

Where Baghdad meets Jerusalem

Poets and fellow Iraqi exiles Salah Al Hamdani and Ronny Someck show the audience at the Jerusalem Book Fair that they share a love of the land where poetry likely began.

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Salah Al Hamdani, left, and Ronny Someck. Photo by Isabel Legni

A groundbreaking meeting in the Middle East peace process took place this week, part of a secret back channel that could change the face of the region.

Scratch that. Rephrase, as writers are wont to do, with less hyperbole and more happenstance.

The groundbreakers in this event were poets, not politicians, and the back channel is not so secret. Salah Al Hamdani, an Iraqi poet jailed under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein and now living in France, is in Israel this week, in part to acknowledge and celebrate his deepening friendship with the poet Ronny Someck, who was born in Iraq and came to Israel with his family at the age of 2.

Both men discovered a little over four years ago, during a poetry festival in France, that not only were they moved by one other's writing, but they were both born in Baghdad the same year.

"When I realized that he was born in Baghdad in 1951, I came to a realization then: I have a Jewish brother who lives in Israel," Al Hamdani told an audience gathered Monday night to hear the two men interact and read from their works as part of the Jerusalem International Book Fair. "I ran to meet him, because I thought, maybe he looks like me. And we do look like brothers, right? Especially around the head," Al Hamdani joked with the crowd in a theater of the Jerusalem Cinematheque, running a hand through his thick white shock of hair and gesturing to Someck's bald head.

They do not actually look alike, but they share a love of the land where poetry likely began, with the Epic of Gilgamesh, and both have deep, gravelly voices that rumble so low, it's hard to fathom that someone can sound so manly and so poetic at the same time.

"I speak to him, Ronny speaks his Iraqi as he feels like it," Al Hamdani continued, eliciting more laughter. "And we understand each other, beyond the words. From there, two Iraqis in exile sitting in France, we came to realize that Baghdad needs us."

Al Hamdani proposed a collaboration, and Someck agreed. In 2012, the two men came out with a joint book of poetry, "Baghdad-Jerusalem," with their work appearing in French, Hebrew and Arabic. The next year, Al Hamdani took up Someck's invitation to come to Israel for a poetry festival in Haifa — largely a quiet visit. But this, Al Hamdani's second visit to Israel, amounted to his first appearance in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv to attend a major literary event.

"I'm here and I will return here to meet the Jews of Iraq. They're my family, they're my blood," Al Hamdani said in French, his comments followed by interpretation into Hebrew. "There's a lot to say about all the problems between Israel and Palestinians, and Israel's policy towards the Palestinians, but these are not what I'm here to talk about."

In a separate interview, Al Hamdani said he "lost some friends" when his connection with Someck and his travel to Israel became known. Many other poets, writers and artists in the Arab world hold that any kind of cooperation with Israel amounts to "normalization" that should be avoided, particularly in the face of a complete meltdown in Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

"I can't be dictated to about where I should go, any more than I was able to tolerate living under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein," Al Hamdani told Haaretz. Referring to the late Palestinian poet, he said: "Even Mahmoud Darwish wrote and spoke Hebrew. Should he be ostracized for that? I do have my critique of Israeli policy, but I think it's for the Palestinians to work out a solution to this conflict with Israel, and I don't think someone from Iraq or Saudi Arabia or Qatar can decide for them. In the meantime, I am proud to be here, and proud of what the Jews of Iraq contribute to my culture."

Another poet was also involved in bringing Al Hamdani to Jerusalem: Gilad Meiri, director of the Poetry Place, a literary project working out of a community center in Jerusalem. Meiri was present at the festival in Sète, France, when the two men signed a contract to do a joint poetry collection on a coffee-stained café napkin.

"We see the terrible racism now in Israel toward outsiders, so it was very important for us to bring Salah to the fair to send a message of openness and coexistence — of multicultural realities," Meiri said in an interview. "Moreover, the fair's roots have been more focused on commercial interests, and so the position of the poet at the fair is not that high. Bringing an international poet like Salah Al Hamdani to the fair means raising the profile of the poet. Most Arab poets don't want to do any kind of artistic cooperation with Israel or feel they can't, and he's engaging with us in an amazing and wonderfully warm way."

At the book fair event, Meiri — accompanied by the music of Luna Abu Nassar, an Israeli Arab musician whose songs move flawlessly between Hebrew and Arabic — read a poem he'd written about Katamon, a West Jerusalem neighborhood populated by wealthy Christian Arabs until 1948. The sale to a developer of a plot of land that had been the place where Meiri watched years of Hapoel Katamon soccer games helped him relate to the Palestinians' feelings of loss and longing, he said.

In reaction to this, Al Hamdani told the audience that this poem, like his very presence in Israel, was a statement.

"He who is in exile, he is doing a political act. My presence here is itself a political act. And in a way I am taking a certain risk. There are those who would like to take our heads off for this and see us dead," Al Hamdani said. "When I come here, I bring memories, I bring messages. The poem on Katamon, what, there's no political meaning there? Of course there is, and that is a natural thing."