



THE MIDDLE EAST THAT NO ONE KNOWS

*In the Shadow of Imam Hussein:
The Karbala Film Festival 2016*

The film festival in Karbala was held for the second year by Karbala Channel and the Imam Hussein Mosque in Karbala. With one hundred invited guests, forty-two different films were shown from a range of countries including: Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Zambia and Sweden. The intention was to show that a country as war ridden as Iraq can use culture as a weapon against ISIS. Through the ubiquitous image of Imam Hussein, his fight and martyrdom at Karbala was stressed. The notion of Hussein as a champion of human rights, during the Karbala battle, was similarly transplanted to contemporary events through the use of these images. There was also a strong nationalistic spirit at the festival. Iraq was presented as a proud nation that will soon be rid of its enemies; as a result, there were many films showing young men fighting and dying for their country.

“We are growing slowly and we want it that way” says Hassanein Hasan, speaking about the choice of location for the festival. As visitors, filmmakers and the press, we attended film screenings at a special camp built for visitors to Imam Hussein’s shrine. We were all lodged in a collection of small suites with the feel of an all-inclusive hotel: gardens, spring water and new two-story houses with plenty of staff to support us. There is a small mosque and a pressroom with Wi-Fi. Travel from the accommodation is equally well organized. When we wanted to get into Karbala there was a car and driver at our disposal who helped us navigate through all the checkpoints. However, our temporary home was gated and heavily guarded. Our enclosed area was a strong contrast to the dangerous images depicted in the films or the violent reality of the car bombs that exploded in Basra and Nasriyya during our stay.

The films shown at Karbala Film Festival varied in quality. The submissions were selected by the religiously conservative Karbala Channel. Thus, religion as a vital tool in the war against ISIS, as well as the bravery of the Hashd Al Shabi - the Shia militia, were dominant themes in a majority of the films. The opening film celebrated the Shia militia as they cared for the abandoned women and children of ISIS militants. Shortly thereafter, another film depicted a martyr’s family grieving his death. As the film progressed, I slowly came to realize that the weeping man beside me was the martyr’s father who was invited center-stage to comment on the film. In most of the screenings, religion and the nation so closely connected - almost inseparable.

The diversity in the screenings should be not overlooked, however. Yavuz Pullukcu, a young Turkish producer depicted the life of the water Bedouins in the south of Iraq and the impact a dam built in Turkey had on them. Another film by the Zambian director Rongano Neony, “Listen,” is about a women sitting in a police station in Denmark seeking refugee from her violent husband. She

finds herself in a situation where the interpreter, misinterprets the conversation and wrongly tells the victim that the police urges her to go back to her husband. In reality, the policeman was trying to aid the victim and get a statement against her husband. The film “Warm Nights,” by Ayman Al-Shatry, tells the story of a family on a ‘normal night’ as bombs rain over Baghdad on the eve of the American invasion. The son in the family studies for a history exam – rattling off facts on the Mongolian invasion of Baghdad: history repeats itself. The father drinks his tea and mutters about how his wife is unable to come home from her visit due to the heavy fighting in the street. The house trembles from the attacks but family life continues. One of the most emphatic remarks from that special night was



that the weather was extremely warm for the season. The last film I want to highlight was “The Key” by Ameen Ihsaan, a 23-year-old producer from Baghdad. It is a high speed, black and white story about an artist that returns to Baghdad after 10 years in exile to find out that only a wall remains in place of his house. “Iraq is full of walls, mental and real walls, and it will take generations to tear them down,” explained Ihsan.

The Karbala Film Festival is not solely about films. International guests were guided on several trips to the shrines of Imam Hussein and Abbas in Karbala. Mosques that were spacious and glittering from the gold, mosaic and crystal crowns were crowded with people. We also visited the Imam Ali shrine in Nadjaf which was equally extravagant - a deep contrast to the poor surroundings. The mosques seemed tremendously rich while the surrounding people seemed tremendously poor. The mosque in Karbala was building its facilities to an extent worthy of a palace in “A Thousand and One Arabian Nights.” Meanwhile the people in the surrounding area seemed to struggle with manpowered concrete machines, building their houses from rough stones while their youngest sons are sent off to fight ISIS in the north of Iraq - many of them returning in coffins that are later laid in the mosques.

The reality of war became poignant when I met a group of young Hashd Al- Shabi and their General Rezan who were visiting the festival before heading to Tikrit to join the fighting. The new recruits seemed were very young. I spoke with a 21-year-old man, married with a one-year old child. “I do this for the country,” he said. His wife was terrified but supported him. “We are also fighting for your safety in the West” General Rezan told me in response to the terror attacks in Paris and Brussels. I could not help but think about the bizarre situation between the privileged West and the wounded Middle East. Young men being forced to walk into battle, while the West closes its borders to people fleeing from this Hell.

Text and photos by Marie Hallberg