

# SANAD

photo by Filippo Zambon (Italy)

For the first two issues of Nisimazine Abu Dhabi this year, we present multiple interviews with the filmmakers of SANAD. Today, we focus on filmmakers in exile: Samir, Mahdi Fleifel and Malek Bensmail.

## samir Iraqi Odyssey

Sanad Project – Documentary (Development)

War is the first, often the only image conjured up when the word Iraq appears on our television screens, newspapers or political tribunes. Yet, Iraq some fifty years ago was enjoying a western-like lifestyle, women had access to the countries' universities and foreign culture was flowing in uncensored. What happened then? Samir, an Iraqi filmmaker living in Switzerland decided to tell the untold history of his country through the story of his family. We met him to find out more about the causes of this dramatic shift.

**Does your project spring from the need to show contemporary Iraqis what was their own country like 50 years ago or to address Euro-American misconceptions about Iraq?**

Of course my intention is to address both. Though I have lived abroad I grew up with my family's stories about Iraq in the 20th century, we came from a very religious Shiite background but the whole family embraced a modern way of life driven by the idea of social justice and not bound to sectarian or religious ideas. We wanted to be part of a modern world with a fair relationship between "north" and "south". Guided by the memories my family passed on to me and by my political and historical knowledge I would like to build a bridge between Euro-American misconceptions about Iraq and its own national memory.

**History is often linearized to support the political status quo. Does this apply to Iraq too? If yes, which are the political factors that shaped this change you are describing in your new film?**

These are all very political questions. In the first place I don't want to do a political film, of course the subject is political but on the other hand I would like to do a film on my family history. Needless to say our family was always related to po-

itics in some way and this will make my film a political one but as a filmmaker, driven by my curiosity, I'm much more interested in trying to understand the world with my own instruments which does not necessarily make my work political. My point of view will naturally emerge from this film: which is that Iraqis, in my opinion, should have a go at secular and progressive politics representing the different cultures in Iraq.

*...the question is: will Iraq find its own independent way to live with its own diversity.*

**Is the story of your family representative of Iraqi society at large or characteristic of a specific sector of it?**

That's a good question. Honestly in my film I'm talking only about my own family. Yet, being surrounded by many other Iraqis, especially from the diaspora but also in Iraq who do not really relate to theocracies, I think my family is representative of a large section of Iraqi people. It must be said that nowadays in Iraq fewer are those who share secular and progressive values since the middle class has almost disappeared, a large part of it having moved out of the country in the last 20 years. I can't give you the figures but there are 5 millions



Iraqi living abroad so I believe that we do represent a strong part of the Iraqi society.

**You describe the progressive customs of Iraqi society 50 years ago as "western-like". Are the current ones "western-induced"?**

Oh, come on! I'm just saying that the society at that time, particularly the middle classes, was incarnating a modern worldview wherefore customs were

developing toward a non-rural model. This is not about "good" or "bad", "right" or "wrong", it is just a phenomenological look at the surface, for the surface in a way represents the state of a society. At the time the majority of the people took off the veil, they took off the "Abaya" and the "Dishdasha", the cloth of the peasants; the so called westerner look represented in my opinion only the ideal society we wanted to have.

**Iraq in the ninth century was a place where Adab, intellectual curiosity about all cultures, was thriving. Diverse ethno-religious groups debated, in relative freedom, about math, scien-**

**ce, philosophy, theology and poetry. Is this heritage alive in the national consciousness?**

The question should be: what constitutes the national consciousness? At the moment we do not have a media discourse in Iraq that articulates and illustrates at home and abroad what is our national consciousness. When I was young the idea that was in everybody's mind was that we would have lived in a modern society where both religious and non-religious aspects would have been contemplated. Back then it was not a question of being Kurd, Iraqi, Shiite, Sunni or Christian, so in this sense now we have a lack of consciousness because there is no real freedom as we know it here in Europe or in other parts of world. Now things are better, we can more or less talk freely but certain taboos around religion for example do persist and each group insist on being "the real" Iraq while diversity is and will be the funding principle around which this nation revolves. Funnily enough, I now live in Switzerland where diversities do coexist; the question is: will Iraq find its own independent way to live with its own diversity without the influence of its neighbours?

By Celluloid Liberation Front