

## Smiling under his *kafiya*

by Chibli Mallat

**H**ani al-Fukaiki will be buried in Damascus today. His death last Saturday marks the third tragic loss for Iraq and the Arab world within the past few months. It comes after the sudden collapse of one of Iraq's great masters of free verse, Buland al-Haidari, and the slow and painful agony of another great poet, Mustafa Jamal-al-Din.

As the veterans of the Iraqi opposition slowly disappear away from their loved ones and are buried in cities they knew as exiles, the sense of drift of that great and unique country is exacerbated by the irony and bitterness of wasted, exceptional, souls.

I met Hani al-Fukaiki in the spring of 1992, on the occasion of the first, and alas, last free elections in the history of Iraqi Kurdistan, probably also in the history of Iraq. As we warmed up to each other in the lush and spirited spring in the mountains – in the derelict hotel of Salaheddin where the Kurdish front had offered us hospitality to monitor their elections – I discovered in the man a sharp intellect allied with a great sense of humour and a conspicuous attachment to the beautiful things in life.

Hani had found in the cellars of the hotel a collection of rare French wine which he enjoyed as a real connoisseur. Hani loved the good things in life. He always smelled good, was always well dressed, always stood upright, always appreciated precise language and subtle formulae. He was the perfect gentleman with a sense of history.

Only many months later, when he published a book of analytical memoirs, *Awkar al-Hazima* ('Nests of Defeat'), did I realise that he was the son of Tawfiq al-Fukaiki, another leading figure of twentieth century Iraq. Tawfiq was a prominent politician in British-governed Iraq, whose *Al-ra'i Wal-ra'iyya* ('The Shepherd and his People') remains, to date, a reference book on the difficult chemistry between rulers and ruled in Arab lands.

Hani's political trajectory was very different from his father's, and so were his books. Whilst Tawfiq was a lettered gentleman with a traditional upbringing, Hani, born in Baghdad in 1936, took the path of rebellion when very young, and became one of the leading architects of the Iraqi Baath party in the 1950s.

That was in the late 50s, before al-Fukaiki served in the short-lived Baath regime of 1963; before Baath lost its claim to establishing liberty as one of the three pillars of its world-view, and replaced it with a reputation – in supreme contention with Pol Pot – as the most repressive regime on earth since the second world war. The other two pillars, Arabism and socialism, were also transformed into hollow words.

By then, Hani had already long undertaken the intellectual path leading to the belief in a liberal and democratic Iraq, and his book, which he had hoped to be followed up by many more reflections on the mistakes and flaws of the political process in the Arab world, will remain as a landmark in the memoirs of Arab political figures.

Perhaps the gist of the book appears in the lucid delineation of conspiracy as the worst system of government, and of conspiracy as the worst vehicle for opposition. In the 'Nests of Defeat', his personal trajectory becomes enmeshed with the failures to bring about a better Iraq by means of underground conspiratorial politics, studding profound inquiry with several episodes of striking frankness and acid humour from his own life.

Lucid as he was about the chances of success, Hani never slackened. His presence inside Iraq as one of the most prominent Arab observers of the Kurdish elections of 1992 represents the culmination of a process where tolerance became increasingly the end as well as the means.

In Vienna, during the founding of the Iraqi National Congress (the INC), he struck me as the most lucid contributor. While many were looking for a meaningful electoral process amongst the two hundred or so delegates from all over the world, he came up with some of the best propositions for ensuring as much transparency as possible in a difficult search for a better representation. Such leadership was recognised in the second founding meeting of the INC, in Salaheddin, in northern Iraq: Hani was elected as vice-president of the executive committee. Here there was a new beginning, which was stopped short by the tragic sickness which befell him and by the contradictions which developed inside the INC.

Hani al-Fukaiki wanted to be buried in Iraq. Even that wish was refused. Such was his

compelling personality, however, that an open and warm tribute will inevitably be bestowed on him, sooner or later, in the heart of Baghdad.

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Like Dr Mallat, adds Gareth Smyth, I first met Hani al-Fukaiki in northern Iraq during the Kurdish elections in that far-off spring of 1992. We drove back to Dohuk together, along with a former Iraqi tank commander and Fran Hazelton, like Dr Mallat an election monitor.

For hour upon hour we passed through the rubble of Kurdish villages which had been destroyed during Saddam Hussein's so-called 'Anfal' campaign of 1987-88, in which perhaps 200,000 Kurds died. It was a hot, dusty day as we rumbled along the bumpy road, and Hani wore his *kafiya*, which of course readily identified him as an Arab wherever we were.

We eventually stopped for refreshment in Aqra, a small town on a steep hillside, where we found a band on a roof playing Kurdish music to a festive audience. We were all welcomed with open arms and hospitality, but Hani was greeted as the guest of honour as cakes and coffee were brought out. He warmed naturally to the occasion.

When I talked with Hani later in London, I found he had a very rare ability to articulate to an outsider the very real appeal Baathism had held in the Iraq of his youth: the desire to combat colonialism, the drive to achieve things quickly. Hani remained to the end of his life an Arab nationalist but he was deeply aware of the need for co-existence with others who wanted their nations too – most clearly the Kurds. His commitment to a federal Iraq was the clearest expression of that belief.

In the name of 'unity', Baathist rule in Iraq has survived by creating division, sowing in hearts and minds sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shi'is, between Arabs and Kurds. Hani understood the horrible dangers these divisions threaten.

When I think of Hani al-fukaiki, I shall always remember him in Aqra, smiling underneath his *kafiya*, surrounded by Kurds, firm on the soil of the Iraq he loved so well.

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