The National

the review

Books This is my iPod. There are many like it, but this one is mine

Saloon Abu Dhabi at the great exhibition hall of China

Big Idea From the mouths of caves

World I'm going back to Calley

Not fade away

While most Ethiopians have kept scrupulously silent about the terror they endured under the Derg regime, Hirut Abebe-Jiri has made loud remembrance her life's work. Andrew Rice on the struggle to build the Red Terror archive

Hirut Abebe-Jiri was born in April 1960, in the 29th year of the reign of Haile Selassie, the last emperor of Ethiopia. It was in that year that the monarchy began to crumble. In December, the emperor was briefly overthrown in a palace coup, during which his son took to the radio airwaves, promising to put an end to what he decried as three millennia of stagnation. But Haile Selassie returned from an overseas trip and put down the rebellion, hanging the chief plotters in public. For the next decade or so, public discontent was stifled, and kept out of the sight of children like Hirut.

Hirut – Ethiopians are formally called by their first names – was raised within the comfortable confines of the aristocratic elite. Her grandfather, a large landowner, had been a confidante of Emperor Menelik II, one of Haile Selassie's predecessors. Her mother, a canny businesswoman, had made a fortune of her own. Hirut's father was a prominent attorney and genteel reformer who penned anonymous letters to Haile Selassie's ministers, protesting Ethiopia's manifold injustices: the poor lacked food, the rich monopolised the land, and the ageing emperor was growing ever more despotic and disconnected. But his class treachery was mainly rhetorical. The family had a summer house, a car and a television set. Hirut, the youngest of six children, was chauffeured each morning to a British-run private school.

"In 1974, when the revolution started, I was 14 years old," Hirut recalled. This time, it was the army that rose up against the emperor. Soldiers came to the royal palace, informed Haile Selassie that he'd been deposed, and took him to prison. Many cabinet ministers and members of the royal family were also rounded up. Hirut was related to some of these men; others were friends of her father's or the parents of her own friends. One night in November 1974, she said, she went to a party with some of the children of the arrested men: they danced and socialised as if nothing had happened. "The next morning this march comes on the radio," Hirut said. With it came an announcement: 59 members of the emperor's inner circle had been executed by a firing squad. "Imagine that you are sitting and talking with me, and you are hearing that your father is killed," Hirut said. "It's shocking. Why did they do it that way? I think to terrorise the people. That day, I think it put something inside the people."

Hirut, continued on 4 →

Hirut Abebe in Ottawa September 4, 2009. Photo by Blair Gable for The National

the review saloon

The great exhibition hall of China

As visa policies relax, a booth in Beijing entices business visitors to Abu Dhabi

A visitor standing outside the China National Convention Centre in Beijing last week could have been forgiven for thinking that Abu Dhabi had the whole place to itself. The exhibition centre, part of the 2008 Olympic infrastructure, is a prime example of Beijing's heroic new scale of architecture, and the China Incentive, Business Travel & Meetings Exhibition – a trade show for countries and regions hoping to attract business tourism – couldn't fill more than a corner of the otherwise-empty building. As visiting mortals inched their way across the endless plain of the car park, they had ample time to consider the Abu Dhabi banners festooning the entrance.

"That's all part of our branding," says Gillian Taylor, the business tourism manager at the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority, who was in Beijing for the exhibition. "It includes the flags outside, and the logos on the bags that are given to all participants. We want people to have an impression of Abu Dhabi before they even get in the door."

The impression doesn't stop there; with the exception of the exhibition booths set up by Beijing and Macau, who have a home-court advantage, Abu Dhabi's stand is the largest in the hall (directions were given as "We're right next to Dubai, but bigger!"). While other countries are shoehorned into prefab cubicles, Abu Dhabi sits upon an expansive platform scattered with cool white armchairs and backed by a scene of men sailing a wooden boat across inviting waters. Dates and coffee are served.

Abu Dhabi's presence at the exhibition is one element of the larger Plan Abu Dhabi 2030 (which ought to impress the Chinese, whose economic plans come in mere five-year increments). It is also the result of a recent change in Chinese policy: before this month, Chinese visa restrictions did not allow tour groups to travel to the UAE; now they do. As a result, the Emirates' recession-battered tourism sector is looking East hungrily.

The name of the game at this exhibition is "business tourism", which is not the same as "business travel", Taylor explains. While the latter might entail just a few company executives visiting somewhere for a day or two of meetings, the former involves large-scale conventions, corporate retreats, and executive getaways. Business tourism, Taylor says, has even developed into a full-blown industry with its own acronym, MICE: Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions. "We try not to use the term MICE," she adds (without elaborating).

Potential clients here consist mainly of corporate scouts and travel agents. But the crowd around Abu Dhabi's stand seems far more varied. The booth's "hook", its killer feature, is a little photo stand where passers-by can dress up in a dishdasha or an abaya and have their picture taken before a backdrop of an Arab man leading a camel on a rope. The attraction is an enormous hit, and shows a grasp of Chinese sensibilities rivalled only by Indonesia's booth, which is offering satay.

Bustle at the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority booth in Beijing. Courtesy the China Incentive, Business travel & Meetings Exhibition

Self-portrait in hand, visitors are then given a presentation on the emirate in either Chinese or English, consisting of a video and short talk. Waiting in line is a 30-something, bespectacled representative from the China Youth Travel Service, one of the country's largest travel agencies (which has expanded to cater to corporations in addition to "youth"). He opts for Chinese, and the video rolls, beginning with three photos of Abu Dhabi taken in 1949, 1963 and the present. The contrast, needless to say, is striking. The rest of the presentation contains a surprising number of artists' renderings – leaving it unclear whether the sumptuous facilities have yet to be built, or whether this has just been done for effect.

The presentation delivers up a greatest-hits list of Abu Dhabi attractions for the business tourist: from the Yas hotel, built on top of the Formula 1 racetrack, to the Al Ain National Exhibition Center ("Futuristic and Inspiring!"), to the island developments in the capital ("Saadiyat: Culture!" "Yas: Entertainment!"). The young representative's only moment of doubt comes with the "Eight Star Emirates Palace". "But how can it have eight stars?" he wants to know. The young Chinese woman giving the presentation, who has never been to Abu Dhabi, dodges a bit before admitting with a laugh that the hotel next door had seven stars "and everyone says the Emirates Palace is better."

Throughout the presentations a faint hint of Dubai-Abu Dhabi competition can be detected. "The first thing we tell anyone is that Dubai is a wonderful destination, and we are in no way competing with them," says Taylor. "But Abu Dhabi does have some unique things to offer in terms of history and culture." The next-door Dubai stand is dominated by a vaguely mosque-like structure that is canary-yellow.

The young travel agent in glasses admits that the majority of his corporate clients remain hazy on the difference between Abu Dhabi and Dubai. "Many also don't realise that the UAE and Saudi Arabia are different countries," he says. "Actually, some think of the whole Middle East as just one big place."

The travel agent and the presenter finally hit on a local analogy. Dubai is like Shanghai, they agree: modern and commercial, leading the development race by dint of a head start. Abu Dhabi, on the other hand, is like Beijing: focused more on history and culture, staid by comparison but also more serious. As it happens, the presenter is from Shanghai and the travel agent a Beijinger. They seem pleased with their analogy, and the tidy win-win scenario it implies.

✱ **Eric Abrahamsen**

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I miss civilisation

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Village people

A virtual world for the Arab world, in the Roman empire

Every day, almost half a million Arabs choose to spend their time dealing with marauding bands of Gauls, battling fierce Teutons and maintaining tracts of Roman farmland.

These are the loyal users of *Travian*, an online computer strategy game similar to *World of Warcraft* or *Command and Conquer*, but with two crucial tweaks – it can be played inside a web browser, and in Arabic. These features have helped the game, developed by a German university student, become one of the great runaway success stories of the Arabic internet, played by almost one in every 10 Arabic speakers with web access.

This makes *Travian* one of the few corners of the web where people from the Middle East are disproportionately represented. Despite representing less than three per cent of the world's internet users and generating less than one per cent of all internet content, Arabic speakers make up more than 10 per cent of Travian's four million active users. Put differently: for every Twitter user in the Middle East, there are more than 100 people playing Travian on a weekly basis.

"It feels good, to be in a place that is like a home for Arabs, for once not to be the weird guys standing in the corner," said Ziad, a doctor from Saudi Arabia, who describes his online *Travian* persona as "Roman, wanting long-term alliances, planning some big conquests".

Ziad keeps a browser window with his *Travian* account open throughout the day at his clinic, which is located in one of the Kingdom's most prominent hospitals (this is why he asked for his last name to be withheld). "Too many people in the hospital are playing it," he explained. "The IT guys have blocked the website, but if you grow up in Saudi, you know how to get around these things."

Travian is played in real time, and is not a game for those who crave instant action. Instruct your farmers to upgrade their equipment and you are told it will take half an hour, which it does.

Good players – who must administer a thriving city centre, multiple farms and other resource-gathering operations to support a conquering army – log into the game for many hours each day. Ziad keeps it running throughout long hospital

Travian is played by almost one in 10 Arabic speakers with web access

shifts, and he has Travian running on his computer when he is home. "The rest of the time, it's open on my BlackBerry," he said. "I make a big time investment. But, as you will see when you visit my lands, it has been worth it."

Users of popular websites like Facebook are likely to have seen banner advertising for *Travian*, with the company using the site and many others to target Middle Eastern web surfers with ads for its Arabic-language service.

The game's popularity in the region has its parent company thinking big about how to capitalise on the Arabic world, said Bernd Heinisch, the head of marketing at Travian Games in Germany. "It has grown so big that we plan something specific and new exclusively for the Arab community," he said.

> *I make a big time investment. But, as you will see when you visit my lands, it has been worth it*

Heinisch, who has overseen the launch of Travian in 40 languages, has a theory that the game's powerful resonance in the Arab world comes from its focus on grand strategy, rather than instant stimulation.

"We're talking about the region where chess has its origins, the home of so many strategy games," he said. "In many ways, Travian is similar to chess. Every individual move is simple, a child can do it. But to understand the whole picture and play against a master will take months or years of practice."

Luckily for *Travian*, the region that appreciates its product also happens to be home to some of the world's wealthiest consumers. Since activating a feature that allows players to purchase game-world gold (the game's key resource) with real-world money, *Travian* has found Arab players keen to invest, particularly those from Saudi Arabia, *Travian's* biggest Middle East market.

"They love investing in their village, building up their projects. It makes people especially happy, and the return on the investment is a real sense of pride," Mr Heinisch said. "They are happy to spend more money on more features. So now we're planning on a kind of Arabic VIP version."

✱ **Tom Gara**

review the week

the big idea

Whether bin Laden can deliver on any of the threats and promises he continues to make brazenly, year after year, remains open to question.

Big mouth

Al Qa'eda's tactical power is impossible to gauge, writes Bernard Haykel, but its real strength still lies where it always has – in public relations

Among those who study and monitor jihadist movements around the world, the health of al Qa'eda – and whether it still constitutes a serious threat – remains a central point of debate. Many commentators believe the movement's death knell can be heard because it has lost militarily on multiple fronts, including in Iraq and Saudi Arabia. They also note the rejection of the movement by Hamas in the Palestinian territories and the serious ideological challenge posed by Hizbollah in Lebanon – the only Islamist group that has engaged and "defeated" the Israeli army. Those who think al Qa'eda still represents a considerable threat, on the other hand, point to its continued existence in Pakistan and Afghanistan, a reinvigorated presence in Yemen and, most significantly, that its two top leaders, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri, remain alive, free and voluble.

But this debate over the strength of al Qa'eda is, in many ways, a kind of inside baseball: it takes place principally among western analysts who are under pressure to predict al Qa'eda's next attack or its imminent demise.

In truth, no one knows the actual power of al Qa'eda: there is no accepted barometer to measure its influence or how widely its ideological arguments and claims resonate with Muslims. All that can be said with certainty is that it has committed specific attacks, and that it has, over 20 years, recruited several thousand men to its training camps. The movement has also made a highly public attempt to monopolize the rhetoric of grievance over the alleged oppression and humiliation of Muslims at the hands of non-Muslims, and by the United States in particular. In this respect, al Qa'eda's ideologues and media mavens have been both eloquent and masterful, using excellent video footage, graphics, narrative and poetry.

The most common themes in al Qa'eda's ideological productions have been the occupation of Muslim lands by non-Muslim armies – in Saudi Arabia, at first, and more recently in Iraq and Afghanistan – and the corruption and unbelief of the leaders of some Muslim states. The advice for liberating occupied land is for every individual Muslim around the world to take up arms against the invader – in essence the privatization of violence. As for dealing with the so-called "apostate regimes", Muslims must rebel, using force of arms if necessary, and topple them. The aim throughout is to radicalize Muslim populations to rise up against the existing political order and to usher in a new system of Islamic governance that rejects the established international order of nation-states.

Al Qa'eda has, on occasion, invoked the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, but it only began to do so forcefully after the events of September 11 – no doubt out of a realisation that the central conflict for the Arabs can not be ignored. It must be remembered that al Qa'eda's roots lie in Saudi Arabia and Egypt; it is the political grievances in these two countries that have dominated its political agenda. The question of the Israeli occupation and the suffering of Palestinians became an especially prominent rallying cry for al Qa'eda after the 2006 war in Lebanon, when Hizbollah's rhetoric and action seriously threatened to upstage al Qa'eda's claim to lead the Muslims' fight against Western oppression. Both movements compete for some of the same ground, and despite their sectarian differences, they share an identical vocabulary when describing the forces of world arrogance (*istikbar al-alami*), which are led by America and Israel, and who oppress the world's meek peoples (*mustadaafin*), especially Muslims.

Al Zawahiri produced a number of tapes during and after the Lebanon war to assert that the liberation of Palestine was also a major goal for al Qa'eda. The problem for him, however, was that al Qa'eda has not been able to strike a single Israeli target, let alone fight its powerful army to a stalemate in battle. Hizbollah, meanwhile, has deliberately prevented any Sunni Islamist group from approaching the Lebanese-Israeli border to engage the Israelis.

In the past eight years, al Qa'eda has attempted to refine its message, and it has begun to target each dispatch to specific audiences or theatres of war. Earlier this year, for example, bin Laden recorded an audio tape intended for Somalis, urging them to support the Islamist group Al Shabab and citing arguments drawn from local issues and grievances. Since 2006, al Qa'eda has deliberately addressed Americans, seeking to undermine support for the Bush administration's "war on terror". The content of these messages betrays some knowledge of American politics and history, and the English subtitles that have appeared on several tapes have been well-translated – likely thanks to the assistance of American converts like Adam Yahiye Gadahn (aka Azzam al Amriki).

> A Saudi wit suggested that these citations were evidence that bin Laden, like many a retired general, clearly has a lot of reading time on his hands

Initially al Qa'eda directed its appeals in the United States at African-American soldiers, attempting to convince them to refuse orders to fight in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and invoking the rhetoric of Malcolm X to argue that African-Americans and Muslims alike have been oppressed by the United States.

Recently, however, that argument has been expanded to include all Americans: the entire country, bin Laden suggests, has suffered under the pressure of corporate interests and the pro-Israel lobby. This is the essence of his most recent audio recording, which was released on September 13 to correspond to the eighth anniversary of the 2001 attacks.

Spoken in flawless, and at times rhyming, classical Arabic, the tone is that of a well-wisher seeking to provide honest counsel to the United States and offering to cease all hostilities between Muslims and Americans. The attacks of September 11, bin Laden says, took place because of American support for Israel and "a few other injustices" that he doesn't elaborate on. He continues to say that "our two nations" – the United States and the Muslim nation – "are victims to the politics of the White House", which is itself, in turn, "hostage to the powerful lobbying groups, especially the large corporations and the Israeli lobby". To prove this point, he directs Americans to several books written by "your own citizens": the first is a memoir by a man named John Perkins, which purports to tell of his career as an "economic hit man", sent by the United States to cripple the finances of developing countries; the second is *The Israel Lobby* and *US Foreign Policy* by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt. A Saudi wit suggested that these citations were evidence that bin Laden, like many a retired general, clearly has a lot of reading time on his hands.

Trying to disabuse those Americans who see great change and hope in Barack Obama, bin Laden claims that even Obama cannot change the course of American policy because of the structures of power that dominate the White House: if he did attempt to do so, bin Laden suggests, he would be assassinated like John and Bobby Kennedy.

Interestingly, Obama is described as a *mustadaaf* (an oppressed person) – the same term bin Laden uses for humiliated Muslims – this, in bin Laden's view, is why he cannot stop the wars that Bush began. Instead, bin Laden says, he has appointed the same defense officials and military leaders as Bush: Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, General David Petraeus and Admiral Mike Mullen – further proof, to bin Laden, that the neo-conservatives and the Israel Lobby still control the White House. It is therefore incumbent on the American people, he says, to realise what is truly happening and to change the system and cease support for Israel and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. If this happens, bin Laden promises, the jihadis – as the fighting vanguard of the world's Muslims – will reciprocate "on a solid and just grounds".

It is difficult to know what to make of such pronouncements. Bin Laden is obviously eager to show off his knowledge of American politics – and his reading of American books. But it is also clear that what he presents in this most recent recording is not his true worldview, which posits a ceaseless war between Muslims and non-Muslims, at least until his version of a global Islamic state emerges triumphant. His claim to control the violence of the global jihadi movement, while simultaneously representing the political aspirations of all the world's Muslims, is an act of sheer bravado. But whether or not he can deliver on any of the threats and promises he continues to make brazenly, year after year, remains open to question. He may have become less significant as a commander of violent acts, but so long as bin Laden is alive and issuing statements, he remains an important symbol, the source of inspiration for a violent cult – and jihadi-watchers, no matter how optimistic, cannot honestly declare al Qa'eda dead.

Bernard Haykel is a professor of Near Eastern Studies and the Director of the Institute of the Transregional Study of the Contemporary Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia at Princeton University.

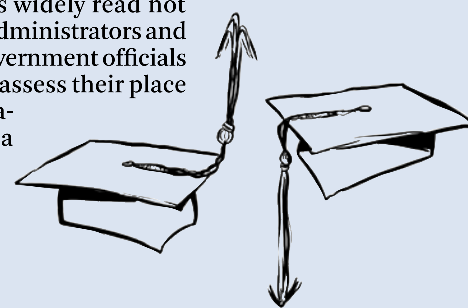
the tangled web

International studies

Five years ago, Hashim Yaacob, the vice chancellor of the University of Malaya, was on top of the world. In a recently published international ranking of universities, UM had placed 89th among 200 top institutions. This was a big deal, not only for the university, but for Malaysia as a whole – for a country that was bent on creating a knowledge economy, it was a nice validation of the progress it had made. Yaacob ordered banners reading "UM a world's top 100 university" and had them hung around that city.

UM's moment of glory was fleeting – one year long, to be exact. When the next international ranking came out, UM had plummeted, from 89th to 169th. In reality, universities don't change that much from year to year. And indeed, UM's drop turned out to be caused by a decline in a questionable measure of its reputation, plus the discovery and correction of an error the university itself had made. After the drop, UM was pilloried in the Malaysian press, and widespread calls for a royal commission of inquiry into the unfortunate episode followed. Within a few months, the vice chancellor, who had been vilified in the media, was effectively fired when he was not reappointed to a new term.

The instrument of Yaacob's rise and fall was a periodical called the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, published by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp (until a 2005 ownership change). For the past five years the newspaper has offered a ranking of universities around the world in a more-or-less open effort to duplicate internationally what US News & World Report has done in the American higher education market. Although *Times Higher Education*, as the publication is now called, wasn't the first effort at producing international rankings, it has become the most controversial; its assessment of the global university pecking order is widely read not only among university administrators and students, but among government officials and politicians keen to assess their place in a world where educational achievement is a proxy for power.



Ben Wildavsky
Washington Monthly
washingtonmonthly.com

Crumbs: half of Britons injured by their biscuits

An estimated 25 million adults have been injured while eating during a tea or coffee break — with at least 500 landing themselves in hospital, the survey revealed.

The custard cream biscuit was found to be the worse offender to innocent drinkers.

It beat the cookie to top a table of 15 generic types of biccy whose potential dangers were calculated by The Biscuit Injury Threat Evaluation.

Hidden dangers included flying fragments and being hurt while dunking in scalding tea through to the more strange such as people poking themselves in the eye with a biscuit or fallen off a chair reaching for the tin.

One man even ended up stuck in wet concrete after wading in to pick up a stray biscuit.

Custard creams get a risk rating of 5.63, the highest of all.

This compared to 1.16 for Jaffa cakes, which was the safest biscuit of all in the evaluation.

Research company Mindlab International were commissioned by Rocky, a chocolate biscuit bar, to conduct the research.

It found almost a third of adults said they had been splashed or scalded by hot drinks while dunking or trying to fish the remnants of a collapsed digestive.

It also revealed 28 per cent had choked on crumbs while one in 10 had broken a tooth or filling biting a biscuit.

More unusually, three per cent had poked themselves in the eye with a biscuit and seven per cent bitten by a pet or "other wild animal" trying to get their biscuit.

Mindlab International director Dr David Lewis said: "We tested the physical properties of 15 popular types of biscuits, along with aspects of their consumption such as 'dunkability' and crumb dispersal."

Mike Driver, Marketing Director for Rocky said: "We commissioned this study after learning how many biscuit related injuries are treated by doctors each year."

Daily Telegraph
telegraph.co.uk

Australia overtakes US as biggest polluter

Australians have overtaken Americans as the world's biggest individual producers of carbon dioxide, which is blamed for global warming, a risk consultancy says.

British firm Maplecroft placed Australia's per capita output at 20.58 tons a year, some four per cent higher than the United States and top of a list of 185 countries.

Canada, the Netherlands and Saudi Arabia rounded out the top five. China remains the world's biggest overall greenhouse gas polluter, followed by the United States.

Maplecroft added that China and India's per person carbon production came in at just 4.5 and 1.16 tons respectively, in sharp contrast to their big overall figures.

"Australia has about five times the per capita emissions of China for instance but China produces over 20 times the carbon emissions of Australia because China has such a huge population," University of Adelaide professor Barry Brook told public broadcaster ABC.

"So you can play around with these numbers all you want but ultimately what matters is the total global carbon budget," he said.

"And unless humanity as a whole can find solutions to that problem, then all of that petty bickering among nations about who's more or less responsible isn't really going to be very helpful."

The report was released ahead of a major UN summit in Copenhagen in December aiming to thrash out a new climate change treaty.

Australia, whose vast size and isolation make for high transport costs for goods and people, has committed to cutting greenhouse gas emissions by up to 25 per cent by 2020 compared to 2000 levels.

However, emissions trading legislation was defeated in the Senate last month, leaving the target in doubt.

Physorg.com

Illustrations by Sarah Lazarovic for The National

5,000

Number of suspected Red Terror leaders and militiamen identified by the special prosecutor's office

"This is part of our story": Archival photos show victims of Ethiopia's 'Red Terror', a violent campaign conducted by the Derg military regime against its presumed enemies. Irada Humbatova for The National

'I think always it will be with me. I always remember the crying out. I cannot eliminate the crying out, the people that were crying and screaming. That went into my mind. It's very easy, the physical scar, but the mental scar, it's impossible to eliminate it'

➔ **Hirut,** continued from **1**

There had been a brief, flowering moment during which it had appeared that the slogans of the revolution – "Ethiopia First! ... Land to the Tiller!" – might actually give rise to a democratic form of government. The executions put an end to that delusion. The new leadership, a committee of military officers known as the Derg, confiscated the assets of elite families, including Hirut's. Her father wrote one of his anonymous missives, warning that if the military persisted in its abuses it would "melt like a candle." Somehow, the government figured out that he was the author and arrested him. Suddenly poor, Hirut's mother had to sell the car and some furniture to make ends meet. At 16, Hirut was forced to drop out of private school, and went to work for a cousin's business as a clerk. Every Sunday, she visited her father at the capital's high-security prison, where he remained for years.

After a period of plots and purges, a diminutive, low-born, unknown major by the name of Mengistu Haile Mariam emerged as the leader of the Derg. He declared his allegiance to the Soviet Union, abolished private land ownership, and imposed a new communist-inspired administrative system. The house across the street from Hirut's family, the residence of a wealthy man, was seized and turned into the headquarters of the local *kebele*, or neighbourhood council. The new authorities formed a militia, recruiting familiar faces from the street corners, the kind of poor young labourers who'd once done odd jobs for the neighbourhood's rich families. One of those who started hanging around the *kebele* headquarters was a man named Negussie, who'd once been married to one of Hirut's aunts. Though they'd had a child together, Negussie had never been invited to family gatherings – he was from a lower class.

The revolution was making its natural progression toward entropy. Originally, it had drawn popular strength from student radicals, but they had grown disenchanted with military rule. An underground left-wing organisation, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), began a campaign of assassinations, targeting officials of the urban *kebeles*. At a 1977 rally in Addis Ababa's main square, Mengistu shattered a glass bottle filled with crimson liquid – some say it was real blood – and declared "Red Terror" against the regime's enemies. The *kebele* militias were mobilised. The leader of the forces in Hirut's area, a ruthless functionary named Kelbessa Negewo, began to strut around the neighbourhood with a machine gun strapped across his chest. Each morning, a fresh batch of corpses would appear on the city's streets, marked with signs bearing warning messages from the Derg.

One evening in 1977, Hirut was walking home from work when she was stopped outside the *kebele* headquarters by a militiaman, who demanded to search her bag. He found nothing incriminating, but ordered her to come inside the walled compound anyway. She was taken into a cramped, sweltering shed, where guards ordered her to sit on the dirt floor and accused her of belonging to the EPRP. Hirut fit their profile of a terrorist: she was young and educated, and her family was associated with the old guard.

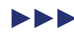
After a while, Hirut was brought into the main building, where she was detained outside an office, listening as another young man – a friend of her older brother – was interrogated and tortured by Kelbessa. Later, her brother's friend was removed from the office; he then tried to commit suicide by drowning himself in a pit latrine. Covered with raw sewage, the young man was left out in the sun on display for the other prisoners. After many hours of misery, he was shot. Hirut was released after about two weeks. It fell to her to visit the young man's family, to tell them to stop sending food and clothes to the *kebele* for their son.

Hirut went back to work and tried to keep out of the authorities' sights, but her reprieve turned out to be temporary. A few weeks after she was released, a knock came at the gate as she was getting ready for bed one night. Armed men entered the house and announced to Hirut's mother that two of her daughters were wanted for questioning; Hirut and one of her sisters were escorted across the street to the *kebele* headquarters. This time, Hirut was taken directly into the main room, the one where her brother's friend had been tortured. Inside a boy was being held, a neighbour no older than about 12. Wearing nothing but his underwear, his hands and feet were lashed together and he was hanging upside-down from a stick suspended between two desks.

"Which one?" the interrogators asked the bloodied prisoner. The boy gestured in Hirut's direction. Her sister was taken out of the room, as was the boy, and then Hirut was stripped, strung up, and lashed with electrical wires. Negussie, her aunt's ex-husband, was one of the men administering the beatings. Kelbessa Negewo, sitting behind one of the desks, kept asking her, "Where is the gun?"

They were looking for a weapon that had been used in several EPRP attacks. Hirut had no idea where it was, but after a few rounds of beating, she was ready to confess anything. After several hours of torture, Hirut was slipping in and out of consciousness, so the guards took her down. Kelbessa wanted to shoot her immediately, but a subordinate appealed to him to wait – they still hadn't recovered the gun. Handcuffed and unable to walk because the soles of her feet had been whipped to shreds, Hirut was carried to a basement storage room, where around 20 other female prisoners were being held in a tiny space. None of them would talk to Hirut – they were afraid to, and they assumed she was already as good as dead.

For several weeks, Hirut was held in that basement room, listening through the floorboards to the torment that was being inflicted above her. Eventually, she and another young man were tied together and taken to another interrogation facility, in one of Haile Selassie's old palaces. The young man asked Hirut why she was being held, and she told him about the phantom gun. He said not to worry. The young man told the authorities that he had disposed of the gun. He was killed, and Hirut was released.



When she crossed the street back to her family home, Hirut could hardly walk, and much of her hair had been hacked off with a broken bottle. Her mother welcomed her home without a single serious question. "This was the hardest part," Hirut said. "We never talked about it. She saw the scar on my hand. She never asked me what went on – never, never. I can't ... I'm trying to explain her side, but it's very hard to explain why she didn't ask me. Why she didn't want to talk?

"One thing I remember, when I left prison, when they let me go, when I came home, she'd already invited all of my cousins over, to say that she was happy to see me. And I was mad that day. You know why I was mad? *Why are you happy?* Because I've been tortured – I can't even walk. But she was happy because I wasn't killed. A lot of kids were killed. You see it's all relative, what makes you happy. Because my torture was nothing relative to my death to her. She didn't lose her kid – that was the way she saw it."

Eventually, Hirut's physical wounds healed. In a portrait taken around this time, she wears an afro and smiles brightly beneath a tilted beret – a small radical flourish. But Hirut lived in fear of being arrested again. She felt like she couldn't trust anyone, and after a while, she decided she had to flee. She talked it over with her boyfriend, a football player, and he recruited one of his teammates into the scheme. They devised a plan to cross Ethiopia's northeastern Danakil fdesert, one of the hottest places on earth, into Djibouti. They found a middleman who set them up with a caravan of Somali nomads, who said they would be willing to guide them across the desert for a fee.

Disguised in Somali robes, Hirut and her friends hiked at night and slept through the heat. Several days into their journey, they were shaken awake by their guides, who demanded more money. When the Ethiopians said they didn't have it, the nomads beat them up and abandoned them to die in the middle of the desert. Somehow, though, Hirut and her friends managed to follow the paths of smugglers into Djibouti. They made it to a refugee camp run by a Canadian charity. Eventually, Hirut was relocated to Ontario.

There Hirut did everything she could to banish Ethiopia from her mind. She got married, opened a restaurant, went to school and earned a degree in engineering design. Eventually, she took an office job in Canada's defence department. Still, she suffered through constant depression, which she fought by working harder – haste and exhaustion kept her dark thoughts at bay. Hirut never had a child, because she felt she could never be certain of its safety. Her personal relationships suffered. After a while, she and her husband divorced.

Ethiopians celebrate the 13th anniversary, in 1987, of the revolution that killed Haile Selassie and brought Mengistu's brutal regime to power. AFP Photo

One day in 1990, Hirut received a phone call from her old friend Elizabeth, who'd grown up in her neighbourhood and now lived in the United States. Elizabeth had also been imprisoned at the *kebele* headquarters, right around the time Hirut was released. Her father, a Supreme Court justice, had been murdered on the street by Kelbessa Negewo's men. Elizabeth told Hirut that a friend of hers, who was waiting tables at a hotel restaurant in Atlanta, had run into Kelbessa. He was working at the same hotel, as a bellhop. Elizabeth's friend was talking to some American lawyers, who said that it might be possible for Kelbessa's victims to sue him in a US federal court for the abuses he'd committed back in Ethiopia. Hirut flew down to Atlanta, talked to the attorneys, and paid a covert visit to the hotel, to make sure it was really Kelbessa. She was taken aback to see by how humble her tormentor looked in his bellhop's uniform.

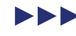
A lawsuit was filed in federal court in Atlanta. At trial, Hirut and two other plaintiffs testified about what Kelbessa had done to them. "It changed me a lot," Hirut told the court. "I was a young girl. I should enjoy my life. I don't. Most of the time I'm depressed. I cry a lot. ... I think always it will be with me. I always remember the crying out. I cannot eliminate the crying out, the people that [were] crying and screaming. That went into my mind. It's very easy, [the] physical scar, but [the] mental scar, it's impossible to eliminate it."

Powerful as Hirut's testimony was, it was Kelbessa's own words that did him in. In 1991, two years before the trial, Mengistu's government had fallen to a rebel army. It had left behind a vast trove of documents that catalogued what seemed like every execution ordered and every bullet spent, in keeping with dictatorship's universal impulse toward bureaucratic self-incrimination. Hirut learnt about this archive from her lawyers, who had been able to locate memorandums authored by Kelbessa in which he boasted of his brutal measures against alleged counter-revolutionaries like Hirut. The judge found for the plaintiffs, awarding them $1.5 million (Dh5.5 million).

That was just the beginning of a long legal odyssey. The three women never collected any significant portion of the court award, but they used the judgment to argue that the US government should deport Kelbessa back to Ethiopia, where he faced a trial before a special tribunal appointed to prosecute those who'd committed atrocities under the Derg. Over the coming years, there'd be a succession of appeals, hearings, setbacks and advances. The case awakened something inside Hirut: she formed close friendships with her lawyers, tirelessly prodded a succession of prosecutors, and for the first time found herself able to talk about the terrible things she'd suffered during the Red Terror. Among the three plaintiffs, Hirut took on the role of spokeswoman and found that it suited her. She was forthright, impassioned and warm, and people didn't want to fail her.

In early 2006, while working on a magazine article about Kelbessa Negewo's deportation case, I went to meet Hirut in the snow-covered suburb of Ottawa where she lived. She welcomed me into her home, decorated with ornate iron Ethiopian crosses, and introduced me to her companion, a rambunctious little puppy named Cookie. A small woman with a singsong voice, her face rounded and unlined, she told me that confronting Kelbessa, and her history, had changed her profoundly. "When you don't talk about it, when it is inside, you never put it in the right perspective," Hirut said. "So it helped me in a lot of ways. It is a therapy, in a way." Then she let out a laugh: a high, girlish, liberated giggle.

One person who had never heard the story was Hirut's mother, who had died a few years earlier. She lived to see Kelbessa put on trial, but she hadn't approved of the case. Hirut told me that her mother thought it was a "crazy" undertaking. She had been dismayed to find that many other Ethiopian émigrés were equally sceptical. "They'd rather forget about it, as I see it," Hirut said. "They used to tell me, 'Do you think you will win the case? What do you think you will get? Nothing will happen to him.' That was their attitude: Nothing will happen to him. But at least it is history... For the record, it will be written there: this *happened*."



On the splintery sash above the door, you could still see a faint slogan, written in Amharic: "Above Everything, The Revolution". It was a drizzly day in June of this year, the rainy season in Addis Ababa. Hirut had brought me to this place so I could understand what she had endured – what the whole nation had gone through – and why it was so important that it be remembered. Behind this door, around the back of a building now painted a cheerful shade of teal, was the basement storage room where she'd been imprisoned. We walked up a grassy hill that ran along the side of the building, which still belonged to the local government. Hirut

3,000

Estimated number that are still in exile or in hiding

Hirut Abebe, who is setting up an archive of documents from the Red Terror: "People had moved on. They'd forgotten about that time. They wanted change. I was stuck, like time had never moved." Photo by Blair Gable for The National

showed me inside, and we walked down a darkened, narrow hallway, to an unassuming office. "This was the room where I was tortured," she said. In the three years since we'd last met, Kelbessa Negewo had finally been deported from the United States, and was now serving a life sentence in a prison on the outskirts of the capital.

Across a muddy dirt road, behind a metal gate, stood her family's old house. It is now a modest hotel. Hirut and I took a seat inside its bar, which was decorated with portraits of Bob Marley and Haile Selassie, who is now revered by many Ethiopians; time, and the power of comparison, works strange effects. As the waitress poured me a Coke, Hirut explained the problem, as she saw it: few Ethiopians had an interest in preserving the memory of the Red Terror. This was something she always had trouble explaining to people who weren't Ethiopian. To those who suffered during the Red Terror, the past was too painful. To those who were implicated, it was too dangerous. Though the special tribunal had prosecuted around 1,000 alleged participants in the killing, a great many more wrongdoers remained at large in Ethiopia, because there was too little evidence against them, or lived safely in exile, beyond the reach of judgment. In places like Canada, there was a tradition of commemorating atrocities, faithfully returning to them like medieval pilgrims, but in Ethiopia, people were inclined to just keep moving forward, quietly resisting any urge to double back.

"This used to be our dining room," Hirut told me. She recalled how she had run to her bedroom to change out of her pyjamas when Kelbessa's men came to fetch her, how she and her sister had held hands, shaking, as they crossed the street. Hirut told me that she and her sister had only recently begun to broach the subject of what had happened that night.A few years earlier, her sister, who now lives in the United States, had been staying in Addis Ababa, and Hirut had come to visit her. This was 2005, and a fiercely contested election campaign was underway, with the ruling party of the prime minister, Meles Zenawi – a rebel leader who had overthrown Mengistu – facing a stiff challenge. Meles prevailed amid allegations of fraud, and in the aftermath of the election opposition leaders were arrested and protesters took to the streets, where some of them were killed by security forces.

"You could hear gunshots, lots of gunshots, and I remember my niece, she was here, and she said, can we go back?" Hirut said. Her niece was half-American. "It's fine, I said to her, relax, let's talk. She said, 'Why aren't you scared?' I said, did you know that I was arrested at that time and tortured?"

Many of Hirut's nieces and nephews joined the conversation. None of them had ever been told the story of the Red Terror in any detail – their parents wouldn't discuss it. "It was 8:30 in the evening when we started talking, and do you know what time we finished? In the morning, six o'clock," Hirut said. "They didn't know that their mother was tortured. I said, let me tell you something: your father has a bullet inside him."

In the turmoil that followed the disputed election, it had become fashionable for people to say that things in Ethiopia were worse than ever before. Hirut wasn't a government apologist, but she thought it was ridiculous to compare Meles, who at least held elections and permitted some measure of dissent, to the bloody repression of the Red Terror. "We are free now to talk. We were arrested at that time for thinking," Hirut told me. "Everybody, they were saying this government is worse than Derg. I said what happened to you? People had moved on. They'd forgotten about that time. They wanted change. I was stuck, like time had never moved."

It was my first time visiting Addis Ababa, and Hirut wanted me to see all the landmarks in her story: the monument to the 59 imperial loyalists executed by the Derg; Meskel Square, where Mengistu had declared Red Terror, and where runners were now practicing callisthenics on a vast staircase; the domed Orthodox church where her mother had prayed for her release, crawling on her knees in a gesture of desperate supplication; the palace where she'd been taken for interrogation, which was now the prime minister's residence. There was even an intact monument built by the Derg, a tower topped by a red star and flanked by friezes in the socialist realist style.

"They protected it," Hirut explained as we stood in the plaza, empty save for a few stray dogs, and gazed at the image of Mengistu, holding a heroic fist in the air. "They said, 'that's our history,' and I respect that, because Mengistu tried to erase everything."

The night that she told her nieces and nephews what had happened to her, and listened to their expressions of disbelief, Hirut made a resolution. Even before Kelbessa was finally deported and sentenced, her mind had begun to move on, to all those files in the Derg's archives, the ones that had provided her lawyers with such incriminating evidence: millions of sheets of paper, each holding a tiny increment of history. She talked about the documents when I first met her, and over the years, in long phone conversations with me and impassioned e-mails, she elaborated on a plan to preserve them. Gradually, against considerable odds, what began as an idealistic notion had evolved into a real initiative, something she called the Ethiopian Red Terror Documentation and Research Center. Hirut was hoping to turn the archive into a library where victims of torture, the families of those murdered, and historians could all readily access the secrets of the Derg.

The task proved to be much more arduous than she expected. For one thing, Hirut was a Canadian civil servant. She didn't know anything about running – or funding – a library in Africa. For another, she had to overcome a certain ingrained opacity in Ethiopian society, perhaps a legacy of its history of dictatorship. The first reflex of authority was always to keep secrets closely guarded, even if their disclosure posed no threat. But Hirut had thrown herself into the project with her usual energy, employing persistence and the strength of her life story to win the support of Canadian politicians, African scholars, and international human rights activists. Somehow, she managed to convince the Ethiopian government to back her, to give her possession of the archives, and even the use of the public building where they were kept, which was to be her library.

"At first they thought I wouldn't go that far, they thought I am one person coming in and asking," Hirut said. "Now they know I am serious."

One afternoon, Hirut took me to see the archive, in an ageing public building near Addis Ababa University. She led me through a deserted hallway that smelled faintly of formaldehyde, down a set of basement stairs, and opened a thick, padlocked, metal door. "Look at all the documents," she said, her voice a little awestruck. In the dim warren before us, there were files spilling out of boxes; dusty binders crammed onto bookshelves; folders stuffed into cabinets, bursting with dog-eared pages. From a haphazard pile, Hirut picked up a small green booklet, marked with a hammer and sickle on the cover: an ID card belonging to one of the agents of the Red Terror. "If it was not for this organisation," Hirut said, "they would be throwing it out."

The documents had been amassed by the office of a special tribunal investigating the crimes of the Derg, which had occupied the building until recently, when it had wrapped up its work. Yosef Kiros, the tribunal's former chief prosecutor, who was now working with Hirut, led us through the cluttered room, explaining that the documents had been trucked over to this building from many locations after the fall of the Derg. Some of them had been used in prosecutions, for instance against Kelbessa Negewo. The most notable case had been that of Mengistu himself, who was convicted of genocide in absentia in 2006. (He currently lives securely in exile, in sympathetic Zimbabwe.) The trials had lingered on for years, hampered by a lack of funding and – some would argue – political will on the part of the Meles government, but now, finally, they were completed. Until Hirut came along, no clear provision had been made to keep the files for posterity. The volume of paper was such that many documents had never been indexed, or even reviewed.

Hirut picked up one memorandum at random: a list, made by hand on notebook paper, of the names of 11 people subjected to "Red Terror action" – killed, in other words. At another location, she told me, she found a cache of photos – "before" and "after" shots of victims taken by their executioners, which she hoped to exhibit. "The first day I saw them, I couldn't control myself," Hirut said. "I had to go outside and breathe." In the case file for the Mengistu prosecution was perhaps the most famous of the documents: the actual minutes of the meeting where army officers resolved to murder the imprisoned Emperor Haile Selassie, reputedly by strangulation in his bed.

Mengistu Haile Mariam, the leader of the Derg, was convicted of genocide in absentia in 2006 but lives securely in exile, in Zimbabwe. AFP Photo

They didn't know that their mother was tortured. I said, let me tell you something: your father has a bullet inside him

The task of cataloguing and preserving the documents, Hirut realised, would be both expensive and technically challenging. She'd formed tentative partnerships with the University of North Dakota and a Finnish web design firm, which were offering her pro-bono technical expertise, but she still faced the challenge of raising the roughly $1.7 million she estimated would be necessary to get the project up and running. Though she'd made approaches to several potential funders, such as the United Nations Development Program and the Open Society Institute, she'd had little luck. For now, she was bankrolling the centre with money that she'd saved from her job in Canada.

Moreover, the ingrained impulse to bury the past was not easy to break. After leaving the archive, we drove past the blockish building that had once housed the headquarters of the Derg, which now served the same purpose for Meles' ruling party. Hirut mentioned that there was a secure storage facility there, built by the East Germans, which contained voluminous files dating back to the Derg era on Communist party members. Those were still off-limits. Driving by one of the emperor's old palaces, Hirut told me that not long before, she'd received a call from the government, asking her to come to Addis Ababa to inspect a newly excavated, unmarked grave that had been found on the grounds. She had arrived with her camera, ready to document the discovery, but higher authorities had barred her from the scene. "They didn't allow me!" she said. "After I went through all that."

Still, Hirut was undaunted, full of ambitious ideas. She wanted to digitise the archives, translate them into English, and make them available online. She was going to publish a newspaper that would focus on the fates of individual Red Terror victims. She was thinking about a mobile museum, which would take history to the countryside. She was considering a trip to Zimbabwe, to agitate for the return of Mengistu himself. She spoke ceaselessly, with frenetic enthusiasm, as if she was making up for many silent years.

"I couldn't scream. I screamed inside, but nobody listened to that sound," Hirut said. "This is the screaming that I am doing now – it's loud."

Andrew Rice is the author of The Teeth May Smile but the Heart Does Not Forget: Murder and Memory in Uganda.

Justice lag

As William Calley, who bore the blame for the massacre at My Lai, makes his first public apology, the eight Marines accused of the most serious crimes in Iraq look likely to walk free, Allison Hoffman reports

Lt Col Jeffrey Chessani, a Marine Corps officer charged with failing to report or investigate the killings in Haditha, photographed at Camp Pendleton in June 2008. Charges against Chessani – and against six of the other seven men facing courts-martials – have since been dropped. Denis Poroy / AP Photo

The Kiwanis Club of Greater Columbus, Georgia – a city hard by the Alabama state line – is the sort of place where men gather to hear lunchtime presentations on subjects like the need to increase support for public libraries. It is not, in other words, a place accustomed to making news, even in the local paper, which may be why former lieutenant William Calley, the only man convicted in the brutal 1968 massacre of more than 300 Vietnamese civilians by American soldiers in a raid on the small hamlet of My Lai, chose it as the venue for his first public apology, 40 years after the fact.

There wasn't any advaasdfnce notice, just a brief announcement at the start of the August 19 lunch that Calley, who has lived in relative anonymity since his release from Army custody in 1974, had a few words to say. "There is not a day that goes by that I do not feel remorse for what happened that day in My Lai," Calley began, according an account published in the Columbus *Ledger-Enquirer*. When the floor opened for questions, one person asked whether Calley thought what he had done was illegal, even if he believed he was just following orders, as he had maintained in court. "I believe that is true," Calley responded. "If you are asking why I did not stand up to them when I was given the orders, I will have to say that I was a second lieutenant getting orders from my commander and I followed them – foolishly, I guess." It was, at this late date, a striking admission from the man who became the living embodiment of the American morass in Vietnam – but one that, perhaps, meant more to Calley, now 66 and graying, than to his country.

As it happens, a few days after Calley's address, a Marine lieutenant general in California announced that the government would abandon its efforts to prosecute all but one of the men charged in the biggest criminal investigation of the Iraq war – into the killings of 24 civilians in Haditha, widely characterized as a contemporary analogue to My Lai. The two dozen people killed on November 9, 2005, allegedly in retaliation for a roadside bomb that killed one Marine and wounded another – represent only a fraction of the body count at My Lai, and with no allegations of the extreme abuses that characterized the killing spree in Vietnam. But in both cases, initial military reports described successful missions, and it took the work of whistleblowers and journalists to reveal very different facts: the apparently wanton killings of unarmed civilians – old men, women, children – by emotionally unhinged American troops engaged in an unpopular war of choice, half a world away from home.

Each story, in fact, seemed to represent a turning point in the domestic narrative of their respective wars, emerging at times when many Americans – even those initially in favor of going to war – were hungry for evidence to support their growing sense that the logic of the war had come, in some essential way, undone. After My Lai, when comparisons began to be drawn to German atrocities against Spanish republicans at Guernica or French villagers at Oradour-sur-Glane, the parents who had fought those wars could not imagine how their own sons had become capable of similar savagery. "I raised him as a good boy, and they made a murderer out of him," railed Myrtle Meadlo, whose son Paul was among Calley's men, to *Time* magazine in November 1969, in an article headlined "An American Tragedy."

Nearly four decades later, Haditha turned a spotlight on the impossibility of conducting a just war in a place where civilians and combatants were often indistinguishable – and where the deaths of ordinary Iraqis had become so commonplace as to blur the line between deliberate killing, reckless application of force, and sheer accident. Coming on the heels of the revelations about abuse at Abu Ghraib prison (exposed, perhaps not coincidentally, by Seymour Hersh, the same journalist who broke the My Lai story), Haditha became the best example yet of how a country that had vowed to learn the lessons of Vietnam was making the very same mistakes in Iraq.

Even as both cases raised questions about the general prosecution of the war – questions that ran up the chain of command to the Pentagon and the White House – the military had only one tool with which to respond: the court-martial. Congressional hearings, investigative inquiries, national soul-searching – all of that is, in military parlance, well above the pay grade of those charged with meting out some sort of justice, even in cases where genuine justice might simply be an unattainable goal. "How do you apologize for that sort of thing?" asked Gary Solis, a retired Marine Corps judge advocate and former head of West Point's Law of War program, who has written extensively on war crimes in Vietnam. "But when there's evidence of criminality of this nature it seems to me that the nation has a duty to see [the court process] through, and take these guys to trial."

When Seymour Hersh, then freelancing for the Dispatch News Service, published his bombshell report on November 12, 1969, William Calley had already been charged with six counts of premeditated murder for the deaths of 109 "Oriental human beings, whose names and sex are unknown, by shooting them with a rifle," according to the charging documents. The actual investigation had actually started months earlier, after a discharged soldier finally caught the attention of two members of the House Armed Services Committee with a series of letters alleging that My Lai had been the site of a massacre and not a "bloody day-long battle", as it had originally been described in *Stars and Stripes*, the Army newspaper. Calley's trial would have been a quiet affair, until Hersh's report guaranteed the press would descend on the proceedings, at which point a new, more public investigation commenced. Ultimately, 26 men – including 14 officers accused of abetting a cover-up – were charged. Calley, the first to face court-martial, was the only man convicted, in March 1971. By the time his immediate superior, Captain Ernest Medina, was acquitted five months later, public interest had already declined markedly. "What did they want," the writer Mary McCarthy wondered at the time, "mint-fresh atrocities, in preference to stale ones?"

The Haditha prosecutions, by contrast, would not even have taken place if not for an Iraqi human rights group that provided *Time* reporter Tim McGirk with video in March 2006 that contradicted the Marines' initial account of what had happened. In short order, the military launched two separate probes; a record number of naval investigators were put at the disposal of prosecutors, and ordered to file duplicate copies of their reports for briefing to members of Congress.

Nonetheless, charges were slow to come, in part because the Marine commandant decided to wait for the initial investigations to be completed before starting court-martial proceedings. It was not until December 21, 2006 – four days before Christmas, when Southern California's palm trees were already strung with lights and everyone was angling to get out of town – that the Marine Corps started the wheel of justice turning. Criminal charges were filed against four enlisted men, for premeditated murder in the killings of some of the victims, along with an array of lesser murder, assault and false-statement charges. Sergeant Frank Wuterich, then 26 and the most senior enlisted man involved in the shootings, faced the gravest charges, a total of 18 counts of murder for the deaths of members of the Ahmed, Alzawi and Salim families. Four officers, including a lieutenant colonel, Jeffrey Chessani, were charged with failing to report or investigate the killings.

> **In both cases, initial military reports described successful missions, and it took the work of whistleblowers and journalists to reveal very different facts: the apparently wanton killings of unarmed civilians – old men, women, children – by emotionally unhinged American troops engaged in an unpopular war of choice, half a world away from home**

At the time, a Haditha resident named Naji al Ani told the Associated Press the troops should face justice in Iraq – "The trial they are talking about is fake," the 36-year-old laborer insisted – but for Americans, still fresh from having turned the Republican majority out of Congress in the November 2006 midterm elections, the charges felt like a first step toward resolution.

"The fact that there was a formal process for examining those allegations means there's a system that is transparent, that the world can look at and see," Tom Umberg, a former Army prosecutor now in private practice, told me earlier this year. And, clearly, the Marine Corps wanted the world to see. The Corps spent more than $1 million to turn a low-slung, two-storey building at Camp Pendleton, near San Diego, into a media centre, in preparation for the camera-toting hordes expected to attend the Haditha prosecutions. I covered the proceedings for the Associated Press – alongside reporters from the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, and crews from the BBC, CNN, NPR and the three American television networks, along with Reuters, AFP and various other wire services and outlets, all of us churning out a raft of front-page stories about the charges.

But what was to be a great display of military justice has since come very much unglued. At least a few of the men charged alongside Calley went to trial and were formally exonerated; in the Haditha case, charges have simply been dropped. Nearly four years later, only Wuterich faces any legal accountability. Of the eight Marines originally implicated in the case, only one, an intelligence officer charged with ordering photographs of the carnage to be deleted, has gone to trial. He was acquitted after refusing a plea deal. Two other Marines were apparently cleared in order to encourage them to testify in other cases; charges against the rest have been dropped.

"My Lai and Haditha are simply not comparable, but what is comparable is that military justice comes out looking bad," said Solis. "To say that it was a miscarriage of justice may be correct, but perhaps a better characterization would be something like a failure of justice."

If Wuterich goes to court-martial, it will be on nine charges of manslaughter and two of assault, along with dereliction of duty, obstruction of justice and reckless endangerment – serious, but a long way from the 18 second-degree murder counts he initially faced. His case has been frozen for more than a year while prosecutors have pursued appeals to obtain unaired footage from a television interview with Wuterich – a strategy that hardly suggests a rush to justice. Lt Col Colby Vokey, who served as Wuterich's military defense attorney until retiring last year, said his team had been prepared to begin Wuterich's court martial in March 2008. "We were supposed to haul back from Iraq, where we were deposing some witnesses, because that trial was supposed to start, and a year-and-a-half later we're still not in trial," said Vokey, who is now in private practice in Dallas. "I can't understand it – I think if I was a prosecutor, I wouldn't have made that decision."

Vokey has been a vocal critic of the Haditha prosecutions, precisely because of the apparent effort by prosecutors to concentrate guilt on one person – namely, Wuterich – in a case where everyone up and down the line had a hand in creating the circumstances that led to the senseless deaths of two dozen Iraqis, most in their own homes, yet another echo of My Lai. "I think there was pressure up and down the chain of command not for a particular result, but for the thing itself" – for a trial, Vokey said.

At this point, he added, it's unlikely that Wuterich will face court-martial before the end of the year, and as time goes on it becomes increasingly possible to imagine that he, too, could be let off the hook. If, or when, a trial eventually proceeds, it will be in a courtroom tucked somewhere among Camp Pendleton's beige administrative buildings, untelevised and off-limits to anyone armed with more than pen and paper. (Cell phones and laptops – anything capable of sending live data – are not permitted inside the courtrooms.)

In 1971, when the Calley verdict was delivered, a poll conducted by the Nixon White House found that 96 per cent of Americans were aware of the news – the highest score for any subject they had polled, according to HR Haldeman, Nixon's chief of staff. A novelty record called *The Battle Hymn of Lt Calley* that depicted the convicted murderer as an American hero sold more than 200,000 copies in a week and "caused fights in bars" across the United States.

Whatever Wuterich's legal fate, it's likely that he'll be spared such notoriety – unlike Calley, he will not be made to represent, rightly or wrongly, the guilt or innocence of an entire war. He will be spared taking the burden of remorse, not just for his company, but for his country – and at some future date, there may not be anyone to stand before some other group of Rotarians or Elks to say they're sorry.

Allison Hoffman, formerly a reporter in the San Diego bureau of the Associated Press, is now senior writer at Tablet Magazine.

Lula in Geneva earlier this summer, pitching Rio de Janeiro as the ideal host for the 2016 Olympics. The city could host "the most beautiful Games," he said, if Olympic officials were ready togive poor countries a chance. Fabrice Coffrini / AFP Photo

Domestic product

Six years ago, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva won the Brazilian presidency by promising radical reform for the country's structural problems. But since then, Gabriel Paquette writes, he's opted for business as usual

Brazilian democracy is, in practice, relatively young. Between 1930 and 1985, only four of the country's presidents were elected by direct voting and only two completed their terms. One of these men, Juscelino Kubitschek, who oversaw the construction of Brasília, governed under constant threat of a military coup. Only in the last 15 years has stable democracy been implemented: two presidents from rival parties have served full, consecutive terms without military meddling. The second of these presidents, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, was elected in 2002 and handily won re-election four years later. The Brazil over which "Lula" – as he is universally and affectionately known – presides is relatively prosperous (at least as measured by GDP), more democratic than many of its neighbours, and committed to an ambitious set of international policy objectives.

But Lula has been a disappointment to those on the left who expected he would tackle the structural problems that have shackled Brazil for decades, if not centuries: stark economic inequality, abysmal educational standards, social stratification along racial lines, rampant urban violence, political corruption and environmental degradation. This disappointment results in part from outsize expectations fostered by Lula's political platform and biography. The president grew up in an impoverished family in the northeast of Brazil, never went to secondary school, and worked as a union leader under the military dictatorship that lasted from 1964 until 1985. On the campaign trail he was a fiery, cogent critic of the "Washington Consensus": the combination of austere monetary-fiscal policies and commitment to unbridled free trade that the IMF, World Bank and US State Department have long colluded to foist on Latin American governments. Brazil's less privileged citizens – the vast majority of the population – felt they had found their champion.

In an unforeseen reversal, President Lula ultimately opted to assuage the interests of capital by redoubling the government's commitment to a stable economic environment at the expense of public sector spending – all to the chagrin of the more radical elements in Brazil's Workers Party and their fellow travellers around the globe. In his second inaugural address, Lula insisted that Brazil had changed for the better "in monetary stability; fiscal consistency; the quality of its debt; the access to new markets and technologies; and in diminished vulnerability" – hardly the sentiments of the crusader many thought had been elected.

The justified consensus of Lula's critics is that the constraints under which the president has agreed to govern have hamstrung his capacity to fix Brazil. Mildly redistributive welfare programs may have helped him enjoy high approval ratings, but they amount to little more than tentative fiddling around the edges of massive core problems, or a tabling of the hard questions for another day. This line of criticism is advanced in a perceptive new book edited by Joseph Love and Werner Bauer. *Brazil Under Lula* features 16 essays, most of them by economists and political scientists, that analyze the first six years of Lula's presidency based on available statistics. In short, the preponderance of evidence suggests that this would-be reformer has left Brazil's most entrenched problems in much the same state as he found them.

The essays focus primarily on Lula's short-term policy missteps. In doing so, they overlook the extent to which his failure is attributable in large part to his inability to transcend the substantial political and economic barriers he inherited. As Marx noted, "the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living". The 1964 coup and the two decades of military dictatorship that followed were hardly alien to Brazil's political culture. The monarchy was toppled in 1889 by army officers who established a republic. But

> One is struck again and again not only by how little has changed, but by how little Lula's government seem to have tried

during the Getúlio Vargas presidency (1930-1945), the country drifted steadily away from democracy. This tendency culminated in the creation of the *Estado Novo* (New State) in 1937, which saw the elimination of the existing political parties and the abandonment of parliamentary government in every practical sense. Democracy's cautious return following the Second World War was short-lived, lasting less than two decades.

Thus the military dictatorship was merely an extreme version of politics past. It installed military courts to deal with so-called political crimes, closed congress, suspended civil rights, and imposed strict censorship, stifling artistic expression and pushing many dissidents into exile. But all regimes need collaborators, and military rule was not entirely anathema to all Brazilians, not least because it coincided with impressive economic growth rates, a rising standard of living for the growing middle class, and the entry of vast swathes of the population into the formal labour market. It might not be accidental, therefore, that Brazil's recent democratic governments have practised conservative economic stewardship orientated around immediate growth at the expense of reform; political legitimacy and economic performance have been inextricably linked in recent Brazilian history.

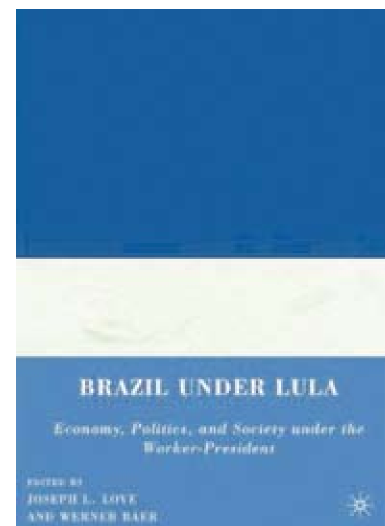
Under Lula's predecessor, Fernando Cardoso, an urbane development economist who was among those forced into exile during the dictatorship, the Brazilian government's role in the productive sector of the economy was severely curtailed. It became a regulatory state that largely deferred to the private sector's whims. This change was accompanied by increasing financial stability: expanded exports, burgeoning foreign and domestic investment, and rising consumer demand. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to imagine what alternative policies Lula could have enacted. To propose structural change just as the economy was finally meeting benchmarks set by powerful international banks and institutions would have been to swim against the current, isolating Brazil at a great cost, one demonstrated by just a casual glance at Venezuela's "Bolivarian" socialist experiment.

It is undeniable that Brazil's economy, the ninth largest in the world, has grown steadily under Lula. According to the World Bank, its GDP grew 2.42 per cent a year between 2002 and 2005. This figure lags behind the other "BRIC" countries – Russia (6.41), India (7.24) and China (9.77) – but it is respectable, particularly as first-world economies stagnate and natural-resource-bubbles burst elsewhere. The recent discovery of major offshore deposits of oil and natural gas could accelerate this growth in upcoming years.

Rapid development, however, has exacted an environmental toll. The Amazon continues to be cleared at an alarming rate to make way not only for agribusiness, loggers and wildcat miners, but also for thousands of landless peasants in search of parcels of land for subsistence farming. Although 90 per cent of Brazil's electric power comes from hydroelectric and ethanol energy sources, the burning of the rainforest by ranchers and agribusiness makes Brazil the fourth-largest producer of greenhouse gases in the world. Lula's government has done little to address this pressing issue. On the contrary, his administration bristles when international NGOs suggest changes to its environmental policy, reacting as if national sovereignty or honour were under attack. This is most ironic in light of Lula's steadfast desire to court and accommodate international investors and creditors. Foreign advice on making money is welcome; foreign suggestions on protecting globally-important natural resources are dismissed as neo-imperialism.

In fact, Lula's leftism and combativeness are today visible only in foreign policy gestures that have little direct impact on the Brazilian people. He has lobbied for Brazil to have a seat on the UN Security Council, and sought to strengthen Mercosul, the South American regional trade agreement, as an alternative to the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas championed by the Bush administration. At a press conference this spring, with the British prime minister Gordon Brown standing behind him, he remarked that the current financial crisis was "caused by no black man or woman or by no indigenous person or by no poor person. This crisis was fostered and boosted by irrational behaviour of some people that are white, blue-eyed."

While Brazil's economy grows and its leader entertains on the international stage, its most pressing problem – the gap between the rich and



Brazil Under Lula: Economy, Politics, and Society Under the Worker-President
Edited by Joseph L Love and Werner Baer
Dh242

the poor – remains as present and pressing as ever. This inequality is traceable to the country's colonial heritage, specifically its African slave-driven, plantation-based sugar economy in the northeast. This established a system of landholding that favoured the creation of large estates, which concentrated both wealth and political power. In the 19th century, the advent of coffee production gave rise to similar dynamics in the southern states. The end of slavery in 1888, one year before the fall of the monarchy, did not fundamentally alter this arrangement. Newly freed men who did not migrate to uncertain futures in the cities soon found themselves accepting low wages or sharecropping contracts on the same estates where they had toiled as slaves.

In 1960, Brazil's Gini coefficient – a scale for income inequality where 1.0 means one person has all of the country's income and zero means everyone has an equal share – was 0.57. In 1983, it stood at 0.60. In 2005, it had returned to 0.57. Neither dictators nor democrats have made a difference, and failure to confront the issue has generated serious social problems, particularly in the country's rapidly growing cities, where material plenty and abject poverty butt up against each other with frequently violent consequences. The homicide rate in 2002 was 27.2 deaths per 100,000 people, whereas the world average is 8.7. There are some specks of light: extreme poverty (defined as living on less than one Real a day) fell from 17 per cent in 1999 to eight per cent in 2004, and Lula's government deserves some credit for this. The most important programme is a consolidation of four old social security programs called Bolsa Família. Since 2003, it has doled out cash to parents as rewards for keeping their children in school and ensuring that they undergo regular medical check-ups. Today it reaches 11.1 million families. But critics charge (quite accurately) that Bolsa Família has been expanded in lieu of systematic and large-scale investment in education and other primary causes of stratification. Cynics might add that such programs also create a client group beholden to Lula and thus more inclined to vote for PT, perpetuating and strengthening the status quo.

Brazil Under Lula documents the conversion of a once-radical leader into a middle-of-the-road politician, constantly putting aside systemic issues for the *next* election cycle. Reading these essays, one is struck again and again not only by how little has changed, but by how little Lula's government seem to have tried. But could it have been otherwise? Has neoliberalism triumphed so completely on the global stage that any statesman who departs from its tenets is condemned to fail? Is state-led social change – as opposed to private sector or NGO-led change, both in Latin America and the rest of the developing world – a thing of the past?

Today neoliberalism's victory seems most secure in precisely those countries which would benefit most from shaking off its stultifying lessons. When its star wanes, we may judge Lula more kindly, less as a radical reformer turned power-conscious politician, and more as a trailblazer who opened up Brazilian politics to the demographic groups who for centuries have been actively excluded from participation in it. But such a moment is at least decades away; in the meantime, mounting disillusion with the apparent limits of electoral politics may make this breakthrough irrelevant. For this generation of Brazilians, Lula's presidency will be remembered as a time of opportunites squandered and ideals forsaken.

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50,000

Hits tallied on YouTube by the video for Hajji Girl, a song about a US Marine murdering an Iraqi family, before it was removed

The rhythm of the tanks

A new book goes searching for insight in the iPods and rap lyrics of American soldiers in Iraq. Spencer Ackerman considers the limits of scholarly playlist analysis

Private Larry Smith of San Fernando, California listens to music while waiting for a flight at Afghanistan's Bagram Air Base in April 2002. Greg Baker / AP Photo

There was lag time between the battle briefing and the mission, actual, boring hurry-up-and-wait lag time: the Humvees had already been loaded with gear and the equipment already spot-checked. I figured a good way to fill it would be to talk about music. It was September, and I had spent the past few days embedded with this particular US Army cavalry troop, riding along on a midnight hunt for a weapons cache in the middle of a rain-starved Paktia Province farm, but I hadn't really broken the ice. So: what music did the first platoon of Alpha Cavalry Troop, 1-61 Cavalry, which called itself the Hooligans, like to listen to?

Fierce debate ensued. A consensus emerged that the only way to get a true representation of what the platoon really used to psych itself up before riding out into the middle of nowhere in Afghanistan was to stop by the combat outpost's gym at 2am and listen to the workout mix. With that caveat out of the way, a playlist emerged. *Domino* by Van Morrison – yes, Van Morrison – inspires men to battle. *The End* by the Doors was another favorite, discomforting Vietnam overtones aside. *Worlds Apart* by Journey. It took a while for anyone to mention the more expected aggressive chugga-chugga guitar stuff, like the American metal band Killswitch Engage; this platoon seemed to favor classic rock. No one contradicted the platoon sergeant when he endorsed Ram Jam's classic gibberish-rock version of Lead Belly's *Black Betty*.

There's no reason why it ought to be surprising that a group of mostly-white soldiers in their 20s should have a soft spot for classic rock. That's what they grew up listening to on the radio in their parents' cars, for one thing. But what do their musical tastes tell us about these men? The idea that such preferences are a revealing fact of identity is a painfully overdetermined subject of study: not all that much follows from the fact that someone likes a certain band or a particular song. Some people go for the familiar when placed in front of the karaoke microphone. Others do the same when they find themselves in a strange country, under fire, asked to confront an enemy that isn't easily distinguished from the civilian population. Anyone who wants to understand a war is wasting time by looking at a soldier's iPod.

Jonathan Pieslak, an associate professor of music at the City University of New York, doesn't exactly make that mistake, but he takes an unfortunately academic approach to the question What Are Soldiers At War Listening To, burdening it with the weight of dense theory. Much of *Sound Targets* is a slog to get through – which is a shame, because buried inside is the kernel of an interesting book, particularly when he turns to explore the music that soldiers make, which is a truer expression of their perspective about the war than inference-heavy analysis of the music they enjoy.

Pieslak isn't interested in a polemic about either the Iraq war or the military more broadly. He writes that his method – interviewing soldiers by email about the role of music in their wartime routines – would have been compromised if his interlocutors perceived him to push a political agenda. My own experience suggests that he may have assumed too much. When soldiers asked me during my embeds what I thought about the Iraq or Afghanistan war, I found they preferred an honest answer to a diplomatic dodge.

But the bigger problem is that the book backs away from analysis in an attempt to remain dispassionate. Pieslak is right not to draw conclusions about the morality, necessity or wisdom of invading and occupying Iraq from a soldier's fondness for an aggressive and vulgar hip-hop song. iPod analysis, in the end, can offer a glimpse of – not a verdict on – how people handle a war. But he seems to back away, to avoid passing judgment, just when he should be digging in. Nowhere is that more apparent than when he discusses 4th25, a rap group composed of Iraq veterans, led by a musician named Neal Saunders, whose very disturbing songs about the Iraq war and the experience of the men fighting it beg for more study.

4th25 (pronounced Fourth Quarter) present themselves as an apotheosis of gangster rap's obsession with gritty reality. (In truth, this subgenre of rap music is especially theatrical, but leave that aside for a moment.) Saunders flaunts his contempt for other rappers – they call themselves tough, but they haven't been hardened in combat. Pieslak cleverly calls 4th25's music "(anti)gangster rap": it employs many of the same tropes – "the survival of the fittest attitude, in which death and violence are portrayed as essential components of survival and attitudes of rebellion against repressed forces... revenge as a way to honor the dead," – but turns them against so-called "studio gangsters". The band haven't got a recording contract yet, but Saunders is convinced this is because their music is so *real* it would explode the pretensions of gangster rap and lead to the collapse of the entire industry: "As soon as one soldier makes it, he just made it harder for everybody else, you know, to tell the same story – the same I sell drugs on the corner s***, and I shoot people with my 45 and that crap."

There's a salient undercurrent here that has less to do with gangster rap than the unequal burdens of military service: one consequence of the US military's post-Vietnam transition to a volunteer army has been the narrowing of combat experience to a small, self-selecting cohort, which has helped spawn a mutual distrust between soldiers and civilians.

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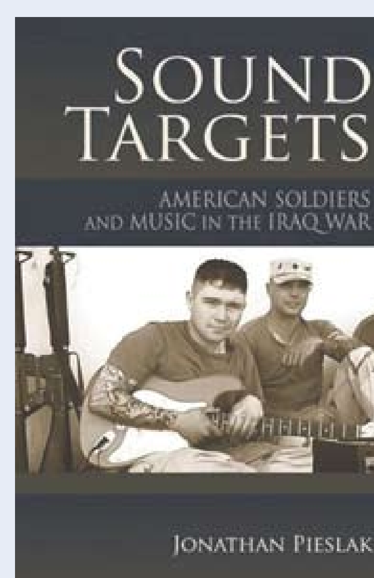
Saunders' bitter attitude to the music industry is congruous with those sentiments – though perhaps 4th25 don't have a record deal because they present first-hand accounts of war that most people aren't prepared to hear, like when they rap about IEDs being placed inside animal carcasses. In a song called *24 Hours*, Iraqis are portrayed as deceitful predators, who exploit the reluctance of American troops to avoid committing war crimes: 4th25 vents by imagining a single day when they could occupy Iraq without any such restrictions. What would happen?

"Light 'em up 'til they talk, if they won't talk, f*** 'em/ They too will change, when you kill enough of 'em... F*** all what's around, nothing's collateral."

By the standards of most rap or heavy metal, the lyrics and imagery of *24 Hours* are standard fare, and even tame, but there is little precedent for the success of a rapper who fantasies about murdering an entire civilian population. What makes the song most disturbing is that its author really was presiding over the fates of those Iraqis he regards with evident disgust. The lyrics makes it seem as if his comrades share his impulses, and are itching to act on them.

It would be a mistake to take a song like *24 Hours* literally, Saunders' protestations of authenticity notwithstanding. But that doesn't mean the ugly implications should be left unexplored. Lots of soldiers have made music, or written poetry, that expresses their regrets over the heavy-handed or ignorant treatment meted out to Iraqis and Afghans: In one poem, "Haddock of Mass Destruction," posted at warpoetry.co.uk, a British Iraq veteran named Danny Martin writes bitterly, "We cut his cuffs, and his wife's/ And left them to their ruined stock/ I should demand commission/ From the Taliban/ For every recruit I've converted to their flock."



Sound Targets: American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War
Jonathan Pieslak
Indiana University Press
Dh102

It means something, in other words, that Saunders would rap about killing civilians. It doesn't mean that the military is full of predators, but it does provide insight into what a command environment breeds when it doesn't emphasise protecting a population. Saunders returned from Iraq before General David Petraeus instructed his troops that their primary mission was to safeguard the Iraqi people from the insurgency, a clear order to draw the difficult, murky distinction between combatant and civilian that Saunders' verse on *24 Hours* explicitly collapses.

Another noteworthy relic of that pre-Petraeus era is an old YouTube clip of a Marine in Anbar Province strumming an acoustic guitar and singing a song he wrote called *Hajji Girl*. ("Hajji," for the unfamiliar, is a widespread and derogatory military term for Iraqis and other Arabs.) The story of *Hajji Girl* goes like this: the narrator, like a Marine Joey Ramone, falls in love with an Iraqi girl who works at the Burger King on his base, but she lures him back to her parents' house, where her insurgent brother and father are waiting to attack. So he uses her little sister as a human shield and kills the whole family. Message: "They shoulda known they were f***ing with a Marine." The chorus, "durka durka Mohammed jihad,"appropriates the way the movie *Team America: World Police* parodies Arabic. It's a disgusting song, all the more so because the video contains the approving laughter of the songwriter's fellow Marines.

Indeed, *Hajji Girl* caused a minor incident, long since forgotten. The YouTube clip was sufficiently embarrassing to prompt a brief investigation by the Marines that quickly exonerated the songwriter, Cpl Josh Belile. Conservatives in the blogosphere, like Michelle Malkin and *Little Green Footballs*, defended Belile against what they called political correctness gone wild. Liberals largely ignored the incident, although the Council on American-Islamic Relations denounced the song. As a moment in the American culture wars, *Hajji Girl* came and went.

That's telling. One of the reasons that the American public is willing to support the continued dispatch of troops to war is the sense that those deployments are ultimately beneficial to the populations of Iraq and Afghanistan: songs like *24 Hours* and *Hajji Girl* undermine that support. It's noteworthy, therefore, that since Petraeus defined the protection of Iraqi civilians as the central responsibility of US troops, songs like these have dwindled from public view, if they're even being written.

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review
the last word

2009 AD

Bags Shopping in Abu Dhabi Mall, Abu Dhabi, 2009 | Photograph by Ryan Carter

In Chicago politics, a fast friendship

On September 11, Benjamin Dueholm attends iftar with the local pols at Illinois' largest mosque

In the years following the attacks of September 11, 2001, enthusiasm for interfaith iftar events swept America's liberal Christians. When I was studying theology, an interfaith iftar – usually hosted by a campus church group – typically expressed a message more political than religious. *We are not stigmatising you*, the Christians took pains to say, *even as politicians and pundits are misrepresenting and maligning a whole faith.* Genuine curiosity about Islam played a role, to be sure, but a subordinate one. At times the events seemed like an anxious assurance of Christian virtue. I'm a veteran of these well-meant gatherings – occasions, I'm afraid, of strained conversation between Christians and Muslims over university-sponsored hummus in a borrowed church fellowship hall.

Despite many such gestures of interfaith goodwill, I had never actually been the guest at an iftar. Indeed I had not set foot in a mosque for 10 years until my wife and I were invited, along with a few dozen other non-Muslim locals, to the 13th annual community iftar at the Islamic Foundation of Villa Park, Illinois, which took place on September 11, 2009.

The Islamic Foundation's hospitality was of an entirely different order than that of the interfaith iftars I remembered. Caterers in white and black scurried around making preparations, as if at a large wedding. We showed up early and made halting small-talk with the elegantly bescarfed matrons taking down information and distributing name-tags. Then as the evening drew closer to its official beginning, a suspiciously well-coiffed, smiling group coalesced and started talking about voting records and elections. The local politicians had arrived.

A young woman took to the podium to begin the proceedings. She gamely tried to teach us to respond to "assalamu alaikum" with "wa alaikum assalam" and explained the ritual breaking of the fast and the call to maghrib prayers. Somewhat at a loss, she pointed out that this year's community iftar was taking place on the eighth anniversary of the September 11 attacks. "I don't know if that was because it was the day the hall was available or because it was the third Friday of Ramadan," she told us, in an earnest and tentative tone of voice. Coincidence or not, she felt it had to be mentioned. Barack Obama's video greeting to the world's Muslims played on the hall's projection screen. He didn't mention the attacks either.

Nor did the parade of local officials that the woman subsequently called up to the podium to make remarks. This suburban part of the state has long been a Republican stronghold, a legacy of the flood of white residents out of Chicago in decades past. But demographics have changed since then. The US Census estimates that 20,000 more Asians live in this area than did only eight years ago, now making up 10 per cent of the local population. The Islamic Foundation raises four million dollars a year from its members, enrols 600 students in its comprehensive primary and secondary schools and accommodates up to 2,000 worshippers at a time. One of the largest mosques in North America, it is now only one of several in suburban Chicago.

> When a Republican politician with a Slavic surname talks about how great Ramadan is, listens reverently to the chants of 'Allahu Akbar'w piped in over the speakers and waits until 7:08 to tuck into the falafel, fine words and multicultural yearnings are pretty much redundant

Hence this is not a place where local politicians of any party can afford to offer grave thoughts on a clash of civilisations. Rather, politicians here are wise to enact the age-old American tradition – honed on German, Irish, Italian, Jewish, and each following wave of immigrants – of sampling the ethnic cuisine, attending the high holy days and pronouncing a group to be the salt of the earth. Mitt Romney may feel free to slip "Islamofascism" into every speech and Glenn Beck can question the patriotism of American Muslims, but politicians around here live under different rules.

Prompted to say something about how they've encountered Islam, one state senator said she had been to an iftar at another mosque earlier in the week. "I learned that Ramadan moves throughout the year," she reported with smiling, democratic candour. A town trustee noted his admiration for the discipline and introspection of Ramadan. "Some of my best friends are Muslim," a candidate for the state legislature said, taking the additional step of pointing one out by name in the audience. He then invited questions about his candidacy. A representative from the local Republican Party – a young man in braces – made a point of meeting everyone and was buoyantly undeterred in his rounds of hand-shaking by the polite refusals of several women. The sheriff invited anyone to call his office line directly or to relay any concerns through Moin "Moon" Khan, the Indian-American broker between the Muslim community and the area's political elite. A prominent public voice for the compatibility of Islam and American patriotism, Khan was himself elected a town trustee in 2005, making him, according to his website, the first Muslim to hold office in the state. Most of the guests mentioned him as their primary contact with the Muslim community.

We filed upstairs for prayers, the guests removing our shoes and observing from the rear. At least one joined in. A young man explained the discipline of salaat, answering questions about the logistics of daily prayer. His public high school, he said, kept a space in the dean's office for Muslim students to pray during the day.

At dinner, I found myself behind the politicians as they cautiously navigated the buffet line, trying to identify koftah and tahini. "Is this sausage?" "No, it wouldn't be sausage." The night's keynote was offered by Ahmed Rehab, the local director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations. He talked about the double horror of the September 11 attacks, which he experienced both as an American who loves his country and as a Muslim who cherishes a very different understanding of his faith than that expressed by al Qa'eda. But, he said, if there was a "silver lining to the dark cloud" of the attacks' aftermath, it was that Muslims learnt to reach out and educate their fellow Americans about Islam. Just like the Germans and the Irish, he said, American Muslims have had to struggle towards acceptance and full citizenship, but they have had to do it "in the spotlight of suspicion" that the attacks engendered.

Rehab's remarks would have been right at home at the interfaith iftars of my theological education. But here they were overshadowed by the event itself. When a Republican politician with a Slavic surname talks about how great Ramadan is, listens reverently to the chants of "Allahu Akbar" piped in over the speakers and waits until 7:08 to tuck into the falafel, fine words and multicultural yearnings are pretty much redundant. It was a surprising scene to me, but it shouldn't have been. Having spent much of my life in the company of religious leaders and local politicians, I'm confident that, left to their own devices, politicians would probably manage to broker respectful coexistence well before religious leaders were done wrangling over the attributes of God. Guided by the imperatives of the ballot box, local politicians have a strong incentive to look for the best in people, establish common values and aspirations and win the trust of a community's acknowledged leaders.

As the crowd broke up for fruit, pastries and conversation, the twinkle-eyed Hyderabadi grandmother who had invited us to the iftar promised Thanksgiving turkeys for the food pantry at the church where my wife serves as pastor. On our way out, she chased after us, sending us off with a vase of brilliant orange flowers. The car park was overflowing with worshippers arriving for isha, hustling children indoors and hastily wrapping up phone conversations – Muslims, Americans and constituents, not necessarily in that order.

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