid, mad things. You can say whatever you like about the British Empire, but at least they had a clear strategy. The US empire-state is led by stupid people.

DW: They think if they bomb everyone and smash things up, they'll be able to pick up the pieces they want afterward.

S: But you see that this is not working. It's one disaster after another. And the Iraqi people, and the Arab peoples, have to suffer for this. What can I say? That's human history, and the only thing that counts in human history is the resistance of people, to build up structures that are in opposition to these policies. It needs time. As I say at the end of my film, I hope my daughter will understand that changing the world for the better takes a lot of time.

DW: Leaving aside the warfare, what are the conditions for ordinary Iraqi people now?

S: Of course, the middle class, which was one of the classes that could establish a civil society, is gone. They left. One can discuss their own failure, but this is reality. The industrial workers, who were well organized in unions in previous times, are also gone because of the embargo. What is left are large layers of the lumpen-proletariat, honestly, and these people are not well organized, they don't know anything about politics and they follow the sectarian leaders.

I'm happy to say that the young people, who are going to the universities and studying, especially the artists, are very radical and quite fearless. I'm astonished by the fact they are doing art in the streets, talking about daily problems in a way that is different to anything before. And that means they understand that the world has changed and they can't follow the old traditions.

DW: In *Forget Baghdad*, one of your interviewees, in describing the situation, said Iraq was not a particularly religious-minded country …

S: I still believe that this is the case. There is no religious or ideological homogeneity, even now.

DW: Then sectarianism is a political problem.

S: Yes. If you look at the most recent elections, even the poorest people, who followed [former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki's sectarian politics, understood that he was going wrong. He only got 20 percent of the workers' votes. Even the majority of Shiites didn't want to follow him anymore.

This was my personal experience when I was in Najaf, the holy Shiite city, last November, doing work on my film, because of my grandfather's past. I was there and I felt there was an immense anger against the sectarian politics, and this was in a place built up on a religious basis.

DW: A political vacuum was created—who is responsible for that?

S: In the first place, this vacuum was created by the United States and its war, that's for sure.

And before that, well, let's be clear, the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein worked well during the 1970s and 1980s, even during the war with Iran, because he had a lot of revenue from oil.

DW: And the Soviet Union still existed.

S: Yes, he could balance himself between the super-powers. That was the end of the Cold War. He was able to buy off a huge percentage of the Iraqi people through the oil money. He made a big mistake, he started the war with Iran because he was foolish enough not to understand that he had started to become an instrument of US imperialism. That led Iraq into the disaster.

DW: The more complicated question is the role of the Iraqi Communist Party, and its support for various sections of the Iraqi ruling elite and military, which was a catastrophe.

S: Of course.

DW: One of the most interesting things in your film—in fact, in both films … but, in this film, for example, is the scene from 1958 and the crowds chanting, "Long live the Communist Party." What happened to that? What happened to that popular sentiment? In my opinion, it was completely betrayed.

S: I say that. I say that they betrayed their own people. Not only the Communist Party in Iraq, but also the Soviet Union. All these bureaucrats … Only a small faction tried to resist these politics, and they were physically demolished because they started a guerrilla fight in the south and they failed.

When I was in Iraq this last time, I noticed that almost every one of my father's age, and my grandfather's age, almost everyone of this generation was deeply influenced by the ideas of the Communist Party at that time.

DW: I think one is very impressed by your uncles and aunts, by their ideals, by their courage, but the strategy of the Communist Party was disastrous.

S: Of course. I hope the left-wing audience will understand that this film is part of the self-criticism and self-reflection. A new left-wing politics has to develop from the ground up.

The young generation in Iraq doesn't know anything about that history. I hope the film will help them to know something about the past and the need for a new left-wing politics. The sectarian politics do not represent the people.

But I'm optimistic, all in all.

DW: There is cause for optimism. There are also enormous dangers. The situation between the US and Russia is highly dangerous. The American policy is provocative and aggressive in the extreme.

S: But did we ever think in our lifetime we would look on the decline of an imperial power?

DW: We're seeing it, but that doesn't make it less dangerous. Look at Buffalo, which is in your film, or at Detroit; America's rulers are attempting to overcome their industrial and economic decline through military might. That's the one area in which they have an advantage.

S: I was shocked to see these images from the South, where this black kid was killed by the police [in Ferguson, Missouri]. The police with military equipment. I'd love to come to Detroit some time. Since I was a child I've heard so much about it.

DW: They are now cutting off water to thousands of people.

S: Where are we now? What century are we in? Are they nuts?

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