

TORONTO — How much Iraq, my home country, has changed. And I know all too well that the changes did not happen overnight. It was, and is, systematic destruction, and for me it started three decades ago during the run up to Baghdad's last planned summit.

Back then, in 1981, I was a newly graduated civil engineer working on the [V.V.I.P.B.](#) – Very, Very Important Persons Building – at Baghdad International Airport, a project that was a symbol of glory, abundance and growth as Iraq prepared itself to host a 1983 conference of [Non-Aligned Movement](#) nations, a prestigious event during the cold war.

We Iraqi engineers were constantly encouraged by our seniors to learn from the overseas construction companies supervising the airport, and other projects. Baghdad was one large workshop.

Once, a French engineer asked me, “Where do you see yourself 15 years from now?” Maybe running a construction firm of my own, I thought. The Italians, French and other internationals opened schools for their children. I remember a British engineer's wife gave birth to their third boy in the Iraqi Red Crescent Hospital in Baghdad. That was how safe and reliable Baghdad was.

But while Iraq was trying to position itself during the cold war, its sons were battling ferociously on its own front line, with Iran. No neighborhood, street or corner, it seemed, was spared the common scene of a mother wailing over her dead son, his body wrapped in the Iraqi flag. My block, included — it was the sign of the time.

The summit never happened, it was cancelled because of the war with Iran. I almost cried the day I learned that it had been moved to New Delhi.

I fled Iraq in 2003. Flying to and from Baghdad in recent years, I learned to take the pulse of the street from my fellow Iraqi passengers. On my first trip in 2010, just after the last parliamentary elections, optimism was in the air before the plane was. I heard phrases like, “Finally, we are seeing the end of the tunnel.” Later, when the politicians had still not been able to form a government after several months, the tone became angrier. “We are going back into the pit,” muttered one man. On my most recent visit, in 2011, the mood was of hopelessness.

Just before take off I noticed a shabby building on the side of the runway and my heart sank. It was the V.V.I.P. building that I had helped build three decades earlier. It had lost its grandeur, and I wondered whether the palm trees that we had carefully planted in its four courtyards were alive, or had they withered like everything else in Iraq?