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Emigration of Christians from Iraq as Reflected in Selected Post-2003 Iraqi Novels

Abstract

In recent reflections on the current situation of ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq and the threat of their extinction, a number of Iraqi intellectuals have stressed they cannot imagine their society without the plurality and diversity that have contributed to the creation of a common interethnic and interreligious Iraqi identity and historical memory. Among them are writers who raise this issue not only in essays, articles and interviews, but also in their fiction. The aim of the present article is to show the interweaving of literary discourse on Iraqi minorities and the wider debate among Iraqi intellectuals on the deteriorating condition of Iraqi Christians – which has led to their mass emigration – as reflected in a number of post-2003 Iraqi novels. The literary image of this exodus cannot be discussed without addressing the position of Christians among other Iraqi communities currently and in the past, as well as the question of their identity. This article refers to the following novels: *Ṭaššārī* (Dispersion, 2012) by In‘ām Kağağī, *I‘ğām* (Diacritics, 2004) and *Yā Maryam* (Ave Maria, 2012) by Sinān Anṭūn, *‘Irāqī fī Bārīs. Sīra ḏātiyya riwā’iyya* (An Iraqi in Paris: An Autobiographical Novel, 2012) by Ṣamū’īl Šam‘ūn, *Frānkanštāyn fī Baġdād* (Frankenstein in Baghdad, 2013) by Aḥmad Sa‘dāwī, and *Sabāyā dawlat al-ḫurāfa* (Slaves of the Imaginary State, 2017) by ‘Abd ar-Riḍā Ṣāliḥ Muḥammad. The article is divided into four parts, including an introduction in which the above-mentioned debate is presented. The second part depicts the plight of Iraqi Christians after 2003 through a brief outline of the lives of four literary characters. The third part focuses on the situation of Iraqi Christians before 2003 by relating the memories of five fictional protagonists. These two descriptive parts are followed by some final remarks. The theoretical framework of this article is based on the reflections

of Birgit Neumann and Astrid Erll concerning the role of literature as a medium in the construction of cultural memory.

Keywords: emigration, Christians in the Middle East, Iraqi Christians, cultural memory, Iraqi novel, Arabic literature

Introduction

In his introduction to the over 800-page multi-author study *Al-Masīḥiyyūna fī Al-'Irāq: at-tārīḫ aš-šāmil wa-at-taḥaddiyāt ar-rāhina* (Christians in Iraq. A Comprehensive History and Current Challenges),[1] its editor, Sa'd Sallūm,[2] asks whether one can imagine the Middle East without Christians. He presents data showing a notable decline in the number of Christian communities in the Arab world since the beginning of the 20th century[3] and indicates a number of significant events which contributed to the worsening condition of Christians in Iraq – which has reached the point that their population is now threatened with extinction. He also emphasizes that religion-inspired violence after 2003[4] has led

[1] Sa'd Sallūm (ed.), *Al-Masīḥiyyūna fī Al-'Irāq: at-tārīḫ aš-šāmil wa-at-taḥaddiyāt ar-rāhina*, Mu'ssasat Masārāt li-at-Tanmiya aṯ-Ṯaqāfiyya wa-al-I'lāmiyya, Baġdād–Bayrūt 2014. The contents of this study are worth noting. The introduction is followed by a text about the roots of Christianity in Iraq. The first part describes Christian monuments, towns and groups, whereas the second part depicts the history of Iraqi Christians under the control of Muslim rulers until the Ottoman era. The third part presents the fate of Christians in the modern Iraqi state between 1921 and 2014, while the fourth part examines their situation after 2003. The fifth part raises questions about the future of Christian communities in Iraq. Finally, the sixth part contains legal acts, statistics and documents relating to Iraqi Christians since the first half of the 20th century. It should also be mentioned that another comprehensive study devoted to Christians in Iraq was recently published. See: Kāẓim Ḥabīb, *Masīḥiyyū Al-'Irāq: aṣāla, intimā', muwāṭana*, Dār Naynawā li-ad-Dirāsāt wa-an-Našr wa-at-Tawzī', Baġdād–Barlīn 2018.

[2] Sa'd Sallūm was born in Baghdad in 1975. He has been a lecturer at the Faculty of Political Sciences of Al-Mustanṣiriyya University since 2007. He has also initiated various civic initiatives, for example, actions in support of civil peace and Muslim-Christian dialogue. He is a board member of the "Masārāt" non-profit organization focused on research and activities related to Iraq's ethnic and religious minorities, studies on collective memory, and inter-faith dialogue. He is an editor of the "Masārāt" journal, published since 2005 and dedicated to the study of the cultural diversity of Iraq and the Arab world, as well as the author of numerous newspaper articles and book publications. See: *Mu'ssasat Masārāt li-at-Tanmiya aṯ-Ṯaqāfiyya wa-al-I'lāmiyya*, Viewed 25 April 2018, <http://masaratiraq.org/identity/>; *Sa'ad Salloum: Curriculum Vitae*, in: *Minorities in Iraq: Memory, Identity and Challenges*, (ed.) Sa'ad Salloum, Masarat for Cultural and Media Development, Baghdad–Beirut 2013, pp. 267–269.

[3] According to Sallūm, the number of Christians in Turkey has declined from millions at the beginning of the 20th century to several thousand today. In Syria, they make up less than 10% of the country's population, down from over a third a century ago. In Lebanon, Christians were the majority in the 1930s, whereas they currently make up less than 30% of the population. In Egypt, the Copts have been emigrating en masse in recent years for the first time since the 1950s. The number of Christians in Palestine has also fallen markedly, despite the fact that they outnumbered Muslims in the past. See: Sa'd Sallūm, Introduction to *Al-Masīḥiyyūna fī Al-'Irāq*, p. 17.

[4] There are many publications concerned with this phenomenon. At this point, actions directed not only against Christians in Iraq, but at the Christian inhabitants of the Middle East in general also need to be mentioned. These actions include various acts of violence, expulsions, the destruction of temples and places of worship, the occupation of land, the lack of legal protection, restrictions on religious practice, arrest and imprisonment, attacks on religious

to the largest emigration of members of this and other minorities in the contemporary history of Iraq.[5] For the vast majority of Christian expatriates, this appears to be a path toward permanent emigration, due to the sense they share of having lost their homeland and becoming strangers in the country where they were born as "indigenous inhabitants".[6] Sallūm subsequently reflects on the contribution of Christians to the creation of Iraqi civilization and their relations with Muslims over the centuries. He then goes on to ponder the historical, pluralistic identity formerly common to all the Iraqis, which is now disappearing, and the Iraqi historical memory, which, years after the collapse of Saddam Husayn's dictatorship, is still being exploited by ruling elites, who distort it for their own political purposes.[7] Finally, Sallūm stresses that the authors of the publication share a common desire to record the presence of Christians in the history of Iraq and to warn against the threat of their disappearance, both in this and other Middle Eastern countries. These researchers cannot imagine their communities without the plurality that has been so characteristic of them, becoming one-dimensional in terms of religion. Moreover, they note that the threatened existence of these Christian communities poses a threat to the existence of the Muslim majority, because erasing regional identity, as well as depriving it of its diversity and heterogeneity, will ultimately serve those states and political elites who seek to divide the Middle East region into ethno-religious islands.[8]

This and other statements by Sallūm in his publications on the current situation of Iraqi ethnic and religious minorities, including Christians,[9] are representative – despite

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leaders, the denial of access to education, institutional weakness, and genocide. See: Huma Haider, *The Persecution of Christians in the Middle East*, "The K4D Report", 16 February 2017, Viewed 20 April 2018, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/59786a0040f0b65dcb00000a/042-Persecution-of-Christians-in-the-Middle-East.pdf>.

[5] Reports most often cite that more than one million Christians have fled Iraq since 2003, and the number of Iraqi Christians dropped to 600,000–700,000 in the first decade of the 21st century. See e.g: John Eibner, *The Plight of Christians in Iraq. Field Trip Report November 3–11 2007*, "Christian Solidarity International", Viewed 19 April 2018, <http://www.aina.org/reports/CSIIraqFieldMission2007.pdf>. In recent years, estimates of the number of Iraqi Christians have ranged from 250,000 to 300,000, with this continued decline being seen as a consequence of the destructive activities of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. See: Saad Salloum et al., *At Crossroads: Human Rights Violations Against Iraqi Minorities After ISIS (Report 1)*, Masarat for Cultural and Media Development, Baghdad 2015, p. 21, Viewed 15 April 2018, <http://masaratiraq.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/AT-CROSSROADS.pdf>. For more extensive information about the emigration of Christians from Iraq during the 20th century and after 2003, see: Ḥabīb, *Masīḥiyyū Al-ʻIrāq*, pp. 371–430.

[6] On the presence of Christians in Iraq before the advent of Islam, see: ʻAbd al-Amīr al-Ḥamadānī and Ḥikmat Bašīr al-Aswad, *Ḫarīṭa ʻan at-turāṯ wa-al-āṯār al-masīḥiyya fī Al-ʻIrāq*, in: *Al-Masīḥiyyūna fī Al-ʻIrāq*, pp. 53–64; Suhayl Qāšā, *An-Nawāris al-muhāǧira. Hiǧrat masīḥiyyī Al-ʻIrāq*, Dār ar-Rāfidayn, Bayrūt 2016, pp. 19–23; Ḥabīb, *Masīḥiyyū Al-ʻIrāq*, pp. 27–59.

[7] On the use of historical narratives by both the Baathist authorities before 2003 and various Iraqi groups after this date, see: Eric Davies, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2005; Jordi Tejel et al., *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges*, World Scientific Publishing Company, Singapore 2012.

[8] Saʻd Sallūm, Introduction to *Al-Masīḥiyyūna fī Al-ʻIrāq*, pp. 17–27.

[9] See e.g.: Saʻd Sallūm, *At-Tanawwuʻ al-ḫallāq: ḫarīṭat ṭarīq li-taʻzīz at-taʻddudiyya fī Al-ʻIrāq*, Mu'ssasat Masārāt li-at-Tanmiya aṯ-Ṯaqāfiyya wa-al-Iʻlāmiyya, Baġdād–Bayrūt 2013; Salloum, *Minorities in Iraq*; Salloum et al., *At Crossroads: Human Rights Violations*; Saad Salloum et al., *Political Participation of Minorities in*

certain discrepancies in regard to some particular issues – of discussion among Iraqi intellectuals on the fate of common – interethnic and interreligious – Iraqi identity and historical memory.[10]

Among those intellectuals embracing the idea of Iraqi unity over ethnic and religious divisions,[11] are numerous academics, journalists and others who have become famous as authors of fictional works.[12] In an 2017 interview, the writer Sinān Anṭūn, who was born in Baghdad in 1967 to a Christian family and emigrated to the United States in the early 1990s,[13] said that after 2003

> "In addition to the material damage brought about by dictatorship, wars, and military occupation, there is considerable damage and destruction of Iraqi collective memory and of the idea of Iraq and Iraqiness. The idea

Iraq. Human Rights Violation Report (2), Masarat for Cultural and Media Development, Baghdad 2015, Viewed 25 April 2018, <http://masaratiraq.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/POLITICAL-PARTICIPATION-OF.pdf>; Saad Salloum, *Forgotten Voices: Minority Women in Iraq*. *Human Rights Violation Report (4)*, Masarat for Cultural and Media Development, Baghdad 2016, Viewed 26 April 2018, <http://masaratiraq.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/FORGOTTEN-VOICES.pdf>; Saad Salloum, *Violence Against Minorities in Iraq*: *Factors, Indicators, Key Actors, Capacity-building, and an Early Warning System*, Masarat for Cultural and Media Development, Baghdad 2016, Viewed 28 April 2018, <http://masaratiraq.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/vol-5-E.pdf>. See: *Mu'ssasat Masārāt li-at-Tanmiya aṯ-Ṯaqāfiyya wa-al-I'lāmiyya*, Viewed 25 April 2018, <http://masaratiraq.org/identity/>; *Sa'ad Salloum: Curriculum Vitae*, pp. 267–269.

[10] Among them is Salīm Maṭar, born in Baghdad in 1952, who left his native country as a member of the Iraqi Communist Party in 1978 and settled in Geneva, where he graduated in sociology. He is the author of several works of fiction and journalistic essays, as well as an editor of the "Mesopotamia" journal, published since 2004 and dedicated to identity issues. Among his publications, in which he refers – often in cooperation with other Iraqi intellectuals – to the idea of an "Iraqi national identity", promoted by him since the 1990s, are: Salīm Maṭar, *Aḍ-Ḍāt al-ğarīḥa. Iškālāt al-huwiyya fī Al-'Irāq wa-al-'ālam al-'arabī "aš-šarqumutawassiṭī"*, Bayrūt 1997; Salīm Maṭar et al., *Ğadal al-huwiyyāt: 'Arab… Akrād… Turkmān… Suryān… Yazīdiyya. Ṣirā' al-intimā'āt fī Al-'Irāq wa-aš-Šarq al-Awsaṭ*, Bayrūt 2003; Salīm Maṭar, *Yaqaẓat al-huwiyya al-'irāqiyya*, Ğanīf 2010; Salīm Maṭar et al., *Mašrū' al-iḥyā' al-waṭanī al-'irāqī*, Ğanīf 2012. See the author's website: *Selim Matar*, Viewed 17 April 2018, <http://www.salim.mesopot.com/>.

[11] It bears noting that 268 Iraqi intellectuals signed a statement published in 2014 to express their disagreement with the activities of various groups and militias which used the deteriorating situation in the country for their own sectarian purposes, at the expense of Iraqi national unity. The statement's postulates include a call for the formation of a broad political alliance that would embrace all democratic, rational and reformatory forces, and which would work on a project for the functioning of the new state in a peaceful and constitutional manner; as well as a call to all leaders of religious groupings to make statements in support of peaceful coexistence, stigmatizing hatred between the diverse groups making up Iraqi society and condemning the terror attacks committed by ISIS. See: *Mubādarat muṭaqqafāt wa-muṭaqqafīna min aǧl waḥdat Al-'Irāq*, "Al-Ḥiwār al-Mutamaddin", 28 June 2014, Viewed 27 April 2018, <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=421485&r=0>.

[12] See: Ronen Zeidel, *On the Last Jews in Iraq and Iraqi National Identity: a Look at Two Recent Iraqi Novels*, "Journal of Modern Jewish Studies" 17/2 (2018), p. 208.

[13] Sinān Anṭūn completed his master and doctoral studies in the United States. He is an associate professor at the Gallatin School of New York University, an author of essays on Arabic literature and a translator of Arabic poetry. He has authored several poetry collections and novels which have won international awards and have been translated into other languages. See the author's website: *Sinan Antoon*, Viewed 28 December 2019, <http://www.sinanantoon.com/about>.

> is not to be uncritical and nostalgic, but to reimagine and remember a different Iraq and a sense of Iraqiness that did exist. (…) The dismantling of the Iraqi state and its institutions and totalitarian ideology was followed by establishing an ethno-sectarian system whose culture and practices were institutionalized and popularized through post-occupation media. Sectarian identities and histories were internalized as were notions about the inevitability of sectarian strife."[14]

Seeing this "new" country from a distance as one based on ethnic and religious affiliations, and drowning in the chaos of armed conflicts provoked by the strongest parties, in which members of so-called "minorities",[15] i.e. the most vulnerable citizens, lack their own paramilitary organizations and pay the highest price,[16] Anṭūn meditates on the present and future of Iraqi Christians with great concern. Like other intellectuals, he believes that although the Christian emigration from Iraq under the Baath Party's rule cannot be depreciated, it had mainly socio-economic motivations "and it was part of a wider upper and middle class emigration rather than an ethnic based emigration." In his opinion, the mass exodus of Iraqi Christians did not begin until the American occupation of the country.[17]

In the face of such fierce violence towards millions of Iraqi citizens, and not just Christians,[18] a writer must strive to present its impact on human existence, according to Anṭūn.[19] The writer's role is to preserve the Iraqi collective memory,[20] because the process of creating a novel is linked to the historical dimensions of reality, the fight against

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[14] *How Sinan Antoon Writes Iraq*, "Hopoe. An Imprint of AUC Press Stories from the Middle East", 10 August 2017, Viewed 15 April 2018, <https://hoopoefiction.com/2017/08/10/sinan-antoon-writes-iraq/>.

[15] The term "minorities" (*aqalliyyāt*), which is usually used in Western discourse on Iraq, has been replaced in Iraqi socio-political discourse by the term "components" (*mukawwināt*). The latter appears, among other places, in Iraq's Constitution of 2005. In the opinion of many Iraqis, it is more politically correct if we consider, for example, the number of Christian communities living in the country in the past. On these two terms, see e.g.: Maṭar, *Aḍ-Ḍāt al-ǧarīḥa*, p. 377.

[16] On the situation of Iraqi Christians (and other minorities) who are often deprived of support from tribal organizations in the face of conflicts between Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds, see: Salloum, *Violence Against Minorities in Iraq*, pp. 43–49; Ḥabīb, *Masīḥiyyū Al-'Irāq*, pp. 245–253; Sa'd Sallūm, *Al-Masīḥiyyūna fī Al-'Irāq: 'alāmāt az-zawāl al-aḫīr*, "Al-'Arabiyya", 10 August 2014, Viewed 20 April 2018, <http://studies.alarabiya.net/hot-issues/المسيحيون-في-العراق-علامات-الزوال-الأخير>; Ḥamza Muṣṭafā, *Al-Aqalliyyāt fī Al-'Irāq… wa-bidāyat dawlat al-mukawwināt*, "Aš-Šarq al-Awsat", 19 November 2014, Viewed 20 April 2018, <https://aawsat.com/home/article/225121/الأقليات-في-العراق-وبداية-دولة-المكونات>.

[17] Dina Ezzat, *It Might Be Too Late To Save Iraq's Christians*, "Ahramonline", 4 August 2014, Viewed 23 April 2018, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/107639.aspx/>.

[18] *Sinān Anṭūn li-"Al-Ǧumhūriyya": lastu ma'niyyan bi-"mukawwin" bal bi-al-insān al-'irāqī*, "Al-Ǧumhūriyya", Viewed 17 April 2018, <http://www.aljoumhouria.com/news/index/390317>.

[19] Farid Farid, *Sinan Antoon: an Iraqi Novelist Living in Continuous Mourning*, "The Guardian", 3 May 2013, Viewed 26 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/03/sinan-antoon-iraq-ave-maria-isis>.

[20] *Sinān Anṭūn "'alā al-fannān an yuḥāfiẓa 'alā aḍ-ḍākira al-ǧam'iyya"*, "Makka al-Mukarrama", 26 December 2015, Viewed 25 April 2018, <http://makkahnewspaper.com/article/124761/Makkah/سنان-أنطون-على-الذاكرة-الجمعية>الفنان-أن-يحافظ-على-.

forgetting and erasing memories, and the writing down of marginalized and forgotten narratives.[21]

'Alī Badr, another renowned Iraqi writer, born in Baghdad in 1964 to a Shia Muslim family and living in Belgium since 2001,[22] highlights the dangers of misusing the concept of "identity". In his view, there are two types of identity: the first is the identity acquired by a person born in a given culture, which can be changed to a different one; and the second is the identity invented by ethnic, religious and political groups, which try to give it an imaginary and narrative dimension through the use of various stories and historical records. This second identity often becomes the reason behind conflicts between distinct groups that share the same stories, but remember them from diverse perspectives. Its effect on the socio-political situation in Iraq over many decades has been clear: the current persecution of Christians and their forced emigration are among its multiple consequences.[23]

As stated by Badr, who is partial to the ideas of Jean-François Lyotard[24] and Hayden White,[25] the responsibility of an intellectual is to question the metanarratives, such as the idea of nationalism, produced by various groups.[26] The Iraqi writer argues that his duty is to create parallel stories that will deny these grand narratives, reveal their false elements, and consequently undermine them.[27] It is his conviction that novels should describe the impact of history on individuals; however, not in the same way that groups use historical narratives for their own political purposes, but through the author's focusing on marginalized people who are omitted from these narratives.[28] Badr believes that a novel

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[21] *Sinān Anṭūn: al-kitāba ṣirā' ḍidda an-nisyān… wa-Baġdād sa-taẓillu tulāḥiqunī*, "Aḥwāl al-Bilād", 14 April 2018, Viewed 19 April 2018, <http://ahwalelbelad.com/news/252688.html>.

[22] 'Alī Badr studied Western philosophy and French literature at the University of Baghdad. In 2001, he made his debut as a writer with the novel *Bābā Sārtre*, which brought him fame in the Arab world. So far, he has published 14 novels, six poetry collections, several non-fiction books, as well as theatre and film scripts. He has received numerous literary awards. He is also a journalist cooperating with many Arabic newspapers. See: *Ali Bader*, "Banipal. Magazine of Modern Arab Literature", Viewed 24 April 2018, <http://www.banipal.co.uk/contributors/114/ali-bader/>.

[23] See: 'Alī Badr, *Iḫtirā' al-huwiyya wa-fabrakat at-tārīḫ: at-taġammu'āt al-iṯniyya wa-al-'irqiyya wa-al-muḥayyala al-ġamā'iyya*, "Masārāt" 1 (2007), pp. 14–19.

[24] Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (trans.) Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, (foreword) Fredric Jameson, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1984, pp. 31–41.

[25] Cf. Mehdi Ghasemi, *Revisiting History in Hayden White's Philosophy*, "Sage Open" 1–7 (2014), pp. 1–7, Viewed 6 May 2018, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2158244014542585>; Aaron Grinter, *Narrative and History: Hayden White's Objections to Scientistic Changes to the Study of History*, "Cosmos and History" 13/1 (2017), pp. 222–239, Viewed 5 May 2018, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313717381_Narrative_and_History_Hayden_White's_Objections_to_Scientistic_Changes_to_the_Study_of_History>.

[26] See the following interview with Badr: Līlyān Ḥāyik, *Ar-Riwā'ī huwa al-muṭaqqaf an-nāqid, wa-al-mufakkir as-sārid, wa-al-bāri' as-sāḫir*, "Raffī", 16 December 2015, Viewed 28 April 2018, <http://raffy.ws/page/206/>.

[27] Asmā' al-Ġūl, *"Al-Quds bi-an-nisba lī al-firdaws al-mafqūd": ar-riwā'ī 'Alī Badr… tafkīk al-yaqīniyāt*, "Al-Ayyām", 1 July 2008, Viewed 30 April 2018, <http://www.al-ayyam.ps/ar_page.php?id=4fd35b0y8370321 6Y4fd35b0>.

[28] Kamāl Ar-Riyāḥī, *Ar-Riwā'ī 'Alī Badr: adab al-manfā fī ma'ziq*, "Al-Ğazīra", 21 August 2015, Viewed 30 April 2018, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/cultureandart/2015/8/21/الروائي-علي-بدر-أدب-المنفى-في-مأزق>.

can play an important role in shaping the concept of the "Iraqi community" since it "writes down the community through narrative."[29]

These two briefly depicted perspectives above clearly indicate that Anṭūn and Badr seek to discuss the Iraqi community and national identity, as well as the situation of marginalized Iraqi groups, not only through their commentaries in the media, but also in their novels. Such a committed attitude is typical of many other Iraqi writers who began to settle accounts with the Baathist past immediately after 2003, when official censorship ceased to function in their homeland. This had been the privilege of authors living abroad up until that time.[30] Moreover, in the post-invasion period, Iraqi writers have felt morally obliged to contemplate their state's tragic present as well.[31]

This strong interweaving of literary discourse with a broader debate involving Iraqi intellectuals through different media and publications solidifies my belief that the most appropriate theoretical framework for examining literary images of Iraq's reality is the field of cultural memory studies. According to one key representative of this trend in research, Birgit Neumann, "Although literature refers to non-textual reality, it is – as a non-pragmatic medium – a constructive form of the exegesis of the world which creates its own worlds of memory through specific literary processes."[32] In Neumann's opinion, literature represents a "'reintegrative interdiscourse' intertwined with other systems such as psychology, history studies, media studies or religion, and powered by contents and concepts of memory circulating in culture."[33] Fictional narratives can function as a "'critical-cultural metadiscourse' which largely co-shapes the creation of collective images of the past." (…) Moreover, "Literary texts can both contribute to the stabilisation of collective identities and accepted hierarchies of values, as well as question outdated interpretations of the past and perpetuate alternative versions of memory."[34] Neumann also draws attention to the fact that in novels concerned with the collective past, "characters and anthropomorphized narrators are usually equipped with their specific perspective (…);" and that "texts which are told from many perspectives or internally focalised, allow readers

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[29] Raḥāb 'Abd al-'Aẓīm, *'Alī Badr: ar-riwāya tashamu fī binā' mafhūm al-umma*, "Mulḥaq al-Ḫalīğ aṯ-Ṯaqāfī", 5 February 2011, Viewed 1 May 2018, <http://www.alkhaleej.ae/supplements/page/a9b76bc3-2ec2-480a-8741-209f9030ecf4>.

[30] On the situation of Iraqi intellectuals before 2003, see: Yasmeen Hanoosh, *Contempt: State Literati vs. Street Literati in Modern Iraq*, "Journal of Arabic Literature" (43) 2012, pp. 372–408; Fatima Mohsen, *Debating Iraqi Culture: Intellectuals between the Inside and the Outside*, in: *Conflicting Narratives: War, Trauma and Memory in Iraqi Culture*, (ed.) Stephan Milich, Friederike Pannewick and Leslie Tramontini, Reichert Verlag, Wiesbaden 2012, pp. 5–23; Ikram Masmoudi, *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2015, pp. 10–20.

[31] See: Shayma Hamedawi, *The Postcolonial Iraqi Novel: Themes and Sources of Inspiration*, "Babel. Littératures Plurielles" 36 (2017), pp. 211–228, Viewed 6 May 2018, <https://journals.openedition.org/babel/5043>.

[32] Birgit Neumann, *Literatur, Erinnerung, Identität*, in: *Gedächtniskonzepte der Literaturwissenschaft. Theoretische Grundlegung und Anwendungsperspektiven*, (ed.) Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, De Gruyter, Berlin 2005, p. 165.

[33] Ibidem.

[34] Ibidem, p. 171.

to view memories of several narrators or characters, and thus they can expose the ways of functioning of collective memory and problems of its foundation."[35]

Literature is also perceived as a medium for the formation and preservation of collective memory by Astrid Erll, another well-known researcher in the field. She introduced the concept of "the rhetoric of collective memory", i.e., "an ensemble of narrative forms which provokes the naturalization of a literary text as a medium of memory."[36] Furthermore, Erll distinguishes four modes of this rhetoric: experimental, monumental, antagonistic and reflective, which can be a useful tool for analysing the world presented in a novel. At this point, I will refer only to the experimental mode, which – as my experience in reading recent Iraqi novels shows – is most commonly used in these texts. This mode "evokes 'the living memory' of contemporary history, generational or family memories;" in other words, it stages "the episodic-autobiographical memory of a witness."[37] In Erll's view, the following literary techniques are characteristic of this rhetorical mode: "1) circumstantial realism, a very detailed presentation of everyday life in the past, 2) presentation of everyday ways of speaking, typical of specific groups, 3) personal voice generated by first-person narration, 4) presentation of the internal world [of a character – A.M.] which reveals aspects of the pre-narrative experience."[38]

In light of the above, this article centres around literary discussion on the threat posed to Christians' existence in today's Iraq as a part of a wider debate involving many Iraqi intellectuals. The aim of the article is to present selected aspects of the deteriorating socio-political situation of Iraqi Christians in recent decades, leading to their mass emigration, as reflected in some post-2003 Iraqi novels. In the article, 2003 constitutes a crucial turning point not only because of the transition from the era of the brutal dictatorship of Saddam Husayn to the era of sectarian mayhem that followed the American invasion, from an era of official censorship to an era of relative freedom of expression; but also because of the conviction expressed by some Iraqi intellectuals – as evidenced by Anṭūn's words above – that the exodus of Christians from Iraq has taken on a different meaning since the beginning of the new millennium in comparison with the previous period, and that their position within Iraqi society has dramatically worsened, despite the fact that they had also been suppressed by the formerly ruling Baath Party.[39] Below, I will focus only on the causes of the Christian emigration and the living conditions for Christians remaining in the country, and shall not describe the fate of those living in the diaspora. I will, however, allude to both their place among other Iraqi communities now and in the past and their identity.

The present introduction is followed by the three parts of the article. In the first, I concentrate on depicting the plight of Iraqi Christians after 2003 through a brief outline

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[35] Ibidem, pp. 167–168.

[36] Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, (trans.) Sara B. Young, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2011, p. 157; Astrid Erll, *Literatur als Medium des kollektiven Gedächtnisses*, in: *Gedächtniskonzepte der Literaturwissenschaft*, p. 268.

[37] Erll, *Memory in Culture*, p. 158.

[38] Erll, *Literatur als Medium*, p. 268; Erll, *Memory in Culture*, pp. 158–159.

[39] Muṣṭafā, *Al-Aqalliyyāt fī Al-'Irāq*.

of the lives of four literary characters. In the second, I examine the situation of Iraqi Christians before 2003 by referring to the memories of the three fictional protagonists mentioned in the previous part. In addition to that, I discuss two other characters in order to highlight their different views on the past.[40] These two parts are solely descriptive and devoid of commentary. In the final part, I draw some concluding remarks. In the article, I generalize about the experiences of Iraqi Christians, without pointing to differences between the numerous sub-groups among them, by focusing on literary characters that embody authentic representatives.[41]

Among the literary texts on which my reflections are based, are novels written by both Christian and Muslim authors, living both in their native country and abroad. The following fictional works are discussed: *Ṭaššārī* (Dispersion, Bayrūt 2012)[42] by In'ām Kağağī,[43] *I'ğām* (Diacritics, Bayrūt 2004)[44] and *Yā Maryam* (Ave Maria, Bayrūt 2012)[45] by Sinān Anṭūn, *'Irāqī fī Bārīs. Sīra ḏātiyya riwā'iyya* (An Iraqi in Paris: An Autobiographical

[40] This is due to controversies around the condition of Christians in the period before the American invasion, to which various reports and scientific papers refer. In her report, Preti Taneja states that members of Iraqi minorities, including Christians, were harassed by the Baath Party regime, which committed acts of genocide against them, sowed terror through "disappearances", and violated their human rights, including the right to self-identification of specific groups. They therefore lived in constant fear. On the other hand, the "secular dictatorship" declared that Iraqi ethnic and religious communities were under its protection and encouraged their members to live in their own way. For example, Christians and Jews were allowed to sell alcohol. In addition, Taneja cites some representatives of these minorities pondering on their living conditions under Saddam Husayn's rule and whether they were worse than those of today. See: Preti Taneja, *Assimilation, Exodus, Eradication: Iraq's Minority Communities since 2003*, "Minority Right Group International Report", 2007, p. 29, Viewed 10 April 2018, <https://sverigesradio.se/diverse/appdata/isidor/files/83/6807.pdf>. Cf. Ray J. Mouawad, *Syria and Iraq – Repression*, "Middle East Quarterly" 8/1 (Winter 2001) [special issue: Disappearing Christians of the Middle East], pp. 51–60, Viewed 8 April 2018, <https://www.meforum.org/17/syria-and-iraq-repression>; Sa'd Sallūm, *Al-Masīḥiyyūna fī Al-'Irāq al-ğumhūrī 1958–2003*, in: *Al-Masīḥiyyūna fī Al-'Irāq*, pp. 294–313.

[41] In the novels under consideration, the most common Christian protagonists are Chaldeans, Assyrians and Syriacs. For more on the various Christian communities in Iraq, see e.g.: Vahram Petrosian, *Assyrians in Iraq*, "Iran and the Caucasus" 10/1 (2006), pp. 113–147; Darren L. Logan, *A Remnant Remaining: Armenians amid Northern Iraq's Christian Minority*, "Iran and the Caucasus" 14/1 (2010), pp. 143–157; Ḥabīb, *Masīḥiyyū Al-'Irāq*, pp. 343–473.

[42] In'ām Kağağī, *Ṭaššārī*, Dār al-Ğadīd, Bayrūt 2012. See the French translation by François Zabbal: Inaam Kachachi, *Dispersés*, Gallimard, Paris 2016.

[43] In'ām Kağağī was born to a Chaldean family in Baghdad in the early 1950s. She studied journalism in the Iraqi capital and then worked in the media. In the late 1970s, she studied in Paris, where she obtained a doctorate in the same field. She has been a journalist for many years, writing articles for such publications as "Aš-Šarq al-Awsaṭ". Her output includes a biography devoted to the wife of the famous Iraqi artist Ğawād Salīm, a work containing excerpts from literary texts of Iraqi women writers, and a short documentary on Nazīha ad-Dulaymī, the first female Iraqi minister in the 1950s. She has also authored four novels. See: *Inaam Kachachi*, "Banipal. Magazine of Modern Arabic Literature", Viewed 9 April 2018, <http://www.banipal.co.uk/contributors/312/inaam-kachachi/>. For more extensive information, see: Ḥabīb, *Masīḥiyyū Al-'Irāq*, pp. 566–571.

[44] Sinān Anṭūn, *I'ğām*, Manšūrāt al-Ğamal, Bayrūt 2004. See the English translation by Rebecca C. Johnson: Sinan Antoon, *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody*, City Lights, San Francisco 2006.

[45] Sinān Anṭūn, *Yā Maryam*, Manšūrāt al-Ğamal, Bayrūt 2012. See the English translation by Maia Tabet: Sinan Antoon, *The Baghdad Eucharist*, American University in Cairo Press, Cairo 2017.

Novel, Bayrūt 2012)[46] by Ṣamū'īl Šam'ūn,[47] *Frānkanštāyn fī Baġdād* (Frankenstein in Baghdad, Bayrūt 2013)[48] by Aḥmad Sa'dāwī,[49] and *Sabāyā dawlat al-ḫurāfa* (Slaves of the Imaginary State, Dimašq 2017)[50] by 'Abd ar-Riḍā Ṣāliḥ Muḥammad.[51] In all of these novels, with the exception of Sa'dāwī's work, Christians are the main protagonists. The literary texts by Kağağī and Šam'ūn depict their lives both in Iraq and exile, while the other fictional works revolve around their situation in their homeland. The action of *Diacritics* takes place in the late 1980s, whereas the events of *Dispersion* happen after the outbreak of sectarian violence in the 2000s, prior to 2012.[52] *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and *Ave Maria* are set in the same period, while *Slaves of the Imaginary State* sheds light on what takes place after the seizure of Mosul and its surrounding towns and villages by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014.[53] Some of these novels also recall

[46] Ṣamū'īl Šam'ūn, *'Irāqī fī Bārīs*. *Sīra ḏātiyya riwā'iyya*, Ad-Dār al-'Arabiyya li-al-'Ulūm Nāširūna, Bayrūt 2012. See the English translation by Christina Phillips and Piers Amodia: Samuel Shimon, *An Iraqi in Paris*, Banipal Publishing, London 2016.

[47] Ṣamū'īl Šam'ūn was born in 1956 to Assyrian parents in a settlement near the former British air base in al-Ḥabbāniyya. In 1979, he left Iraq and subsequently lived in Damascus, Amman, Beirut, Nicosia, Cairo and Tunis. In 1985, he settled in Paris, where he founded a small printing house for contemporary Arabic literature. He has lived in London since 1996; there he co-founded the "Banipal" literary magazine in 2000 and continues to be its editor. He is also the author of two poetry collections and the discussed autobiographical novel. See: *Samuel Shimon*, "Banipal. Magazine of Modern Arabic Literature", Viewed 6 April 2018, <http://www.banipal.co.uk/contributors/62/samuel-shimon/>.

[48] Aḥmad Sa'dāwī, *Frānkanštāyn fī Baġdād*, Manšūrāt al-Ğamal, Bayrūt 2013. See the English translation by Jonathan Wright: Ahmed Saadawi, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Oneworld, New York 2018.

[49] Aḥmad Sa'dāwī was born in Baghdad in 1973. He is an Iraqi poet, writer, cartoonist and journalist; he is also the author of four volumes of poetry and five novels, as well as short stories published in Arabic on-line magazines. He was a correspondent for BBC in Iraq in 2005–2007. He also writes television scripts. See: *Ahmed Saadawi*, "Banipal. Magazine of Modern Arabic Literature", Viewed 10 April 2018, <http://www.banipal.co.uk/contributors/contributor.cfm?contributor_id=693>.

[50] 'Abd ar-Riḍā Ṣāliḥ Muḥammad, *Sabāyā dawlat al-ḫurāfa*, Dār Amal al-Ğadīda, Dimašq 2017.

[51] 'Abd ar-Riḍā Ṣāliḥ Muḥammad was born in Maysān in 1950. He graduated in art education, and was later an editor-in-chief of "Al-Badīl aṯ-Ṯaqāfī" art magazine. He is an artist and the author of art studies, numerous critical articles for Arab newspapers and magazines, two collections of short stories and three novels. See: Muḥsin Kāẓim Ṣabāḥ, *'Ar-Riwā'ī Riḍā Ṣāliḥ wa-tanawwu' al-'aṭā' al-ibdā'ī*, "Aṣ-Ṣabāḥ al-Ğadīd", 28 February 2017, Viewed 15 April 2018, <http://newsabah.com/newspaper/113174>; *'Abd ar-Riḍā Ṣāliḥ Muḥammad*, "Ektab", Viewed 15 April 2018, <http://www.ektab.com/عبد-الرضا-صالح-محمد/>.

[52] On sectarian violence in the years 2006-2008 and its influence on the situation of Iraqi minorities, including Christians, see: Mokhtar Lamani, *Minorities in Iraq: the Other Victims*, "CIGI Special Report", Waterloo 2009, Viewed 20 April, <https://www.cigionline.org/sites/default/files/minorities_in_iraq_final.pdf>.

[53] On the exodus of Christians from Mosul after its seizure by ISIS in 2014 and the condition of those who remained in the city and surrounding villages, see: Maria Abi-Habib, *Iraq's Christian Minority Feels Militant Threat*, "The Wall Street Journal", 26 October 2014, Viewed 27 April 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iraqs-christian-minority-feels-militant-threat-1403826576>; Rana F. Sweis, *Christians of Mosul Find Haven in Jordan*, "The New York Times", 26 October 2014, Viewed 27 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/27/world/middleeast/for-mosuls-christians-a-shelter-in-jordan.html>; Eliza Griswold, *Is This the End of Christianity in the Middle East?*, "The New York Times", 22 July 2015, Viewed 27 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/magazine/is-this-the-end-of-christianity-in-the-middle-east.html>. For more extensive information, see: Ḥabīb, *Masīḥiyyū Al-'Irāq*, pp. 256–278.

events that occurred in preceding decades, through the memories of their protagonists or retrospection. This is particularly evident in *Dispersion* and *Ave Maria*, in which the main characters' memories date back to their youth during the 1950s, as well as in *An Iraqi in Paris*, in which the childhood memories of the hero, dating back to the 1960s, are described in a separate part at the end of the novel, while the main body of the work tells his life story since the moment he left Iraq in 1979. *Slaves of the Imaginary State* also covers several decades, as the main protagonist recalls memories of his own childhood and youth in the 1990s.

It should be emphasized that the article *Al-Masīḥiyyūna fī ar-riwāya al-ʻirāqiyya* (Christians in the Iraqi Novel) by Ronen Zeidel, published in the aforementioned multi-author study edited by Sallūm, serves here as an important point of reference. In his introduction to the article, Zeidel makes reference to a discussion on pluralism led by two Iraqi Muslim intellectuals – Sallūm and Dahām al-ʻAzāwī. Then, in a section devoted to the Iraqi novel, the Israeli researcher first presents the most common depictions of Christians in literary texts written by Iraqi Muslim authors, then scrutinizes their image in works by Iraqi Christian writers. In case of the latter, he focuses attention to the question of how Christian protagonists perceive their identity. Zeidel likewise stresses that he has based his conclusions on over 240 novels written between 1939 and 2014, since he favours quantitative research.[54] The present article is based on many fewer novels and examines the threat to Christians' continued existence in Iraq after 2003 from a slightly different angle, i.e. by taking a closer look at the stories of selected literary characters.

Is there no other way out?

The action of *Ave Maria* takes place on a single day, whose exact date – October 31, 2010 – can be calculated on the basis of an event described in the last chapter, significantly entitled "The Divine Slaughter". In this chapter, the two main characters, the over seventy-

[54] Rūnīn Zaydal, *Al-Masīḥiyyūna fī ar-riwāya al-ʻirāqiyya*, in: *Al-Masīḥiyyūna fī Al-ʻIrāq*, pp. 427–466. See also the English version of this article: Ronen Zeidel, *The Iraqi Novel and the Christians of Iraq*, "Journal of Levantine Studies" 4/2 (Winter 2014), Viewed 5 April 2018, <https://levantine-journal.org/product/the-iraqi-novel-and-the-christians-of-iraq/>. Henceforth in the paper, all quotations of Zeidel's article are taken from the English version. The author included a chapter dedicated to this topic in: Ronen Zeidel, *Pluralism in the Iraqi Novel after 2003: Literature and the Recovery of National Identity*, Lexington Books, London 2020, pp. 119–144. It must be added that in his article concerning Christian characters in post-2003 Iraqi novels, Ṭāriq Ğamīl Ṣakabān also discusses a number of works of fiction, dividing them into those written by Christian and Muslim writers. See: Ṭāriq Ğamīl Ṣakabān, *Aš-Šaḫṣiyya al-masīḥiyya fī ar-riwāya al-ʻirāqiyya aṣ-ṣādira min 2003 ilā 2015*, "Maǧallat al-Bāḥiṯ" 25 (2017), pp. 77–88, Viewed 12 July 2018, <https://www.iasj.net/iasj?func=fulltext&aId=154937>. It bears noting that the study entitled *Al-Huwiyya al-masīḥiyya fī ar-riwāya al-ʻirāqiyya. Dirāsa taḥlīliyya li-riwāya mā baʻda ʻām 2003* (Christian Identity in the Iraqi Novel. An Analytical Study of Novels after 2003) by ʻImād Ğāsim was published in Baghdad in 2017. Its author examines the issue of Christian identity in Iraq on the basis of 17 novels. Unfortunately, I was unable to purchase this publication before this article was completed. See: ʻAdawiyya Al-Hilālī, *Al-Huwiyya al-masīḥiyya fī ar-riwāya al-ʻirāqiyya... dirāsa fī dawr al-huwiyyāt al-farʻiyya*, "Al-Madā", 7 March 2018, Viewed 13 April 2018, <http://almadapaper.net/Details/209071>.

year-old Yūsuf and his twentysomething niece Mahā, attend mass in the Chaldean Church of Our Lady of Salvation in Baghdad which is targeted by an organization called "the Muslim State of Iraq".[55] Amid the attack, Yūsuf is killed, whereas Mahā survives and agrees to be interviewed by one of the TV stations in order to give her testimony of what she has seen.[56] After narrating what happened in the church, the woman says:

> "This is not the first attack against us and, unfortunately, it will not be the last. Even against my family. This is the third time. In fact, we moved from Ad-Dawra three years ago because of sectarian violence and threats, and then again. We left our house and now we have been moving between Ankawa and Baghdad. We are targeted. They want to throw us out of the country? They say about us that we are crusaders and that we cooperate with the occupation forces, etc. All this is a lie and a groundless falsification of history. We did not come on tanks from abroad, like all those who say that they are bigger patriots than we are. Nobody supports us. Neither Iran, nor Saudi Arabia, nor America. America has not helped us.[57] On the contrary, our situation has deteriorated. In the end, we have nothing left but God and our faith. We did not come from outside. We have been here for centuries. Let the people hear it. This is evidenced by history and monuments. Our monasteries and monuments exist. Not only in the north, but in all places in Iraq. Even in Najaf, there is a monastery and the ruins of churches. There are also monasteries in Karbala and An-Nāṣiriyya.[58] We have never wanted power or anything else. It was not us who stole, killed and burned. We only want to live in peace. Our religion is a religion of peace. That is all I want to say."[59]

The problems raised by Mahā, i.e. the aggression towards Iraqi Christians and the accusations and attacks made against them, on the one side, and their declarations that they

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[55] The author also mentions this event on one of the last pages of the novel, but admits that both his literary text and characters are fictitious, and that any resemblance to actual people is unintentional. See: Anṭūn, *Yā Maryam*, p. 157. On the attack on the church, see: Martin Chulov, *Baghdad Church Siege Survivors Speak of Taunts, Killings and Explosions*, "The Guardian", 1 November 2010, Viewed 30 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/01/baghdad-church-siege-survivors-speak>; Elizabeth Kendall, *After Saturday Comes Sunday. Understanding the Christian Crisis in the Middle East*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene 2016, pp. 9–10; Ḥabīb, *Masīḥiyyū Al-'Irāq*, p. 253.

[56] In one interview, the author revealed that he had written Mahā's testimony based on the testimonies of real women who witnessed the event. See: *How Sinan Antoon Writes Iraq*.

[57] On accusations made against Christians of collaborating with the American occupation forces, see: Salloum, *Violence Against Minorities in Iraq*, p. 34.

[58] Extensive information on Christian towns, monuments, churches and monasteries in Iraq can be found in: al-Ḥamadānī and al-Aswad, *Ḫarīṭa 'an at-turāṯ*, pp. 64–142; Suhayl Qāšā, *Sahl Naynawā wa-mustaqbal al-masīḥiyyīna fī Al-'Irāq*, Dār Ab'ād, Bayrūt 2016, pp. 12–14.

[59] Anṭūn, *Yā Maryam*, pp. 154–155. All quotations from the novels under discussion have been translated from Arabic by the author of the article.

are rooted in the Iraqi land and their desire for peaceful coexistence with representatives of other religious communities, on the other, are among the most important issues discussed by Anṭūn in his novel. Most often, as in the quotation above, this is done by employing the personal voices of the two protagonists, either in internal monologues or dialogues with other characters in the Iraqi dialect characteristic of Christians.[60]

Stories about the plight of the country's Christian community after 2003 are mainly told by Mahā, who experiences various forms of discrimination and persecution. The woman tries to remember the times when she did not feel alienated. Each day, she faces social condemnation in the streets of Baghdad because she does not wear the hijab. She even gives up wearing a cross around her neck as everyone around her reminds her that she belongs to a religious minority. She dreams of a life in a different place, one where she could be like others and have the freedom to decide how she will dress.[61]

The year 2006, when sectarian conflict unfolded in Iraq and transformed into a civil war, marks another turning point in Mahā's life. The protagonist feels forced to leave her family house in the Christian-inhabited neighbourhood of Ad-Dawra. She moves to another district to live with her husband in Yūsuf's house. In her reflections on the reasons that led to this decision, Mahā concentrates on hate speech, which escalated after the American invasion.[62] Initially, verbal abuse from a local imam, coming from the speakers of a nearby mosque, was directed at those collaborating with the Americans. She did not pay much attention to this message because she did not realize that it was addressed to her as a Christian. Over the years, the imam's words became more and more dangerous. He claimed that Christians were *ḏimmī*[63] and had to pay *ǧizya*.[64] Subsequently, letters were left at the entrance to her house, whose authors demanded that her family choose between paying *ǧizya* and converting to Islam. Then, members of a group called "Muḥammad's Army" started firing their weapons at Christians' houses and throwing grenades into their gardens. They also burned an Assyrian church and attacked Mahā's Chaldean church, shattering the cross on its dome.[65] One night, bullets broke a window

[60] On various Iraqi dialects, including the specific dialect of Iraqi Christians, see: Farida Abu-Haidar, *Christian Arabic of Baghdad*, Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 1991; Otto Jastrow, *Iraq: Arabic Dialects*, in: *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, Brill, Leiden 2011, pp. 414–424.

[61] Anṭūn, *Yā Maryam*, pp. 110–119. On the situation of minority women in Iraq after 2003, see: Taneja, *Assimilation, Exodus, Eradication*, pp. 22–28; Mumtaz Lalani, *Still Targeted: Continued Persecution of Iraq's Minorities*, "Minority Rights Group International", 2010, pp. 14–16, Viewed 1 May 2018, <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4c43f4322.pdf>; Salloum, *Forgotten Voices*.

[62] On hate speech against Christians, see: Salloum, *Violence Against Minorities in Iraq*, pp. 36–38. For examples of racist, anti-Christian statements by ISIS, see: Ḥabīb, *Masīḥiyyū Al-'Irāq*, p. 931.

[63] See: Claude Cahen, *Dh̲imma*, in: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam. New Edition*, vol. 2, (ed.) Bernard Lewis, Charles Pellat and Joseph Schacht, Brill, Leiden 1997, pp. 227–231.

[64] See: Claude Cahen, *D̲jizya*, in: Ibidem, pp. 559–562.

[65] On attacks on churches in Iraq after 2003, see: Taneja, *Assimilation, Exodus, Eradication*, p. 9; Lalani, *Still Targeted*, pp. 16–18; Hilal Khashan, *"Dateline": Arab Uprisings May Doom Middle East Christians*, "Middle East Quarterly" (Fall 2014), p. 3, Viewed 2 May 2018, <https://www.meforum.org/MiddleEastForum/media/MEFLibrary/pdf/4801.pdf>.

in her kitchen. Moreover, the woman's family found the word "infidels" painted in red on their front door.[66]

After some time, the situation in Ad-Dawra seemed to have improved slightly due to the fact that the neighbourhood is controlled by the "Aṣ-Ṣahwa" militia whose members receive a salary in exchange for protecting the streets against "Al-Qā'ida".[67] Emboldened by a television report in which Muslim neighbours encourage Christian residents of Ad-Dawra to return, Mahā comes back with her husband to reside in her family house. However, she is confronted with one more personal tragedy there. One early morning, two booby-trapped cars explode in her street, one of which is in front of her house. Apart from causing substantial material damage to the building, the explosion causes the woman to lose her unborn child. After leaving hospital, she promises to herself that she would never come back to this cursed neighbourhood. She first lives with her husband's family, then moves again to Yūsuf's house.[68]

While staying with her lonely uncle, Mahā suffers from depression and seeks solace in religion, especially in prayers to the Virgin Mary. In spite of this situation, she tries to continue her medical studies, which prevents her from joining her family in the town of Ankawa, inhabited mainly by Christians and located adjacent to the city of Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan. Mahā learns from her sister about the living conditions of Christian refugees from Baghdad, who are not always welcome in the northern part of the country, even by their fellow believers. The sister comforts the heroine by saying that everything will work out fine when they manage to emigrate to Canada.[69] Eventually, the tragic experiences in Mahā's life as well as the suffering of Christians in Baghdad and throughout Iraq, deprive the woman of the illusion that remaining in her homeland still makes sense.

Like in the above-mentioned novel, the timeframe in *Dispersion* can be determined quite accurately. The fictional work by Kağağī starts with a meeting between French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Pope Benedict XVI at the Élysée Palace in Paris in September 2008. This event is attended by the main character, the eighty-four-year-old doctor Wardiyya Iskandar. She is invited to the presidential palace as a representative of

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[66] Anṭūn, *Yā Maryam*, pp. 118–119. Cf. Adrianna Maśko, *Współczesna historia Iraku w powieściach „Ogrody prezydenta" Muḥsina ar-Ramlīego i „Ave Maria" Sināna Anṭūna*, in: *Orient w literaturze. Literatura w Oriencie. Spotkania*, (ed.) Adam Bednarczyk, Magdalena Kubarek and Maciej Szatkowski, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń 2014, p. 205.

[67] Anṭūn, *Yā Maryam*, p. 128.

[68] Ibidem, pp. 125–130.

[69] Ibidem, pp. 125–129. See short descriptions of the novel in: Maśko, *Współczesna historia Iraku*, pp. 200–201; Adrianna Maśko, *Religious Conflicts after the 2003 Invasion of Iraq Reflected in Contemporary Iraqi Prose Works*, "Hemispheres. Studies on Cultures and Societies" 30/2 (2015), pp. 78–79. On the situation of Christian communities in northern Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, as well as on the living conditions of Christian IDPs in Iraqi Kurdistan after 2003, see: Krzysztof Lalik, *Kurdystan Iracki u progu XXI wieku*, Księgarnia Akademicka, Kraków 2008, pp. 273–274; Jack Healy, *Exodus from North Signals Iraqi Christian's Slow Decline*, "The New York Times", 10 February 2012, Viewed 4 May 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/world/middleeast/exodus-from-north-signals-iraqi-christians-decline.html>; Logan, *Remnant Remaining*, pp. 147–157; Salloum et al., *At Crossroads: Human Rights Violations*, pp. 26–28.

Christian refugees from the Middle East. In exile, Wardiyya keeps in close contact with her unnamed niece, who functions as the narrator in many parts of the novel, and with her niece's family, particularly her son Iskandar, who was brought up in France. Each day, the old lady calls her children living in different parts of the world – the oldest daughter Hinda in Canada, the younger daughter Yāsamīn in Dubai, and the son Burrāq, currently working in Haiti.[70] Wardiyya's difficult decision to emigrate is explained by her niece in the following way:

> "Iraqis wished to travel in those and in the following years [in the 1990s – A.M.], but my aunt did not move from her place. Everyone emigrated except her. Doctors, officers, poets, journalists, singers, painters, academics and guides,[71] and she was either at home or at the clinic. At night, at home, and during the day, at the clinic. Yāsamīn had been her companion before she got married and jumped over the state's borders, just like Hinda and Burrāq. We had all preceded her in this jump over the borders, but she remained stubborn.
>
> This was before our third war. And when the resurrection occurred, the fire of hell burned, and chaos waved its hand over people's heads, my aunt finally realized, thanks to her eighty years of life experience, that destruction would extend its stay in that land. She began to be haunted by the thought of emigration with those who were leaving. Canada was her desired destination, as long as her first-born daughter Hinda was living there. But she kept shaking her head to make the idea go away. 'I will die, I will be buried here and I will not emigrate'."[72]

While alone in her apartment in one of the immigrant neighbourhoods in Paris, Wardiyya thinks of the past, including the last period of her life in Baghdad, which ended with her departure for Amman. In her mind, the woman admits that she was driven by despair and disgust, like her daughter Yāsamīn, who preferred to marry an unknown relative from Dubai and to arrange her marriage over the phone just to leave the country. Wardiyya then remembers the threatening letters thrown into her garden. Their authors demanded her daughter marry one of her persecutors within ten days.[73] The doctor even asked for help from a local imam, who promised to protect them. As for Yāsamīn, she was also tired of her daily life in Baghdad for other reasons. She hated wearing black clothes, as she was constantly attending her relatives' funerals. These ceremonies were the only chance for her family to meet, since other places, including churches, were not safe. For safety reasons, the woman stopped working at the university. Finally, she "went

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[70] Kağağī, *Ṭaššārī*, pp. 3–12, 158, 231–232.

[71] On the emigration of Iraqis in the 1990s, see: Mouawad, *Syria and Iraq – Repression*.

[72] Kağağī, *Ṭaššārī*, pp. 39–40.

[73] On the threatening letters received by Iraqi Christians, see: Eibner, *Plight of Christians in Iraq*, p. 57.

to lead a normal life, leaving the city suffocating from the smoke of incense being burned for the dead."[74]

In Paris, Wardiyya keeps having the same nightmare over and over again. She dreams of a young woman who comes to her clinic in the town of Ad-Diwāniyya, where the doctor had lived for many years before moving to Baghdad. The young woman behaves strangely. During the medical examination, she starts screaming that she does not want to die and kill people around her. Wardiyya senses something being hidden under her clothes and finds explosives. The women waiting in the corridor run to the front door. The doctor, who cannot move, prays for a quick death. After regaining consciousness, she finds herself lying on the floor. Policemen surround her and say that the strange woman did not have the courage to blow herself up. Now, in Europe, Wardiyya is still unable to erase from her memory "the image of the frightened girl with her eyes rolled upward, stretching out her numb fingers to grasp the beauty of life and rebel against programmed death."[75] It was thus also this horrifying event that changed the rhythm of Wardiyya's life and urged her to move abroad.[76]

In exile, in addition to being haunted by this nightmarish dream, the doctor reflects bitterly on what she has left behind. She comes to the conclusion that all the miseries in Iraq have happened in bulk: dead people lie in mass graves; thousands of young people emigrate; pilots, journalists and academics are murdered in a wholesale manner; there are numerous parties, sects, booby-trapped car explosions, and bodyguards; there have been thefts of millions and billions, as well as numerous dictators.[77]

In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, set after the outbreak of the civil war in 2006, one of the major characters is an elderly woman named Elishua (Īlīšūā). She lives alone, in the company of her old cat, in her family house in the Baghdadian neighbourhood of Al-Battāwīn. Her home, which was inhabited by a Jewish family many years ago, as evidenced by its architecture, is an object of interest of the owner of a local real estate office. He has got rich by taking over the houses of people who have left the neighbourhood, fleeing the conflict.[78] Elishua is encouraged by the man to sell her property. Moreover, her daughters call her regularly from Australia and ask her to join them. But she does not want to leave Iraq, since she still believes that her son Daniel, who went missing during the war with Iran in the 1980s, will come back one day.[79] Elishua lives according to a rhythm defined by her everyday habits: each evening she prays at home in front of an image of Saint Gregory, and each Sunday she goes to the Church of Saint

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[74] Kağağī, *Ṭaššārī*, pp. 129–132.

[75] Ibidem, pp. 150, 153–156.

[76] Ibidem, p. 149.

[77] Ibidem, pp. 249–250. See a short description of the novel: Adrianna Maśko, *Refleksje o emigracji w dwóch powieściach irackiej pisarki In'am Kachachi*, "Przegląd Orientalistyczny" 1–2 (2016), pp. 158–159.

[78] On the occupation of Christian properties in post-invasion Iraq, see: Lalani, *Still Targeted*, pp. 19–21; Salloum et al., *At Crossroads: Human Rights Violations*, p. 24.

[79] On the participation of Christians in the Iran-Iraq War and their losses, see: Petrosian, *Assyrians in Iraq*, p. 128.

Odisho in another neighbourhood.[80] The elderly woman is so immersed in her inner world that she does not seem to notice what is going on around her. The omniscient narrator depicts this as follows:

> "The explosion took place two minutes after the departure of the Kia bus, in which the elderly Elishua, Umm Daniel, was sitting. Everyone on the bus quickly turned around. Behind the street crowd, with frightened eyes, they saw a terrifying, black pillar of smoke rising above the car park near the Aviation Square, in the centre of Baghdad. They saw young men running towards the explosion site and a few cars which had hit the strip in the middle of the street or collided with one another after their drivers had become overwhelmed by anxiety and fear. They heard several overlapping human voices, an indeterminate scream, clamour and alarms of numerous cars.
>
> (…) Elishua was sitting in the Kia bus, busy with herself, as if she were deaf or absent. She did not hear the horrifying explosion behind her, at a distance of about two hundred meters. She hunched her frail body on the chair next to the window, peering out of it and seeing nothing. She thought about the bitter taste in her mouth and the mass of darkness that had been bearing down on her chest for days."[81]

Interestingly, the absent-minded elderly woman enjoys great respect from neighbours in her alley, which is particularly strongly expressed by Umm Salīm al-Bayḍah. The Muslim woman believes that Elishua is blessed because explosions do not shake their neighbourhood when the old lady stays there.[82] Elishua herself is so engrossed in her desire to see her missing son that she sees him, due to her very poor eyesight, in the main character of the novel. The so-called "Frankenstein" from Baghdad, named Šisma ("What is your name") visits her secretly in her house.[83] Eventually, her daughters, who

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[80] Sa'dāwī, *Frānkanštāyn fī Baġdād*, pp. 11–24.

[81] Ibidem, pp. 11–12.

[82] Ibidem, pp. 11, 15.

[83] Ibidem, pp. 63–78. On the main character in the novel, whose body consists of body parts of various victims of sectarian violence, as well as on the aesthetics of the work, see: Bushra Juhi Jani, *Violence as the Abject in Iraqi Literature: Ahmed Saa'dawi's "Frankenstein in Baghdad" and Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein"*, "International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies" 1/4 (2015), pp. 321–336, Viewed 9 April 2018, <https://www.ijhcs.com/index.php/ijhcs/article/view/271/280>; Haytham Bahoora, *Writing the Dismembered Nation: The Aesthetics of Horror in Iraqi Narratives of War*, "Arab Studies Journal" 23/1 (Fall 2015), pp. 188, 193–196, Viewed 4 April 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/44744904.pdf>; Mahmudah, *Magical Realism in Aḥmad Sa'dāwiy's "Frankenstein fī Bagdād"*, "Humaniora" (June 2016), pp. 141–152, Viewed 8 April 2018, <https://jurnal.ugm.ac.id/jurnal-humaniora/article/view/16397>; Hani Elayyan, *The Monster Unleashed: Iraq's Horrors of Everyday Life in "Frankenstein in Baghdad"*, "Arab World English Journal" 1/1 (2017), pp. 158–170, Viewed 19 April 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol1no1.11>; Adrianna Maśko, *O przekraczaniu granic człowieczeństwa: "Frankenstein w Bagdadzie" Aḥmada Sa'dāwīego*, in: *Granice i pogranicza w perspektywie orientalistycznej. Szkice o literaturze*

have come to Iraq and are waiting for her in Ankawa, manage to deceive her by sending one of their sons, who looks like the missing Daniel, to Baghdad. The moment Elishua leaves her sold house, Umm Salīm predicts that a disaster will befall the alley.[84]

In *Slaves of the Imaginary State*, whose title ironically refers to the Islamic State (*dawlat al-ḫilāfa*), the events take place after the fall of Mosul in June 2014 and in the subsequent months.[85] The main protagonist is a young Christian man named Isḥāq who is a lecturer at the University of Mosul. He and his family have been living in the city for several years, although he was born in the south-eastern part of the country, in the town of Al-'Amāra. In his first-person narrative, Isḥāq tells the story about what happened that summer, starting with the following metaphorical vision:

> "Dark clouds covered the sky over Mosul in June 2014, obscuring the light of the moon. The darkness descended on all parts of the city. The horses of evil whinnied to spread fright in the eyes of its children, dread in the hearts of its women and fear in its men. (...) They hide under the cloak of religion and doctrine. They raise the banners of apostasy in the name of religion as if they were a spreading plague. They came from outside the history. They are pushed by wild forces from outside the country and from its interior. Nothing connects them with civilization and humanity (…).
>
> (...) We and our ancestors have lived for centuries along with Muslims and followers of other religions. We have coexisted peacefully, as one fabric. Everyone has respected religious beliefs of others, without saying: 'You are infidels'. They have shared joys and sorrows with us. We have experienced good, love, safety and peace from them. So, who are these foreign invaders? In fact, they are not Muslims, even if they say so. They are barbarians who have strayed from the path of God. They are thieves, terrorists and criminals."[86]

After the seizure of Mosul by jihadists, Isḥāq and other members of his family do not move from their house for a month. Their Muslim neighbour provides them with food during this period. However, in July 2014, when all Christians who would not change

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i kulturze, (ed.) Adam Bednarczyk, Magdalena Kubarek and Maciej Szatkowski, Wydawnictwo Libron, Kraków 2017, pp. 249–260.

[84] Sa'dāwī, *Frānkanštāyn fī Baġdād*, pp. 283–297.

[85] In his preface to the novel, the author notes that he wrote it over the course of two years – from the seizure of Mosul by ISIS to the regaining of control over the city and its vicinity by Iraqi and Kurdish troops in July 2017. He admits that it was difficult for him to get news about what was happening in the occupied city. In the first two months, when telephone calls were still possible, he would obtain information from intellectuals remaining in Mosul. In addition, he conducted interviews with friends who had fled the city. After the western part of Mosul was reclaimed, he went there to look at the places where his novel was set. He also visited the church in Al-'Amāra, mentioned in the work. Moreover, he read and watched many interviews with refugees and eyewitnesses. See: Muḥammad, *Sabāyā dawlat al-ḫurāfa*, pp. 7–8.

[86] Ibidem, pp. 52–53.

their faith are ordered to leave the city by ISIS, Isḥāq's family, along with more than 1,200 other people, decide to embark on a journey to a safer place. After their car is confiscated at the city gates, they continue their exodus on foot. That same night, trucks with armed fighters begin to chase them. The jihadi militants shoot at the fleeing people and grab young women. The protagonist's grandfather is killed in the attack, while his aunt Maryam is kidnapped. Those who survive the massacre keep on walking and rest in Christian villages and towns north of Mosul until they reach Erbil.[87]

Following these tragic events, Isḥāq's family makes the decision to fly to Baghdad. Subsequently, they go to Al-'Amāra to reside in their old family house. Nevertheless, the main character cannot accept the loss of his aunt who took care of him when he was a child. So, with the help of his friends, he acquires a fake passport in order to get to the caliphate and find her.[88] Later in the story, Isḥāq describes his fate after joining the ranks of ISIS fighters: recruitment at one of the organization's offices in Istanbul, training for recruits and his subsequent tasks, such as protecting buildings and participating in battles to seize new areas. During this time, he marries an enslaved Yezidi girl and engages in an affair with a Muslim recruit from Sweden, who helps him to get information about the place where his aunt is being held.[89]

Isḥāq ultimately manages to save Maryam and escape from Mosul along with the family of his Muslim neighbour. They reach Erbil, from where he and Maryam return to Baghdad, and then they join their family in Al-'Amāra. Despite this, the rescued woman decides to emigrate to Sweden because she is no longer able to live in the country. In exile, thanks to the assistance of a psychologist, she tries to cope with the trauma of imprisonment and sexual abuse.[90]

Was it better before?

In the first chapter of *Ave Maria*, entitled "To Live in the Past", there is a discussion between its narrator, i.e. the elderly Yūsuf, his niece Mahā, and her husband Lu'ay. The discussion begins with an exchange of views on the announcement of the death penalty for some members of Saddam Husayn's government, among whom there is a Christian, Ṭāriq 'Azīz.[91] The protagonists then debate over the current terrorist attacks in Iraq. Mahā claims that Christians are the primary victims. However, Yūsuf disagrees and

[87] Ibidem, pp. 52–78.

[88] Ibidem, pp. 79–99.

[89] Ibidem, pp. 102–193.

[90] Ibidem, pp. 196–222. On sexual and gender-based violence by ISIS against Iraqi women, see e.g.: *Between the Millstones: the State of Iraq's Minorities Since the Fall of Mosul*, "Minority Rights Group International Report", Brussels 2015, Viewed 29 April 2018, <http://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Between-the-Millstones-English.pdf>.

[91] Ṭāriq 'Azīz was born to a Chaldean family in Qaḍā Talkīf in the north of Iraq in 1936. He became famous as the deputy prime minister in Saddam Husayn's government in 1979–2003, and as the minister of foreign affairs in 1983–1991.

states that all Iraqi citizens suffer due to the assaults. Furthermore, he emphasizes that Iraqi minorities can only be protected by a strong state since they have neither parties nor militias. Lu'ay adds that other Iraqi communities, such as the Sabian Mandeans and Yezidis, are also vulnerable to the sectarian chaos. Mahā comments that Islam is a religion spread by the sword. Yet, Yūsuf argues that the same could be said about Christianity in the past. Mahā admits that she does not know much about the past. What she knows is that the problem of Iraqi Christians is ongoing because Muslims do not want them in Iraq, claiming that the country belongs exclusively to them. Yūsuf says with indignation that this is a country for everyone and that Christians were living here before Muslims, as evidenced by history and museums. Mahā answers ruefully that eventually the place for Christians will be in museums, and that the time in which Iraq belonged to them has already ended, because now they are all deemed unfaithful and *ḏimmī*. Nonetheless, Yūsuf hopes that the socio-political situation in Iraq will improve at some point since this is a natural course of history. In contrast, Mahā disagrees with his opinion that the Iraqi Christians' existence was better in the past and that there will be a positive change in their life in the future. Finally, she concludes that Yūsuf lives in the past.[92]

Some fragments of Anṭūn's novel are devoted to the memories of the old man. He sits in his house, looks at photos, and recalls earlier stages of his life, as well as different happenings in his relatives' lives. Hence, he reminds the reader of various events in the post-World War II history of Iraq that have left an indelible mark on its citizens' fates. Yūsuf mentions, among other things, that he lost a friend with whom he studied in the 1950s, because as a Jew, he was forced to leave Iraq.[93] Besides, one of Yūsuf's brothers was imprisoned for conspiratorial activity during the rule of the Baath Party, and he himself – like millions of other Iraqis – suffered the consequences of the long-standing economic embargo in the 1990s.[94]

In addition, Yūsuf ponders the emigration of his family members, which has intensified since the early 1990s, when their last photo together was taken. His "brothers and sisters began to fall from the family tree so that the wind could sweep them away to foreign lands, or so that the ground in the family tomb, which they had bought in the new Chaldean cemetery on the route to Ba'qūba, could swallow them (…)."[95] One of the rooms in Yūsuf's house "turned into a warehouse with the passing of time, especially in the late 1990s and after 2003":

> "Every relative who decided to emigrate, sold what he could sell and took with him what he was able to take. Then he left some of his baggage

[92] Anṭūn, *Yā Maryam*, pp. 22–27.

[93] Both authors of recent Iraqi novels depicting the plight of Christians and authors of academic studies on them often refer to the expulsion of Jews from Iraq in the 1950s, pointing to the similar fates of the two communities. See: Kendall, *After Saturday Comes Sunday*, pp. 4–5.

[94] Anṭūn, *Yā Maryam*, pp. 37–60. On the deteriorating situation of Christians in the 1990s as a result of the economic sanctions and Husayn's religious campaign against minorities, see: Sallūm, *Al-Masīḥiyyūna fī Al-'Irāq al-ǧumhūrī*, pp. 294–313.

[95] Anṭūn, *Yā Maryam*, p. 60.

> and things which he could need in the family house, with the hope of sending them in the future in some way. But the luggage and boxes have been heaped up and covered with layers of dust, and they have still been waiting for who will come back to carry them to their new homes, away from Baghdad."[96]

However, Yūsuf himself, until his death in a terrorist attack, refuses in conversations with his relatives to sell the house in which he had been living for half a century. He did not want to leave it and join one of his sisters living in Canada and Sweden.[97]

A similar sentimental attachment to the past accompanies Wardiyya, the heroine of *Dispersion*. Unlike Yūsuf, she ultimately makes the decision to emigrate. In her Parisian apartment, the woman recalls the time when she received her first job as a young doctor in a hospital in the town of Ad-Diwāniyya, south of Baghdad. She spent nearly thirty years of her life there, in spite of her original plans. In this town, inhabited mainly by Shia Muslims, she marries her colleague and gives birth to several children. She manages to make friends and gain respect among the local residents. But she also helps women from diverse backgrounds as a gynaecologist for many years, saving some of them from social ostracism and even death at the hands of their relatives. Furthermore, she was the first woman who walked in Ad-Diwāniyya with an uncovered head and who drove a car.[98]

Like Yūsuf, Wardiyya remembers important events in the history of her country, including the expulsion of the Jews and the outbreak of the revolution that overthrew the Hashemite monarchy in the 1950s. In the face of all these political changes in Iraq, which took place over a period of several decades, she continued to strive to be independent, refusing to give her support to both the communists and nationalists.[99] Some of these historical events significantly influenced her family members' fates. Her son Burrāq was forcibly recruited to serve in the war with Iran in the 1980s, while her daughter Hinda suffered during the First Gulf War in the early 1990s. Twenty days after giving birth to her long-awaited child, Hinda was left scared and alone, when her husband was conscripted into the army again (he had fought in the Iran-Iraq War). She moved to live with her family, but she was not safe due to the repeated aerial bombardment of Baghdad. One day, a bomb dropped on a house across the street killed everybody inside. Worried about her husband and terrified by the bombs falling on her neighbourhood, Hinda was unable to produce milk to feed her new-born child. Thankfully they both survived. After the heroine's husband returned from the front line, they departed for Amman. Her brother Burrāq also chose to leave Iraq.[100] At the beginning of the new millennium, after sectarian strife had begun, the same decision was made by Wardiyya's younger daughter, Yāsamīn.

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[96] Ibidem, p. 61. Cf. Maśko, *Współczesna historia Iraku*, pp. 203–204.
[97] Anṭūn, *Yā Maryam*, pp. 85–86.
[98] Kağağī, *Ṭaššārī*, pp. 28–34, 40–42, 47–53, 60–65, 72–84, 113–128, 132–149, 161–167, 176–180.
[99] Ibidem, pp. 99–108.
[100] Ibidem, pp. 180–188.

Isḥāq, the protagonist of *Slaves of the Imaginary State* and an eyewitness to the jihadist seizure of Mosul in June 2014 and the subsequent persecution of its non-Sunni inhabitants, reflects in the novel on the fact that Iraqi Muslims and Christians used to live in peace. He personally observed this peaceful coexistence in his life. In the novel, he tells the story of his family from the moment his grandparents settled in Al-'Amāra, where his grandfather began running an off-licence store. It did not bother anyone from the local Muslim community until 2003, when bearded men destroyed the store.[101] The family members quickly acclimatized to their new surroundings and lived amicably with the other residents of the town. This is evidenced by the fact that both Christian and Shia rituals were performed during the funeral of Isḥāq's parents, who were killed in a car accident.

The protagonist himself had experienced tolerance from the inhabitants of Al-'Amāra during his childhood, and some even thought he was a Muslim, because of his first name. In primary school, the boy attended classes in the Qur'an recitation and was the best of all the pupils in this field. As he says, in retrospect, he grew up in a neighbourhood where members of various ethnic and religious groups lived side by side: Muslim Arabs and Kurds, Chaldean Christians and Sabian Mandeans, as well as Jews before their forced displacement in the 1950s. Isḥāq participated in different ceremonies, including weddings and funerals, with members of these communities. In addition, since his high school days, his closest friends had been a Sunni and a Shia, who would often argue with each other on religious matters. Nevertheless, they always reconciled because they recognized the fact that differences in their religious beliefs exist with regard to specific issues only, but the most crucial issue, that is, monotheism, was common to all of them. Isḥāq kept communicating with these two friends even after his family moved to Mosul. It is with their support that he later crosses into the territory of the caliphate.[102]

Due to the rather sentimental perspective of the three aforementioned literary characters – Yūsuf, Wardiyya and Isḥāq – on the situation of Iraqi Christians in the past, it is worth taking a look at the contrasting viewpoints of two other protagonists, whose life stories are embedded in the modern history of Iraq as well. One of them is the hero and narrator of *An Iraqi in Paris*, named after the book's author – Ṣamū'īl Šam'ūn. As hinted above, a large part of the novel is devoted to his adult life in exile, first in the Middle East and North Africa, and then in France. Throughout all these years, he has been trying to realize his childhood dream of reaching Hollywood and becoming a famous director. However, both his being an immigrant in the Arab world and a refugee in Europe are repeatedly juxtaposed against his identity of an Assyrian who considers himself an Iraqi, but not an Arab.[103]

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[101] On the attacks on Christian off-licence stores since the beginning of the new millennium, see: Taneja, *Assimilation, Exodus, Eradication*, p. 8.

[102] Muḥammad, *Sabāyā dawlat al-ḫurāfa*, pp. 10–52.

[103] For more on this topic, see: Ḫawla Bū Baṣala, *Al-Huwiyya wa-al-intimā' fī riwāyat "'Irāqī fī Bārīs" li-Ṣamū'īl Šam'ūn*, "Maǧallat Dirāsāt" 7/1 (Fabrāīr 2018), pp. 107–117, Viewed 4 April 2018, <https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/38551>. The author of the article draws attention to several problems relating to the hero's complex identity.

Most interesting is the second part of the novel, entitled "The Itinerant Seller and the Cinema", which depicts his life as an eight-year-old boy growing up in the 1960s in an Assyrian settlement in the perimeter of the former British Al-Ḥabbāniyya air base.[104] The boy, named Joey, works as an itinerant food seller and is a passionate fan of American movies he watches at a local cinema run by an Indian man. The narrator acquaints the reader with his family – an over fifty-year-old deaf-mute father working in a bakery, an over thirty-year-old mother who is always occupied with her housework, as well as his siblings. The Assyrian community is also represented by a man named Kyriakos (Qiryāqūs) who instils a passion for American cinema in the boy. There are characters representing other religions, nationalities and ethnic groups, including Shia Muslims – an Iranian man called Naṣrat Šāh and his wife Sākina, who live in the same building and share everyday joys and worries with Joey's family; a Kurdish woman from northern Iraq, aunt Zahra, who lives nearby and works in orchards previously owned by the British air base; as well as her niece Nasrīn, who visits her during holidays and attracts Joey's attention.[105]

The boy, who starts going to school while continuing his work as an itinerant food seller for Naṣrat Šāh, devotes much of his spare time to meetings with Kyriakos. The man not only introduces him to the secrets of Western cinema, but also tells him his life story. Like Joey's parents, the man is an orphan. He once lived in Iraqi Kurdistan but lost his closest loved ones during the massacre of Assyrians in 1933.[106] Kyriakos, who was twelve years old at the time, saw the murdered bodies of members of his family and other representatives of the Assyrian community with his own eyes. He managed to escape with the help of an English officer. Sergeant Mike sheltered the boy in his

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The first is his name, which resembles the Jewish prophet's name. This name becomes a curse for the adult protagonist, as he is considered a spy by the security services of various countries, for example, an Israeli spy by the Syrians, during his travels in the Middle East. The second problem is the fact that he is uncircumcised because his Christian father regarded circumcision as an act of impurity. Whereas the adult protagonist feels alienated since he stays in Middle Eastern countries mainly among the Muslim population, whose members recognize circumcision, like Jews, as a religious duty associated with ritual purity. During his stay in North Africa, the literary character decides to undergo circumcision at the age of 28. The third problem identified by the researcher is the question of the language used by Ṣamū'īl. He is fluent in Arabic, which is the language of communication in the Middle East region. At some point, however, he states that he has found his lost language, which is most likely the Neo-Aramaic language that he could not speak in Iraq, but whose words, spoken by his mother, he had remembered since his childhood.

[104] On the Assyrian settlement, see: Marta Woźniak, *Współcześni Asyryjczycy i Aramejczycy. Bliskowschodni chrześcijanie w poszukiwaniu tożsamości narodowej*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2014, pp. 114–116.

[105] Šam'ūn, *'Irāqī fī Bārīs*, pp. 192–234.

[106] On the massacre of Assyrians in the village of Simele in Iraqi Kurdistan, see: Petrosian, *Assyrians in Iraq*, pp. 120–121. For more on the political tensions that affected the fates of Assyrians in the Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq, and which resulted in the aforementioned massacre, see: Sami Zubaida, *Contested Nations: Iraq and the Assyrians*, "Nations and Nationalism" 6/3 (2000), pp. 363–382, Viewed 20 April 2018, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/464f/1dfa2c4719e932f933682e510f880592e996.pdf>; Katarzyna Leszczyńska, *Kwestia asyryjska na tle ogólnej sytuacji politycznej w Iraku w latach trzydziestych XX wieku*, in: *Niemuzułmańskie mniejszości Iraku*, (ed.) Michael Abdalla, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2008, pp. 229–239; 'Adnān Ziyān Farḥān, *Al-Qaḍiyya al-āšūriyya wa-tadā'iyātuhā fī Al-'Irāq al-malikī*, in: *Al-Masīḥiyyūna fī Al-'Irāq*, pp. 249–282; Ḥabīb, *Masīḥiyyū Al-'Irāq*, pp. 318–341.

house in Mosul and told him about the reasons for the massacre carried out by Kurdish troops with the participation of English and Iraqi soldiers. The English officer worked as a cameraman in the cinema in the Assyrian settlement near the Al-Ḥabbāniyya base, so he taught Kyriakos his profession, which the orphaned boy then practiced after his death.[107] In turn, Kyriakos, who was never himself able to leave his settlement, gave Joey his dream of travel to Hollywood.

This part of the novel also mentions other historical events that directly or indirectly affect the Assyrian community living near Al-Ḥabbāniyya. Among these events are when Egyptian soldiers arrived at the former British base in 1967 in order to train for a possible attack by the Arab states on Israel. Another is the introduction of a curfew in the settlement in the summer of 1968, following the Baathist military coup in Baghdad that brought the nationalist group to power in Iraq. Three months later, representatives of the new government arrived in Al-Ḥabbāniyya with information that it had been decided that civilians were to be deported from the settlement and that only militants would remain, because the base had "a strategic position in the fight against Zionists and traitors". However, as the narrator notes, only Assyrian, Kurdish and Turkmen families and those of Persian origin were expelled, since members of the pan-Arab and chauvinist Baath Party regarded them as "remnants of British colonialism".[108] Joey's house is destroyed by a bulldozer, and his poor family has no way out other than to separate. While the boy's parents move to Al-Ḥālidiyya, he spends three years with Naṣr Šāh and his relatives in Ar-Ramādī, a city inhabited mainly by conservative Sunni Muslims. Joey is initially persecuted by his classmates because of his Christian origins, but later manages to gain their favour.[109]

On the last pages of the novel, the fates of Joey's family members in the following decades are briefly described. In the 1980s, three of his brothers are wounded while fighting on the front lines during the war with Iran; one of his sister's sons is killed in combat, whereas another becomes an Iranian prisoner and later returns after spending ten years in captivity. Kyriakos is arrested on charges of spying for the West and released after three years. Joey emigrates, and never again sees those with whom he grew up.[110]

Although the main protagonist in *Diacritics* is a Chaldean student named Furāt, who is arrested and imprisoned for mocking the Baathist authorities, in the article more attention is given to the character of his unnamed grandmother, who raised him after his parents' premature deaths.[111] Furāt depicts her as a woman who has been going to

[107] Šam'ūn, *'Irāqī fī Bārīs*, pp. 256–263.

[108] On the Baath Party's attitude to Assyrians and other Iraqi Christian groups, see: Sallūm, *Al-Masīḥiyyūna fī Al-'Irāq al-ǧumhūrī*, pp. 294–304; Ḥabīb, *Masīḥiyyū Al-'Irāq*, pp. 175–190, 212–235.

[109] Šam'ūn, *'Irāqī fī Bārīs*, pp. 265–302.

[110] Ibidem, pp. 302–303.

[111] On the novel and its main character, see: Judith Kazantzis, *I'jaam – An Iraqi Rhapsody by Sinan Antoon. In the Heart of Fear and Absurdity*, "Banipal. Magazine of Modern Arab Literature" 29 (2007), Viewed 2 April 2018, <http://www.banipal.co.uk/book_reviews/15/ijaam-an-iraqi-rhapsody-by-sinan-antoon/>; Mahmoud Tawfik, *Sinan Antoon's "I'ajaam: An Iraqi Rapsody". A Literary Daring Deed*, "Qantara.de", Viewed 4 April 2018, <https://en.qantara.de/content/sinan-antoons-ijaam-an-iraqi-rhapsody-a-literary-daring-deed>; Friederike Pannewick, *Dancing*

church every day for fifty years. In her mind, all the major political events in the modern history of Iraq, such as the subsequent military coups, merge with her visits to various churches in Baghdad. The grandmother is critical towards Baathist rule and keeps telling her grandson that things are getting worse. She is angry each time she cannot watch Egyptian TV series, because they are interrupted by Saddam Husayn's long speeches. At the same time, the woman makes sure that his presidential portrait hangs next to images of Christian saints, in case of intrusion by security service members. She often debates their family origin with her grandson. She is proud of her Chaldean roots and the fact that Christians have lived in Iraq for thousands of years. She is dissatisfied when Furāt tries to convince her that the followers of the Chaldean Church are Arabs or Arabised people, and not a separate nationality, like the Assyrians or Armenians,[112] and that the sole element which testifies to their separateness is the language used during mass, and by members of her generation.[113]

Final Remarks

All the aforementioned stories of literary characters from Iraqi post-2003 novels can be discussed with reference to the experimental mode of the rhetoric of collective memory. Taking into account the narrative techniques typical of this mode, the following can be concluded. First of all, their stories seem so realistic and clearly connected to modern Iraq's socio-political circumstances that they resemble the life stories of real citizens. The authors of the works, including Sinān Anṭūn and 'Abd ar-Riḍā Ṣāliḥ Muḥammad, have said that they were inspired by interviews with witnesses of specific events, among other things. Moreover, they drew inspiration from their own lives and from those of their family members, who share certain personality traits and behaviours with the fictional heroes.[114]

Letters: The Art of Subversion in Sinān Anṭūn's Novel "I'jam", in: *Conflicting Narratives*, pp. 65–74; Zahraa Qasim Hasan Habeeb, "Writing Trauma in Iraq: Literary Representations of War and Oppression in the Fiction of Sinan Antoon" (Master Thesis, The Graduate College of Missouri State University, 2015), pp. 29–40, Viewed 7 May 2018, <https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3560&context=theses>; Adrianna Maśko, *"Piszcie bez strachu i wahania…" – odniesienia do propagandy i cenzury za rządów Partii Baas we współczesnej prozie irackiej*, in: *Miscellanea Arabica Posnaniensia I*, (ed.) Arzu A. Sadykhova and Filip A. Jakubowski, Wydawnictwo Rys, Poznań 2016, pp. 85–93.

[112] On the ethnic separateness of Assyrians and Armenians, see: Laura Robson, *Refugee Camps and the Spatialization of Assyrian Nationalism in Iraq*, in: *Modernity, Minority, and the Public Sphere: Jews and Christians in the Middle East*, (ed.) Sasha R. Goldstein-Sabbah and Heleen L. Murre-van den Berg, Brill, Leiden 2016, pp. 237–257, Viewed 6 May 2018, <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/books/b9789004323285_010>.

[113] Anṭūn, *I'ğām*, pp. 22, 32, 72, 73–74, 102–103.

[114] In one interview, Sinān Anṭūn describes his aunt as follows: "These catastrophic events in Iraq remind me of a real person I knew very well, my aunt Na'ima, who lived with us in Baghdad and was a second mother to me. She was a very devout Christian who went to church every morning. Her room was full of religious icons and resembled a shrine. She was born in 1915, when Iraq was in its embryonic stage as a nation-state. She died in 1996 during the economic embargo. Throughout Iraq's tumultuous history in the 20th century and the various regimes: the monarchy (1921–1958), the first republic (1958–1963), dictatorship, she went to church every morning. Iraq's

Secondly, some of the literary characters use colloquial language, i.e. the Iraqi dialect of Arabic, which is particularly evident in both novels by Sinān Anṭūn, whose protagonists speak in a manner characteristic of Iraqi Christians. In the fictional texts by In'ām Kağağī and Aḥmad Sa'dāwī, the reader deals with both colloquial Arabic (in dialogues) and its modern standard form (the narrator's voice). In contrast, 'Abd ar-Riḍā Ṣāliḥ Muḥammad's novel contains dialogues written in Modern Standard Arabic, since they are reported by the narrator/main protagonist (indirect speech). The same applies to the first part of the novel by Ṣamū'īl Šam'ūn, which tells the story of his emigration. But in the second part, devoted to his childhood, dialogues include words from both Modern Standard Arabic and the Iraqi dialect. In addition, some characters mentioned in this part of the work, especially Joey's mother, use a number of words from the Neo-Aramaic dialect spoken by Assyrians.[115]

Thirdly, in the novels under consideration, the main protagonists either speak directly, in the first-person narrative, when they utter words in their internal monologues and in dialogues with other characters, such as in the literary texts of Sinān Anṭūn and 'Abd ar-Riḍā Ṣāliḥ Muḥammad; or their thoughts are expressed indirectly, filtered through the omniscient narrator's voice, as in the works by In'ām Kağağī and Aḥmad Sa'dāwī.

Fourthly, these narratives allow the reader to view the characters' lives from a very close perspective. This is the perspective of ordinary and often marginalized individuals who are not objects of interest in "the great historical narrative". Although they are not real persons, whose authentic stories could become threads woven into the rich fabric of the Iraqi collective memory, the literary record of their fictive fates symbolizes the plight of actual Iraqi citizens, and thus "presents the relationship between memory and identity in their individual or collective dimension."[116] The symbolic dimension of these fictional characters was indicated by Sinān Anṭūn in one of his interviews. The author admits that after publishing *Ave Maria* in Arabic, he received many comments from Iraqi readers belonging to older generations. His protagonist, Yūsuf, reminded them of men in their families and those from their neighbourhoods, regardless of their religious and ethnic affiliations.[117] As Birgit Neumann writes,

> "The basic privilege of fictional texts is the ability of incorporating culturally diverse versions of memories into the relationship of mutual perspective-

history and its turning points were marked by the church she was attending that morning. There were occasional tensions, but they were minor. She was at home as an Iraqi Christian and was proud to be one. The Neo-Aramaic dialect she spoke alongside Arabic was derived from the language Jesus himself spoke. The services she attended every morning were held in Arabic and Aramaic. She would never have imagined a day when she, or anyone for that matter, would be forced to convert, or leave their homes and flee. She would have preferred to die before witnessing this tragedy." See: Sinan Antoon, *On Dead and Living Characters*, "Jadaliyya", 22 September 2014, Viewed 5 May 2018, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/31241/On-Dead-and-Living-Characters>.

[115] On the Neo-Aramaic language and its dialects, see: Maciej Tomal, *Nowoaramejski – język irackich chrześcijan i żydów*, in: *Niemuzułmańskie mniejszości Iraku*, pp. 107–137.

[116] Neumann, *Literatur, Erinnerung, Identität*, p. 164.

[117] *How Sinan Antoon Writes Iraq.*

> taking, the combination of memories and taboos, and the opportunity to test the significance of usually marginalized versions of memories in the culture of remembrance. Through the multi-perspectival diversification of the remembered world, novels are able to create a panorama of coexisting collective memories, and thus shared interpretations of the past become visible, but so do incompatible memories of the collective past."[118]

The panorama of coexisting collective memories emerges very clearly from the discussed novels. Each of the previously mentioned literary characters, who are most often major protagonists in these texts, has his or her own perception of the present and the past. Their views are sometimes combined with the perspectives of minor characters. In most of the novels, the reader can also observe that perceptions of the present and the past are shared, similar or incompatible, which becomes even more evident when one compares the perspectives of all the protagonists. Moreover, generational differences, which Sinān Anṭūn takes into consideration in *Ave Maria*, are of particular significance here. In one interview, the author states that the idea of describing the relationship between Mahā and Yūsuf emerged during conversations with family members in exile, and as a result of comments he received from many Christians of different generations. They made him realize the existence of discrepancies between their perceptions of the present and the past.[119] His literary heroine, Mahā, draws attention to this generation gap in her internal monologue on the Facebook group "Beautiful Iraq", whose members exchange pictures and songs from "better times". Their comments below the posts remind her of Yūsuf's image of "the beautiful past":

> "But the strange thing is that the past did not end and did not start at the same point for them. Among them, there are those who think that the coming of the Baathists [to power – A.M] in 1963 and the cruelty with which 'Abd al-Karīm Qāsim was murdered, was the end of happy times. There are those who consider Saddam's seizure of power in 1979 as the beginning of the end. And there are those who extend the blanket of the happy times up to 1991, because the period of the economic sanctions was the beginning of the end of Iraq. And there are others for whom these old good days end in 2003. Most of them miss the time of the monarchy and post pictures of the royal family on the Internet. They regard the military coup and the cruelty with which the royal family was killed as the beginning of evil times and a descent into the abyss. Each time I read their words expressing their nostalgic longing for the monarchy, I asked myself these questions, in secret: Weren't the Assyrians

[118] Neumann, *Literatur, Erinnerung, Identität*, p. 168.

[119] Ḥasan Ǧawān, *Sinān Anṭūn: Lastu riwā'iyyan masīḥiyyan... anā 'irāqī*, "Aṣ-Ṣabāḥ", 13 December 2016, Viewed 4 April 2018, <http://www.alsabaah.iq/ArticleShow.aspx?ID=127961>.

> slaughtered in that fortunate era of monarchy? Weren't the Iraqi Jews displaced and expelled overnight from their homes and from the country in which they lived? Wasn't poverty growing? And the eras which followed, were they not filled with slaughters and mass graves of the Kurds and Shia Muslims?
>
> The beginnings and the ends mix with each other. Everyone is crying over their happy Iraq. But I felt, looking at all that pictures and the comments attached to them, that I do not have a happy time that I could long for. My happy time has not been born yet. Maybe I will be happy there, far from Iraq. Away from the death, bombs, and all that hatred which have started flowing in [people's – A.M.] veins. We will leave the country to them, so that they can burn it, play with its corpse, and shed tears over it after it is too late."[120]

Mahā's view on the current circumstances in the country, in particular the plight of Iraqi Christians, is devoid of any hope for the future. The heroine's cruel reality, in which she struggles with various manifestations of discrimination, hatred and religion-inspired attacks, leaves her utterly disillusioned with her life in Baghdad. In her opinion, her homeland is already lost to its Christian citizens. She has to look for a happy time and a safe place somewhere else, just like other representatives of the younger generation of Iraqis – Hinda, Burrāq and Yāsamīn, Wardiyya's adult children in *Dispersion* – for whom emigration becomes the only way out. At the same time, Mahā does not have any sentimental attachment to her past, because she has never experienced a really happy period of her life. As a child, she survived bombings during the First Gulf War. She spent several days hiding with her family in shelters and endured the miseries caused by the economic embargo.[121]

The perspective of another member of the younger generation, Isḥāq, the hero in *Slaves of the Imaginary State*, differs from Mahā's view. Although he must leave Mosul after the ISIS invasion, he remains in Iraq and moves to the south of the country. He risks his own life to rescue his enslaved aunt, Maryam, whose trauma is so overwhelming that after being saved she can no longer stay in a state so dominated by terror. The protagonist, however, does not even consider the possibility that he too could emigrate. Moreover, Isḥāq looks at the past differently than Mahā. In his memories, there is no mention of his or his family's difficult life experiences stemming from the socio-political situation during Saddam Husayn's dictatorship. On the contrary, there are stories about the peaceful coexistence of his local community in Al-'Amāra, composed of members of various ethnic and religious groups.

As for representatives of the older generation, they are also aware of the ever-increasing material, physical, psychological and social destruction resulting from the

[120] Anṭūn, *Yā Maryam*, pp. 139–140.
[121] Ibidem, pp. 27–32, 116–118.

growing sectarian violence. The sole exception is Elishua in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, as she permanently loses her touch with the harsh realities of post-2003 Iraq. Yet, all the literary characters belonging to the older age group find it much harder to accept the idea of emigration, because they are emotionally attached to their memories of a better past. Hope that these good times could still return does not leave Yūsuf in Anṭūn's novel until his tragic death during a terrorist attack. Analogously, Wardiyya, the heroine in the novel by Kağağī, wishes to believe that there is a ray of hope for her; the hope that she could spend her last days in Iraq. The old lady says goodbye to her dreams of remaining in her beloved country only when she is unable to cope with the trauma she experiences after being exposed to the failed suicide bombing attempt. Eventually, she leaves her homeland, not only because of the traumatic event, but also because her closest relatives have already left. Similarly, in Sa'dāwī's novel, Elishua leaves both her home and memories behind to join her nearest and dearest abroad.

The past memories of the protagonists seem to indicate that the beginning and end of the "happy times" can be defined in various ways. The 1950–1960s were fortunate times in Yūsuf and Wardiyya's adult lives. They seem to end only in the 2000s, and are thus dominated by the long period of Baathist rule. Yet, it is worth noting that the era of Saddam Husayn's dictatorship in the 1980s is perceived negatively by the Chaldean grandmother of Furāt in *Diacritics*. For the hero of *An Iraqi in Paris*, his childhood spent in the immediate vicinity of Al-Ḥabbāniyya in the 1960s was the happiest period in his life. During this time he lived carelessly in a multicultural and multi-religious environment that ended in 1968 as a consequence of the repressive policies of the Baathist regime.

Nevertheless, most of the described perceptions of a happy past, except for Isḥāq's, do not exclude memories of various painful events in the modern history of Iraq. Yet these are not only those events that affected the lives of Iraqi Christians, such as the massacre of Assyrians in 1933; there have been others, such as the expulsion of Jews in the 1950s, as well as events that touched the lives of the entire Iraqi community, such as the participation of millions of Iraqis in the war with Iran in the 1980s, events which have led to imprisonment or loss of health or life for many.

Irrespective of the diverse views on the present and the past represented by literary characters belonging to different generations, all of them share the conviction that Christians are indigenous Iraqi people. In addition, many of them want to remember that peaceful coexistence with Muslims was once possible and that they were regarded as truly equal members of a pluralistic society in "the country of two rivers". This belief is one of the issues also raised in non-literary discussion of the deteriorating conditions for Iraqi Christians and other Iraqi ethnic and religious minorities. Among other issues that echo both in the novels, especially in *Ave Maria*, and in the words of Iraqi intellectuals, are accusations of collaboration with the American invaders directed against Iraqi Christians, and the vulnerability of Iraqi minorities to violence inflicted by various militias loyal to stronger groups in society.

Furthermore, with regard to the novels under consideration, it is hard not to agree with the main argument formulated by Ronen Zeidel in his article, where he states that

> "whereas Muslim intellectuals try to find a place for Christians as part of a more pluralist Iraqi national identity, to their detriment more and more Christians question both their alliance with the Arabs in Iraq and, even more so, their Arab identity. (...) Christian writers such as Sinan Antoon raise the question of whether this amalgam will ever be possible."[122]

The need to emphasize the peaceful coexistence of the Christian and Muslim communities seems to be particularly evident in 'Abd ar-Riḍā Ṣāliḥ Muḥammad's novel, which can be seen as an expression of solidarity with Iraqi Christians vulnerable to persecution by ISIS jihadists. As has already been mentioned, despite the fact that the story of Isḥāq and his family incorporates memories of their difficult past experiences, it does not shed light on the tragic events that profoundly marked the lives of all Iraqis in the country's modern history. This makes the author's vision of Iraqi society before 2003 somewhat idealized.

Analogously, in the novel by Muslim writer Aḥmad Sa'dāwī, Elishua seems to be a full-fledged and respected member of a pluralistic micro-community inhabiting one of the central neighbourhoods in Baghdad, which is tormented by sectarian violence. Without this Christian old lady, the social cross-section of Al-Battāwīn would not be complete. Moreover, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* carries important symbolic meaning because Elishua lives in a house that previously belonged to a Jewish family. This brings to mind the Iraqi intellectuals' debating the similarities between the fates of Jews expelled in the 1950s and those of Christians, who have been leaving en masse since the beginning of the new millennium.[123] What is more, the elderly woman can be considered a literary embodiment of all those Iraqi women of different backgrounds who lost their sons in the war with Iran.[124]

In turn, in the novels written by Christian authors, there arises both the issue of the ethnic and religious separateness of Iraqi Christians and reflections on their further existence in Iraq. The former is particularly addressed in the novel by Ṣamū'īl Šam'ūn, whose protagonist faces his otherness throughout his adult life in exile.[125] In his childhood in an Assyrian settlement near Al-Ḥabbāniyya, the hero gets used to living in a multi-ethnic and multi-faith community. His separate identity is only revealed to him by Kyriakos, who tells him about the massacre of Assyrians in 1933, in which both he and many other Assyrian inhabitants of the settlement lost loved ones. Their ethnic and religious distinctiveness is emphasized by Iraqi nationalists, who, after rising to power in the country, show their lack of trust in the "remnants of British colonialism", by destroying the villages and towns of now suspect minorities and resettling their members. As Zeidel puts it, "Joey is a product of various processes, and his construction of an Assyrian identity

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[122] Zeidel, *Iraqi Novel and the Christians of Iraq*, pp. 114–115.

[123] Cf. Ibidem, pp. 126–127; Zeidel, *On the Last Jews in Iraq*, p. 207. See also footnote 93.

[124] Ṣakabān, *Aš-Šaḫṣiyya al-masīḥiyya*, p. 79.

[125] See footnote 103.

is secular and ethnic (in the sense of being based on history, community, and language) but it is also based on the acceptance of others and on pluralism."[126]

In *Diacritics*, in discussions between the main character, Furāt, and his unnamed grandmother, there are echoes of the dispute over whether Iraqi Chaldeans are not only a separate religious group, but also a distinct ethnic group. Furāt takes the view represented by many Chaldeans and Iraqi intellectuals that it is difficult to recognize the followers of the Chaldean Church as a separate nationality, like the Assyrians and Armenians. His grandmother is a representative of those Chaldeans who do not allow themselves to think that after centuries of assimilation, they are as Arab as the Sunnis or Shiites inhabiting Iraq.[127] In Zeidel's opinion,

> "the grandmother in the novel is a marginal figure, used to show the sectarian background from which Furat emerges as an Iraqi patriot, the sacrifices he makes, and the antisectarian and Arab-Iraq content of his identity, which is also Antoon's. Antoon understands the grandmother, but all his being revolt against the narrow parochialism that she represents. *I'jam* praises Arab-Iraqi patriotism, defying Ba'thi repression, as the sole solution for young Christians in Iraq."[128]

As to questions about the future of Iraqi Christians, these are posed especially in *Dispersion* and *Ave Maria*. In both works, representatives of the older generation, Wardiyya and Yūsuf, who share certain memories, feel they are strongly rooted in Iraqi reality and its pluralistic society. Wardiyya, already living in exile, rejects the idea that she is a persecuted refugee, and prefers to think that she is a guest of the French president. The woman prays for her country, in which blood is being shed on a daily basis, but "the sky does not respond to her prayers."[129] Liqā' Mūsā as-Sa'īdī, an Iraqi researcher specializing in contemporary fiction by Iraqi women writers, points out that the literary character of Wardiyya resembles other exiled female Christian characters appearing in two other novels by In'ām Kağağī – *Sawāqī al-qulūb* (The Streams of Hearts)[130] and *Al-Ḥafīda al-amīrikiyya* (The American Granddaughter).[131] What links these women is

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[126] Cf. Zeidel, *Iraqi Novel and the Christians of Iraq*, p. 130.

[127] For detailed information on factors which have influenced contemporary Chaldean collective identity discourses, particularly among Chaldeans living in the United States; as well as on representations of Chaldean identity in English-language works of fiction written by US-based Chaldean authors, see: Yasmeen S. Hanoosh, "The Politics of Minority. Chaldeans between Iraq and America" (PhD Thesis, The University of Michigan, 2008), Viewed 7 July 2018, <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/61663/yhanoosh_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

[128] Zeidel, *Iraqi Novel and the Christians of Iraq*, p. 133.

[129] Kağağī, *Ṭaššārī*, p. 251.

[130] In'ām Kağağī, *Sawāqī al-qulūb*, Al-Mu'ssasa al-'Arabiyya li-an-Našr, 'Ammān-Bayrūt 2005. A Fragment of the novel in English translation by Muhayman Jamil can be found in: Inaam Kachachi, *Habits of the Heart*, "International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies" 3/3 (2009), pp. 287–306.

[131] In'ām Kāğağī, *Al-Ḥafīda al-amīrikiyya*, 2 edition, Al-Ğadīd, Bayrūt 2009. See the English translation of the novel by Nariman Youssef: Inaam Kachachi, *The American Granddaughter*, Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation

their strong sense of attachment to Iraqi land, which they cannot erase in their new French homeland. Moreover, the main idea of the three fictional works by Kağağī is, according to As-Sa'īdī, to show the relations connecting Iraqis from various social and religious groups. These relations form a kind of patriotism that is hard to get rid of.[132] In interviews, Kağağī stresses that her protagonists do not suffer from an identity crisis in exile, since "they are one of [the country's] most ancient indigenous peoples and an authentic part of its social fabric."[133]

As for Yūsuf, he seems to be even more nostalgic than Wardiyya. Ronen Zeidel claims that he is "a personification of Iraqi nationalism". The Israeli researcher, who analysed the relationship between Yūsuf and his niece Mahā, notes that the latter is "a greatly modified version of the grandmother in *I'jam*," but unlike the old woman, she "is not a supporter of the separate ethnicity of the Chaldeans or a traditionalist."[134] Moreover, Zeidel reads Yūsuf's death as Anṭūn's symbolic representation of the fact that an optimistic outlook on the current coexistence of Iraqi Christians and Muslims is becoming harder to maintain. Mahā's being left alive indicates that pessimistic reflections on the further existence of Christianity in the country have begun to prevail.[135] In the aforementioned interview, which was published a few years after the publication of *Ave Maria*, when ISIS militants terrorized Iraqi Christians in Mosul and its vicinity, Sinān Anṭūn spoke in a similar vein: "Yusif lies in a cemetery outside Baghdad, but what of Maha? Did she leave Iraq and end up, like millions of Iraqis, in our vast diaspora? Or is she still in Iraq? What of her family? Are they still in Ainkawa in Iraqi Kurdistan or did they immigrate? I don't know and never will."[136] He also says:

> "In a central argument in the novel, Maha tells Yusif that she fears Christians will end up in museums, a relic of the past, and of an interrupted existence. Novelists might feel euphoric if what their characters say in a novel comes true. In my case, however, I feel quite sad. I had hoped that what Maha said in that argument, in a moment of pain and anger, would never come true. History, however, thinks otherwise."[137]

Publishing, Doha 2010. On the novel, see e.g.: Fadwa K. Abdel Rahman, *Writing the Self / Writing the Other in Thomas Keneally's "The Tyrant's Novel" and Inaam Kachachi's "The American Granddaughter"*, "Postcolonial Text" 7/3 (2012), pp. 1–19, Viewed 15 March 2018, <http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/1368/1385>.

[132] Liqā' Mūsā as-Sa'īdī, *Tağalliyātuhunna: Bibliūğrāfiyā ar-riwāya an-nisawiyya al-'irāqiyya ma'a dirāsa fī al-maḍāmīn wa-al-aškāl al-fanniyya (1953–2016)*, Al-Mu'ssasa al-'Arabiyya li-ad-Dirāsāt wa-an-Našr, Bayrūt 2016, pp. 39–43.

[133] Al-Mustafa Najjar, *Inaam Kachachi: 'We Are Experiencing a True Upsurge in Iraqi Fiction'*, "ArabLit Quarterly", 18 April 2014, Viewed 3 March 2018, <https://arablit.org/2014/04/18/inaam-kachachi-we-are-experiencing-a-true-upsurge-in-iraqi-fiction/>.

[134] Zeidel, *Iraqi Novel and the Christians of Iraq*, p. 134.

[135] Ibidem.

[136] Antoon, *On Dead and Living Characters*.

[137] Ibidem.

At the same time, despite concerns about the fate of Iraqi Christians expressed both in his interviews and literary texts, Anṭūn emphasizes that the latter should be read primarily as novels about Iraq. Even if these works focus more on one of the components of Iraqi society, they should be seen from the wider perspective of the whole of Iraqi society, which constitutes a pluralistic entity.[138]

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