

The assassination of a leading Iraqi intellectual

- Kamel Shiaa Abdullah* who has been killed in Baghdad in a carefully planned assassination on ۲۳rd August, was a leading Iraqi intellectual. His ideas and political influence were the source of enormous encouragement to those committed to a secular and left politics in Iraq both during his years of exile and since his return to his country in October ۲۰۰۳. As an intellectual, Kamel had always been committed to a politics that combined realism with utopianism; but the translation of these principles into the maelstrom of Iraqi politics on a daily basis involved courage, selfless dedication and a clear and heroic sense of the personal risk at stake.

Kamel was born in Baghdad on ۱st July ۱۹۵۴, the second son of a large working-class Baghdadi family. Growing up during the ۱۹۶۰s he, like many others of his generation, profited from the educational advantages of the period and the comparative lack of political repression under the Baath before Saddam Hussein came to full power. While studying at the High Institute of Teachers at the University of Baghdad (where he trained as an English teacher from ۱۹۷۱-۳) Kamel developed his life-long love of English literature, which he supplemented with hours spent in British Council Library in Al Wazyria, Baghdad. During this time he became deeply committed to left politics, sympathising with the Iraqi Communist Party, which had a large enough following to offer an alternative to Baath domination. His first important essay “Science, Technology and Society”, signed only as K.Sh, emerged out of this political engagement; greatly admired for its innovative ideas and stylistic elegance, it established his significance among his contemporaries on the left.

During the campaign to bring education under the direct influence of the Baath, Kamel refused to join the Party, and like many others, was forced to escape from Iraq, leaving on the ۴th of February ۱۹۷۹. After a short period in Algeria, where he taught English, and in Italy, where he published an English, Italian, Arabic dictionary for travellers, Kamel settled in Belgium in ۱۹۸۳. He took an M.A in Philosophy at the Catholic University de Leuven and his thesis, “Utopia as a Critique” gained him a triple “A” with distinction. During these years of exile he expanded in interests into a wide range of subjects: modern European philosophy, contemporary Arabic and European literature and the arts, (including photography, music and films), also becoming fluent in four European languages. He wrote extensively on a variety of subjects: in

١٩٨٦, an essay on “The Frankfurt School” and in ١٩٩٧, the catalogue introduction for the exhibition “The end of exile: a Festival of Iraqi Art and Culture”. In “Exile unfolded” he clearly articulated the cultural and political dilemmas of exile, arguing that, transcending both the exigencies of personal experience and the loss of a native country, it produced a condition of utopian aspiration:

‘Obviously, exile, as a forced banishment, is unimaginable without country, but the latter, ‘country’, only mutates into the condition of ‘exile’ if it is understood in terms of political ideas and community that appear, at a given moment, to be utopian. Exile, in this sense, is the effect of a utopian commitment and at the same time, its possible fulfilment. It is the condition of utopia realized both within history and outside it. [We suppose that such awareness has its own value which can not be trivialized by simply appealing to metaphysical or cosmopolitan arguments.] In other words, by revealing the contingency of human experience, exile remains irreducible to the realms of abstract reason or practical action. If any language might be able to capture this real experience, it is that of the ordinary, passing exchanges of daily conversation”.

He became well known in the Iraqi exiled community through his writing, lecturing and political activities, and gained a wide range of friends from different nationalities and backgrounds. Kamel was always known for his lack of personal pretension, and his straight-forward charm was, to all who knew him, epitomised by his characteristically cheerful smile.

After his return to Iraq in late ٢٠٠٣, he was appointed Adviser to the Ministry of Culture. Due to the policy of sectarian rotation, he worked with four successive ministers, including a Police Officer and an Imam [of a Mosque]. Although these conditions were not always easy for Kamel, he accepted the challenge; as he once put it: “This ‘dose’ that is reality has no respect for either text-book models or personal desires”. He continued to give priority to reviving those crucial, but fractured, traditions of Iraqi secularism and intellectual life, organising intellectual, literary, and artistic activities and events in his professional capacity. He was also Chair of the National Coordination Committee for the Safeguarding of Iraqi Cultural Heritage, responsible for working with UNESCO. Kamel continued to work politically within the PCI and the struggle to bringing back to life the remnants of a secular left committed to women’s rights and the trade union movement. His political rigor, understated charisma, enormous personal charm and intellectual eminence all contributed to his growing eminence. As Editor of the Iraqi Communist Party Magazine “ALTHAKAFA AL-JADIDA” [“NEW

CULTURE”], he engaged widely with the cultural and political life of his country by writing, public speaking and through interviews.

He adamantly refused to leave the country in spite of the dangers he faced daily and the pleas of his family and friends. Reflecting on his decision stay in his own country, rather than in a safe place like Belgium, he said: “I know I might well be the target of unknown killers who have no interest in personal revenge on me. I know instinctively that I fear the moment of death. And I know, above all, that I worry about the fate of my brother and my two bodyguards who risk their lives and their families’ futures protecting me both in my sleeping and waking hours. Nevertheless, insofar as my personal fate is concerned, I am at ease with myself because when I set foot again in this tragic country I had to be reconciled to that fate. This is not the suicide bomber’s acceptance of death for the promise of a reward in the after life. The question for me is of life not death. Life should not necessarily be safe but satisfy the desire for being, action and dedication’.

Kamel Shiaa Abdullah’s importance and influence are tragically born out by the fact of his assassination as well as the immediate outpouring of tributes to his memory. His mother and his eight brothers and sisters in Baghdad, his former wife and their son Elias in Belgium and his elder brother, Faysal Abdullah, in London survive him.

* Kamel Shiaa Abdullah was born in Baghdad on 1st July 1904 lived in Algeria, Italy and Belgium before returning to Baghdad in 1933. After leaving Al Mutanabi Books Market and heading to his mother’s house for lunch on 23rd August 1968, he was killed in cold blood by a professional assassin.