

The borderline



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Introduction	4
I.	6
II.	14
III.	22
IV.	28
V.	34
VI.	44
VII.	52
VIII.	60

Introduction

Here are nine stories of young adults moving to Berlin in the 2000s. Some of them moved after 2015 – that's when the refugee crisis in Europe became more tense –, and some of them relocated voluntarily for studies. What unites them is that they all moved from a country riddled with wars in the past two decades: Iraq. While collecting stories for this research, the lack of narratives on Iraqis and not Syrians, Turks or Afghanis became visible. So, with this fanzine, we want to try and patch this hole up, even if only a little bit.

How did they relocate? Did they also manage to move on the mental level? Where is the borderline of belonging to one county or to another? What do they perceive as their homeland?

I am addressing my heartfelt thanks to the respondents of these questions, who are left anonymous. This project would never turn into a reality without their empathy. It would also not exist without the research seminar offered at the Freie Universität and support of its leader, Madeline Bass, and of the Berlin University Alliance, which sincerely agreed to support this project financially. Neither would this fanzine exist without the input of my dearest friend Noor. A million thanks for your trust and for the stories that inspired me during the last three years.



How did you move to Berlin?

– I come originally from Baghdad, but I moved to Jordan with my family in 2006 and have been living there since then. I came to Berlin last October to do my MA: I study Sustainability, Fashion and the Creative Industries. Once, I participated in a workshop where we talked about the ethics of business, and this was what I wanted to research further, using Iraq as an example. So, for me, the trip to Germany started not from fashion affection, but from the desire to achieve social justice and make fashion more environmentally friendly in Iraq. But, here in Germany, I could not find anything on design or sustainability in Iraq on any academic database. It is all about war and nothing else. I feel there is a lack of interest in research related to Iraq, except if it is about war.

2006 was the worst year ever in Iraq because the civil war started. There was a lot of bombing, a lot of kidnapping, and I had actually never heard of a religious war between Sunnis and Shias before 2006. Just going to school felt horrible. Once, my sister had to go to school for her finals and one of the security guards was shot, so kids had to cross his body as if it was something normal. When entering the school, the American military had to search us. I was in the 3rd grade and it was just too much for me, at that moment.

So, in 2006, I flew together with my parents to Jordan, initially just for the summer. Each of us had only one bag, and everyone thought that it was just for the holiday – but in reality it turned out to be 14 years of summer holidays. My dad refused to stay, at the beginning. He went back to Iraq, in order to support the country and the people, but, after two years of loneliness, he came to Jordan.

It became clear to me that we were going to stay in Jordan when one of my parents said that we had to look for a school there. I did not really understand what was happening. I was always very distant and silent because it was just always too much for me to process. When I left Baghdad, I did not have time to say goodbye to so many friends. In my mind, I was always supposed to go back, to pick up my things. And, until today, I can picture my home and can remember exactly where my favourite things were placed. Life in Jordan is completely different to life in Iraq. Jordan is a very poor country, and at that time it was even poorer. So, here is the misconception: a lot of people who came from Iraq to Jordan were rich, so the people in Jordan took advantage of that and put higher prices on the rental of cars, apartments, on supermarket goods. The clash between the people started to grow: Jordanians were unhappy with the Iraqis, as their arrival caused an increase in prices, and the Iraqis were also unhappy with Jordanians because they said that the locals were unfriendly and always frowning at them.

At the beginning, I also had this in mind – that we are, basically, ‘the others’. The Iraqi dialect is also different. It’s heavi-



er and a bit harder than Jordanian, and, when I started going to school, I tried to copy the Jordanian accent, but people could always tell that there was something wrong with it. As a result, now I do not have either of the accents and it is not understood if I am from here or there.

Every time I do transitions, I think: what if something bad happens and I never go back home? Even coming here to Berlin was not easy at all. Even if this is a different scenario: I came by choice, I came to study, I am accepted. But I still think: what if something bad happens and I won't be able to see my dad anymore?

What do you remember about war in Iraq?

– My dad almost died more than once. One time, he was walking and some people tried to kill him 13 times – he even took a picture of the wall with the shots in it. At that moment, I was just next to that wall, but from the other side, hanging out in the garden, and I opened the gate next to it. My dad always tells me that he will never forget my face opening the door under the shootings, and that I basically saved him.

Do the memories about Iraq come back often to you?

– It is actually like a loop. I believe that in order to change something, I need to go back to my roots. Those memories are triggered by questions about my identity, my values, which are things that are directly linked to my work, as I think

a lot about social justice, sustainability. It is a bit strange, but I always have to circle back and think about Iraq. It makes me feel stuck rather than comfortable.

What have you struggled with the most, integrating in Germany?

– My country's status caused a lot of problems. When I tried to open an account in Sparkasse, I was rejected the first time, as my documents were Iraqi. They told me that I came from a high-risk country. So, for the first two months, I actually never had a bank account. Later, it turned out that that was illegal: according to German law, everyone is allowed to open a basic bank account.

Is there something that you didn't manage to find a replacement for, in Germany?

– I always feel that I am a guest. I do not feel that I belong here. This is not a place where I feel I can find all the bits of myself and all the answers to my questions, even if a lot of people are very open-minded and friendly. Ironically, it's also why I came here – I felt I would be able to explore myself as a designer, or as an artist, or simply grow outside of the controlled environment of a very warm family. But Germany turned out not to be the right place. I miss a sense of belonging. And I actually never felt that in Jordan, either.

People here are very individualistic. They don't take care of anyone else. They don't approach anyone. They don't worry

about anyone. So, even if there are so many people in Berlin, I always feel alone. In Iraq, the level of social interaction is so high, compared to Berlin, and everyone has a collective approach.

Is there something in Germany that you like most?

– I hate it, but I also love it, so it's a love-hate relationship: how everything is so planned. I'm such a messy person and I am very spontaneous, so having a structure helps me to get things done in a more relaxed way. But I also think that if people were just a little looser, they could have so much fun.

Which land do you personally consider as your homeland?

– So, to me, Jordan is home because I grew up there. It shaped me and my personality. But when I think more deeply about my life, my studies and my career, I always go back to Iraq. I ask myself: what could I do there? And I imagine that the end of my life will be spent there. This is actually my current dream: I just want to visit it once, in the upcoming years, and live the life that my mom and my dad lived. I want to see where their pictures were taken, and listen to the Iraqi accent all the time.



What is your favourite place in Berlin and in your homeland?

– I think the one in Berlin is actually connected to my homeland and to my family – it is the Ishtar Gate in the Pergamon museum. It is something that I always grew up with because my dad is an archaeologist and he wrote a lot about Babylon, and could talk about it for ages. At the same time, I hate it because it is not supposed to be in Pergamon – it is supposed to be back in Iraq. In Bagdad, my favourite place is my grandparents' house.

What's the word which explains your attitude to your homeland?

– Maybe nostalgia? Even though it might sound cheesy. Love?



II.

How did you move to Berlin?

– I am an anti-religious anarchist and I am verbal about it. Moreover, I have always had long hair, so I was basically most of the time under the radar in Iraq: threatened, followed. And that's why me and my partner were forced to come to Germany in 2016, crossing the sea.

We left on the 16th of January from Baghdad to Turkey by airplane, and then from Turkey by the sea to Lesbos, from Lesbos by plane to Thessaloniki. The trip was actually pretty good. From Thessaloniki we went through Serbia, where we walked 28 hours in the forest and it was -15 degrees Celsius. And then through other countries like Slovenia, Croatia, Austria, we arrived at Munich and, finally, to Berlin, where we presented ourselves as refugees. In 10 days, on the 26th of January, we were already in the capital. And from there, everything started going the wrong way, until now.

The first thing that we faced in camp, in Berlin, was vocal harassment and abusive communication. The camp itself looked like a huge basketball hall (was that the freedom that I was looking for?), where every day you had to sign a paper indicating that you are present. The next 9 months were just hell because everyone was doing whatever they wanted. The

kids were shouting and there was literally not enough space for all the people. Luckily, after 9 months, we managed to get the approval to move to another place. But as soon as we did it, we received a letter saying that our application for a residency permit was rejected. And the worst was that this letter was sent to the camp address, so we didn't know about it. As we did not see it and did not answer, I ended up getting a permit that is called 'Duldung' in German. It is a staying permit for individuals who must leave the country, but are unable due to different obstacles. This status basically does not allow you to work, to move, to breathe. Back in Iraq, I was kidnapped twice. I was checked literally everywhere. I was harassed in a vocal way and also in a physical way, but I never ever felt so traumatised as when I got this 'Duldung' paper. Even now, I have to do therapy, in order to overcome that.

So, because I could not work for anyone, me and my friends opened a non-profit association which was called 'Gemeinsame Horizont' – it was about redefining the concept of integration through educational programs. Being a refugee myself, I had participated in hundreds of courses. They are made too much from a western perspective, so people always end up thinking that you are not educated enough. We refugees are accused from the first day: we are all racist, all Nazis, and, so, we must change. Me, as a person who knows both Arabic and English, I am approaching it in another way, from the ground up. Already in the second year of its existence, the NGO has become very successful.

What do they struggle with most, integrating?

– The biggest issue is that, actually, they do not trust the German government anymore, and they do not trust people in general. The system offered them so many things, in principle, but there was nothing, in the end.

Also, the ones who come here have to do collaborative work. In Iraq, people are used to believing that work come on its own to them. For example: if you want to find a job, you go and tell your family, you don't write an application, you don't prepare for an interview. And this is the majority. They do not hassle. Moving here they are entering a very competitive field, they have to accept the fact that they can be rejected. But they never learn it.

What do you remember about the Iraq war until now?

– Let me first give you the whole perspective: I was born in 1985, during the Iraqi-Iranian war. I went to primary school in 1991, during the first Gulf war. I went to school during the second Clinton bombing. I went to university during the second Gulf war. My life is, basically, all about war. Every time I had a new period in my life, it was accompanied with people dying, killings and losing a couple of cousins. Therefore, I would say that it is just a continuous war. I wouldn't say that there was one and then another.

Yes, there was no war between 1992 and 1998, but people had no food, no jobs, no security – only the authoritarianism of Saddam Hussein. Is that not war? Does war have to be pointing a gun into people's faces? If my father has a trauma and an experience in war, don't you think that I am experiencing war through his perspective, his behaviour, his trauma?

So those are my memories. Until 2003, we had only two channels on the TV. I was a kid and woke up in the mornings so I could watch cartoons. However, the first 30 minutes on the TV were always videos from the war. Then, at university, I remember that, once, someone said that a professor had died, that he was killed on the way to the university, on the bridge. His son was in university with me, in the same class. So as soon as he found out about it, he went to the bridge. And he got killed on the bridge, as well. Now, no one wanted to go to the bridge to take their bodies – otherwise you would be killed as well –, so you just sat in the classroom, waiting.

What have you struggled most with, integrating in Germany?

– Well, for me, formal integration is when the German authorities acknowledge you, and I am not acknowledged. But I would also look at the concept of integration more precisely. What does it actually mean to be integrated? I guess in order to be fully integrated, you have to come here, to change your name, probably do a plastic operation – but

then you won't be yourself anymore. For sure, I can meet as many crazy people as I want, be a part of the LGBTQ+ community – but is this integration?

Is there something that you didn't find a replacement for?

– Psychological stability. In Iraq, I could navigate. I knew how to deal with the war. Here, I do not know how to deal with the situation. I do not know how to cope with some parts of the bureaucracy. Moreover, I have to sell myself as a refugee sometimes. When I go to conferences and, at the end, I say that I am a refugee, the attitude to my research changes immediately. To them, you should not make it, because you're a refugee. I wish I could change this negative connotation in the word 'refugee'.

At the beginning, that caused me a lot of pain – why don't you just look at me? Why do you have to judge me? This is also why I was actually fighting with my parents and society at large, in Iraq. Why would you say that I am an anarchist, if I am just listening to black metal?

Is there something in Germany that you like most?

– The diversity, I think. There is something for everyone. When we arrived and started calming down, I got to see that, for every one of my passions, there is a group that I can join. And if there is no exact existing group, you can go

to a meet-up and just create it. Kayaking, computer games, heavy metal – I always found people who shared my interests. I was also always fascinated by how Germany recovered, after the war. When I got older, I had to read 'Mein Kampf', and, after that, I started digging into the country's History. In my teens, I was also absolutely mesmerized by German philosophy: Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Schiller, Goethe. I hate the weather, though.



What is your favourite place in Berlin and what is your favourite place back home?

– In Iraq, it is the al Mutanaabi street. As we don't have any bookshops, this is the only one street in Iraq where you can get books. As much as I can recall, I started coming here, as soon as I was 7 years old, to buy normal books – Dostoevsky, Russo, Melville. After 2008, everyone started selling their libraries by the kilo, over there. Every Friday. But the books were controlled by Saddam's regime, so you had to do that quickly. Back then, I would just come and tell the person that I would take the responsibility if the police came, and would just read all the books over there. Now the street is popular. I think there are a lot of activities happening there.

In Berlin my favourite place is my shared house. I came here in June 2020, when I was mentally broken, weighed 100 kilos, and was not socialising at all. I just wanted to drink in my room and be miserable. I knew that living alone was not an option for me, and a friend of mine offered to show me this commune. Otherwise – Pergamon museum, where I also worked as a tour guide.

What is your homeland and what is your attitude to it?

– I don't acknowledge the concept of homeland: I am anti-nationalist. I also believe that the Iraqis are not territorial people: we are tribal. So, on the one hand, I think that the feeling of home is linked to the people around you and, also,

it comes from inside. Because I am a vagabond, like that, I would say that my homeland is found as soon as I get that inner feeling. I wish I could say that home is the place where everyone I love lives, but I don't think that's ever going to happen.



III.

How did you move to Berlin?

– I am 26 years old and I am now doing my Masters at Game design, at HTW Berlin. I finished my master's in architecture in Jordan and moved to Berlin on the 11th of May, in 2021, but I did an exchange here, 4 years ago, so the city is not completely new for me.

I settled in Jordan with my family, after going through different countries. I was 4 at that time: from Iraq to Egypt, from Egypt to Libya and from Libya to Tunisia. My parents decided to move long before the war, in 1995, and primarily it was because my dad worked in Tunisia, and we wanted to be closer to him. And it was also because my mother did not want her daughter to grow up in an extremely conservative country.

Why Berlin?

– The Middle East is too conservative for me. As I am a homosexual, I knew that it wouldn't work there, so, since I understood that, I decided that I would eventually move out. I won't say that I felt oppressed in Jordan, but I was definitely not free. I could not speak about what I was actually thinking. That gave me the feeling of missing self-expression. In

the Middle East, it is definitely haram ('forbidden' in Arabic – Ed.) to be a homosexual.

Just because they say it's that way, it doesn't mean it has to be so. I came out to my mother, when I was 19 years old, and she cried, of course. And, of course, she was homophobic, in the beginning, but, in the end, she accepted it and became a different person. The same for my sisters: they know about my preferences and they are fine with that. However, I am not sure that my dad knows and I would never tell him, as he is too conservative. I don't think he will like it.

What do you remember about war in Iraq?

– In 2003, when it happened, it was not really a war: the USA just invaded Iraq, and people actually welcomed the American troops. Everyone was happy. This is what my parents say and this is also what I saw myself, when I travelled back there to my mum and to my aunt, in 2003. My mother even went out and danced a lot, thinking that the Saddam Hussein regime was gone. But then shit started to happen. We had thought that the US was going to help us. In reality, they just came to use us. They didn't really care about the people living in the country.

Our family was not really affected by the war because we come from a quite well-to-do family. Just once, a bomb landed near my grandfather's house, and it was really close. The windows were completely broken, but luckily no one was injured. I actually never lived that war life because my parents

moved out in 1995. There is also this: when people get to know that I am from Iraq, they start saying that they feel sorry for me, but they do not understand that I lived a privileged life and did not see the war at all. Sometimes I feel bad about it, as my life was extremely easy compared to other people's life in my homeland.

What was the hardest for you, while moving to Germany?

– I think the language. Because I feel that people here refuse to talk to you, if they see that you do not know German. I actually passed the test successfully. I do understand German, but I feel really insecure while speaking, so you could say that I feel integrated in everything except the language.

Is there something that you did not manage to find a replacement for?

– Food – it is definitely something different back home. Shaurma, here, actually never tastes the same as the one we have in Jordan. The meat is just different, and I think that the other ingredients are different, as well, and I guess the way we prepare it is also different.

Here, I live alone in my dorm, and sometimes I miss this feeling of having someone around me. I have always actually wanted to live alone: back in Jordan, I was all the time sitting in my room. I am not the family person who would go out

and talk to people. But there are moments that I just want to leave my room and see people.

Is there something in Germany that you especially like?

– Techno, and it is not just the music, but the culture in general. I usually meet up with my friends in some abandoned parks, but I find crazy nightclubs regularly. My first party was with my sister and my sister-in-law, so I could not go crazy. For my second party, I went to 'White Rabbit', the club where I first tried ecstasy, which was an experience that changed my life. I used to do a lot of drugs, in the beginning, but now I think I am getting a bit tired of it. I guess it is what normally happens with anyone after 2-3 months of continuous raving.

I started listening to techno when I was 6 years old because of my older sister, who never actually did hard raving, but was just listening to it at home. I love the fact that everyone comes to have fun, but at the same time that it is so free and de-socialized. When I come to a club, I usually find a spot and stay there for a couple of hours, not contacting with anyone around me. I stop talking to people and stay with myself.

What is your favourite place in Berlin and one in your homeland?

– In Berlin, it is the Mendelssohn-Bartholdy-Park stop near Potsdamer platz and Gleisdreieck. It was the first station where I landed, coming to Berlin.



My favourite spot back in Jordan is our old house. We moved there when I was 6 years old. I used to have so much fun there. A lot of my school friends were also my neighbours and we went out very often together. Things started to go wrong when I had to socialise in my teens. For example, I would feel left out because all the girls around would start saying that they found that or that guy hot, but I obviously could not say anything.

Which land do you personally consider as your homeland and what is your attitude to it?

– I am not a big fan of Jordan, but I would say that it is Jordan. I think my parents would consider their homeland Iraq. The

funny thing is that all the Arab countries and people have the same mentality. So, when I say Jordan, when I say Iraq, when I say Lebanon, it is really the same thing: we share the same traditions, the same language, the same religion and ideology. Imagine the US: the states are different, for sure, but, together, they compose United States.

I don't want to seem careless, but I do not really give a lot of meaning to the concept of 'homeland'. It is just a coincidence, if you were born here, or there. As for Germany, I would not say that I feel patriotic about this country, but I feel comfortable. I feel free and I can express myself, especially in Berlin. The word which best describes the people back in my homeland is, in my opinion, 'ignorance'. I feel bad about my country. It is just so unfair. Europeans are not better than us because they were born in different conditions. For the people in my homeland, there wasn't even the slightest opportunity to actually have a civilised youth.

IV.

How did you move to Berlin?

– I left during the refugee crisis in Iraq, in 2015, so I've been in Germany for 6 years. I am now 25 years old. When I first came, I was especially impressed by women without hijabs. I felt as if I was now more educated because I had to live in this society and see all of the differences.

– I also came here in 2015 with the refugees. Unfortunately, I can't go back to Iraq and that is actually why I stayed here. I had everything in Iraq: friends, family, money, a house, but I could not develop that, as freedom was lacking. Freedom is the most important reason why I decided to come. When you live in Iraq, you never know what is going to happen to you tomorrow. But I also did not find this in Germany, as there are too many rules to obey, as a refugee. These 6 years of my life in Germany have been extremely difficult for me.

What do you remember about the Iraq war?

– I was 17 when I got these three bullet scars on my body – look. This was not the hardest thing, though: my mum was killed in 2006. She is not alive anymore, but I always think that she is alive and that she is in Iraq. I would do anything to see her one more time.

What did you struggle most with, integrating in Germany?

– I came here as a refugee and had to do the integration course. If I refused to participate in it, I would go to court. Even though I still haven't done it, I will have to do it sometime in the future. As far as I know, the integration course is mainly about learning the language, but I can actually speak German.

Also, it is the situation with working that freaks me out. I can't do the job I did in Iraq because I have no official papers regarding my education. Back there, I used to change the cushions in cars. The job centre in Berlin is forcing me to study what I do not really want to learn, and, because I refuse to do it, they cut the money that is supposed to be given to me. By doing this, they are forcing me and others like me to find a job in the black market. Though neither me, nor those others I know want to do it.

– I haven't made any German friends so far, nor have I gotten a girlfriend, or just a female friend. When I talk to them, they just run away from me. For me, it was also difficult to find a job – I live now in Sachsen, and all the places where I applied for a job refused me, as they are full of Nazis. Now I finally got something that is not schwarzarbeit ('illegal employment' in German – Ed.). My life in general looks the same as in Iraq: I work, then go to training, and then I sleep.

– For me, the only difference is that I started smoking a lot of weed, here. In Iraq, I did not need it, actually. I had so

many responsibilities that I did not need a distraction. I had my house, my family, a job I loved. Whereas everything surrounding what I do, here, makes me stressed.

Is there something that you didn't manage to find a replacement for, in Germany?

– A lot is missing. Probably everything.

– I would like to find the replacement for the safety that I was hoping for. The job centre actually gave me a house in Köpenick, where I never stay. I just go there to grab the mail. I do that because, if we were there having this conversation in Arabic, my neighbour would come and break the door and the windows. He did that once, already. I went to the police station to report it, but they said that it is not a crime and that they can't do anything about it – so it is not as safe as you think.

Also, now I have a driving license and, theoretically, I can drive, but, in reality, there are so many rules, in Germany, that I can't. So, every time that I drive a car, I have to pay a fine to the government. Does this circulation of money actually make sense?

Is there something in Germany that you like most?

– I see freedom and I love it here. At the very beginning, when I had just arrived, the clubs and the nightlife were something that I could not imagine for me at all.

– Yes, it is true. I would say that this never-ending night gives you a feeling of freedom. That you can do whatever you want and that it is never going to end.

What is your favourite place in Berlin and one in your homeland?

– I do not like Berlin. My favourite place in Germany is Köln. Here, society is much more judgmental, so sometimes I feel that I can't go anywhere because I look different. Also, Berlin is more hectic and much more pretentious – just like the people living here. In Bagdad, I really loved my clothes shop, but I sold it, in order to come to Germany.

Which land do you personally consider as your homeland and what is your attitude to it?

– Iraq, for sure. I consider myself a patriot and I wish I could do something for my country. If it was safer there, I would go back. I wish the militia troops would just leave my country.

– I actually tried to leave Germany to another European country, but I could not, as I am in the process of getting my documents. Until they stamp my documents, I am absolutely stuck here and I wish I could be sent back home.

One thing that I can say as a summary of this interview – and I print my finger on it ('I swear' in Arabic – Ed.) –, is that it was a mistake to come. It is awful here. We became losers. If we knew what was waiting for us in Germany, we

would have never done it. You should all know that Iraq is not like Syria, Afghanistan, or other Middle East countries: we actually have money, food and we do not seek for that in Germany. We just want freedom and safety, which one can't find, there.



How did you move to Berlin?

– I am now 34 years old. I was born and grew up in Baghdad, and left the country as a refugee, when I was 26. I flew to Turkey and crossed the sea border with Greece, on a boat. I did it with my partner, and, all the way up to Germany, we went either by our own means, or with the help of NGOs.

As a teenager, I dreamed of going out and seeing the world, but an Iraqi passport is a big obstacle, if you want to do this – so I always had these ideas to being with, although, in my teens, I was not thinking of moving out forever: I had created my own bubble, in Iraq, which accepted me as I am. But, every time that I wanted to travel with my partner, he could never get a VISA. And that's how it started. We tried different approaches and different countries: Canada, the UK, a job VISA, but nothing worked. In 2015, we saw the refugee crisis on TV, but it didn't feel real, until the cousin of my partner came to say goodbye. He found a smuggler via Facebook who would help him cross borders. Shortly after, his wife called and said that she was leaving, and so my partner asked whether we should leave as well. And I said yes. It was as simple as that.

At that point, my partner had been threatened, a couple of times, and, whenever I was with him, I was actually threat-

ened too. So that's why we probably had no hesitation about wanting to leave. Our smuggler was actually a cool dude: he did his job so well! He was very decisive and very conscientious, telling us exactly when we had to cross the sea, so we don't feel negatively about it. He did not ask for a lot of money, just 1000 EUR, which, compared to the other guys I heard about, was not much at all.

In Baghdad, I was always told that I had to leave because I was different from everyone over there. I would not say that I was completely unhappy, though: I had a family which supported me, and I never worked, over there – I studied all the time (translation and linguistics). But, now, if you ask me whether I would like to go back, I wouldn't know how to answer. I am not sure if I would like to do it. When I was 13, I read a book by a famous Iraqi sociologist called Ali Al-Wardi, and that was the moment when I got to understand that I didn't want to follow the norm, my family. I did not want to end up studying medicine and getting married, turning into my mom, or my dad. Step by step, I got to know through the Internet what LGBTQ+ is, what social activism is – and all of that opened a new reality for me.

There are several words in Iraqi culture which are of the utmost importance. One of them is 'haram', which means 'God forbids that', and the second is 'eayb', which means shame, or socially inappropriate. 'Haram' is a religious concept, and 'eayb', although it stems from religious ideology, mainly concerns society. Sometimes people use 'eayb' to oppress what is against the norm, and claim a religious jus-

tification, in order to deceive. Those labels made me angry, so I started asking people: what is 'haram', for you? And what is 'eayb', for you? Being a girl and hugging a male friend in a public space? Listening to metal music? Riding a bike? I think that a lot of good friends of mine were asking themselves the same questions, but they just did not have enough guts to be loud. I did.

What do you remember about war in Iraq?

– Between 2003 and 2005, the situation was kind of stable. As far as I remember, the Americans were calm, so everyone was sure that Saddam Hussein's regime was gone. I can't explain it logically, but, in 2006, the civil war started, and everything collapsed, the whole society collapsed. So, during the Shia and Sunni war, people were forced to leave their houses and, depending on which group had taken over the territory, they had to move to another district. I did not have to move out, but it affected my uncle and my aunt, who were Shia, but the territories where they lived were taken by Sunnis. They were threatened and had to move out. All of this was done by militia, and no one actually knew who they were, who financed them, where those guys came from.

What did you struggle most with, integrating in Germany?

– I actually hate the word 'integration'. It is something that politicians invented and there is no meaning in that concept. For example, when people see that I speak German

fluently, they say that I am well-integrated. Does the actual fluency of speech mean being integrated if I do not have any residency permit, for example? Also, in Burgeramt (literally 'the citizen's office' in German, a place where you register your house, become or prolong your VISA, etc. – Ed.) someone told me: 'Wow, you look very modern and wear normal clothes!' Do people think that we are from the Middle Ages, in Iraq?

So: what is integration? I would not put my sojourn in Germany under that umbrella. I would just say that, in the beginning, I suffered. I have always considered myself an open-minded person, but, when I came to Berlin, I needed some time to get used to the local specificities. For instance, it took me 2 years to understand why everyone goes crazy about parks. What's so cool about it? Why do Germans like it so much? At some point, I realised that I come from a place where you usually have a garden, so, if you want to see nature, you just go there. But, in Berlin, people live in apartments, they connect with nature in other ways. I am serious: it took me 2 years to acknowledge the concept of 'park'.

Is there something that you didn't manage to find a replacement for, in Germany?

– It is a very simple thing. I miss some linguistic collocations, jokes, pun words in Arabic, which I can't use in English, or German, as it won't make any sense. The way people talk to each other – this is what you can't actually translate. There is



one swearing expression that I really miss in particular, and I would actually never be able to give you a proper translation of it, but, literally, it would be something like 'fuck the pimp': 'بالكواد خرب'. I used to say it so much!

Is there something in Germany that you like most?

– Well, I like Berlin because it is so radical, so cheap and I can relate to it. Although I do not like it when people start using labels. For example, I feel that being 'LGBTQ+' is sometimes equal to being cool in Berlin. I would not like to be seen like that, as I am just a human being.

What do you do in your free time in Baghdad and what do you do now?

– I would normally never be allowed to stay out later than 8 or 9 pm, so in Baghdad in my spare time I would always be outside hanging out as much as I could – because I knew that, after a certain hour, I would have to be in my room, whether I wanted to, or not. Now that, in Berlin, I have that freedom, I am always in my room playing video games because I love being in a fantasy world where everything can happen.

What is your favourite place in Berlin and one in your homeland?

– In Baghdad, it is the Mutanabbi Street, on the riverside, where you can find different restaurants and cafés, bookshops, lots of events and concerts, full of people and life. Here, in Berlin, my favourite places are the Warschauer Strasse area and, especially, when you take the bridge on the left side – a perfect spot for a sunset. Another place is Mehringdamm, which is beautifully constructed. There you can also find my favourite coffee shop called ‘uppers espresso’. They have the best cappuccino in town.

Which land do you personally consider as your homeland and what is your attitude to it?

– The concept of homeland has actually no definition, in my head. I study linguistics and you study literature, so you know that words are very tightly connected to the culture where they come from. Therefore, there is no such thing as ‘homeland’ in Iraq, in its language, in its culture. I would say the equivalent word for it is ‘wupan’ – and it literally means a place where you have resources for living. So, where you can find water, there you will also find the Iraqi people.

Does the word ‘homeland’ mean the place where I have ‘my people’? If that’s the case, then it is not Iraq, because I am not accepted the way I am, there. Is it the place that gives me stability and security? Iraq also does not fit. Neither does Germany, as I am still a refugee with no rights, no residency, who

succeeded in finding work only last year. I also do not feel that I belong to society, here – it is too diverse and I am who I am.

I also think that people confuse the words ‘attachment’ and ‘belonging’. If you were brought up with something, for example, Iraqi food, it gives you the feeling of attachment, but not belonging. For sure, you would be nostalgic and would have memories of your favourite things. But ‘belonging’ is something deeper, something that you believe in. But what if I do not have a belief? And I do not want to have a belief because that would mean that I would have to follow something. I just want to live my life.





VI.

How did you move to Berlin?

– I am an architect and urbanist, and I am 29 years old. I was in Iraq until 2006 and, then, we moved to Jordan with my family. I moved to Berlin for my M.A. studies, in 2015.

I think that the turning point, for my family, was when, at the end of 2003, my brother got kidnapped. It was done for religious purposes and, also, because my dad used to be in the military, before the American war, so he was seen as a traitor. Those people were asking for money, and it took 6 months for my dad to gather this amount – so we did get my brother back. He was absolutely brainwashed: he became devoutly religious. He never allowed anybody to hug him. Not even our mother. He never told us what happened to him. I guess there was no physical abuse, but he was always saying that he was glad that he was kidnapped. So, after we got him back, my dad decided that we should go ‘on a holiday’ to Jordan.

While studying in Jordan, I applied for the M.A. in Germany – I was not getting along with my parents, at that time, and I did not want to live with them. Luckily, I got the scholarship and was able to come. They would not have supported me, as they are pretty conservative and religious. They did not

want me to live alone, to talk to guys, and I would probably end up getting an arranged marriage. We are now in good terms, but every time we meet and talk, my mum starts crying because I am becoming a man for them, and I am not married, and so on. I love them, but I can’t see them more than for a week, or two, per year. For them, the masters and work that I do is not valid for as long as I am not married.

What do you remember about the war in Iraq?

– For me, of course, it is the story of my cousin who turned out to be my uncle. Or vice versa. It is about the consequences of the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988. My cousin got kidnapped by the Iranian army – and he could not come back home after the war finished because, in 1990, Iraq was put under sanctions – so he was only able to come home in 2003. During that time, we knew nothing about him.

So, when he came back, he wanted to see my grandfather and grandmother, but they were already dead. And that was the time when my aunt came up with the truth: I thought he was my cousin, but he turned out to be my uncle, as well. My aunt could not have children, and she was the oldest one in the family, so my grandmother decided to have a child and give her that kid, as it is haram in Iraq to say that you have no children. So, all this time, I thought that he was my cousin.

What do you struggle most with, integrating in Germany?

– I was actually struggling, until last year. Back in Jordan and Iraq, I had a curfew which made me be back home at 7pm, the latest. Even when I got accepted to the most liberal university in Jordan – the German University – I lived in a conservative way, as I was always afraid of disappointing my parents. Although, no matter how much effort I put in, they always made scenes and exaggerated everything.

So: I was doing my best for my parents, all of the time, but I was never actually asking what I really wanted. It was difficult for me to get rid of this need for their opinion and approval. Even when I was far away in Germany, I would tell them what I did and always feel guilty if I did not do what they expected.

So we can say that my integration started last year, when I started integrating with myself: I started asking myself what was truly valuable for me.

Is there something that you didn't manage to find a replacement for, in Germany?

– Food, I guess. And, to be more precise, the Iraqi way of preparing fish. It is called 'masgouf' and I never found it in Germany, even when I came across Iraqi places, in Berlin. When I was in Jordan, recently, I ate this dish seven times per week.

Is there something in Germany that you like most?

– Firstly, I started having a weekend here. In Germany, wochenende ('weekend' in German – Ed.) is a holy thing. Back in Jordan, there was actually no difference between the seven days of the week.

Secondly, I got to understand that I really love decorating my house. I feel that this is a Berlin thing: new stuff is not bought from Ikea, but, thanks to the ideology of sustainability, we can always find something on the street, or on the ebay kleinanzeigen (the very popular sub-webpage, in Germany, where used items are resold – Ed.).

The next thing which is also a very important part of the local culture are the Samstag-protests. For me, it means that people are really expressing themselves and are ready to defend their point of view. And, what's more, the police are not aggressive with them. So, if there is a hot discussion in the media, you can expect that, on Saturday, people will go out on the streets and be vocal about it.

What I also like is that people, here, are super proud of their body. I wasn't used to seeing my body in the mirror. I wasn't even able to change my clothes in front of my sister, or my mum. But I started loving my body here, and that changed me completely.

I was also very impressed with how kind people are, here. I will give you an example. When I first came to Berlin, I

was living with an old woman who would help me without expecting anything in return. In Islam, we do not have such a mindset: even if we do good, we do it to get something in return. Everything we did, we calculated in 'hasanas'. My dad would always tell me the amount of hasana I became, if I acted that way, or another. Once, I could not buy a bus ticket in Berlin and hoped to dodge the fare, and, as you can imagine, I got caught. I had to pay a penalty of 40 EUR, but I did not have that money. When I came back home, freaking out, and told that story to the old woman, she instantly sat down to write an email saying that I came from Jordan on the back on some camels... So I was allowed to only pay 2 EUR. Until now, I do not know why she helped me.

What is your favourite place in Berlin and one in your homeland?

– I love my home in Charlottenburg. It is only in this 30-people commune that I feel in control and that I have no fears that I will be kidnapped, or that the house would explode. I also have an unlimited contract, which is rather rare, in Berlin, and it makes me feel very chilled. I love going back home. There is nothing that I crave for in Jordan, or in Iraq.

Which land do you personally consider as your homeland? What's the word which explains your attitude to your homeland?

– For me, it is Berlin, because I realise how fully and openly I can express myself, being in this town.

I was always feeling that I was an outsider, when I was in Jordan, although I spoke with a Jordanian accent. I'm sure I had it more than a regular Iraqi person. But I felt that I had less rights than everyone there. And, also, being in Jordan, this idea that I had to go back to Iraq never left me.

Once I did it, when I was doing my M.A. I decided to challenge myself and write my thesis about the Bagdad wall, so I flew to Iraq to collect data, as, online, I could not find anything. Even if all my family was against it, I went there and, in the end, I felt extremely bad about it. Everyone was treating me like shit. People would tell me all the time that I did not fit in, there, because of the way I looked and my accent. I went to the places of my childhood, but I did not feel at home. In the end, I just wanted to be back in Berlin.

The word 'home', for me, means safety, belonging and acceptance. All this, I feel in Berlin – and not only because of the people, but, also, because of the streets, the architecture and the tiny details.



VII.

How did you move to Berlin?

– I was born in 1997, in Bagdad, and I lived there until 2017. I moved to Berlin for my studies. First, I learned the language for two years and, then, I applied for an Ausbildung (‘vocational training’ in German– Ed.) in Megatronics. Now, it is my fourth year in Berlin, and the third year of my studies.

When I was 14-15 years old, the idea of leaving Iraq started appearing in my head. There were two important events, in my life, at that time. I realised that I could be gay and, also, I accepted that I am an atheist. For people from both of these categories, life in Iraq is not the easiest.

I was bullied a lot, harassed. Once, I was even hacked by a guy who told me that he was going to post all of my photos and texts with my girlfriend on Facebook. At that moment, I thought that either I was going to leave the country until I am 21, or I was going to kill myself – because that is better than being killed by my own brother, or by society, for things that should be completely normal.

I was accepted in the best university of Bagdad – the University of Technology – and, on the first day, the head of the university asked me why I was there, if I was a woman. So, in

that university, I also had a friend whose sister was studying in Germany – and I made her meet with my parents in person, in order to convince them that studying abroad was alright.

At first, they were pretty skeptical about it. My dad has always had this dream of studying abroad, so he was very supportive, in this situation. Finally, I got my VISA and my ticket by the end of 2017. Before I left, my dad held me tight in his hands and said: ‘don’t forget you are a Muslim – don’t drink, don’t smoke, don’t talk to boys and don’t do any drugs’. They know that all of this does not apply to me now, but they are fine with it.

What do you remember about war in Iraq?

– In 2005-2006, there were a couple of areas in Bagdad where you would not go if you wanted to stay alive – there



were literally bodies everywhere. If you were to touch the bodies, you could be sure that, on the next day, they would come to kill you because they would think that you are with them. So, when I was going to school, there were bodies everywhere and it was all normal for me.

Back in 2004, the Americans came and were looking for Saddam Hussein. I lived in a quite sheltered part of the town with a lot of embassies around. The Americans thought that Saddam was somewhere there, in a house 50 meters away from ours. I remember this one episode clearly: when I was sitting in the living room with my father and brother, I suddenly heard the loudest explosion. Right before, I saw the rocket heading to the nearest house. In a second, the building turned into a wall with a hole 20 meters deep. I did not sleep for two weeks, after that. I was only 6 years old. I was terrified that it would happen again.

What did you struggle most with, while integrating in Germany?

– I think that I have reached the point where I can say that I became more German than most of the Germans. I mean that I do things exactly the way they would do it, and I am not at all bothered by it. When I travel, I start asking – why isn't this done in the German way?

So, on my first year here, I hated Berlin. I had no friends, and I was living in Moabit, within a big Turkish and Arab community. Living there was also a trauma for me: every day, I

would be reminded of my life in Iraq, that I used to go out in secret. So, until now, whenever I pass through that district, I have exactly that fear in my body. I usually ride as quickly as possible through those areas.

The first moment when I got to understand that I am more or less integrated was when I had a mental breakdown. My friends did not yell at me as people would, in Iraq. They just came to me and hugged me. And, so, I realised that people, here, are actually different, and I can open up to them. I also started going out more, doing things that I would not have allowed myself to do – smoking weed, partying, doing drugs. I started seeing different parts of Berlin and I really enjoyed it. I continued developing this positive attitude in my everyday routine. I like my Ausbildung with 8 hours of German every day, as well as going to therapy, which had a great impact on my self-understanding, as I was diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder, which changed my life in many ways.

I think I have reached the point where I can say that I know why I am here. I see my future here. I want to stay here and buy a house, here. I even planned where exactly I want it and how much it is going to cost. Most of my difficulties have been overcome.

Is there something that you didn't manage to find a replacement for, in Germany?

– Food. Most importantly, the real taste of meat. I haven't come across it in Germany, so far.

Is there something in German culture that you like most?

– Freedom, and that the law protects everyone. I feel that I can do anything I want. I can maintain my own identity and I never lose my values, or my point of view. It makes me feel mature and that I am indeed someone. The support of the law is especially important, as it never ignores you, but tries to propose a solution to your problems.

I also love the work system here. everything is regulated: they have unions, a government for workers which is really well established. So, even when you are doing your job, you feel that you matter, you are not just a slave. You have your holidays, you have your time, there are rules and obligations.

What is your favourite place in Berlin and in your homeland?

– In Iraq, there is actually nothing because I did not go out often enough to build a connection with the town – I think I was out around 10 times per year. In Berlin, it is difficult to say because the town is pretty diverse and it has places for all my moods. For example, the best party place for me is Berghain, the best chill place is the Müggelsee forest. I was there biking with my friend, when I realised that there is no noise at all – holy shit, at all! I could hear the flies, the water, the sound of silence.

Which land do you personally consider as your homeland and what is your attitude to it?

– So, originally, I am a pure Arab. My grandparents are cousins, my great-grandparents are cousins. I grew up there and spent 19 years of my life, there. But I didn't create any connection to Iraq, during that time. Probably, the only thing that I miss is the food.

First, I had an identity crisis: I hated being Iraqi, I hated telling people that I came from Iraq. Sometimes, people would think that I was from Spain, or Mexico, or the US, and I would always agree because I hated the fact that I didn't have another nationality.

But, then, my mindset changed. I was already in Berlin, and, so, I went with my friends to an exhibition where ancient Iraqi accessories and carpets were presented. They were really impressed, asking a lot of questions and listening carefully to my explanations. From that moment, I became prouder of the things that we did and started pointing out that Iraq is just not in the best situation, now. I accepted that I am Iraqi and I stopped stressing about it. However, if the third World War started, I would defend Germany, rather than Iraq. Yes, I would never be 100% German, but I grew up here, and I got to experience things that I was only used to seeing in movies. So, for now, my homeland is Germany and I love it, and I am proud to be a part of it.



VIII.

How did you move to Berlin?

– I am an architect, and I moved to Berlin in 2019, for my M.A. I am 26, now, and I left Iraq in 2003. I have never experienced a war there, so I was lucky to fly to Jordan before everything started.

I was studying at the German University in Jordan, which allows you to be what you actually want to be, and is the only ‘open university’ where male and female can have a comfortable conversation without everyone looking at them. It is quite tough to get into this university because you have to pass specific tests and interviews – at least for the architects – and my parents were pretty sceptical about me managing to get into it, but I did. My family is very religious and I am actually their disappointment – the middle guy among 7 kids turned out to be amiss.

In the first year of my studies, I had my first female friend, I started going to bars, opening up – and I hated everything that was said in my family. I would pray just in order to get my dad’s car. When the whole family would go to pray on Sunday, I would just go to have breakfast and come back. That was also the time when I met the first atheist in my life and read a book called ‘A conversation with my atheist

friend’. It is a book from the 80s, a talk between a Muslim and an Atheist with the idea that all atheists are wrong. As you can guess, instead of reading it and becoming more conservative, I became more left-wing.

In 2019, I got the acceptance from HTW (‘Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft’, the largest public University of Applied Sciences – Ed.) and was over the moon. The last 2 years before I left Jordan, I had to work at my dad’s office, which was stuffed with cameras on every corner. So, even if I did not want to pray, I had to do it. I was looking forward to freedom in my life in Berlin.

What do you remember about war in Iraq?

– This story is about a relative from my father’s side. My father’s uncle had a son who was driving back home. He was stopped on the road by some people with guns – and they started asking different questions about the territories. All my family is actually Sunni, although my grandfather’s family is Shia. So my relative was Sunni and he was moving in Shia territory. First, they asked his name, but it was neutral. Then, they started asking specific questions on the Shia way of praying. He did not know the answers, so they took him to the forest. It was in 2005, or 2006. He never came back. My father’s uncle still mentions his son all the time and believes that he will come back. It breaks my heart, every time.

The stories from the war have followed me, until now. I was in Jordan, for a while, during the pandemic, and, there, the



curfew is regulated with sirens. When I heard it for the first time, it reminded me of the one I heard during my time in Iraq, when the attacks started.

What did you struggle most with, integrating in Germany?

– As I have never actually lived alone before, it was difficult to get used to that. I had no clue how to cook, as the men in our family did not do that. During my first three months in Germany, frozen pizza was my main food.

Also, there are some things that I needed to get used to – the local features. For example, why everyone wears black, or why people go clubbing every weekend, or why there is a long queue all the time in Tresor. Now I know all of that and I think I am the most integrated person in Berlin ever.

Is there something that you didn't manage to find a replacement, for in Germany?

– I don't know. Maybe it is the feeling of chilling and doing absolutely nothing, because here it does not happen with me. Here, I have to work and, after that, I am always busy with side projects, or other things. Sometimes, I am also busy with fun stuff, but it still feels like a responsibility. I still feel that I cannot let things slide. And probably this will never come, because I lost my state of being careless, as well as the feeling of home.

Is there something in Germany that you like most?

– I like punctuality and ordnung ('discipline' in German – Ed.). Not counting today, I am usually super punctual (the respondent was late for the interview for 15 minutes – Ed.). I love planning every single hour in my day. I do not like meeting at '10ish', but at the exact time. I guess I learned that here.

What is your favourite place in Berlin and one in your homeland?

– I would say Neuköln. I live in Weisestraße and I am one block away from the canal and one block away from the bars, so I am literally on the borderline of a quiet place and the local life – I belong here and there.

In Jordan, I also live in a neighbourhood full of contrasts. It is where our university is located: between the most busy and fancy part of the town and – if you go 3 blocks down – the most religious spot. Our university is exactly in the middle. It is a limited freedom area.

Which land do you personally consider as your homeland and what is your attitude to it?

This is hard. An identity crisis actually haunts me and the sincere answer would be: I do not know. Because home for me is first of all comfort, where I am without worries. The

only thing I can tell you for sure is that I do not feel that Iraq is my homeland, even though I was born there.

When people ask me where I am from, I usually say that I am Iraqi and that I grew up in Jordan. I never stop on the first part of this phrase without saying the second – only when I am in a club and it doesn't make sense to go deeply into details.

I hate being in the Arabic places, here in Berlin. I avoid the Sonnenalle and Hermannplatz. Even though I miss our food, I just do not want to see all those people. Also, I do not speak with the Iraqi accent anymore because I do not follow how the language has developed, there. So I kind of got stuck in my old Arabic. I basically speak Iraqi, which does not exist.





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