

Burying Tariq Aziz

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At the end of May 2015, I boarded a plane from London bound for Amman. I had just spent a couple of weeks in the United Kingdom at my Master's alma mater with colleagues, preparing to go to the field while getting over the Tucson to London jet lag. By the end of two weeks in the U.K., I was ready to get on the ground in Jordan and start my summer of fieldwork. It seemed like the plane had barely hit the tarmac before I found myself being hurried into a car by the cousin of a colleague, along with at least one person that I didn't know at all, and soon we were all barreling north from the capital towards Jerash.

I was going to Jerash in order to try to conduct pilot interviews with Palestinian refugees living in what is known locally as "Gaza Camp," a United Nations refugee camp established after the Six Day War of 1967 to house refugees fleeing fighting in the Gaza Strip. As I've discussed elsewhere (Cotter 2016), the name of the camp is somewhat misleading, given that the refugees in question are almost uniformly not from Gaza but had been living in Gaza as refugees following the forced migration of Palestinians out of historic Palestine in 1948. Many of Gaza Camp's residents are thus doubly refugees. They represent not only the enduring legacy of the Palestinian refugee crisis, which long stood as the largest refugee community in the world,¹ but reflect the all-too-common and incredibly complex sociopolitical and demographic reality that the Palestinian community faces nearly seven decades after the creation of the state of Israel.

Weaved into this broader summer project of attempting to spend time with members of this community to better

1 As a result of the Syrian Civil War, the Syrian refugee crisis has now surpassed the Palestinian refugee community in terms of its size.

understand their lives, their history, and for me, as a linguistic anthropologist, their language, were a number of experiences that stick out in my mind as defining what that field experience was like and how I reflect on it two years after the fact. One of these experiences frames what I present below and represents an amalgamation of my field notes from the summer of 2015, experiences culled from my social media feeds and my admittedly imperfect memories about the day and event in question.

I woke up on June 13th to a phone call, which I admittedly wanted to ignore. The call was from Ahmad,² a friend and local PhD student who had been helping me conduct my research near Jerash. For much of my time in Jordan in 2015, I had been unbelievably depressed. In speaking with colleagues, depression seems to be a fairly common fixture of at least some portion of many field experiences, and it's very much a core experience for me anytime I go to the field. As a result, I had been sleeping until early afternoon most days of the week and if I didn't have anything planned, my days were often spent re-watching bootleg copies of *Tremors*³ over and over on my laptop or writing at the plastic table in the middle of my studio apartment.

Trying to force myself to wake up as I answered my phone, Ahmad asked me if I was interested in hanging out but said that he wanted to do something else aside from doing interviews. I put aside both my depression and my frantic desire to do as many interviews as possible before I had to leave the field at the end of the summer and agreed to take a day off to do something relaxing. At least, I assumed it would be relaxing when Ahmad initially asked me to spend the afternoon with him.

When I got in his SUV outside of my tiny apartment that sat above a gas station along the road to Amman, Ahmad

2 A pseudonym

3 I'm almost ashamed to admit, but I watched this over twenty times that summer. I counted. Depression manifests in interesting ways.

asked me if I wanted to go to a funeral. I hadn't been in Jordan long, but in the short time I had been there that summer I already found myself at a funeral earlier that week, that one for a relative of a friend of a friend. That earlier funeral left me somewhat uneasy given that I didn't know the deceased, and my status as a foreigner certainly made me stick out like a sore thumb among a large group of mourners. Add to that the fact that in my usual, non-fieldwork life, I make a point to avoid funerals as much as possible, even when they're for people that I know.

So, I assumed that Ahmad was suggesting that we go to the funeral for another friend of a friend or potentially a family member. As I queried Ahmad about who this person was, I quickly realized that he was asking me to attend something completely different. He wanted us to go to the funeral for Tariq Aziz, former Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq and close personal advisor to Saddam Hussein.

The Eight of Spades

I didn't really feel as if I was in much of a position to say no. However, I did raise the question of how a heavily tattooed American researcher would be received at the funeral for a top Ba'ath Party official. I had certainly heard of Aziz, but my only real recollection of who he was or his role in Saddam's government stemmed from the Second Iraq War, which I had watched transpire on television and in the newspaper while I was in high school. In particular, I recalled George W. Bush's statement about Aziz, declaring that he was one of the people in Saddam's government that was shielding the location of Iraq's purported weapons of mass destruction.⁴ Somewhat hesitantly, but also out of an admitted curiosity, I agreed, and Ahmad sped out of the parking lot of my apartment building.

As we headed towards Amman and from there on to Madaba, the site of Aziz's final resting place, I dug out my phone to look up who he really was and his role in the regime

⁴ http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2003-05-03-bush_x.htm

that my government had so vehemently despised. Aziz served as Saddam Hussein's Foreign Minister (1983-1991) and Deputy Prime Minister (1979-2003) and was an important member of Saddam's inner circle. During the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, Aziz acted as the face of the regime, justifying their actions within the international community. During the Second Iraq War, Aziz was ranked 43 out of 55 on the United States' list of most wanted Iraqi officials.⁵ On the now infamous decks of playing cards that were handed out to American forces in Iraq, Aziz was the eight of spades.

Aziz was a unique figure within Saddam's regime, in part due to his ethnic and religious background. Born in the northern Iraqi city of Tel Keppe, Aziz was Chaldean Catholic, and one of the only Christians in Saddam's inner circle. He surrendered to American forces in April 2003 and was subsequently imprisoned. The Iraqi government charged Aziz with the deaths of 42 merchants executed by the regime, as well as planning the forced displacement of Kurds from northern Iraq, although in both cases the extent of his involvement in those crimes was heavily disputed.^{6,7} He was sentenced to death by the Iraqi government; however, his execution order was never signed. Aziz suffered a stroke in 2010 and ultimately passed away in 2015 in a hospital in Nasiriyah at the age of 79. He was to be buried in Jordan, where his son and sisters live.

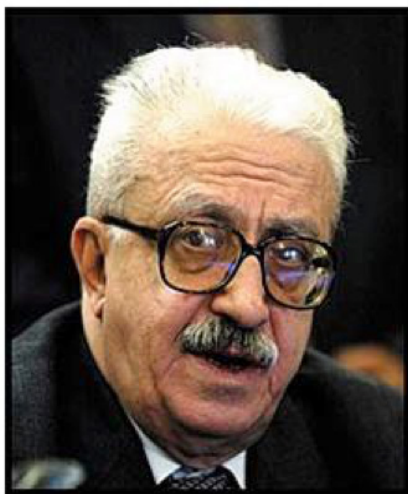
A Ba'ath Party funeral

As we arrived at the church just outside of Madaba, forty minutes south of Amman, we ran into Ahmad's friends who had also decided to pay their respects and spend their afternoon attending the funeral of this key Ba'ath Party player. Standing outside of the entrance, I took note of the Bedouins whose tents and land seemed to surround the grounds of the church. The church seemed oddly placed to me, although it had clearly been there for longer than I can really imagine.

5 <http://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=79511&page=1>

6 <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/03/11/iraq.main/index.html>

7 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11631462>



TARIQ AZIZ
Deputy Prime Minister
RCC member



Figure 1. Tariq Aziz playing card. (photo from Christian Science Monitor.)¹

¹ http://images.csmonitor.com/csmarchives/2010/10/1025-tariq-aziz-VERT.jpg?alias=standard_900x600



Figure 2. Land surrounding the church (photo by the author)

I initially didn't bother, but after thirty to forty-five minutes of waiting under a tent to shield us from the blistering summer sun, I inquired as to when the funeral was actually going to take place. That morning, a larger funeral had been held for Aziz at the St. Mary of Nazareth Church in Amman before his body was to eventually be transported to Madaba for his final burial and service that afternoon. As I looked around at the other faces sitting under the tent, I saw what I would eventually be told were family members, Jordanian politicians, and other key members of the Ba'ath Party. There were also a number of people with no connection whatsoever to Aziz.

They were people like us, who were either curious or simply wanted to pay their respects. We waited, as a long stream of cars continued to pull up, with my friends pointing out prominent people as they made their way into the courtyard of the church. Party members embraced each other, and along with colleagues and friends paid their respects to Aziz's family. The crowd grew gradually as we all waited for his body to complete its trip from Amman.

After having had enough of the cheap white plastic chairs that filled the area under the tent in the church courtyard, I stood up from my seat, wandering and looking out over the sea of mausoleums and graves surrounding the church. It wasn't lost on me that I was one of only a few foreigners there, aside from two foreign photojournalists. I was certainly the only American in attendance, which I came to feel quite acutely when chants sprung up denouncing the American invasion of Iraq that ultimately led to Aziz's capture and imprisonment, America's seemingly unwavering support of the Israeli government, and the tumultuous relationship between Iraq and Iran.



Figure 3. Church grounds (photo by the author)

Even though I shared the general sentiment of much of the rhetoric denouncing America's role in upending life in Iraq in 2003, being the only American at a Ba'ath Party funeral was a unique and admittedly uncomfortable experience.

Despite my discomfort, my identity as an American either didn't wear as plainly on my sleeve as I assumed it did, or, perhaps more likely, no one at the funeral really cared. There were simply far more important things going on that day. We sat in the courtyard, making the polite kinds of conversation with those around us that seem emblematic of a funeral service. As the afternoon dragged on, the sound of bagpipes and chanting slowly grew from the direction of the road leading to the church. Aziz's funeral procession had finally arrived in Madaba.

I stood, looking out towards the road. His casket was flanked on either side with Ba'ath Party supporters carrying the Iraqi flag, along with large framed photos of Aziz and the late Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein. His body moved slowly up the road with the chants growing louder and more pronounced, taking what seemed like an eternity before it even approached the walls of the church grounds. Journalists moved with the procession, snapping photos of Aziz's casket and his supporters. When the procession made its way into the church courtyard, everyone was standing. I noticed the aging politicians and party members wiping the sweat from their brows as others jockeyed for a good spot from which to photograph or film the casket as it moved through the courtyard. I found myself doing the same thing, pulling out my cell phone to photograph and film the procession as it moved. As I looked around, beyond the journalists covering the funeral both from the ground and from the rooftops of the church buildings, we were all documenting it on some level. Videos and photographs of the event were rapidly making their way onto the Facebook and Instagram accounts of the people who were there, including my own.

In retrospect it's unsettling to me, having been enculturated into treating funerals as decidedly somber events that I would never think of putting on social media. But looking back

at my Instagram feed, in the moment, I obviously couldn't help myself and neither could anyone else. Maybe we were all motivated because of who it was, his importance to the Ba'ath Party, to Arab nationalism, his status as a prominent Christian, or his legacy of anti-imperialist views. Or maybe we all just wanted to show that we were there. Thinking about my own motivation, I suspect the latter.

The procession eventually made its way into the maze of mausoleums and gravesites that surrounded the church itself. Most of the people in the courtyard didn't follow the body, and the sound from the bagpipes and the chants faded away. The church courtyard seemed to lull back into a dull hum of conversation. People were crying. The politicians and party members shook hands, embracing each other before they began to move towards their cars. It was over, and Aziz had been laid to rest. I wondered aloud to my friends what would happen to the oversized photos of Aziz and Saddam that had been carried with the procession. At the time they struck me as gaudy and cumbersome, but now in retrospect they almost remind me in some ways of the photo memorials that one might see at a Christian funeral in a place like the United States, albeit with notable political overtones. My friends told me they would most likely be left at the site of his grave, and I'm now wondering two years later if they're still there.

Conclusion

Occasionally, I find myself thinking back to that day. I recall telling a Jordanian colleague that I had attended the funeral and she told me that, in her opinion, it was good that I had. Aziz was a long-standing figure. He played a key role in events that defined the face of the modern Middle East and stood beside one of the region's most well known and polarizing political leaders.

Looking back at my notes, I see nothing on the pages that reflect any political or emotional reaction to being there. I grew up with the War on Terror as a political backdrop to my adult life and although Aziz was a target of my govern-

ment's metaphorical war, I found myself ambivalent about it from its beginnings. That ambivalence is compounded by the point raised by scholars like Talal Asad (2007, 13) in noting that not only did my government and its allies provide Saddam's regime with intelligence and weapons, but that we also destroyed it for our own reasons, which ultimately had little to do with the atrocities that the regime carried out.

When I reflect on that funeral, with two years of distance, I'm struck by the enduring inequalities that are inherent to the ways in which liberal democracies like the one I call home conceptualize political violence or "terror." Asad (2007, 2-3) argued that terrorism and its manifestations, despite being cast as non-modern or non-liberal, are ultimately part of liberal subjectivity. As I entered college during the Second Iraq War, even with my frustration surrounding my government's actions, the framing of the war cast figures like Aziz as antithetical to who "we" were as Americans. Maybe that's what drove me to take interest in attending his funeral, that despite my own feelings about what my government has done and continues to do in the Middle East, Aziz encapsulated a lingering representation in my mind of what I had been told I was supposed to stand against.

References

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