

# Opinion

## The girl who seized the internet

Tara Fares fashioned herself into the Instagram queen of Iraq. Then she was shot to death.

Molly Crabapple

On Oct. 9, the Iraqi author Sinan Antoon tweeted, “Killing those who are other/different has become a ritual/hobby, practiced by individuals for fun, after having been institutionalized by the state, political parties and militias for years.” His tweet referred to reports that an Iraqi teenager had been butchered on a Baghdad street by an assailant who thought he looked gay. But Mr. Antoon could have been referring to any of the young Iraqis who have tried to break free of the rigid social codes governing both genders only to suffer vicious reprisals.

The most famous of these victims has been Tara Fares. When she was killed in September, Ms. Fares, who had 2.8 million followers on Instagram, was the sixth most popular person on Iraqi social media. At 22, she was a self-created celebrity who mixed sexy fashion shoots with video diaries in which she fired back at her conservative critics. Ms. Fares was shot dead in Baghdad’s Camp Sarah neighborhood while riding in her Porsche.

When I read about Ms. Fares’s murder, recognition hit me like a punch. Though I am 13 years her senior, when I was her age, I also worked as a scantily clad internet model. I also reinvented myself on social media, posting endless photos of myself, trying to build a following that would somehow translate into something more. Back then, qualified only for menial jobs, I also saw my looks as a fast-closing door to freedom and used them as best I could. But I am in the United States, and she was in Iraq. The stakes for Ms. Fares were far higher. Her courage was of a different magnitude from mine.

Ms. Fares was born in Baghdad into a Christian family that converted to Islam when she was 6. Her parents married her off at 16 to a man she described as traditional and violent. When her parents caught him beating her, they took her back into their home. She was 19 and soon discovered she was pregnant. After she gave birth, she said, her husband sent armed men to take their son. “All Iraqi men want a woman to serve them, wash their clothes, devote themselves to them, but they do not ask you to have feelings. It is tantamount to asking you not to be human,” Ms. Fares said later.

Perhaps before, perhaps after her divorce, she had started modeling. The first Miss Iraq beauty pageant took place in 1947; the winner was a Jewish girl, Renee Dangoor. The pageant closed shop in 1972, though unofficial pageants continued in less extravagant forms, until Miss Iraq officially restarted in 2015. Ms. Fares made her debut in an unofficial pageant in 2014 in a bare, over-lit room at the Baghdad Hunting Club, whose contestants were extraordinary only in their ordinariness. She was baby-faced and wide-eyed and won runner-up. In 2015, she was crowned Miss Baghdad at the Hunting Club.



ANMAR KHALIL/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Around this time, she began to post selfies on social media. “I never thought they’d become viral,” she later said on YouTube. “I felt powerful from all of these replies of love and hate. I started to feel that I was strong enough to choose whatever I wanted, to dress the way I saw as correct, because it is my choice and my life after all.” Ms. Fares left for Turkey in early 2015, determined to find success as a model.

The Instagram account that made her famous kicked off in May 2016. In her first post, she sports an Adidas baseball cap and a pout, and describes a nightmare about a car bombing in the caption. “I saw blood. I saw corpses . . . but the strangest thing I saw was my body, thrown onto the ground. #Follow\_TaraFares.” The juxtaposition of hot girl and horror garnered her post 15,091 likes.

Ms. Fares’s likeness remains repeated in this internet hall of mirrors: swathed in a hotel robe, getting her hair done on Eid al-Fitr, playing video games, flaunting her intricate tattoos. She traveled across the region from

Beirut to Doha to Amman, posting increasingly stylish and slick videos of her adventures.

In a self-produced mini-documentary, actors whisper her name as she trots into a hotel lobby. The legend reads “Glamour Queen.” She sports skimpy clothes, designer bags, blinged-out nails.

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She is her own woman, mimicking the aspirational lifestyle of the Westernized ultrarich. Men harassed her online and on the street. Women, too, denounced her. When, on an Iraqi YouTube show, the host asked her about rumors she did sex work, she denied it, then mocked her accusers. In a video diary, she berated an unnamed cleric who offered her a “pleasure marriage” — a temporary union unique to Shia Islam.

After rejecting his proposal, she declared: “Tara Fares has more honor

than the members of Parliament and the Iraqi politicians. Because Tara doesn’t swear at people. Tara doesn’t speak in sectarian language. Tara doesn’t suck the blood of the Iraqi people.”

Ms. Fares was based in the city of Erbil but she traveled frequently to Baghdad. Her love for her hometown was evident. Four months before her murder, she tweeted, “I have always been proud of where I have come from and others around me. I never feel shame” for being from “a city inhabited by war and destruction.”

The murder of Miss Baghdad is a big headline, and in death, Ms. Fares made the news around the globe. On Iraqi social media some praised her as a free woman, some mourned the killing of a harmless model, but to some others, she had earned death because of her immoral behavior. A few days before Ms. Fares’s killing, Suad al-Ali, a women’s rights activist, was shot to death in Basra. In August, Rafif al-Yasiri and Rasha al-Hassan, two beauticians and prominent figures on Iraqi social media, died in mysterious circumstances in Baghdad. Some Iraqis see connec-

tions between the deaths and fear that extremist militias were killing these outspoken and outgoing women.

The murders remain unsolved and questions remains around the mysterious deaths. On Oct. 16, The Baghdad Post claimed that the Iraqi Interior Ministry had ordered the prosecution of militia leaders in connection with the killings of Ms. Fares and another Iraqi internet star, a flamboyant actor named Karrar Noushi, stabbed to death in 2017.

“The militarization of the Iraqi streets with armed men at checkpoints and the proliferation of militias has created new mechanisms of social control,” the sociologist Zahra Ali wrote in the aftermath of Ms. Fares’s murder. Violent patriarchy may have killed Iraq’s Instagram queen, but in her brief, vivid life, she seized the internet’s possibilities for self-determination. In her death, she remained an irresistible icon.

**MOLLY CRABAPPLE** is the author of “Drawing Blood” and co-author of “Brothers of the Gun.”

**A display at the gravesite of the social media star Tara Fares, in Najaf, Iraq.**

## Australians must reject a nationalist push into universities

Politicians and activists are shaping nationalist sentiment into pride in artificial and ahistoric notions of civilization.

David Brophy

**SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA** In 1985, the Australian entrepreneur Paul Ramsay took a tour of Nottoway Plantation in Louisiana. So impressed was he with the luxurious “white castle” mansion and its grounds that he decided to buy it right there and then. In Mr. Ramsay’s hands, the property became a popular tourist attraction and resort. The resort’s website continues to revel in Nottoway’s antebellum glory days, while neglecting to make any mention of the slave labor from which it was built.

A similar desire to whitewash the past informs the institution that Paul Ramsay has left Australians as his legacy: the Ramsay Center for Western Civilization in Sydney.

In the 1990s, Prime Minister John Howard accelerated the privatization of Australian health care, introducing a tax rebate for those who took out private insurance. During the sell-off of state assets, Mr. Ramsay specialized in turning veterans’ hospitals into profit-making enterprises, before expanding his interests across the sector. By the time he died in 2014, his net worth was likely upward of \$2 billion.

Mr. Ramsay’s health care fortune is now being plowed into a second sector facing a dire erosion of public funding: higher education. With Mr. Howard as chairman of its board of directors, the Ramsay Center is in negotiations with multiple Australian universities to fund a new program of courses in Western Civilization.

There’s no denying the benefits that philanthropy can bring to a public university, but the Ramsay Center is no ordinary donor. Its board members have been frank about their political goals: to redress what they see as excessive criticism of the West in Australian universities, and to cultivate a “new generation of leaders” who will “defend and promote” Western civilization, which the chief executive of the center, Simon Haines, believes is “arguably the richest of all civilizations.”

The Ramsay Center wants to establish its program alongside, and separate from, existing offerings in disciplines like history and philosophy — disciplines already heavily weighted toward the West. And it intends to privilege “Western civilization” by providing its budding “cadre of leaders” with scholarships and learning conditions that outstrip those available to their peers.

Ramsay’s push onto campuses marks the next step in a wider campaign to roll back the more pluralistic definition of national identity that is emerging in today’s multicultural Australia. In the 1990s, Prime Minister Howard voiced his hostility to a “black armband view of history,” which in his view gave excessive weight to the indigenous viewpoint on Australia’s colonization.

Speaking in 2010 at the launch of the Foundations of Western Civilization Program, an initiative of the free-market Institute of Public Affairs, Mr. Howard railed against the Australian Labor Party’s new high-school history curriculum, which he felt belittled European and British influences on Australia.



MARK NOLAN/GETTY IMAGES

Paul Ramsay speaking in Sydney, Australia, in 2011.

But it is not only Australia’s history wars in which “Western civilization” serves as a rallying cry for conservatives. In a 2011 address entitled “Western civilization must be defended,” Mr. Howard argued that same-sex marriage was “an exercise in de-authorizing the Judeo-Christian influence in our society.” Another former prime minister, and Ramsay Center board member, Tony Abbott, has justified the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in terms of “defending Western civilization against the forces of chaos.”

The myth of an embattled “Western civilization” has also been featured in a recent series of alarming interventions into the politics of race and immigration in Australia. In August, Senator

Fraser Anning referred to his harsh policy ideas as the “final solution to the immigration problem,” arguing that we must not “concede the field to enemies of Western civilization.” Earlier this month, the governing Liberal-National coalition endorsed Senator Pauline Hanson’s motion echoing the alt-right slogan “It’s O.K. to be white,” and deploring “attacks on Western civilization.”

Efforts to re-center the university curriculum on more celebratory notions of “Western civilization” feed off, and in turn give scholarly legitimacy to, interventions such as these. The Ramsay Center’s rhetoric may sound more sophisticated than the outright Western chauvinism emanating from

the Australian Senate, but the kinship they share is obvious.

The Ramsay initiative mirrors a wider global trend in which politicians and activists shape nationalist sentiment into pride in artificial and ahistoric notions of civilization. Amid growing geopolitical rivalries, and widely expressed hostility toward free trade, kindred spirits on the global right now seek to divide the world into cultural camps, threatening the critical spirit and international exchange that is so vital to scholarly work.

In the United States, the conservative National Association of Scholars has lobbied to restore “Western civilization” to the centrality it once held in America’s college curriculum. This campaign led to the creation of Texas Tech’s Institute for the Study of Western Civilization, headed by the N.A.S.’s founding chair. Next month, the institute is hosting Bruce Gilley, a professor of political science at Portland State University, who will present “the case for colonialism.”

In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is introducing a curriculum that will inculcate a “new civilization” informed by his definition of Ottoman and Islamic values. In China, President Xi Jinping has similarly set himself the task of reviving his nation’s confidence in “5,000 years of Chinese civilization.”

In some cases in Australia, universities have shown themselves vigilant to the dangers inherent in this climate of cultural nationalism. When Beijing’s Confucius Institute came knocking at the University of Sydney, my colleagues rightly insisted that they have no role in teaching Chinese language and culture to our undergraduates.

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