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Guest Editorial

New Book Accuses Iraqi Kurds of Assassinating Assyrian Leader

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(AINA) -- Editor's note: A newly published book by the UN's media strategist accuses Iraqi Kurdish officials of the murder of an Assyrian leader in Iraq. Laura Maccidssi's book, **700 Days in Baghdad**, has been published in Sweden and only in Swedish. AINA asked award winning Swedish investigative journalist Nuri Kino to review the book.

An unknown voice took me to Baghdad and its war.

It was a chilly morning in February 2005 when the phone rang. It was from abroad. A man's voice crackled through the wire.

He presented himself as the spokesman for the UN office in Iraq and was wondering if I was interested in working for the UN in the Green Zone in Baghdad. I didn't know much about the Green Zone, but it sounded like an exciting offer. I asked no questions about how he'd found me -- I never had applied for any job in Baghdad -- but answered right away that I was very interested in going to Iraq. At that time the bloody violence dominated the news all over the world. And like the old journalist I am I thought it'd be a privilege to witness first hand the history of a regime change.

That's how Laura Maccidssi's book, **700 Days in Baghdad**, begins. My first thought when I heard about the book was "Finally!" But when I had it in my hand I became doubtful. How could anyone do the war justice in just 277 pages? I gave it a chance. After all, Maccidssi had been there, and in her job as media chief of the UN she had met almost all the political and religious leaders of Iraq. She headed the media strategy -- the public face -- of the UN. I also became suspicious when I saw that she described not only the political game but also her romantic problems and other everyday stories. But once I started, I couldn't stop -- I read the book from cover to cover.

We are shaped by the meetings we are exposed to and expose ourselves to. I, like many others, have since the invasion of Iraq felt rage and despair. All Iraqis I've met, except those who've made economic gains of the war, call it a catastrophe. Women and minorities have lost the most. Iraq is now an Islamic state with an Islamic constitution and an Islamic world view. Non-Muslims and women that do not want to be suppressed do not belong in this country, known for centuries to be the world's most liberal -- the land that is said to have been the cradle of civilization. The country of two rivers that so many want to be part of, have a part of. Not "only" due to the oil and other natural resources but also because you want to take pride in having Gilgamesh, Hammurabi and Sargon as your ancestors.

I started this article by talking about how many are frustrated, one of the reasons is over how the media has let itself be manipulated since the war in Iraq began. For example, newspapers, magazines, radio and TV have reported about the Kurdish Yezidis. There are no Kurdish Yezidis. The Yezidis are a people of their own, also one of Iraq's aboriginal peoples. They are a fascinating minority with their own religion, traditions and culture. They are part of the human mosaic that make up Iraq and its surroundings. I have many fine memories of my meetings with Yezidis who were my neighbors in south-eastern Turkey, where I was born. Laura Maccidssi speaks intelligently about the Yezidis and it is things like that which make her book one of the most important documents that I've read in a long time.

Maccidssi and I met at the Swedish Radio, the public service radio of Sweden. She worked at the Arabic department and I worked at the daily news and other "more sophisticated" departments. I used to sneak down to the immigrant language departments almost every day to gossip. One of our favorite topics was the misunderstandings of foreign correspondents. They often misunderstood ethnic, religious and political struggles, and they were often manipulated. But we excused them -- it's not easy for someone that's not from the Middle East to distinguish between the myriad of people that live and compete in the area. **700 Days in Baghdad** silences most of that type of critique, even if there's one mistake that she'll surely be criticized for. She calls the Kurdish dialect that's spoken in Iraq Kurmanji, which is partly true. But in places like Arbil and Sulaimania they speak Surani, the other Kurdish dialect. The book contains too many names of people and political parties -- on every two pages she delivers a new name. Despite the name register in the end of the book I can't keep track of it all. But it's difficult to see how she could have written the book any other way.

Maccidssi writes that Iraqi UN employees and their relatives were kidnapped, raped and executed, while other's took their lives. "One out of two had lost a relative, a son, a sibling or a parent." In my meetings, in the interviews I've made with Iraqi refugees in seven countries, it hasn't been one out of two but almost every person. Almost all the Iraqis have suffered what Maccidssi's colleagues described to her. But when they come to countries like Sweden, their experiences are dismissed, or ridiculed. The country reports that are used to make decisions about asylum are not only bad, but close to useless. They are filled with misunderstandings, lies and contradictions. The Migration Board should throw them away. Luckily the Migration Courts have often disregarded the country reports and made completely different assessments and judgments than the Migration Board.

Since the war erupted I have followed the lives and destinies of Iraqi refugees, especially non-Muslims. The Supreme Court of Migration has decided that Mandaeans, another Iraqi minority with their own religion, tradition and culture, can't be protected in Iraq and therefore

should be allowed to stay in Sweden. Macdissi comes to the same conclusion. She also writes that two thirds of the Christian Assyrians of Iraq have been forced to flee. She reveals how the Assyrians tried to stop the systematic ethnic cleansing by, among other things, applying for a protected zone.

"The Assyrians had for long demanded an autonomous area in northern Iraq. After the invasion the leader for the Independent Syriac Assembly, Isho Majid Hadaye, saw that this goal was within reach. In October 2006 he wrote an open letter to the National Assembly of Iraq and demanded that Assyrians receive a protected administration of their own in the Nineveh-plains. A month later Hadaye was murdered by a Kurdish death squad that belonged to the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Kurdistan Patriotic Union."

This is world news. Until this day, this murder is not yet officially investigated. Officially, leaders for KDP and PUK say that the Assyrians should be allowed their own administration -- as long as it doesn't report to Baghdad but to KRG (the Kurdish Regional Government). It's all about the top level power game. That's the case with much in Macdissi's book. I get many pieces of the puzzle, many feelings of "so that's what happened behind the scenes when this and that decision was taken." Macdissi was there.

Above all else I feel gratitude when I read 700 Days in Baghdad. The author makes me understand that I am not alone in feeling a strong sense of frustration. The book is not a literary masterpiece. But it is an important historical piece of work, a book that should be used in schools and state departments and migration authorities all over the world. On top of that it's a thrilling story about a part of the world that the US misunderstood. It is also a revealing story about how greed takes over everything and makes Arabs attack Arabs, Kurds attack Kurds, Sunnis attack Shiites, Shiites attack Sunnis, Sunni on Sunni, Shiite on Shiite, Kurdish Shiites on Kurdish Sunnis. And then there are the Americans that try to participate or make peace in every conflict. Minorities get trampled and forgotten in this chaos. Iraq is about brutal death. Like no one else, Macdissi gives me insights about that through her straightforward language.

Things have calmed down in Iraq since she wrote the book, it's less violent, she claims. But compared to what? A spring day in Stockholm? Or Darfur when it saw its worst days? And the struggle for oil remains, it has not been settled. Civil war can brake out any second. Let us hope that it will not. Let us hope that Macdissi can go back to Iraq and walk the same streets as the Iraqis without having to wear a bullet proof vest and a helmet, and hide in a tank that's escorted by an entire convoy.

Translated from Swedish by Christopher Holmbäck

Nuri Kino is a journalist in Sweden specializing in investigative journalism, and is one of the most highly awarded journalists in Europe (CV). He is an Assyrian from Turkey. His documentary, Assyriiska: a National team without a Nation, was awarded The Golden Palm at the 2006 Beverly Hills Film festival.

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