

The Stolen Women of Kurdistan

Was There a Kurdish Part in It?

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Last December, a letter was smuggled out of Abu Ghraib prison. It was signed by an Arab woman. It was addressed to her loved ones as well as “all the honest and honorable brothers in Al-Ramadi, Al-Khladia and Al-Falluja.” The Jews, this woman wrote, are now running the prison complex. Referring to the pencil in her hand, she said, it “is standstill and unable to express.” But when she finally moved it, what came out of it was horror in its most concentrated form. She had been subjected to “hunger,” “thirst,” “sleeplessness,” “nudity,” “heavy-handed beating,” and “mental suffering.” She must have had a cell with a view of the local highway for she added, when your trucks pass by, “transporting building material,” I cannot help but conclude that you “have sold” your sister for money. Turning her attention to the clerics, she scornfully berated them for their slackness, “Have you forgotten the divine message [of] our Prophet Muhammad?” She went on, is it possible that you have come under the influence of the “Jewish” dinars? And the ultimate of guilt trips, “You are responsible before God for our destiny.”

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If you could put aside her malicious, malignant and malevolent bigotry, which casts a long shadow on her credibility, the reported scandal of the Abu Ghraib prison by Seymour Hersh in the “New Yorker” pretty much confirmed the tale of this hapless woman. What the expose didn’t reveal, but the remaining part of her letter did, goes beyond what has been reported in the mainstream media, and if it ever finds some traction, we will be staring at the makings of an Olympic size quagmire in Iraq. For the woman alleged, “We are suffering a lot especially when we see Jews drinking alcohol and then raping us like wild animals.” And, “I do not want to say bye, but before saying goodbye, I would like to advise you to be afraid of God, [for] our wombs are carrying the bastards of the sons of bitches.” And, “Before saying goodbye, I would like to ask the honorable people if you have weapons please kill us, and kill all of them [too], inside the prison.” And then the clincher, “if this message falls in the hands of clerics who are afraid of Almighty God, it is their duty to read it to people from their pulpits.”

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According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, there were 30 women at Abu Ghraib prison complex when the news of the smuggled letter began making the rounds in Baghdad. By the time Sgt. Joseph Darby of Pennsylvania blew the whistle on his fellow soldiers-turned-into-torturers, all but two were released. The woman who had signed the letter, as “your sister,” and “Noor,” was one of them. Because an awful stigma is attached to females who are imprisoned in the Middle East, she has gone missing. Huda Shaker, who reports for Amnesty International from Baghdad, thinks

that she may be dead as well. But her letter, apparently, is not. It has become the most favored recruiting device of the Jihadists.

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You are probably wondering what does this letter of an Arab woman have to do with a conference dedicated to the elucidation of things Kurdish or related to Kurdistan? The short answer is a lot. The long one, unfortunately, cannot be delivered in the brief address that is expected of me at this gathering. Someone, someday, will have to do a dissertation to really understand what happened to thousands upon thousands of our own Kurdish "Noors" who were taken alive, never to be seen again, in the course of eight Anfal campaigns when Saddam Hussein was calling the shots. This afternoon, if I manage to share with you some of their stories, and say a few things about our own role, as Kurdish leaders, in their misfortunes and link these things with the "up-to-date" phrase, nation building, then, at least, I can say that I tried to uphold my end of the agreement with Frederick Cloyd, the organizer of this conference, a good friend of our people, and a sincere voice of reason, tolerance, and genuine goodness in America and the world.

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That for every Arab woman who was imprisoned in Abu Ghraib, there were, at least, one thousand Kurdish women who were summarily executed in the Arab desert, and while the abuse at Abu Ghraib has rightfully become a cause célèbre all over the world, the treatment that the Kurdish genocide has received, both in the past as well as today, is nothing less than a disgrace, is hardly worth mentioning here. That Noor's letter is compelling, and enough of a reason, even without her venomous insinuation that all Americans are Jews, for the likes of the Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld to step down, yet the plight of Kurdish women who were branded as "the spoils of war" or "hallal" for the soldiers of a standing government in the Middle East without a denunciation from either the Muslim or the Christian world will certainly go down as one of the most shameful chapters of our times. Calvin Trillin of the "Nation" must have had this incongruity in mind when he penned his immortal lines, "Though you may think life is absurd, be thankful that you are not a Kurd."

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Others may be thankful that they are not Kurds, but what are we supposed to do with ourselves whose lot is that of Kurds? When the Jews of Europe faced a similar predicament in the 1930s, they quickly called themselves, German, French, English, Danish, Italian, Greek, and Russian to avoid the Nazi dragnet. I have never met an Arab who has said that he is a Kurd, but thousands of Kurds have to call themselves the first to stay alive. Why is that? Born in a time of challenges to a challenged people, can we remain indifferent to those who have legalized the extirpation of the Kurds? The Jihadists are trying hard to lift the Muslim world to its feet to give chase to the most powerful nation in the world through the use of letters like that of Noor. Can we, whose women were not only licensed to be violated, but also murdered as if they were dogs with rabies, more on this later, sit still and sing, "what will be, will be?" To be sure, as far as I know, there is no surviving letter of a Kurdish "Noor." But there are stories: untold, unheard, and unbelievable in the polite circles, and yet a source of pride and roaring laughter among those who still pass as our masters. Do you want examples? Two years ago, a Kurdish mullah visited Mecca, Saudi Arabia, to fulfill one of the pillars of Islam. There, he befriended a Saudi pilgrim who invited him to his apartment for dinner with his Kurdish wife. As tea was being served, he found out that

the Kurdish woman was a survivor of Anfal. And how she made it to Saudi Arabia became the subject of the conversation for the rest of the long night.

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The story of this Kurdish woman like all horror stories in our dysfunctional world has a beginning. In her case, it started in the spring of 1988. Captured alive, declared "hallal," she was seen fit for death in a ditch on the Saudi border in southern Iraq. If you are not familiar with the way Saddam Hussein got rid of the Kurds, don't just take my word for it; check out, "Genocide in Iraq," a frightening report by the Human Rights Watch. To say that the Baathists had turned the heinous task into an elaborate celebration is an understatement. The solitude of the desert was their favored spot. The dusk of the day was their preferred time. Buses turned into ambulances filled with Kurds of the same sex, the killers loved calling them, "goats," came to them from Iraqi Kurdistan. The edge of an open ditch served as an altar for the sacrifice. A hail of bullets sent the reeling Kurds down into what passed as their resting place. No one shed tears over them. Roaring bulldozers lightly buried the sacrificial lambs, or should I say, goats? Wild dogs and birds of prey often feasted over the abandoned harvest. It is a miracle that this Kurdish woman survived. I guess, we might say that she had her own guardian angel watching over her. Running away from the scene of mayhem, she had thrown herself on the mercy of strangers in the first human settlement. In their home, she had found not only refuge, but also apparently a husband.

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Last spring, the Kurdish world was rocked with the discovery of a classified document in Baghdad that shed some additional light on the plight of the Anfal women. This particular one, dated December 10, 1989, was marked, "secret," and listed the names of eighteen Kurdish females who were sent to Egypt as prostitutes. Their names are real; their real ages varied from 13 to 30; and their surviving relatives have stepped forward, clamoring for the whereabouts of their missing kin. To date, no one in the Arab world has heard of them. So far, no one has stood up to blow a whistle on the evildoers, like Sgt. Joseph Darby, to make the Arab Iraq or Egypt proud. The Kurds, on the other hand, are still holding on to the bleak hope that their daughters will, one-day, come home.

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There is, apparently, a flip side to this story as well. In her new book, "A Thousand Sighs, A Thousand Revolts: Journeys in Kurdistan," Christiane Bird relates the story of another group of prostitutes, this time from Egypt, who were posted in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurds, the author writes, contended that Saddam Hussein was up to no good with his new venture -- introducing prostitution to a population that had no tradition of it -- and wanted to get rid of these unwanted "guests." The Kurdish Peshmerga forces attacked their dwelling and blew it into pieces together with them. No one, to date, to my knowledge, has suggested a direct link between the Egyptian women who met violent ends in Iraqi Kurdistan and the Kurdish women who were sent there, apparently, as replacements. But I suspect there is one. The Kurds were kidding themselves if they thought they could outmaneuver the Butcher of Baghdad. In the end, our women paid the ultimate price, through our own follies, in the brothels of Egypt or as fourth, fifth and who knows maybe even sixth wives of Arab sheiks.

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By way of bringing a closure to my talk, I thought I should also say a few words about nation building relative to what I have shared with you so far. Of the eighteen women

that were sent to Egypt, three were related. They were a mother and her two daughters. They were 29, 14 and 13 on the last day of their so-called free lives. Imagine for a second, the mother is alive and well in Egypt. Imagine as well, she has decided to write a letter of her own to the people of Kurdistan. What could she write in it? If she asked you for help, whispering in your ear that she did not know how to write, how would you handle it? If confronted with the same request, like you, I could not, in good conscience, turn my back to her. Here is, what I think, she would have had me write in her brief letter.

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“To the Enslaved and Dishonored People of Kurdistan: I have been waiting for this moment for sixteen years now. I write not as a proud daughter but a fallen one. I am filled with pain, not just that of a mother gone mad over the loss of her two children, but also of the existential threat that is facing you on the mountains of Kurdistan. In these extraordinarily difficult times, I watch with horror how you are you are put to death with ninnies like, “we are all Muslims,” or “We are all brothers,” or “my wife is from Sirt,” or, my favorite, “my mother is Kurdish.” Let me try, one of my own, to torture your hearings and torment your minds with the hope that it might awaken you from your deep deep deep sleep. About 2800 years ago, there was a Greek king, Lycurgus of Sparta, who used to force his slaves to get drunk to teach his subjects a lesson in temperance. That farsighted Greek king thought that if his people saw the foolish acts of drunken slaves, they would practice abstinence. Personally, I see no difference between forced drunkenness, which leads to foolishness and forced slavery, which, in my case, led to forced prostitution. The challenge facing us is how to free ourselves without participating in the evil acts of slavery. Another way of tackling this very question is to consider how James Madison saw it in his own days 2600 years later. He said, “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance.” Since we are forced to do what we don’t want to do, it means we are ignorant. We should stop complaining and start addressing our shortcomings. I have a modest proposal by way of a remedy. Please bar money from the land of our fathers. I mean, buy books, and don’t forget to read them too, with what you have of it to liberate the Kurds and Kurdistan and why not, perhaps even the Middle East. In case you don’t know it, with the beheadings and more dangerous still the banning of the letters of the alphabet in Turkey, our foes have turned not just our lands, but the cradle of western civilization as well, into one of the most frightening places on the face of the earth. Oh, one other thing, don’t expect me to come home anytime soon. I will only do so when Kurdistan is free and the women, even if they practice voluntary prostitution, are safe. Your daughter, Hasiba Ahmed.”