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Iraqis' Diet Fifteen Years After the Invasion

Some Iraqis might assert that today everything is available in their country. That's true to a degree; if you exclude self-sufficiency. And trust.

Traveling throughout Baghdad and into the south I recognized the same models of vehicles one finds in the US, along with some Chinese-made trucks. We pick up tasty BBQ chicken from street vendors. Fresh vegetables and fruits, shoes and garments and cosmetics of all varieties and qualities are available; furniture and linens and toys for any age are plentiful, as are electronic goods. Communication by FaceBook and Whatsapp are unregulated. YouTube is heavily used.

You have fast food bistros serving salads and french fries. Pizza is popular, and a few upscale family restaurants moored on the banks of the Tigris are well patronized. You can linger at wifi-connected coffee shops, and find bars and discos open until early morning. Fresh baked fish and roasted chicken plates can be delivered to office or home.

To all appearances the Iraqi economy is just fine, if you observe only consumption habits. A simple, more accurate way to judge economic conditions is to turn from the sparkling facades of Chevrolet show rooms and decline a pizza lunch to instead stroll through a local supermarket.

Doing so in Iraq, I am reminded what I found 20 years ago inside a Palestinian food store in Al-Bireh village nearby Ramallah. Two-liter soda bottles stacked outside the shop were not only for American teenagers visiting their grandmothers. Soda had become everyone's preferred beverage. Those columns of orange and green bottles may add color to the street and signal modern tastes and available surplus cash. At what cost?

Leaning closer to examine the labels, I see they're in Hebrew. With no attempt to camouflage their origin, Israeli products are exported for Palestinian consumption. Inside the shop I note how canned and packaged foods likewise originate in Israel. Why should I be shocked therefore when I find Al-Bireh's lebaan, yogurt, labeled in Hebrew? Lebaan, the staple of Arab breakfast enjoyed with olives, sliced cucumber and tomato, and unleavened bread, is (was!) the traditional produce of Arab herders and farmers throughout our history. Olives are the last surviving sign of Palestinian agriculture, and this industry too is in decline.

The fate of Palestine's olive industry is paralleled by Iraq's date production. Iraq's legendary 40 million date palms, provenance of California's successful date production, once Iraq's primary and unsurpassed export after crude oil, are wasting away today.

Which brings us back to Iraqis' diet and my visit a few weeks ago to a Baghdad supermarket. I pause on the residential street in Karrada's middle class neighborhood where I stay, to slip into a food store. Here too the shop's entrance is constrained by stacks of bottled soda. Pepsi seem the most abundant brand; others with names I do not recognize are plentiful too. Moving into the entranceway, both sides are piled with boxes and trays displaying generous supplies of chips and cookies (labeled in English and Arabic, or English only).

Inside the store, I saunter along one isle perusing canned and bottled items. Pickled olives and mayonnaise, salad dressings, tang and apple juice, cheeses, olive oil, pasta, canned tuna and tea— almost all of them imported. Not Israel here, but Spain, Turkey, Columbia, China, Thailand, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia supply Iraqis with most of their food. Foreign company names appear on all packaged food items I examine. Moreover, prices here (where 1,300 Iraqi dinar = one dollar) differ little from US supermarket rates. The cost of a 'Pringles' package or a can of tuna in Baghdad, for example, is what I pay in the U.S.

When we turn to fresh produce, fruits and vegetables, the situation is even more alarming. Here too most produce is imported. Even oranges (in this land of orange trees). Beets and cabbage are marked 'Iraqi', but pomegranate, okra, eggplant, bananas, cucumber and other greens are from Jordan, Turkey and beyond. The nicest looking tomatoes (a staple in Iraqi dishes) are foreign produced.

Why these imports when Iraq is still largely rural? Foreign produce is less expensive than that produced by Iraq's farmers, I'm told. Why? Because they are priced to undercut Iraqi production. Why? Because import licenses are awarded to foreign suppliers. And why is

this? Because ministry personnel who negotiate these contracts receive handsome kickbacks. This, at the same time, when: a) electricity supply in Iraq is so weak and unreliable that local production is impossible, and b) ministries responsible for agriculture and manufacturing don't function in the interests of Iraqi producers. Iraq's once thriving agricultural base is woefully neglected and derelict.

These conditions are a direct result of government policy and a heavily corrupt bureaucracy. In the case of the bankrupt Palestinian economy, declining production and joblessness are to a large degree imposed by the occupier, Israel, implemented through a compliant Palestinian bureaucracy, oversupplied with wage earners whose disposable income supports a consumption economy and reliance on imports.

In Iraq, the US government still wields enormous influence on Iraq's administration. From the start of its occupation of Iraq, the U.S. has thwarted attempts to rebuild the nation's electricity grid and build and install machinery essential to a functioning manufacturing base.

(Significantly, some energy is available to ensure communications function, so that Iraqis can access television and their phone apps. Most homes and small businesses augment a patchy, inadequate government electrical supply with batteries and generators, imported of course.)

These conditions, in both Palestine and Iraq, are bald 'disaster capitalism'. They exhibit what Naomi Klein identifies in [The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism](#). Her influential 2007 study was followed in 2015 by [Disaster Capitalism](#), offering irrefutable evidence of these insidious foreign-directed processes which [enrich outside powers](#) while directing responsibility onto incompetent corrupt local governments.

At every level, from reliance on underwear for its soldiers to pharmaceuticals to tangy beverages, Iraq's decline into a consumer nation is unarguably the policy of outside powers. It works with a compliant merchant class of suppliers, happy to take a narrow slice while its foreign partners enjoy the prime cuts. It's a process well known to every Iraqi.

BN Aziz recently returned from a two week visit in Iraq.