

Al-Moutanabbi Street

A unique cultural phenomenon

Report - Walid Abdul-Amir Alwan . Photos - Fadhel Abbas As-Selami

Since the 1950s, Arab intellectuals have been saying: "Cairo writes, Beirut prints and Baghdad reads". This is still true today. Baghdad's residents and foreigners continue to flock to Moutanabbi Street, the traditional haven for intellectuals and artists, situated to the East of the Tigris in the centre of Baghdad. The 250m street has many side streets with printing houses and book binders. It was named after Abu Al-Tayeb Al-Moutanabbi, a famous poet from Kufa.



Inside Al-Foufouli Bookshop

جانِب من مكتبة الفلّلي

Al-Moutanabbi street through the ages

Al-Moutanabbi Street was called "Hospital Street" when the Turks ruled Iraq. The hospital was near the seat of government in Al-Qushla district. After independence a military bakery was constructed. The printers and bookbinders were also there while the bookstores were in nearby As-Saray Street. During the 50s, the bookshops began a mass migration to Al-Moutanabbi Street. The

printing houses and the bookbinders also moved in. Asriah Bookstore was the first to relocate. It was followed by Al-Ahlia and Al-Mothanna, which became one of the most famous bookstores of Iraq and expanded into publishing; then came Al- Maarif and others and the street was transformed into a permanent book fair. Stationery shops catering for students soon arrived. Most writers who came to Baghdad, visited this street - particularly Asriah Bookstore. Mr.

Abdul Hamid Arrashoudi told Islamic Tourism that his customers included Mikhail Noayma, Mohamed Khalil Bihim, and Hassan Al-Amin.

Al-Moutanabbi Street during and after the sanctions

After the second Gulf war, the street witnessed a qualitative change whose effects are still apparent. Because of the ➤



Ashabandar coffee shop

مقهى الشابندر



Assaray Souk

سوق السراي

deterioration in living standards and the quality of life, intellectuals sold their books to help make ends meet. The street turned into an auction house for the best books on any and every topic. It is now common to see professors and teachers selling their books. A new class of vendors appeared. They were called street sellers because they spread their books, magazines and other goods on the floor. Their prices are about half those of the bookshops. This trend is encouraging the public to buy books for their libraries. The opening of Iraq, after the fall of Saddam's regime, and the availability of many works that were forbidden, because of their intellectual or religious content, resulted in an over abundance of literature. One cannot imagine the amount of printed material, magazines and books that were forbidden for three decades. During these dark days, history books were very much sought-after, to the extent that many were

reprinted several times, in total disregard of copy right laws. Political parties exploited this cultural gathering place to distribute their newspapers and booklets.

Al-Moutanabbi Street on Friday

Friday is certainly Iraq's non-official, cultural feast-day. The people who have an interest in culture visit the street in large numbers in search of books and publications and just to see what is available. Some sellers keep the novelties for this day. The street is also a weekly meeting place for students and professional authors.

The sellers, notably those who display their goods on the floor, come early in the morning, bringing all the books and magazines they could gather. Close to noon, the prices of the books have a tendency to drop, because the street begins to empty of customers, who either head towards the mosques for prayers

or return home. The sellers want to get rid of as much of their stocks as they can.

Students, especially postgraduates, benefit most from this book festival. They buy much needed books, references and dictionaries. The famous Al-Mawrid dictionary is photocopied and bound in such a way that it cannot be distinguished from the genuine Beirut edition. It sells for half the price of the original. Al-Mutanabbi Street is one of the most attractive streets for the Iraqi and Arab media, who are constantly filming scenes from daily life. Similarly, newspaper and magazine correspondents often question patrons about what is on offer and the prices. There are always television reports about this street, where tourists and orientalists who visit Baghdad converge to look for a map of the capital or for old books.

Iraq is really the market where books are sold at the lowest price in the world - even in difficult times. A considerable stock of ➤



Ashabandar coffee shop

مقهى الشابندر



Ashabandar coffee shop

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books was preserved in private libraries and bookstores and the Iraqi state subsidized books by about 50%. Most Iraqi students studying abroad brought lots of books back with them. Hard times forced them to sell their collections at low prices. While researching this article, I bought an important biology book in English, for 500 Iraqi dinars - 34 cents.

If you want a book, look in Al-Foufouli's

Visitors to Al-Moutanabbi Street must go to the souk that nourished the bookstores and greet the owners of the bookstore set up by the late Hussein Al-Foufouli. This bookstore was founded in 1930 and is currently managed by his descendants. It contains valuable books covering all disciplines, in several languages, some dating back to 1800. It is also the place for rare manuscripts, a meeting point for researchers and students and a venue for cultural meetings. Eminent Arab men of letters gather here. It is usual to see foreign visitors and tourists who come to look for old books on Iraqi civilization, manuscripts or maps. Some time ago I met an American researcher who needed a book on old Persian literature in the Persian language. It was amazing that he could find it at a very good price. Hence the Iraqi intellectuals' saying: "If you want a book look in Al-Foufouli's".

Ashabandar coffee shop

At the end Al-Moutanabbi Street, in front of Assaray souk, you find Baghdad's most



Mr. Abdul Hamid Arrashoudi
talk to the author

الباحث عبد الحميد الرشودي
يتحدث للكاتب

famous coffee shop. The capital's intelligentsia meet here on a weekly basis after visiting Moutanabbi Street. Ashabandar Coffee Shop was built in 1917 and named after Ashabandar the owners of the building and the heirs of Mohamed Said Ashabandar, one of the notables of Baghdad. Because of its proximity to five ministries, including the Ministry of Justice, most of its customers were jurists, magistrates, lawyers and their clients. During the fifties, some cultural events were organized there, with the participation of the singer Rachid Al-Qundarji. The present owner, Haj Mohammad Al-Khishaly, described how the proceeds from these events were donated to charities, like Atafid School.

Today the coffee shop is the place for daily or weekly meetings of intellectuals, academics, lecturers, men of letters and journalists. It has

its own code of conduct and customers must refrain from speaking in loud voices. They are seated according to their professions: lawyers, magistrates, teachers etc

Printing houses and bookbinders

Al-Moutanabbi Street has an integrated book industry, including the preparation, printing, binding and sale of books. Modern printing houses stand side by side traditional establishments dating back to the beginning of last century. Most of the book binders still use old manual processes: lead for the preparation of clichés and the use of gilt edged paper for the covers.

As in the rest of Baghdad, the old and the new co-exist in a happy symbiosis in Al-Moutanabbi Street. ■