

*Dancing in the No-Fly Zone: A Woman's Journey Through Iraq*, by Hadani Ditmars.  
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In the midst of a flurry of publications on Iraq by journalists, politicians, diplomats and academics, Hadani Ditmar's work undoubtedly stands out. Her book is not only engaging, interesting, original and perceptive but she has clearly done her homework. The book is full of information that provides the reader with a historical context and insight into the human costs of sanctions and war. Yet it is not just a book about misery. *Dancing in the No-Fly Zone* is about people pursuing art, culture, music and entertainment despite economic deterioration, repression and, later on, war and occupation.

Hadani Ditmars' book is also the story of a return. The Canadian journalist of Lebanese origin first visited Iraq in 1997. By that time Iraq had already been subjected to 7 years of the most comprehensive sanctions regime ever inflicted on a country in addition to the ongoing political repression by the regime of Saddam Hussein. After this initial trip, Ditmar travelled to Iraq on numerous occasions, writing for the *New York Times*, the *Independent*, the *Globe and Mail* and *Newsweek*, in addition to broadcasting for CBC and BBC. In September 2003, 6 months after the invasion, the journalist returned to Iraq to find out what happened to her friends and the various people she had met on previous visits. Throughout this book Ditmar compares the situation and her experiences during her earlier visits to the rapidly changing situation since the invasion.

Her stories about the sanctions period go against the grain of most existing literature: Ditmar does not merely write about the deteriorating infrastructure, health conditions and poverty, although she refers to it. But she manages to provide insight into a dynamic and vibrant cultural scene, describing, for example, various theatre visits to extremely popular plays, parties with friends and dancing in the Al-Rasheed hotel, or one of her best friends playing in the National Orchestra. In 2003, some new cultural and social spaces and opportunities seem to be opening up for her friends, and many people she talks to welcome the changes. However, most of what she describes point to a deterioration of every day living conditions and the author detects trends and developments related to a lack of security, violence and corruption which have escalated tremendously since her last visit.

As Ditmar is trying to trace the steps of artists, actors, musicians, businessman, even her former government minder, we sense her disappointment, her waning enthusiasm, and increasing fear as the security situation worsens. The journalist visits her friends' houses, restaurants, churches, hospitals, theatres, prisons, ministries and the infamous Green Zone. She is searching for visual metaphors in the new Iraq – Baghdad streets lined with death shrouds announcing the names of recently deceased mere yards from advertisements for the latest satellite dishes; the music and ballet school enclosed by barbed wire and bordered by an endless line of Iraqi soldiers waiting for their pay from American marines, barefoot children leading looted race horses through traffic jams; and the mural of 26 year old Esam Pasha painted over a former portrait of Saddam Hussein

(p.197). The mural, in the words of Ditmar, 'was a tame ode to the treasures of "old Baghdad." Buildings from the city's glorious past declared themselves in Disneyesque forms and *fantasia*-like colors. At best, it was decorative. At worst, it was irrelevant' (p. 198). Esam Pasha, whose claims to be the grandson of the Prime Minister under the King Faisal II, Nuri al-Said are hotly disputed by Iraqi intellectuals, has become one of the symbols of the 'new Iraq'. Elevated to being a significant Iraqi artist in the western media, 'the soldiers love my work' Esam proudly says (ibid.), he has little credibility amongst established Iraqi artists and intellectuals inside or in the diaspora.

As a social anthropologist trained in research ethics but also as someone of Iraqi origin I had to clench several times as Hadani described quite openly and without any sense of shame lying about her professional identity (p. 132), concealing her small video camera (p.109) or taking pictures when people only reluctantly agree (p. 108). Occasionally I found her writing self-indulgent and bordering on the indiscreet where her relations and friendships with Iraqis or her fellow journalists were concerned. My respect for Robert Fisk plummeted, for example, finding out that he happily sang and joked on the way to Abu Ghraib prison (p. 178), although this was obviously before the news about the torture and abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American troops had reached the western media. Her relationship to Karim, formerly principal cellist at the Iraqi National Orchestra turned into NGO activist with a substantial salary is complex and full of tensions. While the changes of Karim in dress code, mannerism and behaviour seem to be an overall metaphor of what is going wrong in the new Iraq, I could not help feel a sense of betrayal as Ditmar painstakingly reproduces conversations between herself and her increasingly estranged friend.

Although poetic and appealing, the title of the book is misleading as the author never actually sets foot, let alone dance, or even witness dancing, within the former no-fly zone. Ditmar dances in Amman and in Baghdad but not in the no-fly zones that were proclaimed by the US, the UK and France after the Gulf war in 1991 to protect the Kurdish population in the North (from 36<sup>th</sup> parallel northwards) and the largely Shi'i population in the South (from the 33rd parallel southwards).

Despite these misgivings, I thoroughly enjoyed reading Ditmar's writing. She eloquently succeeds in creating atmosphere and her observations and analysis are full of spirit, depth and valuable information. She portrays with warmth multi-dimensional characters who are complex and not just good or bad. In other words: real people not just victims or terrorists. Ironically, what the author describes as a deteriorating period in post invasion situation Iraq appears now to be the golden era given the systematic increase in violence – by occupation forces, by various Islamist militias, by terrorist groups and by criminal gangs, sectarian killings and tensions as well as general chaos and lawlessness. 2003 even 2004 are referred to with nostalgia by Iraqis who have lived through 2005 and the horrors of the summer of 2006.