

## Trauma in the Novels of the Iraqi-Kuwaiti Writer, Isma‘il Fahd Isma‘il

O. Ishaq Tijani

A prolific Iraqi-Kuwaiti writer, Isma‘il Fahd Isma‘il (1940-) has published over thirty novels among other literary works. Though a less-studied Arabic novelist, his writings are comparable—in terms of quantity, genre, length, technique, and subject matter—to those of the Egyptians Najib Mahfuz and Tawfiq al-Hakim. This article argues that trauma is reflected not

just in Isma‘il’s fiction, but also in his own conflicted persona, his identity as an Iraqi-Kuwaiti writer. The article reads *al-Ḥabl*, in particular, as an autobiographical novel that portrays Isma‘il’s personal experiences of trauma in 1960s Iraq.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Fiction, Iraq/Kuwait conflicts, Isma‘il Fahd Isma‘il

### Introduction

Iraqi traumas have been the focus of many fictional and non-fictional works. Sinan Anton’s novel *The Corpse Washer*, for example, presents graphic images of the post-2003 traumas being experienced in Iraq to date. Some of these works—by the more famous Iraqis—have been studied by other scholars (see, e.g., al-Musawi; Milich et al.). This article focuses on the life and works of Isma‘il Fahd Isma‘il, as they represent his personal traumatic experiences in Iraq in the 1950s-1960s. It argues that trauma is reflected not just in Isma‘il’s fiction, but also in his own conflicted persona, his identity as an Iraqi-Kuwaiti writer.

Isma‘il was born in 1940 in Basra<sup>1</sup>, where he also spent his childhood and youth. After his secondary education, he began to work in 1957 as a teacher in the same city. In 1967 he was compelled to relocate to Kuwait due to the political crises in Iraq in which he was indicted and imprisoned, as further explained below. He continued his teaching career in Kuwait before traveling for further study in Egypt in 1969. On returning to Kuwait, he worked as a civil servant while at the same time studying at the Kuwait Higher Institute of Theater, from where he graduated in 1976 with a bachelor’s degree in drama. In the late

1980s, he retired from the civil service to establish his own private business.

A more detailed literary biography of Isma‘il is contained in al-‘Ajmi’s *Irtihālāt Kitābiyya* (Literary Journeys), which features an extended interview with the writer.<sup>2</sup> Of more importance here are the points that in 1961 Isma‘il published a poem in the Beirut-based newspaper, *al-Ḥaḍāra* (Civilization), in which he lampooned the Iraqi dictator ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim (r. 1958-1963), and that, so far, he has published over thirty novels among other literary works. Moreover, during his stay in Egypt and other short visits to Lebanon, Isma‘il met several leading Arab writers, including Najib Mahfuz (or Naguib Mahfouz; 1911-2006), Salah ‘Abd al-Sabur (1931-1981), ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Abnudi (1938-2015), and Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972). He also has contacts with other Iraqi writers including, most notably, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Rubay‘i (1939-). Just as Isma‘il has been influenced by these people, so also has he influenced some younger Kuwaiti writers, including Layla al-‘Uthman (1945-) and Talib al-Rifa‘i (1958-). Isma‘il is the leader and convener of a prominent literary circle, *Multaqā al-thulāthā’* (The Tuesday Rendezvous), which usually meets on a weekly basis in his office in Kuwait City; I personally attended some of

its programs in 2003 (Tijani 21). Though one of the least-studied Arabic novelists, Isma‘il continues to gain regional accolades, with two of his most recent novels long- and short-listed in 2014 and 2017, respectively, for the “International Prize for Arabic Fiction.”<sup>3</sup>

### Trauma in Isma‘il’s Early Novels

In simple terms, trauma is defined as “a wound,” “a violent shock,” or “the consequences” that a thing, act, or event may have on someone’s body and/or mind (Laplanche and Pontalis 465-466). For Sigmund Freud, trauma is more of a psychological problem of the mind than a medical—i.e., physiological/bodily—one. For him, “the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event.” Rather, it “is experienced [not] too soon” as “to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivors” (as cited in Caruth 3-4). Echoing Freud, Caruth claims that trauma is “a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (3). By contrast, scholars of literary trauma studies argue that the representations of trauma vary from one writer to another

and from one cultural or historical context to the other (Visser 250-265).

This article considers as trauma any form of bodily and/or mental suffering, damage, pain, shock, etc., and their consequences as experienced by both Isma‘il and his characters in the novels discussed hereunder. The cause of Isma‘il’s personal traumas was his earlier-mentioned poem in which he satirized ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim for attempting to take over Kuwait in 1961. A brigadier in the Iraqi army, Qasim became Iraq’s prime minister through the 14 July 1958 revolution that led to the abolishment of the Iraqi monarchy. He, too, was overthrown and assassinated during the February 1963 coup led by members of the Iraqi Baath Party. Some critics have described Qasim as a “benign dictator” who had “a significant impact on Iraqi society” in terms of economic prosperity, social and educational reforms, and the recognition of women’s and minorities’ rights (Davis). Nonetheless, all his goodwill toward the Iraqi people has been overshadowed by the fact that he:

Closed newspapers, banned political parties and refused to allow democratic elections [...]. The result of his actions was the degradation of political discourse. Politics was reduced to bina-

ries of good versus evil, revolutionaries versus reactionaries, nationalist heroes versus the agents of imperialism. (Davis)

To this end, many Iraqi intellectuals suffered governmental repression during his regime, and even during the subsequent military regimes. Many of them were killed, jailed, silenced, or forced into exile (al-Musawi; Milich et al.).

The focus here, however, is on Isma‘il, who as a result of the publication of his poetic invective was repeatedly arrested, incarcerated, and tortured by officers of the Qasim regime (al-‘Ajmi, *Irtihālāt* 9). Publishing the poem was not just a turning point in his life, but also the point at which he started experiencing an identity crisis. He declared:

I am a Kuwaiti from an Iraqi mother [...]. But the attempt by ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim to take over Kuwait in 1961 segregated me from my peers among the then generation of Iraqi writers. There and then I felt uneasy being Kuwaiti. (9)

Openly criticizing the government brought an added physical and psychical assault unto him and his entire family. That Isma‘il married four times and divorced

four times—twice in Iraq and twice in Kuwait (18)—might have been one of the lasting effects of that trauma on him. After his successive incarcerations, he was prevailed upon by his father to relocate. His father, too, abandoned his inherited huge farming business in Basra, and the entire family moved to Kuwait (9). This aspect of Isma‘il’s traumatized life is represented in his fiction, as he declared: “all my novels reflect, more or less, aspects of my past experience in life, although that reflection does not necessarily have to be exactly in the same manner as an event had happened to me” (25). While he did not specify those autobiographical elements in his works, he acknowledged that he empathizes with certain characters (25), some of whom I identify below.

Isma‘il was on a *revenge* mission—to avenge his traumatic experiences in Iraq—when, upon settling down in Kuwait, he ventured into publishing his first set of novels in the early 1970s: *Kānat al-Samā’ Zarqā’* (The Sky Was Blue), *al-Mustanqa‘āt al-Ḍaw’iyya* (The Light Swamps), *al-Ḥabl* (The Rope), and *al-Ḍifāf al-Ukhrā* (The Other Banks). These novels were written in the 1950s and 1960s whilst he was still in Iraq (al-‘Ajmi, *Irtihālāt* 9-15), but he edited them upon moving to Kuwait and then Egypt. Roger Allen treats these novels as a quartet that successively portrays the

collective traumas of the Iraqis in the period in focus (154-155). Aspects of only two of them are briefly examined below.

### **Al-Mustanqa‘āt al-Ḍaw’iyya: Trauma and the Mockery of the Oppressor**

One of the dimensions of Isma‘il’s revenge against the Qasim regime is mocking it. This mockery is embodied, for example, in the character of Humayda, the protagonist of the second novel. An intellectual, Humayda is imprisoned not because of his antagonistic writings—as his true identity is not known to the officers of the regime—but for committing manslaughter, as evident in this exchange between him and the chief warden of the prison:

- Did you kill someone?
- Two persons.
- [...]
- [...]
- [...] Why did you kill them?
- Because they killed their sister.
- Is that sister your beloved?
- No.
- [...] What exactly is your relationship with them?
- I was a spectator.
- And then a killer.
- Exactly. (*al-Mustanqa‘āt* 37-38; see also al-‘Ajmi, *A Novelist from Kuwait* 72-73)

Implying a mockery of the regime is the aspect of the novel that treats the friendship that soon evolves between Humayda and the unnamed chief warden, who has discovered the prisoner's real identity and shares his pro-masses ideas. That friendship culminates in the chief warden secretly taking Humayda out to a cinema. At the cinema, the prisoner surreptitiously undoes the chain with which he has been tied to a chair by his friend before using the same to shackle the chief warden. The prisoner goes out to the street to buy two bottles of soft drink and then comes back to meet his friend. Astounded, the chief warden queries:

- You [just] had the chance to run away. Why did you come back?!
- [Silence].
- You're crazy! I swear, you're crazy!
- [Silence].
- Why did you chain me to my seat?
- To prevent you from running after me.
- Why did you come back then?! (*al-Mustanqa'āt* 52-55; al-'Ajmi, *A Novelist from Kuwait* 77-78)

As al-'Ajmi notes, the prisoner wants to reciprocate his friend's goodwill by not running away, which could have caused

the latter serious trouble with the government (*A Novelist from Kuwait* 71-75). On the other hand, one can say that Humayda's actions in the scene briefly described above signifies the idea that, rather than the ordinary citizens, it is the corrupt and brutal authorities—symbolized by the chief warden—that should be put under lock and key. Similarly, Humayda's decision to remain in prison implies that—for the intellectuals in particular—living in Iraq during the 1950s-1960s was like living in prison. He is able to continue writing against the regime while in prison—under the pseudo-name of Jasim Salih—because there is more time and freedom and less fear to do so there (*al-Mustanqa'āt* 78). This is something he might not have been able to do if he lived in the country as a free man.

The idea of prison as a place where people often derive inspirations, have more time and freedom to reflect and be creative, is also echoed in Isma'il's other works. In his third novel, for instance, the reader finds one of the characters—a revolutionary activist—narrating his ordeal to his fellow prisoner, the protagonist of the novel:

- [...] Iraqi policemen are never negligent [of their duties].

Surveillance... Sudden arrests [...].  
Remaining in prison is much better.  
Rather, much more relaxing.  
Prison is a school. (*al-Ḥabl* 41)

Finally, through the character of Humayda, Isma'il shows how the political repression of the Qasim regime had turned youthful, active, and progressive-minded Iraqis into passive, frustrated, and desperate individuals (*al-Mustanqa'āt* 78). Like Humayda, Isma'il is also an intellectual who was imprisoned by the regime. Aside from this, Humayda seems to have nothing more in common with the author. This is unlike the protagonist of *al-Ḥabl*.

**Al-Ḥabl: Trauma, Revenge, and Restoration**  
*Al-Ḥabl* sounds more autobiographical than its predecessors because it represents more of the author's personal trauma and revenge. The idea of revenge resonates throughout the narrative, with frequent mention of words such as *antaqim* (I'm avenging), *nāqim* (an avenger), and *naqma* (revenge or affliction), as evident, for instance, in one of the protagonist's internal musings:

*Kuntu nāqiman. Fa-kharajat naqmatī qaṣīdat hijā'* (I was avenging. And my revenge brings out a satiric poem). (79)

An unnamed Iraqi man from Basra, the protagonist, like the author, admits having written a satiric poem in which he criticizes the same historical figure. He narrates that, during one of the interrogation sessions, a police officer commanded:

- Prove your innocence.
- I'm innocent.
- [Reflecting:] But the lone poem which I composed and in which I lampooned 'Abd al-Karim Qasim spread quickly among people. It was secretly distributed. I heard more than one person reading its *maṭla'* (opening line).
- Prove your innocence.
- I'm not a member [of any revolutionary group].
- The poem!! (17)

Regrettably, that poem is no longer extant, the newspaper that published it is now defunct, and none of the few available scholarly works on Isma'il quote from it. Worse still, not a single line from it is quoted by Isma'il himself in any of his subsequent publications, including his extended interview cited in this article. Is this because the author is still being haunted and traumatized by the consequences of the satiric poem? In any case, my argument in this article is not about the text of the poem itself, but about its satiric

message, which caused both Isma'il's and his protagonist's trauma.

Extracts from the novel that illustrate the life-changing effects of the poem on the protagonist include when the reader finds him musing:

- A single poem that is your entire life. Just one poem [...].
- [...]
- How many times have you challenged yourself to write another poem?! [...]
- [...]
- The poem... the revolution... the [political] Left... If only the revolution, if only the Left... In the past... thieves used to have their right hands cut off. But now it is the Left that is severed. (*al-Ḥabl* 18; see also Allen 154-155; al-'Ajmi, *A Novelist from Kuwait* 75)

Like *al-Ḥabl*'s protagonist, it is a poem that changed the author's life forever—from an ordinary Iraqi-Kuwaiti citizen and a budding writer to a more committed literary political-ideologist. Through the poem, Isma'il was only trying, in Tarek El-Ariss's words, to "expose" or "hack" Qasim by exposing the folly of his action for attempting to annex Kuwait. But Isma'il was, in turn, "exposed, hacked, and scandalized" (511). The poem exposed Isma'il in two ways: firstly, to political victimization

through his repeated arrests, and secondly, to the outside world, as a voice to be reckoned with on the Arabic literary scene.

Moreover, following his political travails in Iraq, the author migrated to Kuwait, as earlier noted. It is probable that he was smuggled out of Iraq. He could not have used his authentic identification papers to facilitate his exit from a country whose leader—a tyrant—he had lampooned. Isma'il must have been designated a security-risk leftist on the government's watch list in the same way that the protagonist of *al-Ḥabl* is marked "*siyāsī mutaṭarraf khaṭir*" (a dangerous political extremist) (56). This is following the protagonist's release from prison, when he applies for a passport from the Iraqi immigration department:

- At last, after waiting for two months [...] there arrived my papers, on which it was written: "*siyāsī khaṭir ... mamnū' min al-safar ilā al-khārij*" (a dangerous political activist ... prohibited from traveling abroad). (41)

Desperate to leave the country and to avoid further incarceration, the protagonist is smuggled out of the country without any identification document, as he recounts:

My wife sold our bed. She sold the closet. We gathered ten dinars. I paid eight to an unknown man [who said to me]:

- I will take you to Kuwait without your passport. (41)

The security tag placed on him is repeated many times in the text, albeit in different phrases, to indicate how it haunts him throughout the narrative, including during his stay in Kuwait (24, 36). Isma'il might have been haunted by the same tag as a former political prisoner, or "*mawqūf siyāsī*" (a political detainee) (*al-Ḥabl* 25).

### Torture

As earlier noted, Isma'il declared that he was tortured by officers of the Qasim regime. Torture is also represented in *al-Ḥabl*, though captured through the point of view of another unnamed male character who is among the thirteen political detainees packed together in the same cell (68). Recounting his ordeal, the other political detainee tells the protagonist he has been arrested for writing an abusive essay against the government:

- [...] I suffered a severe torture... Look at my fingers!

I looked. Only one nail was left in his right hand. My body shivered.

- They insisted on getting [my] confessions... (26)

Terrified to see how his friend's hand has been severed, the protagonist "said to [himself]: 'Then I'm a scapegoat (*kabsh al-fidā'*)'" (26). With this statement, the brief torture scene ends, and the reader is left to guess the scale of the impending torture the protagonist is to experience, over and above the regular "*ḍarabāt*" (battering) and "*ṣafa'āt*" (slaps) (23-24, 33, 36). Both the protagonist and his friend did not know each other prior to their imprisonment, but they both share the same democratic beliefs. Whereas his *comrade* actually belongs to a left-wing political association, the protagonist—like Isma'il himself at the time of his ordeals in Iraq—does not (26). This explains what the protagonist means by referring to himself as a scapegoat, an appellation that also suits Isma'il at that time. As a revenge, the author formally declared for Marxism as a literary-ideological persuasion when he traveled to Egypt in 1969. It was there and then that he physically joined the league of Arab leftist-leaning writers, some of whom have been earlier mentioned (al-'Ajmi, *A Novelist from Kuwait* 64).

### Stealing as Revenge

The protagonist of *al-Ḥabl* has had a stealing habit since childhood; at least, he had stolen a carpentry tool as a ten-year-old (31-33, 60). After his deportation from Kuwait (40-43), he also returns to his stealing habit. On this occasion, however, his recourse to thievery is a form of revenge: to retrieve his meager but hard-earned booties from Kuwait—his "*ḥaṣīlat al-'umr*" (lifetime savings) (47-48)—which had been confiscated at the Iraqi border. He recounts:

[The Iraqi immigration officer] said to the policeman:

- Search his pockets very well.
- The policeman did so, thoroughly.
- Some cash, sir! ... Twenty dinars.
- Put it here.
- And a bottle of perfume.
- Great ... Put it here.
- Cigarettes ... Five packets of cigarettes. (47)

It can be argued that the protagonist's indulgence in stealing at childhood has little or no connection to his experience of trauma. Contrastingly, he recurses to stealing having lost his job since his time in prison, with no compensation or pension paid to him. All hope is lost for him in Iraq (35-36), even more so after forfeiting

his gains from Kuwait. Nonetheless, his real reason for returning to thievery is to avenge the confiscation of his possessions. He justifies this, for example, when he retorts: “*Hum saraqūni wa-yasriqūnī*” (They stole from me, and they are still stealing from me) (25), implying the denial of his rights as a citizen, as he tries to convince his wife to support his stealing mission. He is directing his anger to the government officials who represent the regime’s corruption and repressiveness (*al-Ḥabl* 49-50, 57-58). For him stealing now becomes a *mihna* (profession) that must be mastered (*iḥtirāf*) and perfectly executed (47-48), a situation that can be interpreted as a reflection of trauma. This is because some people commit crimes as a reaction to other people’s aggression or injustice, among other personal reasons.

Like *al-Ḥabl*’s protagonist, Isma‘il embarked on a revenge mission through the publication of his first set of novels, as earlier noted. The author, though, does not see these publications as constituting revenge in a strict sense. Nonetheless, one can read the protagonist’s acts of stealing as a child and an adult as allegorically autobiographical. As a child and young adult, Isma‘il saw writing as a hobby and child’s play; he never imagined the repercussions of writing anything against a military junta.

But, consequent upon his travails in and escape from Iraq, he felt challenged and invigorated, so he decided to take writing as a profession and perfect it in the same way that the protagonist of *al-Ḥabl* works assiduously to actualize his stealing mission.

### The Rope and the Restoration of a Trauma Victim

A rope is an item used to *connect* two sides, things, places, etc., and, from a biological point of view, it is like the umbilical cord that connects a baby with his/her mother. The novel’s title, *al-Ḥabl* or *The Rope*, refers to a rope used by the protagonist to climb over the roof of the house he wants to steal from. According to al-‘Ajmi, the rope “symbolizes [the protagonist’s] wife’s yearning for a normal life,” since she wants it to be used for drying clothes “rather than for theft” (*A Novelist from Kuwait* 77). This explanation is self-evident in the novel (11-12, 94).

I would read *The Rope* also as an allegory: it has both personal and political significance in the lives of both the protagonist and the author. The disagreement between the couple over the rope symbolizes the disagreement over the ownership of Kuwait land. That same disagreement is also embodied in Isma‘il’s personality, as he is torn between his affini-

ty with and loyalty to his fatherland and his motherland. Lastly, the province of Basra—with which both the author and his protagonist also share an affinity—is like a rope that connects the rest of Iraq with Kuwait, just as it is also Iraq’s main gateway to Iran.<sup>4</sup>

In the novel, *The Rope* is a symbol not just of a trauma-engendered crime, but also of trauma crisis resolution, or the restoration of a traumatized mind. This is captured in a dramatically presented scene featured in the final pages of the novel, where the protagonist gives up stealing and returns the rope to his wife. After successfully gaining entrance into the house of his most targeted victim, he is able to find items that are commensurate with what was confiscated from him:

A bottle of perfume. [His wife] will be delighted with that... Twenty dinars and a bottle of perfume... What about the packs of cigarettes?! (94)

“He initially takes a piece of gold [i.e., jewelry] but returns it to its place” (93), as that item was not included in what was forcibly taken from him. This point serves to underscore his honesty and integrity, which he strongly believes every human being should possess and always demonstrate:

“There must be honesty and truthfulness in whatever we do, even in thievery,” he says to himself (89). His honesty is put to the test when he does not find packs of cigarettes in the house to complete the targeted number of items, thereby having his mission fully accomplished in just one place. (His earlier outings on the stealing mission were either preparatory, for fact-finding, or unsuccessful, because of the vigilance of the people of the house or the night watchmen in the neighborhood.) But he had promised his wife that this particular outing, whether successful or not, would be his last:

How many times have I promised her but failed!... Well, she will not be angry this time. Henceforth, she will have this rope for her alone. (94)

The protagonist's wife plays the stereotypical role of a submissive and conformist female throughout the narrative. Nevertheless, from the point of view of trauma studies, she performs the all-important role of a pacifier of a traumatized mind, admonishing her husband to stop stealing, and to forget and forgive (his oppressors). Still, his eventual renunciation of stealing is more as a result of self-repentance than of an external influence.

The author's portrayal of conscience and repentance as remedies for trauma is featured toward the end of the novel, where the unnamed third-person narrator tells us that the protagonist experiences “*shu'ūr bi-naqma*” (a feeling of self-indictment). This is when his movements awaken a baby girl in his victim's house. He enters the baby's room, carries her, and sits down to lull her back to sleep:

Mama!!

– Fear begins to reflect in her voice, as she sits tight on his lap. He nearly bursts into a jesting laughter.

He must leave her room now before she realizes it is a thief that has turned a mother. A jesting smile forms on his lips. It is followed by a feeling of self-indictment. (89)

This scene prompts the protagonist's sense of guilt as well as his resolution—expressed through the statement: “Oh, Devil! I will never be deceived by you, henceforth” (94)—with which the text ends. Literary trauma theorists would see the end of the novel in which the protagonist returns to a normal life as a kind of closure that symbolizes the possibility of *healing*, of the rehabilitation and restoration of a traumatized mind, which the classic trauma theorists believe are unhealable

(Caruth 3-4). The last two pages of *al-Ḥabl* provide the final process of that healing in a somewhat similar way as the American Toni Morrison's novel *Home*. As Visser writes:

[...] The final pages of *Home* speak unreservedly of healing, rejuvenation, and personal growth [...]:

*[The tree] looked*

*So beautiful.*

*Hurt right down the middle*

*But alive and well.*

The image of the beautiful tree symbolizes a sense of closure that is not the erasure or denial of past hurt, but which affirms growth and health to emphasize that recovery, despite traumatic wounding, is possible, and that trauma, although it stands outside precise representation, can be integrated. (257)

Isma'īl uses the final scene in *al-Ḥabl* not only to provide a closure, but also to highlight that, irrespective of the reasons for doing it, any act of misdemeanor is a disservice to society. The scene also implies that the future generation should be considered, irrespective of one's position in a crisis, and that, with self-discipline, it is possible to overcome trauma.



### O. Ishaq Tijani

is an adjunct faculty member in the Department of General Undergraduate Curriculum Requirements, University of Dubai, UAE. He earned his BA and MA degrees from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, and PhD from the University of Edinburgh, UK. He is the author of *Male Domination, Female Revolt: Race, Class, and Gender in Kuwaiti Women's Fiction* as well as articles in refereed journals and chapters in edited volumes. His research interests include women and gender in Arabic and Islamic culture, Arabian Gulf literature, Arabic and comparative literature.  
**email:** itijani@ud.ac.ae

### Conclusion

Narrating or documenting one's traumatic experience is one of the most effective means of getting over it, or at least reducing its effects (Visser 250-265). Through his writings, Isma'il has documented some of his troubles in life, thereby realizing some healing from his traumatic past. If revenge is considered a cure for trauma (Beattie 513-524), then Isma'il's writings—through which he has exposed, mocked, or lampooned his oppressors, as explained in the foregoing—are his easiest means of (non-violent) revenge, of his trauma cure.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> He died on 25 September 2018.

<sup>1</sup> Please note that, unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

<sup>2</sup> *Arabic Fiction Org*, <https://www.arabicfiction.org/ar/Ismail%20Fahd%20Ismail>. Accessed 9 July 2018.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the economic and geographical significance of Basra to Iraq see, for example, Nabih Bulus, "Once Iraq's Crown Jewel, Basra Crumbles from Neglect." *Gulf News*, 13 July 2018, <https://gulfnews.com/news/mena/iraq/once-iraq-s-crown-jewel-basra-crumbles-from-neglect-1.2248038>. Accessed 13 July 2018.

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ISSN: 2196-629X  
<https://doi.org/10.17192/meta.2018.11.7796>