Sense of Place in Baghdad: Identification and belonging in a city besieged by conflict

Diane Siebrandt
Abstract

Baghdad was once one of the most important cultural capitals of the world. It housed a multicultural population, and featured a landscape rife with mosques, shrines, churches, museums, educational institutions, markets, parks and historical sites. The city played host to international cultural festivals and supported the art and science industries for generations. Local and international communities who called Baghdad home connected emotionally with the venues located throughout the city. This paper will discuss how Baghdad’s population created a sense of belonging and identification with the city, concentrating on three cultural sites connected to the local and international communities.

Different conflict events have altered the sites over time, but not the values people have placed on them. This paper will examine the sense of place before and after conflict in relation to the sites, and some of the measures that have been taken to remedy lost connections. Because of the recent unrest in the country, the collection of large-scale current primary data has proven difficult to obtain. The three case studies cited in this paper were developed from a series of informal interviews and conversations conducted with Iraqi cultural heritage personnel in Iraq between 2006 and 2013.

A Cultural Capital of the World

Events and places in Iraq have shaped human history for thousands of years, from the Shandidar Caves in the northern mountains near the present day city of Erbil where clans of Neanderthals once lived, to the ancient cultures that settled along the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers 10,000 years ago. Ancient Mesopotamia, the land we now call Iraq, is home to the many inventions that catapulted human beings into culturally advanced societies. The invention of the wheel, writing, astronomy, mathematical systems, and canal irrigation are only a few of the achievements relevant to humanity’s cultural evolution. Many of today’s cultures are based on the ideologies and scientific innovations that were developed in Mesopotamia thousands of years ago. Through a series of vast trade routes and networks, those ideas and innovations spread throughout the Old World, connecting different cultures across time and space (Bertman 2003).

Iraq’s rich cultural history and contributions to the world came from diverse ancient cultures, including the Sumerians, Babylonians, and Assyrians. After the fall of the last great ancient empires, the Abbasid Dynasty made Baghdad the Muslim capital of culture and education. Abu Ja’far Al Mansour, the Second Abbasid Caliph, established Baghdad, the City of Peace, in AD 762. His Baghdad was a city of learning, and scientific discovery. This was the Islamic Golden Age, which saw the establishment of schools and institutions dedicated to educational advancements. Baghdad’s ‘Bayt al-Hikmah’, or House of Wisdom, drew Muslim and non-
Muslim scholars from all over the world to study math, engineering, medicine, and translate the works of ancient Greek philosophers. ‘Al-Mustansiriyah’ and ‘Al-Nizamiyah’, were established as well respected educational institutions as venues for higher learning (Taha Al Najim 1993). Baghdad flourished and was a desired destination for traders traveling from across the Arab world, as well as from lands as far away as China. During its Golden Age, Baghdad was a city of knowledge and human creativity. It was a multi-cultural city, boasting a population of Arabs, Persians, Jews and Turkmen. It served as a cultural crossroads that allowed for the interaction of diverse civilizations and interchanges to facilitate the spread of different ideologies throughout the world (Falagas, Zarkadoulia & Samonis 2006; Gregorian 2004).

Baghdad’s Golden Age came to an end when Hulagu Khan, one of the many grandsons of Genghis Khan, sacked the city during the Mongol Invasion in 1258. Hulagu’s Mongol forces swept through the city slaughtering up to 100,000 inhabitants. They damaged ancient irrigation canals and destroyed libraries, palaces, and mosques, all the while looting what was not burned or damaged. The devastation was so great that the city was never able to fully recover (Black 2004; Frazier 2005). The once great city of Baghdad lost much of its cultural identity, falling into further decline after the 1534 Ottoman Turk takeover, and remained a governed province until after World War I. While a pall of colonialism hung over the country during the British Mandate after 1920, Baghdad did begin to reemerge from the long shadows of gloom that had hung over it since the Mongol Invasion, in large part due to oil revenues (Black 2004; Simon & Tejirian 2005).

Baghdad’s reputation as a city of knowledge, culture and artistic expression started to flourish again. In the mid-20th century a group of artists called The Pioneers, led by Faik Hassan, fathered Iraq’s modern art movement. Their innovative restyling of the human and animal form in Islamic art eventually led to the establishment of the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad. As the modern art movement grew, Baghdad was soon hosting international art exhibits, attracting artists from much of the Arab and European worlds (pers. communication A. Al-Makhzomy, December 2011). In addition to the revival in art, Iraq’s ancient past, buried under her desert sands, was a draw for western archaeologists who poured into Iraq from all over Europe and the United States. They flocked to the country to excavate ancient cities cited in Biblical stories, passing through Baghdad as they made their way north and south. One of the most famous of those explorers was Gertrude Bell, who not only passed through Baghdad, but lived in the Old City until her death in 1926. Her long list of achievements while in Iraq included establishing the first archaeological museum in Baghdad, further adding to the city’s growing cultural significance and laying a foundation for the preservation of Mesopotamian artifacts (Wallach 2005).

The allure of Baghdad also drew the likes of literary giant Agatha Christie and her archaeologist husband Sir Max Mallowan, who owned a house is the city. Baghdad even became a setting for one of Christie’s murder-mystery novels named, They Came to Baghdad. By the 1940s, souks, or markets, bookstalls, casinos and cafés lined Al-Rashid, Abu Nuw’as and Al-Mutanabbi Streets. By the end of the 1950s oil revenues made it possible for the King to hire distinguished architect Frank Lloyd Wright to design an opera house and cultural centre slated to sit on the banks of the Tigris River. Although the 1958 Iraq Revolution prevented the initiation of the project, which was never revisited, the city could still claim status as an international cultural capital of the world (Cole 1960).

Look at any postcard from the 1960s and you will see a Baghdad freshly independent from foreign rule where western tourists visited without fear. Despite its internal and external political problems, it was a clean, vibrant, modern city, filled with red double decker buses, colorful gardens, and neatly manicured streets running alongside the banks of the Tigris River and blue domed mosques gleaming in the bright Iraqi sunshine. Smartly dressed men and women, some in western clothing, some in traditional Arab garments, reveled in the cultural splendors of the city. In January 1970, a city proud of its heritage opened the Al Baghdaddi Museum, located on Al-Rashid Street, to serve as a tribute to showcase life in early 20th century Baghdad. The museum exhibited life-sized sculptures depicting various traditional city scenes, from men playing games of chess at the local coffee shop, to a peek inside a metallurgy shop.
The museum was established in order to remind the community about their heritage and to appreciate the long-standing customs that were part of everyday Baghdad life.

Conflict and Unrest

Cultural heritage in Baghdad continued to prosper well into the 1980s, albeit much of the population suffered under the tyrannical rule of Saddam Hussein. It was during the Ba’ath Party’s time in power when traditional arts, under the guise of promoting Arab nationalism, were generously supported. It was also during this period when numerous statues, mosaics, and monuments were made in Hussain’s image and erected across the country. A few of the most iconic images, the Victory Arches, or Swords of Qadisiyya, and the Monument to the Unknown Solider, became infamous due to their inclusion in the US controlled ‘Green Zone’ during the Iraq War (Isakhan 2013). However, Baghdad’s modern day decline started and ended with events that took place during Hussein’s hegemony. First with the Iran-Iraq War, up to the most recent 2003 Iraq War, Iraq’s capital city experienced economic decline, international sanctions and isolation, and the destruction of tangible cultural heritage on many levels.

Since Baghdad’s founding, the city has experienced peaks and ebbs of violence, prosperity and decline. Its renowned streets, souks and iconic sites have survived and revived after each of the city’s transformations. After the 2003 Iraq War, Baghdad experienced a new transformation, much on par with the devastation caused by the Mongol Invasion more than 700 years earlier. Baghdad was bombed for three consecutive days during the US led Shock & Awe Campaign, Saddam Hussein’s palaces and Ba’ath Party governmental buildings being the main targets (Allawi 2007; Fallows 2006). Although cultural icons such as the Iraq Museum and the Iraq National Library and Archives were not targeted by US and coalition military forces, local vandals looted and damaged museums, libraries, and numerous other buildings. Historically Iraq had experienced a relatively heterogeneous social-cohesion between Shi’as, Sunnis and other minorities up until the Iraq War. The 2003 disbanding of the Sunni dominated Iraqi army, the de-Ba’athification campaign, and Sunni and Shi’a militias opposed to the post-2003 Iraqi government created a long-lived insurgency. What originally began as a crusade against the occupying troops, soon escalated along sectarian lines, resulting in rocket and bombing attacks against mosques, governmental buildings, and local souks. Neighborhood demographics started to change with the violence, most dramatically after the bombing of the Shi’a Al Askari Mosque in February 2006, which ultimately changed the relationship between Shi’a and Sunni sects. Concrete barriers manned by Iraqi police checkpoints physically segregated neighborhoods. Further psychological barriers were imposed by militias on both sides who created their own checkpoints, relying on sectarian identification to intimidate and threaten anyone in the ‘wrong’ neighborhood (Damluji 2010; Hendrickson & Tuckerb 2005; Isakhan 2013).

Today it is difficult to image a Baghdad free of the barriers and checkpoints that have become a part of its modern landscape. A trip down any street in the city will reveal buildings pockmarked with shrapnel scars, even along the famous bookstalls on Al-Mutanabbi Street and the Al-Ghazi pet market. But despite the violence, loss of life, sectarian divisions, and disruptions to daily life, the true sense of the Iraqi spirit of place shines through. Shortly after their erection, the concrete barriers were covered with colorful art, much of it representing the numerous archaeological and cultural heritage sites located throughout the country (Figure 1), while the markets re-opened for business with new books and pets available for purchase. The landscape changed during and after the war, but the sense of place did not. Baghdad’s maze of buildings and structures may have been physically altered, but the human connection to them remains to this day.

A Sense of Place and Attachment

Baghdad did not become one of the great cultural capitals of the world by physical attributes alone. Although the city’s markets, streets and historical buildings hold aesthetic appeal, the memories of individuals and groups associated with those places have greatly contributed to the city’s importance. Looking at the city as a place or a significant space, then Baghdad’s
space has held meaning to its inhabitants dating back to the city’s founding. Many of Baghdad’s families have lived in the same homes and neighborhoods for generations. Significant events took place in those homes, times that mark the milestones in life, such as weddings, the birth of children, and the passing of the elderly. Events such as these result in deep emotional investments attached to the markets, streets, and homes. Memories attached to the physical property develop into spirit of place. That is, the Iraqi’s attachment to the souks and heritage sites is due to past generations bonding to the familiarity of the places, creating feelings of identity, belonging, and attachment (Vanclay 2008). One of the best examples of this is the culture of books.

Baghdad is steeped in a long-standing set of traditional values told through poems and stories, which are in the collective memories of generations of Iraqis. The city streets provide the means to share those values. Baghdad’s literary culture has always lived in the streets and book markets of Al-Mutanabbi Street, in the Rusafa district made famous for the storefronts, stalls and streets filled with books and other pieces of literary art, giving credence to the old Arab saying, ‘Cairo writes, Beirut publishes, Baghdad reads’ (Al-Hussainy & Matthews 2008: 97). But it was more than the books, newspapers and journals sold at the market that gave the street its identity. The individuals who frequented the market were there for more than just buying, selling and trading. Pre-2003, the area welcomed a mixture of Sunni, Shi’a and Christian residents and visitors; the books served as a bond that brought the different sects together. The street served as a gathering place to share ideas, discuss politics and debate differences in opinion, as well as hear the latest neighborhood news. The market acquired its identity from the generations of merchants, buyers, and visitors who made the book market a part of their daily lives. Iraqis who grew up and around this literary culture were deeply affected by the March 2007 suicide car bombing of Al-Mutanabbi Street, not only for the devastating loss of life, but the loss of memory, of the dead and the living. What had been a street filled with positive memories, soon turned to negative emotions. The bombing of the famous market changed what had been part of Iraqi identity for centuries. The collective memories that created the sense of place were destroyed in one violent act. There has never been a claim of responsibility for the 2007 bombing, but other bombings in the Rusafa district have been linked to Sunni insurgent groups. Following lines of ethnic segregation in districts throughout Baghdad, by 2007 Rusafa boasted a heavy Shia militia presence, with only a small Sunni presence in the most northern section of the district (Cochrane 2007). The bombing created a divide beyond identifying with the place, it also segregated a once heterogeneous neighborhood. Recognising the importance of the physical and emotional loss of the market prompted a US based organisation to create the Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here organisation. The group’s main focus is revitalising literacy for all Iraqis, and does not delve into the sectarian issues of Iraq, rather members of the group sponsor book and poetry readings, and cultural events to support the re-establishment of Baghdad’s literacy legacy (Karim 2012). In addition, Baghdad’s population has been resilient enough to ensure the identity of the market was restored. Just one year after the bombing the street was reopened and the merchants and buyers returned. However, the ethnic diversity of the crowds is unknown at the time of this writing.
Iraq’s long history as a multicultural country, with overlapping cultures shaping its growth over millennium, has left an emotional impact on its modern day population. In the Abu Ghraib district just west of Baghdad, one can find modern day Agar Quf, also known as ancient Dur Kurigalzu. When European travelers first encountered the remains of Dur Kurigalzu in the 17th century, they believed it was the Biblical Tower of Babel, a misconception that continues to this day (Oates 1986). The ruins are actually the remains of 14th century BC city built by the Kassites, a cultural group originally from Persia who invaded the country during the Mesopotamian Dark Ages (Matthews 2003; Roux 1992). The ruins include the remains of a ziggurat and three temples that were excavated by western archaeologists between 1930 and 1945. Stating in the 1960s the Iraqi Directorate of Antiquities began restoration work on the site, which continued well into the 1980s. It was also during this time when several modern buildings were added on the site. A small museum, a collections storage room, administrative offices and a café were constructed for the use of staff and visitors alike. In addition, a recreation area comprised of an outdoor stage, picnic areas and a children’s playground. The remains of the ziggurat have served as a landmark to ancient and modern travelers alike. Agar Quf was one of the few recreational or cultural attractions in the greater Baghdad area that was open to the public during Saddam Hussein’s time in power. Specific areas in central Baghdad were designated off-limits to all but Saddam’s family and members of his Ba’ath Party. Because Agar Quf was located outside those areas, Iraqis identified with the site as a means of independence from a repressive government. Although the district has always demographically been a Sunni majority, that was not a deterrent for visitors pre-2003. In addition, its close proximity to the city limits of Baghdad made Aqar Quf one of Iraq’s most frequently visited archaeological sites before the occupation (pers. communication A. Kadhum, February 2009).

As with the Al-Mutanabbi Street book market, Agar Quf holds an important sense of place on a local and international level. The 3,000 year-old ruins have different concentrations of appeal for several specialized groups, such as archaeologists, and historians who are interested in studying the site to better understand the Kassite culture’s influence on Mesopotamia. The local community are connected by memories of outings to the recreational facilities to watch outdoor plays or dine in the café. However, like so many other venues throughout the country, in 2003 the buildings were completely looted of furniture, lighting, and most

Figure 2: Local Iraqi children stand in front of the remains of the Dur Kurigalzu ziggurat at modern day Agar Quf in March 2011. (Source: Diane Siebrandt)
contents, including the museum’s collection of artifacts. Soon after the looting, the Sunni militant organisation known as Al-Qa’ida in Iraq (AQI), controlled the area for much of the war, and with the exception of a few neighborhood children attempting to climb the ziggurat, visitors, especially Shi’a visitors, were scared (pers. communication A. Kadhum, February 2009). AQI was eventually driven out of the district during the US lead ‘surge’. Soon after, a US military unit provided funding for the site curator to refurbish and improve the recreational areas in hopes that visitors would return and once again identify with the site (Roberts & Roberts 2013). The upgrades were completed, but the tourists did not return in droves. The curator was unable to secure further funding to maintain the refurbished buildings and recreation area, and the site once again fell into disrepair. Unfortunately, at the writing of this paper the site remains largely unfrequented, post-2003 fears of sectarian violence deters most Shi’as, with only a few Iraqis attempting to visit the ruins, and most of those are the local children (Figure 2).

Another Baghdad venue that Iraqis strongly identify with is Al Zawra’a Gardens, located in the Karkh district. During Saddam Hussain’s regime, the district was Sunni controlled, dominated by the Ba’ath Party and Republican Guard Headquarters, the Ministry of Defence, as well as several other governmental institutions and a number of palaces. However, the gardens, housing the Baghdad Zoo, which is nestled among outdoor entertainment venues including carnival and boat rides, parklands and picnic areas, was concealed from the regimes edifices by palm groves and 200 acres of land. The zoo and surrounding park grounds were established in the early 1970s, and were the setting of the once-annual November holiday known as ‘Baghdad Day’. Since its opening, the park was a popular destination for family outings and young couples. The green lawns, colorful flowers and a large lake in the center of the park offered a welcome reprieve from the heat of the city centre. The zoo could always be located by spotting Zawra’a Tower, a restaurant featuring an Islamic themed dome perched on top of a 54-meter high pillar, offering panoramic views of the city. At the onslaught of the 2003 war, damages to the park and the looting and killing of large numbers of zoo animals was yet another catastrophe for one of Iraq’s cultural venues. Zoologists from across the globe responded with offers of assistance, and eventually a project led by a US army unit saw that the park was renovated and reopened to the public in July 2003 (Howell & Neal 2012).

Conditions at the park continued to improve over the years, including becoming an integrated Sunni-Shi’a neighborhood, according to data collected by the School of International and Public Affairs of Columbia University in New York City (The Gulf Project 2014). By November 2007, ‘Baghdad Day’ was once again celebrated after an almost four year hiatus. From that date forward, Iraqis were able to reengage in the traditional celebrations of their capital city. One of those traditions being the Arabic Maqam, which is music developed from traditional poetry. It features the playing of the Oud, a stringed instrument resembling a lute, along with drums, and accompanied by rhythmic singing and dancing. By 2012 the park hosted an international flower festival, complete with ‘Maqam’ bands and dancers, roving chai or tea merchants, as well the opportunity to ride a 55-metre-high Ferris wheel, reputed to be the second largest in the Middle East (Figure 3). By January 2013 construction projects providing refurbishments to the amusement park and restaurants, including Zarwa’a Tower, were well underway (pers. communication, D. Saddam, January 2013). The steps taken since the early days of the war resulted in Baghdad being named the 2013 Cultural Capital of the Arab World in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Cultural Capitals Program. The park continues to host an annual international flower festival every spring, which highlights Baghdad’s cultural revitalisation, and acknowledges her long history in the development and spread agriculture.

The redevelopment of cultural venues throughout Baghdad has helped the Iraqi people reconnect with their heritage by transforming a bad place into a good place. Frank Vanclay notes that places frequently change which can either cause place attachment, or a reduced sense of place. According to Vanclay, in order to overcome loss and reengage with place attachment, it is necessary to attract an audience through festivals or physically altering a place (Vanclay 2008: 4). The refurbishments and subsequent festivals at the park are a positive example of how the Iraqis have chosen to pursue reattachment through refurbishments. Many
Iraqis had an emotional investment in the park for years, and the physical damages affected how they could respond to it after the war. Emotional healing took place in part by reviving the annual festivals and shows. While it may have appeared odd to promote family outings to enjoy the splendors of flower festivals when civil unrest continued to besiege the country, the emotional healing and reconnecting to the park promoted a sense of belonging to something other than war and strife.

All three sites discussed in this paper share a common component in that their architectural framework appeals in both the physical and emotional senses. Houses and shops along Al-Mutanabbi Street featuring traditional 'Mashrabiyas', carved wooden lattice worked window screens, evoke a sense of historical familiarity. Iraqis would wander between booksellers while overlooked by these ornate screens. Local visitors at Agar Quf could relate viscerally with the ruins of the ziggurat that sat as a landmark in their own backyard, while international visitors sensed a cognitive connection to the site due to western based theological stories associated with the ruins. The design of the various species of flora spread across Al Zawra’a Gardens, in conjunction with the amusement park rides, offered a recreational retreat from the drudgeries of everyday life. The physical attributes of these three sites engaged the senses of the people. The sights, sounds, smells and feel of these places created mental footprints of belonging and identification. Therefore, when these places were damaged due to different conflict events, the psychological reconstructions were as much, if not more, important than the physical reconstructions.

A sense of place has numerous influencing factors depending on an individual’s or a group’s experiences. These can include political, social, spiritual, and cultural memories allied with any specific setting or event. Understanding viable connections and transitions through concepts of ownership, power, control, and knowledge between, and across lines of human and non-human relationships help define emotional responses to a setting. A Person-Process-Place (PPP) tripartite model demonstrates how bonding with places can elicit emotional responses from individuals and groups. PPP measures human connections to a site through, (1) the identity of an individual or group, (2) how the meaning of a place is processed cognitively and behaviorally by that individual or group, and (3) the physical and social attachment an individual or group has to a place. All three dimensions work together in order to define place attachment and ultimately how they fulfill human needs such as survival, security and the accomplishment of...
goals (Scannell & Gifford 2010: 2). In the three case studies provided in this paper, the human connections to the sites can be understood as both social and environmental attributes of PPP. Ultimately the goal was refurbishing and reopening the sites after they were damaged and closed to the public. Overcoming security issues played a large part in enticing the return of visitors and accomplishing the goal of refurbishment.

Each site is an important measure of Iraqi cultural norms and values, and engagement in everyday life. The reconstruction projects at the sites therefore support the notion that healing the physical place and feeling a sense of security can in turn, assist with the healing of human emotions and sense of place attachment. Literature on understanding place attachment has mainly focused on analysing individual and group values and their emotional connections to tourism venues and environmental issues (Brehm, Eisenhauer & Stedman 2013; Campelo et al. 2014; Ramkissoon, Smith & Weiler 2012; Stephenson 2010; Tam 2013). According to Campelo, Aitken, Thyne and Gnoth, place branding defines how a space is valued by the local and international communities for touristic purposes, keeping community characteristics foremost in mind (Campelo et al. 2014). The reality of any large-scale international tourism in Iraq will not materialise any time soon however, local visitation does occur depending on the security situation at any given moment. Therefore, a modified version of the Campelo et al. model can be used to determine sense of place in relation to ancestral ties and everyday experiences as they relate to the community and uniqueness of each place. Each of the case studies in this paper possess cultural and historical significance for generations of Iraqis. And although foreign visitors are a rarity these days, when Baghdad was a cultural capital of the world, global influences contributed to how each place was shaped over time. This did not diminish the value of any of places, but rather added to their universal appeal. For example, the diverse literature shared at the book market, the cross-cultural interests at Agar Quf, and forming cross-cultural international relations using flower festivals as a mediator. The central factor common to each site is the significance of the human component of place attachment. Without the bond of the human to the non-human elements, the sites would not hold special meaning, and would just be another street, site or park.

Because the city of Baghdad has been inhabited for more than 1,200 years, and the country for thousands of years more, the generational connections between people and place tends to be deeper than a more recently constructed venue. In theory, the longer a person or population is connected to a place, the stronger the bond tends to be (Lewicka 2011). One contributing factor to the relatively quick refurbishment of the Al-Mutanabbi Street book market after the 2007 bombing was due to the local community’s long history of connection with the place. The market itself possessed a memory, and it proved difficult for the community not to go back as quickly as possible because of the strong sense of place attachment. However, reconstruction is only one of the many steps necessary in order to heal the physical and emotional wounds. To brand Baghdad as a desirable city and realise its ambition to reclaim its status as a cultural capital of the world once again is fraught with extraordinary challenges owing to the continued sectarian violence, civil unrest and the on-going fluid security situation in the country. Appreciating what the city means to the population and why its cultural venues matter is one step towards healing. Unfortunately, some places in the world are historically violent, and Baghdad is at the heart of continual disorder.

The Future of Baghdad

Baghdad enjoyed the high status of a cultural capital of the world in its golden days, and is fighting to be part of a global market again. Through reconstruction projects and international outreach, the Iraqi cultural heritage community is striving to return a sense of place to Baghdad so it can become a cultural capital again. Great leaps and bounds have been achieved since the start of its decline in the early 1980s. However, the city continues to be beset with sectarian conflict and civil unrest, which threatens to undermine the advances made so far. Districts and neighborhoods that remain ethnically segregated can only promote further disunions and violence. The added menace of the radical Islamic extremists calling themselves the Islamic State are severely endangering the region today, causing international concern for the future
of Iraq and her population. Iraq, especially Baghdad, has been a difficult environment to work in for the past 40 years, with the last 10 specifically hard because of escalating conflicts and difficulties for non-Iraqis to enter Baghdad and move about freely. For Baghdad to once again be a cultural capital of world, a re-engagement with an ethnically diverse, and cross-cultural population is needed, which is unlikely to occur if violence continues. As the situation in Iraq remains fluid, field research on the topics presented in this paper are hoped to be conducted in greater depth in the near future.

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advisor to Kings, ally of Lawrence of Arabia*, Alfred A. Knopf Incorporated, Westminster.