

The War on Iraq Two Decades On



The Folders of Assafir Al-Arabi - 2023

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*The Testimonials from Iraq are a joint collaboration between Assafir Al-Arabi and Jummar



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The War on Iraq Two Decades On

Nahla Chahal

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Translated by **Sabah Jalloul**

This is not a commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the senseless war on Iraq, which marked a regression to colonialism's earliest methods of occupation, carried out under the brutal march of army battalions and the destructive force of weaponry arsenals. Those methods included tampering with the targeted nation at every level, dismantling its civil and military structures, obliterating its institutions, and looting and destroying its cultural heritage, including the ancient artefacts that bore witness to the dawn of human civilization in Sumer, Babylon, and beyond. This inflicted devastation was additionally accompanied by the plunder of Iraq's modern-day wealth, particularly its oil reserves.

We do not commemorate the erasure of the efforts made by the elites of modern societies to draw up what became globally recognized regulations and principles - particularly in the aftermath of World War I and II and the subsequent brutal wars waged against liberation movements across the globe.

Nor do we commemorate the diminishing efforts of institutions which, while they may have often fallen short of fulfilling their declared goals hindered by their own considerable hypocrisy and inability to overcome inherent flaws, have nonetheless constituted frameworks for globally acknowledged "principles" and controls. Although these principles are frequently violated, their importance lies in the fact that they did exist as a point of reference for all.

The two global wars on Iraq, spearheaded by Washington with the active participation of London, and all that unfolded between and after these two wars, have contributed to the erosion of these principles and the rise of pure barbarism. This brazen, unbridled barbarism has coincided with the current reign of a specific form of capitalism referred to as neoliberal globalization, which dismantles institutions, states, and societies for the benefit of a select "despotic" few who dominate power, finance, and media, while chaos trails everywhere, and on everything, using "mafia" methods if need be.

We do not commemorate the Iraqi tragedy, which some speculate may have been orchestrated by a contemptuous Israeli-Zionist scheme against the “land of the two rivers” and its people. The project happened to coincide with the desires of neo-conservatives at a specific moment in history when the global balance, which had once played a deterrent role against the execution of this deplorable international scheme, crumbled following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its socialist bloc.

We do not commemorate what has unfolded after all plans miserably backfired. The Islamic Republic of Iran garnered sweeping influence over Iraq, encroaching upon the country at every level, as its contemporary elites rekindled the dreams of its ancient empire. Al-Qaeda and later ISIS emerged, disrupting the stability of nations that had once deemed themselves invulnerable and far from whatever happened in distant “undeveloped” regions. This highlighted the interconnectedness of our world where nothing is truly remote, as if we had discovered anew that Earth is indeed round. In fact, our planet is fragile and vulnerable to destruction, whether it be one country at a time, as we have witnessed, or collectively through the incessant interference with the planet and the climate with shocking shortsightedness and nihilism. Both these destructive trends raise questions about the feasibility of “progress”, even the viability of humankind itself, who - although never completely devoid of hubs of resistance - appears to be either oblivious to the existential threats or oddly resigned to its “fate”, in stark contrast to the philosophies of ancient and modern thinkers.

We present our readers with eight texts, each explicitly or implicitly addressing these issues. We have chosen these various topics because they best reflect the ongoing situation. The first text, written by Mizar Kemal, introduces the issue by addressing Iraq itself and its subsequent devastation. It is followed by several texts that delve into the repercussions across the region. Raja Al-Khalidi explores how this devastation affected the Palestinian struggle for liberation. Mona Sleem examines the impact of the Iraqi issue on Egypt, and how it contributed to circumstances which eventually led to the January 2011 revolution. Omar Benderra reflects on the lessons learned by Algeria, a nation with a longstanding revolutionary tradition, namely that oppressive regimes constitute the shortest route to weakening societies and stifling their capacity to resist. Samir Aita sheds light on the state of turmoil that overcame Syria following the “fall” of Iraq. Finally, in collaboration with Jummar, the young Iraqi media platform whose founders emerged from Assafir Al-Arabi, we present three texts that provide living testimonies from Iraqis who witnessed the event. The first is by Dima Yassine, who was a young woman coming of age at the time of the invasion. The second is

by Mobeen Al-Khashani, who was a five-year-old child witnessing the bewildering omnipresence of US weapons around him, which metaphorically gouged his already ailing eyes. Lastly, Amani Al-Hassan, who was only six during the war, reflects on how she had coped with and endured the horrors of that unforgettable event.

With these texts, we underscore the enduring impact of the Iraq war, as its aftershocks persist and continue to interact and reverberate. The war's realities and aftermath ripple across not only the region but also the world, like a bouncing bomb that strikes multiple times over, each time regenerating new crises and situations - first in the plundered and ravaged Iraq, then in its neighboring region, and ultimately in the world at large. The war on Iraq was, indeed, a global event, and it remains one!





Serwan Baran - Iraq

I Am All of These Dead Faces

Mizar Kemal

Writer and journalist from Iraq

Translated by **Sabah Jalloul**

The numbers say that 200,000 civilians and an equal number of soldiers, children of these civilians, lost their lives in the war. But nobody keeps track of the number of the scared in times of war - those who may have cheated death but still bore witness to it. We were among those forsaken masses, digging trenches in our garden, razing our grass and sacrificing our grapevine to survive. And now, we find ourselves telling the story of what happened.

The shelter sits beneath the garden, and the grapevine arbor stretches over the wall, as though it sprung from an ancient place beyond. Its branches cascade onto the garden's soil which has not seen green grass in a long while, ever since my father decided to build a bunker underneath it to shelter us from the American warplanes. The aircrafts would often materialize, as if from thin air, over our cities and release precision-guided bombs onto us. After all, this had happened several times before, on the fortified civilian shelter of Al-Amiriyah and on Laila Al-Attar's home, so why should we be an exception?

Dawn usually brings along a gentle breeze, but on that particular day, it carried the scent of death - not the kind that merely kills but that which crushes bodies to a pulp and obliterates them to dust until nothing remains. It was reported in the news that the dead numbered 408. In reality, that was just the number of bodies found, while others perished without a trace. All that was left of them was their final image in the memory of the survivors: They awoke from their sleep and proceeded to perform ablution as they prepared for the Fajr prayer. They were anxious and afraid as they sought refuge within the concrete walls of the Al-Amiriyah shelter, clinging to dear life. But all their efforts were in vain.

It happened at dawn on Tuesday, February 13, 1991. Iraqis had no idea that two F-117 Nighthawks were bringing them death wrapped in two guided bombs, the first of which penetrated a 1.5-meter thick ceiling, while the second one descended on the terrified bodies in the shelter, exploded, and tore them apart. 261 women, 52 children, and 95 men were discovered lifeless. There were others whose remains were never found. The explosion had incinerated their bodies.

People were talking with trembling voices about the massacre in Al-Amiriyah. Terrible photographs circulated, and the faces of people in Baghdad wore an unmistakable expression of terror. The aftermath of the massacre filled my father with unease and fear as he grappled to find ways to protect us, ways that neither he nor the state could provide. He dug an impromptu shelter for us in the garden, knowing it would not withstand much. He had witnessed the horror that had unfolded in Al-Amiriyah, but what else could an Iraqi father do to shield his family from the US missiles and bombs? He didn't want to leave his home, so he dug a trench.

The grass in our garden withered away, and the grapevine arbor saw its final demise. We turned the latter into our own wooden monkey bars, and we broke off its desiccated branches to smoke like cigarettes. Our father, in true Iraqi paternal tradition, responded sternly upon discovering our antics. He uprooted the arbor, scolded us, and punished us with falqa (beating the soles of our feet with a stick). He also warned us that the

shelter was no playground, and that we were only to enter it upon hearing the sirens wailing in the city's skies.

That was when the sky became an object of obsession for us Iraqis. It was the final barrier between us and the US Army. They were over there, in their distant bases, but we remained in close proximity to them, should they choose to take to the sky - their means and their route. On January 18, 1991, we realized the significance of that vessel. In a single night, 100 Tomahawk missiles, never before used in history, rained upon us from the heavens. 1,300 air raids were carried out in our skies, and the bombing continued for 42 harrowing days. Death struck our cities like cataclysmic thunderbolts.

The French newspaper Le Figaro quoted its Baghdad correspondent, Remy Favre, describing that fateful night: "Fires caught fire in the sky of Baghdad, and the camouflaged air defenses on hundreds of surfaces began firing, the American F-15 planes struck Iraq on the head (...), during which the sky [of Baghdad] was torn apart." It was a time when weaponry held sway, and the United States was keen on telling the people of the world that it was indeed "the world's superpower".

It appeared that waging a war on a weak and vulnerable nation was the US's way of delivering a conclusive blow to the Soviet Union's ailing body, hastening its inevitable dissolution, and none was weaker than Iraq. It was a country ruled by a dictator who believed in Arabism as an Arab Bedouin might believe in the supremacy of his own small tribe. And while the dictator spoke in a televised speech about the infidels, the descendants of the prophets, the hornets' nests, and jihad, 2250 fighter planes were dropping bombs upon the nation he ruled, in the fiercest, most enduring aerial warfare in human history.

The numbers say that 200,000 civilians and an equal number of soldiers, children of these civilians, lost their lives in the war. But nobody keeps track of the number of the scared in times of war - those who may have cheated death but still bore witness to it. We were among those forsaken masses, digging trenches in our garden, razing our grass and sacrificing our grapevine to survive. And now, we find ourselves telling the story of what happened. The numbers say that 200,000 civilians and an equal number of soldiers; children of these civilians, lost their lives in that war. But nobody keeps track of the number of the scared in times of war - those who may have cheated death but still bore witness to it. We were one of those left in the dark corners, digging trenches in our garden, razing our grass and sacrificing our grapevines to survive. And now, we find ourselves telling the story of what had happened...

A war that started long before 2003

The war on Iraq began long before 2003. There was ample time for spreading hunger and fear in the country, while Iraqis' fascination with the sky had waned as their gazes lowered to the ground in defeat. Thirteen years of siege could tame a pack of wild beasts, and the hearts of Iraqis were each a beating cage wherein fear, violence, poverty, silence, disease, and ignorance were growing, restless beasts. When the second round of war commenced, all the wild beasts were unleashed, and they have been roaming and multiplying ever since.

Around the time Saddam Hussein met his fate on the gallows, I had taken up the company of Sweileh, our village's "madman" - and sage. We often found ourselves perched atop the water pipe that served as the lifeline of our village and snaked through the village alleys. Sweileh possessed an insatiable appetite for news broadcasts, and he particularly enjoyed imitating the newscaster. He would somberly recount the death tolls of explosive cars, and just as swiftly, he'd become the Minister of Defense incarnate, Sultan Hashem Ahmed, beseeching then-Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, to orchestrate the withdrawal of the US military from Iraq and facilitate the terms of Israel's quick surrender, before President Saddam Hussein unleashed the rest of his missiles against it.

Sweileh would then sternly warn Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his followers, threatening that any bloodshed among the police or army ranks who hailed from ancestral clans would not be tolerated. These figures, lacking even the most basic amenities such as electricity and water, were to be respected. Sweileh believed the elders of the community bore the responsibility of convening to solve any problems and expel Al-Shawka family from the community's embrace for their repeated transgressions, thievery, car-napping, and thuggery against unsuspecting travelers along the international highways.

The chaos in the city was not very different from the haze in Sweileh's mind. Everything seemed to be spiraling out of control. Powerful clans seized whatever state property they got their hands (and weapons) on. Food stores, banks, ammunition storages, fuel and oil depots, hospitals, schools, universities, and the remaining state institutions were looted, and civilians were cruising the streets in government-owned vehicles. The village we had moved to looked like a military barracks due to the large number of ZIL and GMC military vehicles that wandered its streets. The pious believers who did not miss a single Friday sermon used to gather at night to steal the iron PRC fence that ran along the international road with Jordan to build their new houses from the barriers they had dismantled from both sides of that highway.

However, while chaos was rampant, not everyone participated in the madness, but we all watched it happen. The once terrifying iron state had vanished, and the long-repressed instincts were now uncontrollably on the loose. Merely an hour away from our house, a civil war had erupted in Baghdad between Sunnis and Shiites. Funerals arrived in our village, and all we could do was dig up graves and sprinkle them with rose water.

{And whoever saves a life, it will be as if they saved all of humanity}¹

“Decadence is more dangerous than the occupation”, the honourable sheikh always repeated, as if he could foretell what was about to happen. The librarian of the Great Mosque, Sheikh Khalil Ibrahim al-Kubaisi, chose solitude over the festival of madness outside, but he never shut the library’s doors in the face of those in need. Many came to him seeking advice and asking for his blessings. They had been through a lot in life and had come to the library to tell their stories. I practically lived at the library, and so, sometimes, I heard their tales.

The war on Iraq began long before 2003. There was ample time for spreading hunger and fear in the country, while Iraqis’ fascination with the sky waned as their gazes lowered to the ground in defeat. After thirteen years of siege, fear, violence, poverty, disease, and ignorance were growing beasts. When the second round of war commenced, they were all unleashed.

In a remote corner of the library, a drawer bore the inscription “Private Research”. It was opened once or twice a week by an individual who holds its key; a tall, deliberate man who moved in a soldier-like manner. He always entered the library in a white dishdasha, and occasionally, he would be holding a string of prayer beads in his hand.

More often than not, he would sit alone with Sheikh Khalil, exchanging hushed dialogues, pausing when someone entered the room, but I overheard some of the Sheikh’s guidance. They talked about jihad, the US occupation, the government, and all that was happening, from an Islamic standpoint. In the Sheikh’s opinion, what was transpiring was a kind of “collective madness”, advocating for the pursuit of individual survival. He believed politics was impure and that religious clerics were some of the most dangerous groups in society because their influence, eloquence, and sanctity rendered them both potent and vulnerable to “spiritual afflictions”. He said that a very slim fraction of this group had learned to quell their vanity and dedicate themselves to God, people, and their own spiritual betterment. He called vanity “the ego” or “master

¹ Qur’an 5:32, Surah Al-Ma’idah.

of the self.” In his eyes, the ego was the worst of our problems in Iraq.

I found out later that the man who came in for the “Private Research” drawer was a ‘mujahid’ in Afghanistan during the days of jihad against the Soviet Union. He had fought with Al-Qaeda, and when the United States invaded Iraq, he became a Prince within the organization. Later, he left the group, or they may have expelled him. That makes no difference, yet an interesting distinction lies in the reason behind that rift.

During one of Al-Qaeda’s operations against the US army in the city of Al-Ramadi, they captured a Sudanese translator who worked for the US army. When the Prince asked him why he did it, the translator’s tearful response was “poverty”. This prompted the Prince to intervene for the man’s safety. He gifted him a wristwatch and made arrangements for the translator’s relocation to Baghdad, with the condition that he would return to Sudan.

According to Al-Qaeda’s jihadist ideology, the translator was to be eliminated, a directive they were prepared to carry out. However, it was this Prince’s sense of basic human compassion and Arab solidarity that transcended religious allegiance. This, in particular, was the reason for the parting of ways between the Prince and Al-Qaeda. It marked the primary distinction between the armed groups known as the ‘resistance’ against the US army and the terrorizing ways of Al-Qaeda.

The US had miscalculated the cost of its war on Iraq, which significantly outweighed the gains from oil and arms. Iraq slipped from the American grasp like a fish from a fisherman’s hold, only to be captured by another, tighter grip - that of Iran. The latter’s familiarity with Iraq affords it a keen understanding of Iraqi vulnerabilities.

Al-Qaeda fighters consider themselves “jihadists”, dedicated to the cause of God. To them, participating in a holy war is an unequivocal obligation, and martyrdom represents “one of the two favorable outcomes” of combat undertaken in the name of Allah. In contrast, the civilian casualties resulting from their actions are perceived as collateral damage, individuals whose ultimate judgment rests with Allah, contingent upon their intentions. With this moral quandary seemingly resolved, Al-Qaeda proceeded to engage in street battles and the deployment of booby-trapped cars and explosive devices within residential neighborhoods. This approach was facilitated by the relative ease of targeting US soldiers in narrow alleys, where the soldiers lacked familiarity with the cities and their inhabitants.

The “resistance”, however, primarily consisted of individuals who hail from clans and the Iraqi army that was disbanded by American administrator Paul Bremer. Its fighters’ perspective on the conflict clearly diverges from that of Al-Qaeda. To them, the fight is directed solely against the occupier, with the goal of liberating Iraq from the US troops. In the ideology of the Al-Qaeda, this stance is deemed a departure from Islam and a betrayal of fellow Muslims, categorized as “riddah” - an act of apostasy that warrants execution.

Everything seemed to be spiraling out of control. Powerful clans seized whatever state property they got their hands on. Food stores, banks, ammunition storages, fuel and oil depots, hospitals, schools, universities, and the remaining the state institutions were looted, and civilians were cruising the streets in government-owned vehicles.

In his book entitled “Why Do You Kill, Zaid?” German journalist and politician Jürgen Todenhöfer tells a story that truly illuminates the distinctions between resistance operations against the US occupation and Al-Qaeda’s jihad. The story revolves around Zaid, who was assigned the task of detonating an explosive device in a US army convoy on Street 20 in the city of Al-Ramadi. Zaid’s role was to press the detonation button as Humvees, filled with American soldiers, passed by. However, as the military convoy advanced over the explosive canister, Zaid discerned an elderly man in close proximity to the envoy, and thus refrained from triggering the detonation. At least four US occupying soldiers survived because a civilian had to be spared death in that operation. Todenhöfer says that despite the fact that the operation did not proceed, the resistance fighters warmly embraced Zaid and commended his choice to prioritize saving the life of the elderly Iraqi man.

The writer delves into the United States’ hostility and the Western notion of a war against terror. He attempts to formulate a new definition of the term ‘terrorist’ within one of his book’s chapters titled ‘In Search of the Truth.’ He then raises the question (while assuring his readers that he does not intend to draw comparisons): If Al-Qaeda’s terrorist operations have resulted in the deaths of 5,000 individuals, who then bears responsibility for the demise of 70 million lives during World War I and II? He subsequently proposes a series of questions, unraveling the West’s double standards in justifying wars and evaluating violence between the “Western and non-Western worlds”.

Todenhöfer recounts the story of Zeid and his tragic loss of both his brothers to US

army snipers. The narrative reveals how the ravages of war prompted a 22-year-old young man to shoulder arms and resist the occupying forces that claimed the lives of numerous young people and destroyed Iraqi cities under the pretext of liberating them from a dictatorial regime. Ironically, the American approach, marked by high costs that persist to this day, proved to be even more detrimental than the dictatorship itself.

More stray bullets than birds in the sky

It wasn't always possible to venture into the streets of the city. Sometimes, the long days of curfew dragged on and the street battles showed no signs of subsiding. There were more stray bullets in our sky than there were birds; there were more dead bodies in the streets than pedestrians. The explosive devices planted on sidewalks outnumbered the benches, turning a regular walk in the city into a risky adventure. Going to the market posed an even greater risk, especially since it meant entering the heart of the old city, where the US army had transformed the local government headquarters into a military base. Within a square kilometer of their fortress, they planted their surveillance cameras, snipers, and barricades. Meanwhile, the rest of the city descended into utter chaos.

Within that enclosed square kilometer, the US army conducted its dirty dealings and illicit activities. They managed Anbar Province in a manner reminiscent of how Hollywood films depicted their management of Third World countries: specific individuals - often the clans' sheikhs, local leaders, and corrupt thieves - were handed millions of dollars in exchange for their cooperation. Those agents recruited followers who were tasked with safeguarding the US supply routes, as these were the primary concerns of the US army during that period. These practices fostered an environment that not only encouraged but also propagated corruption, which subsequently permeated Iraqi political life to an extent still manifest in the present day.

Al-Qaeda fighters consider themselves “jihadists”, dedicated to the cause of God in an unequivocal obligation. The civilian casualties resulting from their actions are perceived as collateral damage whose ultimate judgment rests with Allah. With this moral quandary seemingly resolved, Al-Qaeda proceeded to engage in street battles and the deployment of booby-trapped cars and explosive devices within residential neighborhoods.

In 2008, the State Audit and Administrative Control Bureau in Iraq issued its annual report, which stated: “In 2007, the US army in Anbar Province provided an amount

of \$614,400 to the director of the sewage department in the city of Al-Ramadi for the purpose of implementing projects pertaining to the department. However, there is no information available from the accounting department as to how this amount was expended. The Bureau has requested an investigation into the disappearance of this fund.”

The department’s director was just one of hundreds of corrupt officials, employees, and tribal sheikhs who joined the Islamic Party in seizing contracts awarded by the US military to its collaborators. Some of the initial privileges shared with the Islamic Party in 2007, apart from power and official positions, were an additional \$70 million added to the budget of the Anbar Province, \$50 million in compensation allocations, and the creation of 6,000 local jobs. These jobs were distributed within the sheikhs’ circles to buy the loyalty of the tribal masses.

This corrupt and hostile environment created fertile ground for the proliferation of extremism in all its forms: religious, tribal, and partisan. As this atmosphere continues to grow rampant, the state and its laws retreat to the background, no longer capable of holding any real effect or sway. To every means of the law and the state, an in-kind alternative is created. Against the law stands faith - be it in religion, sect, or tribe- and, indeed, faith prevails. Against the state’s armaments, or the so-called tools of “legitimate violence”, are the weapons of the clans, armed groups, and militias, and these weapons also prevail as more powerful and effective. This characterizes all Iraqi contexts post-2003. In Sunni environments, as in Shiite environments, this scenario has unfolded, with subtle differences only in its aesthetics, mannerisms, dialects, and rituals.

Right from the beginning, the US military and the Washington administration treated the Iraqis as the British had treated the Indians. Their failure to grasp the distinct contexts and timings of each occupation only exacerbated the situation. What compounded the Americans’ lack of understanding was the emergence of alternative parties and figures from the Baathist era, who came to take control of a country and a people now on the loose.

Washington has established a new system based on “muhasasa”, a quota-based political system through which thieving factions, empowered by arms and corrupt money, were able to take over the state and its institutions. This system was consecrated through the methods of Paul Bremer, the de facto American figurehead in Iraq, as leader of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). Bremer handpicked CPA members under the presumption that each of them should be a representative of either the Shiites, the Kurds, the Sunnis, or any among the numerous minorities in Iraq - a nation

about which Bremer lacked any real understanding.

Bremer was once described by Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani as an “arrogant man, ignorant about the region.” Barzani recounted a meeting with Bremer during which the latter asserted that he represented “international legitimacy”, and that “the Security Council has decided that this is an occupation, which is an ugly word that you have to get used to.” Bremer promised to form a committee of Kurdish advisors, but cautioned them “not to expect that their every suggestion will be approved.”

What the numbers say

The US had miscalculated the cost of its occupation of Iraq, which significantly outweighed the gains from oil and arms. Iraq slipped from the American grasp like a fish from a fisherman’s hold, only to be captured by another tighter grip - that of Iran. The latter’s advantage lies in its familiarity with Iraqis, which affords it a keen understanding of Iraqi vulnerabilities. Former Iraqi Minister of the Interior, Falah al-Naqib, had even accused Iran of bombing the shrines of the two Al-Askari Imams, highly revered by the Shiites, located in the Sunni city of Samarra. He also claimed that Iran was preparing a \$200 million operation to transfer the remains of Imam Ali al-Hadi from Samarra to Iran.

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The sectarian war between Sunnis and Shiites in the period 2006-2007 prepared the ground for an Iraq that overflows with various armed factions, extremist religious parties, and militias that do not recognize national identity as an inclusive identity. These groups strived for an Iraq under a trans-boundary Islamic caliphate, a nation which pledges unwavering obedience to the ruler - be he a caliph according to the Sunnis, or Al-Wali Al-Faqih, the supreme religious authority and deputy of the awaited Al-Mahdi, among the Shiites. Below these supreme leaders are countless figureheads and holy men who also demand obedience.

Even in retrospect, it proves difficult to unravel what had happened during the US occupation of Iraq as it actually happened. The tangled threads of geography, history, culture, religion, clans, and nationalism all interplayed in the events that transpired.

However, perhaps statistics can give a general idea of the insurmountable tragedy that had befallen the country and its people.

In 2006, the British medical journal “The Lancet” issued a study entitled “Mortality before and after the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: Cluster Sample Survey.” The study revealed that the war amassed a death toll of around 655,000 Iraqis since 2003. At that time, this number represented 2.5 percent of the total population. The study stated that 56 percent of the victims were killed by US army bullets, 13 percent by car bombings, 13 percent by air strikes, and 14 percent by shelling.

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ORB Center² has calculated a different, more harrowing figure, in a study with an error margin of 1.7 percent. The study stated that the number of Iraqis killed as a result of the US occupation exceeded one million until August 2007. The numbers did not include the deaths in Anbar and Karbala governorates. In Baghdad alone, 40 percent of families lost at least one of their members. 40 percent of those were killed by US army bullets, 21 percent were killed in car bombings, 8 percent were killed in air strikes, and 4 percent were killed as a result of the sectarian war.

The sectarian war between Sunnis and Shiites in the years 2006-2007 laid the foundation for an Iraq that teems with various armed factions, extremist religious parties, and militias that do not recognize national identity as an inclusive identity.

The death toll did not stop at 2007, when the study was concluded. It has tragically continued to rise at an unyielding pace, reaching a climax with ISIS invading large areas of the country, and marking the beginning of another harrowing chapter in the war saga, with many more dead and more than 7 million refugees and 8 million internally displaced persons in Iraq and Syria. As for the United States, the war cost it 5,000 soldier, in addition to a staggering \$ 2.9 trillion, according to the reports of the “Cost of War Project” at Brown University.

² A US-based digital newsroom and journalistic organization.



Palestine



“Nafas” by Sundus Abdul Hadi – Iraq. Mixed media on canvas, 2010.

Prospects for the Liberation of Palestine between the Two Wars on Iraq

Raja Khalidi

Palestinian Economic Development Expert

Just as the first war of Iraq created the conditions for Arabs to sit at the same table with Israelis, so did the second war over a decade later expedite legitimizing Israel and its eventual (dominant) integration into the economic- security system in the region. Probably the most dramatic outcome of the post-Iraq wars shocks, was the ultimate Arab regimes’ surrender to Peace, Negotiations and Recognition, with the final Act in that process being cooked in 2023.

How far we have fallen

The prospects for Palestinian national liberation have never been simply about the relative power of the two parties, Palestine and Israel, in a struggle that rages a century on. Both parties have always been allied with, or anchored in, external powers and states with a political or strategic interest in the still unresolved question of which peoples should have which rights in Palestine. While the Zionist settler colonial project from the outset received essential sponsorship, legitimacy and funding from colonial and imperialist powers, Palestine's strategic depth has always been among the Arab peoples, rooted in the concept of the Arab nation and its primary cause, Palestine. Palestinian national liberation prospects have appeared more or less promising depending on the scope and depth of Arab popular and official support.

My story of how a once-unbreakable bond of Arab solidarity with Palestine has been shattered and diffused, with only a handful of Arab states today still faithful to that pan-Arab principle, begins in 1978, in Baghdad. A high-point moment in PLO relations with the Arab states was enshrined in the Arab Summit of "Steadfastness and Confrontation", when the Arab states rallied around the PLO, the newly baptized sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, in the wake of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. That shock had been the first break in the wall of the historic Arab position of "No Peace, No Negotiations, No Recognition". The rhetorical Arab position towards Israel contrasts with the de-facto recognition of Israel through Arab acceptance of UN resolution 242, which signaled the end of the Arab-Israeli "struggle" as far back as 1967, and its transformation into a series of battles/conflicts, most of which have now been resolved.

That new Arab alliance, effectively headquartered in Baghdad, remained faithful to its commitment to support Palestine economically and diplomatically, and to continue to isolate Egypt from the Arab League for many years following. Yet this embrace proved fatal for the PLO in another way, as it ended up forcing Yasser Arafat into the camp of Arab states who refused to condemn Saddam Hussein for his invasion of Kuwait, viewing the US led campaign as serving to defend and Israel and establish an imperial footprint in the region after decades of post-colonial politics.

This not only meant the further break-up of the pan-Arab solidarity network for Palestine, with the powerful and rich Gulf states (and Egypt) firmly allied with the USA against Iraq. More significantly for the PLO, as the weakest chain in the pro-Iraq alliance, it suffered the most from the blowback of its risky, and ill-conceived, position in support of one Arab bloc against another. While the PLO had faced off in violent battle over

the decades against a number of Arab states (Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Libya and Iraq itself), it had generally been above the fray, trying to adhere to its official position of “non-intervention in the internal affairs” of its Arab brethren.

Between the impacts of the first and second wars against Iraq, the much vaunted PLO slogan of “the independent Palestinian decision” was trampled under the boots of global imperialist and regional reactionary powers claiming the high ground of democracy, good governance, human rights and privatization. Yet today, despite the past decades of war, slaughter and destruction in Palestine and among too many of its brethren Arab states, and with Arab-Israeli normalization the latest fad, neither the flame of Palestinian national liberation struggle, nor that of democratic revolution among the Arab peoples have been clearly extinguished.

The Effects of the First Gulf War on the Palestinian National Liberation Movement

The fallout of the first Gulf war on Palestine was swift, cruel and collective, with long-lasting political consequences. These may be summarized under four key impacts.

1. Economic and social impacts

The bitterness of Palestinian defeat at a moment that liberation seemed reasonably attainable was only intensified by the terrible toll on Palestinian society and economy. The Arab funding of the PLO (official and popular) that had been essential to PLO survival in its post-1982 Arab exile ceased in August 1990 and within a few months the PLO was unable to pay its military and civilian and other staff around the world, with no illusions about this being the only price it was to pay for its support of Saddam Hussein.

Is the apparent willingness and ability of thousands of young, desperate and brave Palestinians to renew and recreate modes of armed struggle and Arab popular resistance to despotic regimes and predatory capitalism not one and the same struggle? And does it not seem that neither Israel’s military supremacy nor any degree of Arab despotism can suppress resistance, however much the balance of power between the forces of revolution and reaction remain asymmetric?

Most significantly, in the wake of Kuwait’s liberation, Palestinians living in Kuwait, many for decades, and who played an essential role in managing the country’s public services and economy, were viewed as PLO supporters of Iraq, and treated accordingly, regardless of the individual concerned. Over 400000 Palestinians were obliged to

leave Kuwait and the Gulf countries in the wake of the Iraqi withdrawal, leaving behind homes, jobs, lives and futures.

Most returned to Jordan and Palestine, unable to relocate in other Gulf countries which began restricting Palestinian expatriate populations no less important to their economies. The social fragmentation that this new Palestinian exodus entailed had immediate economic repercussions, with families again cut off from each other, transformed from providers of hundred of millions of dollars in annual remittances to both Palestine and Jordan, to unemployed, penniless refugees.

The shock to the PLO of the Arab financial boycott which lasted for five years, further softened it up for what was to come in the form of the Oslo Accords and their favoring of pragmatism over idealism, something which the PLO leadership had already largely bought into since 1974. But the impact to the local economies was no less lasting: only once the intifada had been extinguished and a new Israeli “peace” government elected in 1992 leading to Oslo, was it possible for the PLO to redefine its conditions for “Peace, Negotiations and Recognition” and try to drag the Palestinian national movement and people along into this historic compromise.

2. The first intifada, PLO’s isolation, and the Madrid Conference

Most Arab states which had opposed the US-Gulf coalition against Iraq could withstand the break in relations this entailed. But for the PLO, the Arab official boycott had disastrous impacts at a moment when the first uprising had begun to gain its own traction in terms of international attention and Arab popular solidarity. That boost had led to a US-PLO political dialogue with Arab shepherding, and the PLO declaration of the independent state of Palestine as a historical compromise, in 1988.

Between the impacts of the first and second wars against Iraq, the much vaunted PLO slogan of “the independent Palestinian decision” was trampled under the boots of global imperialist and regional reactionary powers claiming the high ground of democracy, good governance, human rights and privatization.

By 1991, PLO hopes for a Palestinian driven peace process building on the intifada and renewed Arab solidarity with Egypt back in the fold, had been dashed. Its Ambassadors were no longer welcome in the halls of Arab power, with Arafat himself increasingly isolated in his exile of Tunis, far away from the action. However the victors, Arab and international, not only had to display their appreciation of the core issue in the region, Palestine, but also could not ignore the still smoldering Palestinian uprising which by

1991 had been transformed into mainly armed guerrilla resistance.

The Arab funding of the PLO (official and popular) that had been essential to PLO survival in its post-1982 Arab exile ceased in August 1990 and within a few months the PLO was unable to pay its military and civilian and other staff around the world, with no illusions about this being the only price it was to pay for its support of Saddam Hussein.

Hence, the Madrid International Conference on Peace in the Middle East, convened in 1991 and from which two tracks of negotiations were launched: Jordanian/Palestinian-Israeli on the core conflict, and multilateral on regional issues, including Israel. While this international conference had long been a PLO demand, its participation was limited to back-room directions to a Palestinian delegation from inside Palestine. Presumably, both Israel's and Arab states' refusal to allow the PLO to take the Palestinian seat was a rude reminder that the PLO was no longer the only master of its destiny. So the Iraq war may have opened a door to peace for Palestine, but the Madrid terms dictated by the victorious allies against Iraq, were so skewed against Palestine, that we ended up with Oslo!

3. End of the myth of the possibility of Arab military superiority over Israel

So much of Arab nationalist history has been chequered by the extraordinary claims, rarely backed-up by the eventual historical record, of Arab potential to destroy or defeat Israel (imminently) on the battlefield: in 1948, in 1967, in 1973 and in 1982. There remain many ideologues even today of this option: if only there had been a will, if only we had developed our military industries, if only we had secured the best Soviet weaponry, if only we had democratic regimes with popular support... the ifs are many.

In contrast, there have always been "moderate" Palestinian and Arab politicians, who either did not believe in the strategic possibility of Arab military victory against the more technologically advanced Israeli forces, or others whose interests were allied with neo-colonial or Zionist ambitions to deny Arabs the means to confront Israel on a balanced footing. The emergence of PLO armed struggle in the 1960s helped to redress the balance, at least visually, but Arab armies remained on a defensive posture, even when producing some battlefield results against Israel during the 1973 war, while the PLO military experience in Lebanon had come to its heroic and fiery end in Lebanon in 1982.

Even after the 1982 Lebanon defeat of the PLO, and the further defeat of the Gulf

War, as Iraqi ballistic missiles rained down on Israel in 1991, Palestinians took to the rooftops to cheer their savior Saddam Hussein, who had finally shown Arab military prowess. When it turned out that most were fitted with normal explosive heads, some Palestinians attributed this to Saddam's strategic prowess. This mass deception (illusion) of the 1990s as to whether Iraq had the N-weapon and would use it as a last resort, propagated by Israel above all, came crashing down by 2003 for any Palestinian hold-outs, along with the remnants of the pan-Arab nationalist empty promises of a brutal and dictatorial regime.

4. Oslo and its historical compromise

For the cause of Palestine, there was a greater injustice that the earthquake of the first Gulf war generated, along with the collapse of the Soviet bloc ally. From Madrid to Washington, ending in Oslo in 1993, the PLO committed to terms that compromised the feasibility of pursuing any feasible strategy of national liberation. Its hopes for an international commitment to an end of occupation and settlement, and Palestinian independence, were postponed to after an interim period of self-governance supposed to last 5 years, but which endure today. Historians will continue to debate whether the compromise that entailed the return of the PLO, and the center of struggle, to Palestine could have, should have been avoided. But no doubt, the first war created conditions that ultimately distorted the Palestinian national liberation movement and agenda.

The shock to the PLO of the Arab financial boycott which lasted for five years, further softened it up for what was to come in the form of the Oslo Accords and their favoring of pragmatism over idealism, something which the PLO leadership had already largely bought into since 1974. The impact to the local economies was no less lasting: the intifada had been extinguished and a new Israeli "peace" government was elected in 1992 leading to Oslo.

Once the PLO had signed off on Oslo and subsequent accords, it not only gained its long sought after foothold in Palestine with a semblance of autonomy, but also an international legitimacy it had never enjoyed, and a return to the Arab fold. However, as the past thirty years have demonstrated, Arafat's strategy of "escaping forward" came to its final painful conclusion with the second intifada, launched as a revolt against the broken promises of Oslo that he had believed, his besiegement and eventual assassination by Israel. The limited gains of Oslo remain the only ones Palestinians have been offered in return for maintaining international acceptance and abandoning armed resistance. Even those terms (of surrender?) appear preferable to those plans

the Zionist racist right in power in Israel is considering for the Palestinian people today.

The Second War on Iraq and the Quest to Eliminate the Palestinian Question

The developments of the 1990s set in motion dynamics that played out in Iraq and Palestine, coming to a head in 2003. Indeed the first war continued with unprecedented sanctions imposed on Iraq throughout the 1990s, turning it into a pariah among brethren and enemies alike.

1. Exposing the deception of the promises of the peace process, the second intifada and the war on terror

By the end of the agreed Oslo interim period, the time had come for the PLO to exchange its velvet gloves for boxing gloves. The attempt by Arafat to hold up the Palestinian national red-lines (thawabit) at Camp David revealed the true Israeli position of No Peace, No Negotiations, No Recognition. It seems that the old warrior, still impervious to Iqbal Ahmad's and many others wisdom regarding the feasibility of waging armed struggle against Israel from outside or within Palestine, resorted (as in 1990) to what he and most of the PLO perceived as the only remaining option. The initially mass non-violent second intifada soon transformed into armed Palestinian-Israeli warfare that lasted five years and brought the PLO, now bereft of its founding leader, to its knees.

Presumably, both Israel's and Arab states' refusal to allow the PLO to take the Palestinian seat was a rude reminder that the PLO was no longer the only master of its destiny. So the Iraq war may have opened a door to peace for Palestine, but the Madrid terms dictated by the victorious allies against Iraq, were so skewed against Palestine, that we ended up with Oslo!

Before Yasser Arafat had been defeated, and in tandem with the emergence of Hamas (and eventually other factions') suicide bombings targeting civilian targets deep inside Israel, the elephant in the room of the coming second war on Iraq had shown itself, in the form of the September 2001 attacks on the heartland of the USA. The Palestinian resistance was immediately conflated by Israel and the US with Islamic Qaida terror and the Iraqi weapons of mass destruction threat. Not even the photo-op of Arafat donating blood to victims of 9/11 could dispel the image, with the reality meaning little in the build up to the war.

So the "war on terror" became (and continues as) a joint Israeli-US-NATO mission,

targeting (Islamic or other) Palestinian armed resistance to Israeli occupation, legitimate under international law, as part of the same terror threat of Qaida and later, ISIS. It also paved the way for coopting the PLO in the post-Arafat era into a range of political, economic and security bargains with Israel that restrict its autonomy, and prevent it from even trying to achieve independence.

2. The last stop of the independent Palestinian decision

A natural corollary of the end of the Arafat regime and his way of doing business, was that the successor regime not only had its wings significantly clipped, but that its decisions became increasingly subject to the influences of external forces. Negotiating options and positions became entwined above all with Jordanian-Egyptian interests in their own relations with Israel, regional and global powers. The Mahmoud Abbas regime was repeatedly drawn into rounds of fruitless but energy consuming “peace negotiations”, until any pretense of a peace process was abandoned with the last Obama-Kerry attempt of 2014. The PLO accepted Quartet imposed political conditions that undermined the possibility for Palestinian democracy encompassing Hamas, while locking in “security coordination” with Israel and the USA that remains the major point of contention in Palestinian internal politics.

For the cause of Palestine, there was a greater injustice that the earthquake of the first Gulf war generated, along with the collapse of the Soviet bloc ally. From Madrid to Washington, ending in Oslo in 1993, the PLO committed to terms that compromised the feasibility of pursuing any feasible strategy of national liberation.

Meanwhile Palestinian economic policies, strategies and priorities became largely hostage to international financial institutions and donor agendas, under the same template “reforms” being initiated in the newly “liberated and democratic Iraq”. In both Palestine and Iraq, traditional governing power structures and political norms were replaced with a formula designed in DC and imposed wherever globalization, liberalization and privatization waves hit around the world. Gulf Arab states had already joined the Washington Consensus and abandoned visions of Arab regional economic integration, instead opting for ties with the advanced economies of the OECD. But both countries were ripe for laboratory experiments that were abandoned in swift succession, leading to the weakened, externally-dependent regimes in Baghdad, Erbil, Ramallah and now, Gaza.

3. **Opening the way for Arab-Israeli normalization**

It is not surprising that all Arabs suffer the results of two massive wars against Iraq, an ongoing war against the Palestinian people under occupation, a series of Arab civil wars in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and heavy doses of economic liberalism, structural adjustment and imported democracy agendas in Palestine, Iraq, Egypt (and soon to come, Syria, Lebanon and any holdouts of the 20th century).

So the “war on terror” became (and continues as) a joint Israeli-US-NATO mission, targeting (Islamic or other) Palestinian armed resistance to Israeli occupation, legitimate under international law, as part of the same terror threat of Qaida and later, ISIS.

Probably the most dramatic outcome of the post-Iraq wars shocks, was the ultimate Arab regimes’ surrender to Peace, Negotiations and Recognition, with the final Act in that process being cooked in 2023. The first step toward explicit Arab normalization was dressed up in the traditional language of Arab solidarity of the Saudi-backed “Arab Peace Initiative” in 2002, which conditioned Arab peace with Israel on a just Israeli-Palestinian solution. So just as the first war of Iraq created the conditions for Arabs to sit at the same table with Israelis, so did the second war over a decade later expedite legitimizing Israel and its eventual (dominant) integration into the economic-security system in the region.

However today, even the modest red-lines of the Arab Initiative no longer retain any deterrent influence, with US spearheaded normalization of Israel’s political, economic, security and strategic relations with several Arab states already in the bag, and others touted as imminent. Regardless of the many factors behind the transformation of the regional political map and the relation of the Palestine cause to the peoples of the region, we have clearly suffered a strategic defeat for the cause and the for PLO’s room for regional maneuver, which historically was its major survival mechanism. The years 1990 and 2003 remain key milestone in that process.

4. **The rise of the influence of the Islamic resistance**

A final impact of the wars on Iraq that continues to ripple through the Palestinian national movement in a transformed global and regional landscape, is found in how the crushing of the Baath regime in Iraq was the end of many Arab nationalist dreams, including in Palestine. Just as marxist and communist resistance to imperialism in the region rose and fell, so did the promises of Palestinian nationalist and above all pan-

Arab resistance, fail to deliver. The wars in Iraq were vital nails not only in the coffin of those aspirations, but also the clarion call for political Islam to enter the battle in its own reactionary language, violent means and new forms of organization. For many pan-Arab nationalists, Hizbollah's armed struggle against Israel, and that of the (Islamic) resistance in Palestine, is viewed as a viable and effective revolutionary model for continued Arab and Palestinian deterrence of Israel, regardless of its other dimensions.

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Hamas was born in the first intifada and strengthened by the PLO and Arab nationalist failures of the first Iraq war. Similarly, the opportunity for being freely and democratically elected by the Palestinian people manifested itself in 2006 in the wake of yet another defeat of pan-Arab and nationalist PLO resistance. Today, even that version of an alternative to past resistance ideologies sitting in comfortable power in Gaza, has become a no less part of the problem facing the prospects for Palestinian national liberation than the impotent regime in Ramallah.

Can Palestine be the cradle of a new Arabism?

In twenty years, the underlying premise of a possible two-state solution has been transformed: instead of "(returning occupied Palestinian) land (in exchange) for (granting Israel) peace" is now one of Israel taking as much land as it needs in exchange for not continuing to wage war against Palestinians. A sad state of affairs, and one that could have not ensued without first destroying Iraq, and a few other Arab countries in the process.

Many questions remain, each of us may have a different answer. Has the flame of resistance truly been stamped out, once and for all? Beyond the symbolic and moral value of the new wave of Palestinian fedayeen, from Jerusalem to Gaza to Jenin, can we discern a new model of Palestinian freedom fighter, not attached to discredited regimes, to inspire Arab militants fighting for their political, human and civil rights? Is the apparent willingness and ability of thousands of young, desperate and brave Palestinians to renew and recreate modes of armed struggle and Arab popular

resistance to despotic regimes and predatory capitalism not one and the same struggle?
And does it not seem that neither Israel's military supremacy nor any degree of Arab
despotism can suppress resistance, however much the balance of power between the
forces of revolution and reaction remain asymmetric?



Egypt



“The Battle for Sumer” by Sundus Abdul Hadi – Iraq. Acrylic on canvas, 2005.

When the US Invasion of Iraq Stirred Political Waters in Egypt

Mona Sleem

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Translated by **Sabah Jalloul**

The United States invasion of Iraq marked a pivotal moment that presented an opportunity for shifting the political scene in Egypt. New generations and opposition groups were coalescing like a growing snowball, propelling waves of momentum, with each wave ushering in a larger one. It was in this climate that Kifaya Movement emerged, birthing several other groups. The most notable of these groups was the influential Youth for Change, whose active presence helped mobilize the opposition and raise voices against a proposed popular referendum on constitutional amendments, which they regarded as a farce.

This was the first war that Egyptians could watch live on television, after the spread of satellite dishes to many of their homes. The initial shock was profound, but it was only the beginning of other reverberations that would follow.

In 2003, the air was filled with anticipation of a war in Iraq, prompting the resurgence of numerous questions within the Egyptian sphere related to the past, present, and future of the country. Some of these questions pertained to the formal relationship between the two regimes in Egypt and Iraq, along with the lingering wound caused by Egypt's participation in a previous US-led war on Iraq in 1991 for the liberation of Kuwait. At the time, Egypt was promised the forgiveness of its debt, which amounted to approximately \$34 billion, by the Paris Club. The prospect of another US-led war on Iraq raised concerns about the possibility of Egypt's involvement in another shameful position, such as allowing American ships to pass through the Suez Canal.

Another pressing question pertained to the consequences of this impending war, considering that nearly 4 million Egyptian workers had returned from Iraq in the early 1990s without receiving their due payments (an issue that remains unresolved to this day). However, it was the popular response to the war quickly became the central issue and the genuine reflection of the conflict. The public's emotional engagement was explosive, characterized by a relentless determination to affect change and overthrow a dictatorial regime that aligned itself with the Zionist-American alliance.

The Egyptian regime found itself at a crossroads during the early 2000s, as the world grappled with the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" doctrine put forth by the United States. This doctrine was swiftly translated into military action, culminating in the direct bombing of Afghanistan.

The following are the main axes along which the war on Iraq affected Egypt and the lives of Egyptians.

Official Relations

Egypt's stance on the unfolding international events was marked by ambiguity. The government's political performance was passive, neither vocally supporting nor objecting to any action. Egypt joined the non-permanent members of the UN Security Council in endorsing a draft international statement which called on the US and Western nations to continue to inspect weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq instead of opting for a military invasion. Even after the American-British decision to wage war on

Iraq materialized without international consensus, Egypt continued to fail in articulating a clear position.

On the other hand, Egypt's minister of exterior promoted that the government's decision to allow US ships to pass through the Suez Canal was sound and wise, despite widespread Arab and international public anger at the decision and calls to disallow the access of the military vessels. The head of the Suez Canal Authority (SCA) stated that demands to prevent American vessels from using the canal were "a trap that the Egyptian authority would not fall into." He stressed the SCA's commitment to international conventions and treaties, particularly the Constantinople Convention which guarantees the right of free and safe navigation for all ships without distinction of flag.

Egypt's diplomatic performance had a profound impact on its foreign policy, particularly in its approach to regional issues, most importantly the Palestinian cause. Since then and until the moment of the January Revolution in 2011, the broken record of "Egypt's security first" resurfaced in official media discourse, cautioning against supporting Arab causes at the expense of national interests. It was that same argument that was used to justify the closure of the Rafah crossing in the face of Gazans for years, since Hamas's rise to power in Gaza. The border closure became a participation in the blockade on Gaza and was upheld even during Israeli bombings of the strip, until Gazans themselves tore down part of the wall at the border in 2009.

Twenty years have elapsed since the US invasion of Iraq... Two decades during which Egypt has witnessed profound changes and turbulent periods marked by waves that alternately induced and stifled change. Iraq was an open wound that sparked the flame of rage in Egypt, where efforts to overthrow the oppressive regime lead to the rise and fall of the Arab Spring across the region.

This trend, referred to by the Egyptian regime as "prioritizing national interests", remained prevalent. However, several opposition voices argued that this policy was based on senseless subordination to Western allies and could ultimately harm Egypt's national security. While this argument temporarily receded in the years 2011 and 2012, it resurfaced and has continued to shape both official and popular discourses since 2013. President El-Sissi's statement, "We are not better than Syria and Iraq", was a foundational statement for this argument. Consequently, the Iraq War and its outcomes have served as a giant scarecrow wielded by an authoritarian regime in Egypt, which consistently promoted the "security first" rhetoric.

The economic dilemma

During the years of the US sanctions on Iraq in the early 1990s, there were no official Egyptian-Iraqi relations in place between the two countries. Nevertheless, the war on Iraq had immediate indirect, yet lasting impacts on Egypt's economy in two major ways.

One of the two main consequences was the deepening of the economic crisis due to the loss of a major source of remittances from Egyptians living abroad. These remittances constituted one of the primary sources of hard currency for the Egyptian state. Most estimates agree that there were around 4 million Egyptian workers, employees, and investors in Iraq until the early 1990s. However, Egyptian returnees from Iraq in the early 1990s were never able to recover their deferred financial dues despite persistent demands and repeated promises to pay them. In 2010, joint Egyptian-Iraqi committees were established to assess these deferred assets, taking into account their accumulated interest. The assets amounted to an estimated total of more than \$60 million¹.

The economic crisis was exacerbated by the loss of a major source of remittances from Egyptians living abroad. Most estimates agree that there were around 4 million Egyptian workers, employees, and investors in Iraq until the early 1990s. Egyptian returnees were never able to recover their financial dues despite persistent demands and repeated promises to pay them.

Not only did the Egyptian economy lose remittances from workers in Iraq, but trade relations and business partnerships between the two countries faltered. The volume of trade exchange between Iraq and Egypt during the period 1997-2001 amounted to approximately \$1.402 billion, a noteworthy stance for Egypt, considering that this was during a time of US sanctions on Iraq. In 2001, the two parties signed a protocol to liberalize all exchanged goods of national origin in both countries from customs and non-tariff restrictions.

Official data show a subsequent rise in the curve of trade exchanges a few years later, indicating a recovery from the previous crisis period. During the period 2005-2008, the trade exchange saw an upward trend with an annual growth rate of 77 percent. The total trade exchange in 2009 alone reached \$370 million. Since 2021, the Egyptian state has been working towards concluding new economic and development partnerships after a tripartite summit in Baghdad that included the leaders of Iraq, Egypt, and Jordan.

On the other hand, the official, toned-down political position of Egypt and its persistence

¹"Egyptians receive a third of deferred Iraqi transfers: Central bank", Ahram Online, 08/04/2012.

as a strategic ally of the US, before and after the 2003 war, led to the multiplication of economic partnerships with this “ally”. The QIZ agreement was the jackpot for those seeking quick profit in the Egyptian market. It is a protocol that was signed in February 2005, by which Egyptian companies are allowed to export to the US markets without customs, provided that there is an Israeli input of up to 35 percent of the product, according to a World Bank specialized report. After the agreement took effect, the total value of textile and clothing exports from the qualifying industrial zone increased from approximately \$500 million in 2006 to \$900 million in 2011, an increase of 45 percent. Since then, there has been no further growth in QIZ exports, and the level has remained almost stagnant since 2012, after pressure within the government to reduce the Israeli content to only 10 percent.

A popular awakening

Perhaps this was the most significant reverberation made by the Iraq war in Egypt. Since the Peace Treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1979 and with the tightening of the security grip in Egypt and the prohibition of any discussion regarding a peaceful transfer of power in the country, popular political forces became more present. New movements and parties emerged and resisted all forms of normalization, while supporting the Palestinian resistance and rejecting Zionist aggressions on the Arab region.

The broken record of “Egypt’s security first” resurfaced in official media discourse, cautioning against supporting Arab causes at the expense of national interests. It was that same discourse that was used to justify the closure of the Rafah crossing in the face of Gazans for years. The closure became a participation in the blockade on Gaza, persisting even during Israeli bombings.

A young generation emerged from Egypt’s universities into the political arena, following the defeat of June 1967. Several popular committees were formed, and they engaged in political, social, cultural, and media activities. However, protesting in the streets remained a big red line for all opposition groups, though they sometimes managed to breach the prohibition on specific events, in front of university gates, or at book fairs. However, the price they paid for their protests was always heavy.

In scarce breakthroughs, some of the opposition leaders, including parliamentarians and artists, managed to form delegations to Iraq or Gaza under the banner of “breaking the blockade”. In December 1998, an Egyptian delegation comprised of parliamentarians, intellectuals, and artists visited Iraq to express solidarity with the

Iraqi people in response to the international economic blockade they were facing. In 2009, a similar delegation visited Gaza in solidarity with the Palestinian people after the Israeli aggression called “Cast Lead”. The delegation condemned the Egyptian regime’s involvement in the blockade by closing the Rafah crossing.

President El-Sissi’s statement, “We are not better than Syria and Iraq”, was a foundational statement for the argument of “national interest first”. Consequently, the Iraq War and its outcomes served as a giant scarecrow wielded by an authoritarian regime in Egypt, which consistently promoted the “security first” rhetoric.

The delegations expressed the true sentiments of the Egyptian people, while public spaces, in particular, Tahrir Square, remained off-limits to the people. The square had not seen political action since the truncated popular uprising of January 18-19, 1977, known in political groups as the “Bread and Freedom Demonstrations”, and labeled by the State as the “Thieves’ Uprising”.

The Egyptian people, particularly the country’s political and cultural groups, closely monitored the rapid developments of the US attack on Afghanistan, carried out under the pretext of combating terrorism, which was accompanied by an international political climate that was laying the groundwork for the US invasion of Iraq.

On February 15, 2003, a global call was made for demonstrations against an international resolution that authorized a US invasion of Iraq. This call was championed by anti-globalization, anti-imperialism solidarity movements worldwide. Massive demonstrations unfolded on that day in 60 capitals worldwide, drawing approximately 16 million participants. In Egypt, some opposition figures attempted to organize a similar event but ultimately failed. The head of the Medical Syndicate at the time submitted an official request to the Egyptian Ministry of Interior to open Cairo Stadium to the public on that day to allow the expression of popular opposition to the impending US war on Iraq. As expected, his request was denied.

It appeared that the simmering anger of the opposition and its eagerness for action remained stifled by the tight grip of security forces. Then came March 20, 2003. The world awoke to the sight of phosphorus bombs blazing the pre-dawn skies over Iraq. Almost spontaneously, Egyptian opposition groups swiftly reached out to one another and flocked to Tahrir Square, in an impressive act of impromptu organizational collaboration that warrants further examination. This spontaneous response, not anticipated by security forces, allowed hundreds of activists, political figures, prominent

community leaders, and youth to gather in Tahrir Square. Young people and students in particular had become prominent political participants following the Al-Aqsa Intifada in Palestine at the end of 2000, giving rise to a new generation of activists within Egyptian universities.

People and groups of diverse political affiliations, genders, and ages met in the heart of Tahrir Square on the afternoon of March 20, 2003. While their overarching message was to protest the US invasion of Iraq, their anger was fuelled by their deep concern for Egypt itself and their own position in the unfolding crisis. Chants such as “They who strike in Iraq, tomorrow will strike in Al-Warraql!” (a Cairo district), and “Those who have betrayed their promises, those who have stolen everything, those who have forsaken their Arab identity, those who have become slaves to the West... They do not represent us!” echoed through the square. Emotions of anger blended with feelings of pride on a day that bore witness to both the rejection of the US war and the celebration of spontaneous Egyptian popular action that had found its way to Tahrir Square.

The official, toned-down political position of Egypt and its persistence as a strategic ally of the US before and after the 2003 war led to the multiplication of economic partnerships with this “ally”. The QIZ agreement was the primary outcome, signed in February 2005, by which Egyptian companies are allowed to export to the American market without customs, provided that there is an Israeli input of up to 35 percent of the product.

As expected, the security forces regained strict control of the street in a matter of a few hours. Despite that, that brief moment implied the emergence of new remarkable and creative political courses. The opposition groups involved became engaged in their respective frameworks, unions, syndicates, and movements. Small demonstrations persisted for two days in front of the ruling party headquarters and parliament and were attended by no more than a handful of protesters. The security forces responded with mass arrests and brutal beatings, even targeting figures like Hamdeen Sabahi, who was a parliamentarian at the time and would later run for president. The security apparatus widened its grip beyond arbitrary street arrests and started raiding homes as well, targeting anyone who had showed signs of involvement and activists or figures who were deemed as potential leaders capable of mobilizing masses. As they raided and arrested people at the break of dawn, scenes of a war and violence were unfolding on every television screen.

Baghdad fell on April 9, 2003, and although only students were able to protest the war within the walls of their universities, it was evident that the winds of change had started

to blow. Revolutionary energy was eager to be released. Inside prison cells and small apartments, secret meetings and lively discussions were held away from the eyes of the security forces, and an opportunity for political action seemed ripe.

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In tandem with the political course, a lawsuit was filed against the Egyptian government demanding that US warships be prevented from passing through the Suez Canal. The lawsuit called on the government not to hide behind international agreements that supposedly require its neutrality in the event of conflict, because in reality, Egyptian national security and the country's economy were being jeopardized by the war, which meant that Egypt had a legal right to prohibit the passage of American vessels.

Several press conferences, including one famous speech by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at the American University in Cairo, tried to campaign for justifications for the US invasion by attacking dictatorial regimes in the region, and saying that it is no longer acceptable to continue close relations with those regimes in order to maintain American interests, while this undemocratic atmosphere leads to the formation of terrorist groups that attack the West. This was often rumoured to be the reason behind the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001².

Born from the shockwave

Just as is expected in periods of profound upheaval, debates ensued within Egyptian popular opposition political circles on how to respond to that turning point. Discussions were directed at rejecting American global policies while simultaneously addressing the need for escalating resistance against Egypt's authoritarian and subservient local policies. It was from that dialogue that Kifaya Movement emerged in September 2004, based on the stance of "No extension [to the presidential term], no inheritance [of power]", with signatures of 300 Egyptian politicians and intellectuals who demanded the President step down from power.

This occurred in parallel with two key factors. First, the opposition perceived a

² Secretary Condoleezza Rice, "Remarks at the American University in Cairo", U.S Department of State, Archive, 20/06/2005.

new preparedness on the part of the regime to introduce some political changes in response to American pressure. Simultaneously, political and economic arrangements were being made, foreshadowing a deeper role for the Mubarak family in dominating Egypt and its economy³. On one hand, the regime proposed a popular referendum on a constitutional amendment to allow the direct, general secret ballot election of the President of the Republic by all eligible voters, as opposed to the previous method of selecting a president through a referendum after one name had been nominated by the People's Assembly. On the other hand, the National Party's plot was not very subtle. It started arrangements for the president's youngest son, Gamal, to take control of the ministries, with the help of a handful of powerful businessmen, to start implementing his economic and political visions as he prepared to declare his candidacy.

“The story goes... They robbed our country, those bastards! Once upon a time... They robbed our country, those Americans! The story goes that generation after generation... We saw Israel take Palestine. Troops took Baghdad in the afternoon... And at sunset, they were ready to take Egypt!” In January 2011, the song was revived in the squares of the revolution with new lyrics about the Arab Spring.

The US invasion of Iraq marked a pivotal moment that presented an opportunity for shifting the political scene in Egypt. New generations and opposition groups were coalescing like a growing snowball, propelling waves of momentum, with each wave ushering in a larger one. It was in this climate that Kifaya Movement emerged, birthing several other groups. The most notable of these groups was the influential Youth for Change, whose active presence helped mobilize the opposition and raise voices against a proposed popular referendum on constitutional amendments, which they regarded as a farce. The movement also directed attention at the widespread electoral fraud during the 2005 presidential election which ended with the arrest of presidential candidate, Ayman Nour.

A comprehensive workers' movement also crystallized and headquartered itself at the Parliament's sidewalk. Then came a big wave of protests on April 6, 2008, when opposition forces called for a general strike. The loudest outcry came from the workers of Ghazl el-Mahalla, a city famous for its textile industry. Afterwards, the National Association for Change was established, and calls emerged for the return of the Egyptian politician Mohamed el-Baradei to Egypt to run for president, followed by vigils led by young activists against torture in police stations in 2010, under the slogan “We

³“Who's isolating whom?” The Economist, 23/02/2006.

are all Khaled Said⁴.”

Consecutive and impactful waves of protests followed, beginning with a few hundred people gathering in Tahrir Square to express their anger at the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003. These protests evolved into millions gathering on the Friday of Anger on April 28, 2011, demanding the overthrow of the regime. As the people took control of Tahrir Square, the flags of Palestine and Iraq became a common sight, with protesters chanting against the Zionist-imperialist alliance as fervently as they did against their own authoritarian regimes.

“They who strike in Iraq, tomorrow will strike in Al-Warraq”, they chanted. Emotions of anger blended with feelings of pride on a day that bore witness to both the rejection of the US war and the celebration of Egyptian popular spontaneity that had found its way to Tahrir Square.

The features of this new scene took shape, evolved, and found their place in Tahrir Square. It was not just an Egyptian event, but an Arab one par excellence. In Tahrir Square, the people voiced the stories and woes shared by all the peoples of our region. Eskenderella, a band that became the voice of the youth at the time of the revolution, described that emerging scene with rare clarity in their song “The Story Goes”. In 2003, they sang against the backdrop of the US occupation of Iraq:

*The story goes... Guess what? They robbed our country, those bastards!
The story goes... Once upon a time... They robbed our country, those Americans!
The story goes that generation after generation... Israel stole Palestine.
Troops took Baghdad in the afternoon... And at sunset, they were ready to take
Egypt!*

In January 2011, the song was revived in the squares of the revolution in a newer version in which more optimistic verses about the Arab Spring were added.

*The story goes... Guess what? Our people reached for the light with their bare
hands.
The story goes... Once upon a time... The people’s wishes were heard demands.
The story goes... Generations of Egyptians were reborn in Tahrir.
The story goes... The sun of the revolution was created by a martyr.
The story goes... Oh, liberty! Ours is an Arab revolution.
From dawn to morn to noon to evening.*

⁴ Khaled Said was an Egyptian man whose death in police custody in Alexandria on 6 June 2010 helped stir up the January 25 Revolution of 2011. [Translator’s note].

From Tunisia to Libya to Syria to Egypt.

Twenty years have passed since the US invasion of Iraq... Two decades during which Egypt has witnessed profound changes and turbulent periods marked by waves that alternately induced and stifled change. Iraq was the wound that sparked the flame of rage in Egypt, where efforts to overthrow the suffocating oppressive forces lead to the outbreak of the Arab Spring and its subsequent decline across the region.

Regrettably, the situation in Egypt has culminated in this surreal scenario: the current President of the Republic, wielding military authority, emerges from the depths of the very deep state against which the Egyptian people have rebelled in 2011. He cautions against the dangerous allure/illusion of change that could potentially lead the nation to the "tragic fate of Iraq". It is as though Iraq, a nation that has endured two decades of devastating tragedies, still possesses the capacity, albeit in reverse, to serve as a guiding beacon, pointing the Egyptian compass in the direction the country must follow.





Serwan Baran - Iraq

Twenty Years after the Invasion: Lessons of the Iraqi Tragedy

Omar Benderra

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Translated by **Sabah Jalloul**

Saddam Hussein's silencing of any dissident voice deprived Iraqi society of essential debates on the country's fundamental strategic choices. By monopolizing political truth, despotism became the primary cause of a debilitated society, incapable of defending itself. In the Maghreb, particularly in Algeria, all controversies surrounding 'democratization imposed by foreign armies' ended with the destruction of Libya in 2011. The prevailing sentiment is that the political leaders of the country bear responsibility for this disaster as well.

The image is unforgettable. On that spring night, massive explosions shuddered a sleeping city. The United States' air force was initiating the first phase of the invasion of Iraq through bombing one of the most iconic capitals of the Arab-Muslim civilization with unprecedented violence. Broadcast live by the CNN and the Qatari channel Al Jazeera, which was widely watched in Algeria, the fiery display immediately brought back memories of the horrific massacre at the Al-Amiriyah shelter in 1991 during the first Gulf War. In the twisted minds of American neoconservative pseudo-strategists, this inferno of violence was meant to elicit "shock and awe" in the bombed population through the use of overwhelming power and spectacular displays of force that supposedly destroy their will to fight and lead to their unconditional submission to imperial supremacy. At that very moment, the international legal order established after World War II was being undone.

From Iraq to Algeria: geographic distance and historical proximity

Algerians were not caught off guard by the aggression which had loudly and repeatedly been announced by the United States and its allies. The political message of this attack, marked by monstrous brutality, was unmistakable. The heavy and indiscriminate bombing of civilians and the destruction of civilian infrastructure with the stated goal of toppling the Baathist regime were an explicit warning to anyone who dared to challenge the US supremacy, especially to the countries of the Rejectionist Front and, through them, to the Arab-Muslim peoples in solidarity with the Palestinian people.

The first line of defense against any external threat lies in the unity of the people and leaders of the country. It is absolutely necessary, in Iraq, as in Algeria and elsewhere in this constantly crisis-ridden Arab world, to achieve political systems which are acceptable to the majority of the populations. This means that regimes must be open to fundamental freedoms and the rule of law.

In Algeria, the trauma lingers twenty years later, and none of the witnesses to this tragic event have forgotten the apocalyptic opening act, founded on brazen lies, of a new chapter of the perpetual Iraqi tragedy. The extensive Western propaganda campaign, based on manipulation and deception, only deceived those who were willing to be deceived: Iraq, which was in no way involved in the 9/11 attacks, did not possess weapons of mass destruction. Like the rest of the Arab public opinion, Algerians closely followed the series of bloody events, the carnage, and the destruction of a country which was the cradle of civilizations.

Though geographically distant, Iraq was emotionally close to Algerians. No one in Algeria has forgotten the multifaceted and unwavering support of the Iraqi people for the national liberation struggle, nor has anyone forgotten the reception of Algerian students in Iraqi universities and military academies at the height of the anti-colonial war. In fact, many Iraqis visited Algeria in the early years after independence to provide technical support in various economic and social sectors in Algeria. Some even established roots in Algeria while maintaining ties with their home country. This was facilitated by the fact that the two peoples at opposite ends of the Arab-Muslim crescent shared numerous socio-cultural traits. In truth, behind their apparent rough temperaments, both Iraqis and Algerians concealed genuine generosity.

Algerians and the trajectory of the Iraqi disaster

On the political front, while unwavering solidarity with the Iraqi people was tangible, Algerian public opinion remained critical of Saddam Hussein's regime. The widely shared sentiment was that the brutal Baathist dictatorship bore a heavy responsibility for the tragedy endured by the people of "the land of the two rivers". These mixed popular sentiments were also shared by the Algerian authorities, who had not forgotten that it was Saddam Hussein himself who, by tearing up the March 1975 Algiers Agreement¹, had placed his country on a catastrophic trajectory. The historic agreements reached by the Shah of Iran, Reza Pahlavi, and Saddam Hussein, then vice-president of Iraq but the strongman of the regime, under the auspices of President Boumediene², had been recognized by the Iranian regime that took power after the 1979 revolution. Baghdad's abrupt shift, which was justified by the threat posed by the new Iranian Islamic regime, and its new allegiance towards the Gulf monarchies, after having been one of the driving forces behind the Arab opposition to these states' abandonment of the Palestinian cause, were insidiously encouraged by Western powers, who were more than happy to kill two birds with one stone.

Subsequent historical milestones, starting from the economic collapse to the annexation of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990 with the collapse of the Iraqi army in the face of a coalition led by the US in 1991, and culminating in the US military intervention in 2003, represent a coherent, destructive trajectory triggered by the terrible strategic blunder of waging war against Iran in September 1980

At each of these stages, Algerian diplomacy tried everything in its power to placate

¹ An agreement between Iran and Iraq to settle any outstanding territorial disputes along the Iran-Iraq border.

² And his Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who would later become president of Algeria between 1999 and 2019.

the Western impulse towards a war and encourage Iraqi leaders to exercise restraint by alerting them to the major risks involved. The tireless efforts of President Chadli Bendjedid in the spring of 1990 to find a political solution to Saddam Hussein's Kuwaiti adventure were met with a resounding refusal. Before this, in the midst of the Iraq-Iran war, the ceaseless efforts of Foreign Minister Mohamed-Seddik Benyahia to bring the belligerents to the negotiating table ultimately cost him his life in May 1982.

In the twisted minds of American neoconservative pseudo-strategists, this inferno of violence was meant to elicit “shock and awe” in the bombed population and destroy their will to fight, leading to their unconditional submission to imperial supremacy. The international legal order established after World War II was being undone.

In 2003, Algeria's voice carried much less weight on the international stage, as the country had been embroiled since the 1990s in a “dirty war” against civilians, which had severely weakened it and tarnished a regime that knows no other recourse than repression. Nevertheless, the Algerians, shocked by the US-British aggression, forced the Algerian leaders to allow solidarity demonstrations outside the capital. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika condemned the invasion of Iraq³ in relatively measured terms. However, the triumphant reception of French President Jacques Chirac in Algeria in March 2003, following France's eloquent refusal to take part in the invasion, as expressed by Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin on March 14, evidently expressed the true sentiment of the population.

Gunboat diplomacy: divide and conquer

The imperialist intervention of 2003 in Iraq, without the approval of the United Nations, marked a new era in international relations. Gunboat diplomacy⁴, a means of Western colonial expansion that many believed had disappeared since the waves of independence of colonized settlements and the American defeats in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s, was regaining its full function and efficacy as an instrument of power.

Since the dissolution of the USSR in 1990, Western states, under US leadership, have never hesitated to resort to war whenever they deemed the strategic circumstances in

³ Algeria-Watch, La guerre contre l'Irak défie la légalité internationale, Algeria-Watch, 13/12/2009.

⁴ Gunboat diplomacy is a form of hegemony comprising the pursuit of foreign policy objectives by colonial powers, using displays of power or threats of war to terrorize the countries they intend to subjugate. [Translator's note]

their favor. This belligerence was evident in the former Yugoslavia in 1999, even before the invasion of Iraq, as well as in Afghanistan in 2001, and was confirmed in Libya in 2011.

The advances of positive international law since the end of World War II were being challenged by the development of ideological arguments such as “humanitarian intervention” and the “duty of assistance”, among other expressions of media and psychological warfare. These elements of communication, presented as a permanent psychodrama, were heavily deployed all over the media to condition Western public opinion. The powerful propaganda justifications, amplified by globalized media apparatus, contribute to stifling critical voices that contest the regression of rights in favor of a logic of power devoid of any morality. This course has been maintained, with minor differences, under the Trump administration. Joe Biden’s administration, however, has been fully committed to the geostrategic perspective established by George W. Bush. As an enthusiastic warmonger and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 2003, Joe Biden distinguished himself with the radicalism of his discourse, oscillating between messianic flights and deceptive arguments, even advocating the partition of Iraq...

The Iraqi tragedy is the tragedy of the entire Arab-Muslim world, from the Gulf to the Atlantic. Two decades after the destruction of its state, Iraq’s absence from the international stage is strongly felt Arab societies. This country of immense culture and ancient wisdom, traditionally a defender of just causes in the Middle East, is bound to regain its independence and rise again.

The Iraqi theater has been and continues to be a field of application of neocolonial methods of dividing societies along ethnic and sectarian lines by using socio-political ruptures to weaken all resistance to domination at its roots. One of the essential lessons of the Iraq war lies at the level of the complete destruction of all state structures in Iraq. The modus operandi of imperialism, in direct reference to the “lessons” of colonial anthropology, centers on deepening the antagonisms present in the societies it targets in order to fragment the nation-states that attempt to resist its domination.

This tactic was heavily practiced in Iraq, by pitting Shiite and Sunni Muslims or Kurds and Arabs against each other... The same strategies are activated wherever possible, as observed in Syria, Sudan, or Yemen. In Algeria, neo-colonial agents have been attempting in recent years to create a division between Arabic-speaking and Berber-speaking populations.

In 2023, Iraq is a country under US tutelage, fragmented and severely weakened. The central state, largely stripped of the elements of its sovereignty, no longer represents the strategic depth of the countries on the front lines of the confrontation with Israel. For many, this was indeed the primary objective of the war initiated by Bush and US neoconservatives.

Resistance twenty years later

Beyond psychological warfare, the invasion of Iraq essentially appears to be a culmination of all the criminal practices committed by an occupying army. The American discourse about defending freedom, fighting autocracies, and the “global war on terror”, as George W. Bush put it, could no longer mask the entirely cruel actions that starkly contradict any defense of democracy and peace.

One million deaths, hundreds of thousands of wounded persons and shattered lives, along with countless human rights violations and the overt looting of Iraq’s heritage... The US occupation and its military leaders can be blamed for all these atrocities, including the destruction of civilian infrastructure and violating religious symbols. The undignified and perverse media spectacle of Saddam Hussein’s execution on November 30, 2006, on the day of Eid al-Adha, revolted even those who had no sympathy for the deposed dictator, but considered the display an insult to Islam.

For Algeria, the political and security implications of the 2003 war against Iraq were straightforward: “if you want peace, prepare for war.” However, it seems that not all the lessons of this war have been learned. The need for a consensual deterrence policy has not been accompanied by political openness, and the regime continued to practice political repression.

The overwhelming material superiority of the invader did not, however, diminish the will of Iraqis to live freely in a country free from neocolonial tutelage and the bane of the Green Zone, a true center of imperial decision-making at the heart of Baghdad. In a striking parallel, like Algerians in the past, Iraqis continue to resist and inflict daily damage on the occupying forces.

With its series of unpardonable crimes, the US occupation marked the end of the illusion of democratization imposed by foreign armies. In the Maghreb, and in Algeria in particular, controversies regarding this issue ended with the destruction of Libya in 2011. The widely prevailing sentiment is that the political leaders of the country

bear responsibility for this disaster as well. There is a near-consensus that Saddam Hussein's regime's prohibition of any dissident voice deprived Iraqi society of essential debates on the country's fundamental strategic choices. By monopolizing political truth, despotism became the primary cause of a debilitated society, unable to defend itself.

Lessons of the 2003 war

Beyond this common-sense observation, the need to have sufficiently deterrent defense capabilities to discourage any external aggression is evident. This prerequisite is illustrated by the weakness of Iraq's defense capabilities, exhausted by years of war and embargo. The same was true in Libya, which greatly facilitated foreign interventions.

Though geographically distant, Iraq was emotionally close to Algerians. No one in Algeria has forgotten the multifaceted and unwavering support of the Iraqi people for the national liberation struggle, nor has anyone forgotten the reception of Algerian students in Iraqi universities and military academies at the height of the anti-colonial war.

For Algeria, the political and security implications of the 2003 war against Iraq were straightforward: "si vis pacem para bellum" (if you want peace, prepare for war). The modernization and equipping of the Algerian army undertaken after the invasion have continued and fortified with the deterioration of regional security conditions. However, it seems that not all the lessons of this war have been learned. The need for a consensual deterrence policy has not been accompanied by political openness. In terms of political repression, the regime did not budge, and in terms of its foreign relations, the pro-Western policies, which were evident during the corrupt reign of Abdelaziz Bouteflika (1999-2019), have not contributed to the country's development. From this perspective, the recent rapprochement with China and Russia constitutes a rebalancing of the country's international relations more in line with its tradition of non-alignment.

In a global context characterized by Western determination to maintain hegemony - even if it entailed resorting to war - it is impossible for a country like Algeria to achieve strategic parity with industrialized nations. A more realistic goal would be to be able to inflict substantial damage on any potential aggressor within a context of an asymmetrical conflict.

The rising dangers in the Maghreb, overshadowed by the war in Europe and tensions in the Middle East and the Taiwan Strait, are indeed alarming. The chronic destabilization of the entire region, the crises in Libya and the Sahel openly fueled

by extra-continental interference, extend to the western borders of Algeria with the emergence of a particularly hostile actor. Indeed, following the normalization of its relations with the Moroccan monarchy, Israel is developing extensive and multifaceted military cooperation clearly directed against Algeria.

The Algerian authorities did not forget that it was Saddam Hussein himself who, by tearing up the March 1975 Algiers Agreement, had placed his country on a catastrophic trajectory. Baghdad's abrupt shift, justified by the threat posed by the new Iranian Islamic regime, and its new allegiance to Gulf monarchies, after having spearheaded the Arab opposition to these states' abandonment of Palestine, were insidiously encouraged by Western powers.

These alarming signals have enhanced awareness of security challenges which have been growing for several years. The adaptation of defense capabilities, which was initiated in 2005 through military agreements with Russia⁵, seems to be confirmed. It appears that the current Algerian leadership has learned the lessons of the 2003 war, as well as of NATO's aggression on Libya in March 2011.

Multipolarity and sovereignty

On the front of external politics, the lesson that can be drawn from the Iraqi tragedy lies in the need to consolidate solid and effective international alliances. Adherence to the principles of non-alignment is a condition for maintaining a minimum level of autonomous decision for a country like Algeria, which holds a median political weight on the international stage. Above all, the lesson is about not repeating the political mistake made by the Baathist regime. In his eagerness to appear as a trustworthy partner, Saddam Hussein fell for Western promises, and for this mistake, his people continue to pay a heavy price.

It is clear that American unilateralism, which has exacerbated since the late 1990s and now heads the rest of the vassalized Western world, has not contributed to pacifying a divided world. On the contrary, the collapse of the Soviet Union, which further gave way to US hegemony, launched a sequence of brutal destabilizations and unending wars. Western armed interventions in Iraq and elsewhere have brought unprecedented mourning and destruction while fueling extremism. To ensure their protection, prosperity, and security, there is no other option for countries wishing to preserve their decision

⁵ Laurent Zecchini, *L'accord Moscou-Alger met en cause l'équilibre au Maghreb*, Laurent Zecchini, Le Monde, 21/03/2006.

autonomy than to work towards a less imbalanced world order.

Thus, the necessary democratization of international relations can only be contemplated through the establishment of counterbalances that only multipolarity can guarantee. Initiatives for regional groupings like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) or international ones like the BRICS⁶, are positive signals in the path toward the peaceful resolution of disputes between sovereign countries.

Nevertheless, the tragic Iraqi experience proves, twenty years after the war, that the first line of defense against any external threat is the unity of the people and leaders of the country. It is absolutely necessary, in Iraq, as in Algeria and elsewhere in this constantly crisis-ridden Arab world, to achieve political systems which are acceptable to the majority of the populations. This means that the regimes of these countries must be open to fundamental freedoms and the rule of law.

The lesson lies in the need to consolidate solid and effective international alliances. Adherence to the principles of non-alignment is a condition for maintaining a minimum level of autonomous decision for a country like Algeria. Above all, the lesson is about not repeating the political mistake made by the Baathist regime.

The Iraqi tragedy is, in fact, the tragedy of the entire Arab-Muslim world, from the Gulf to the Atlantic. Two decades after the destruction of its state, Iraq's absence from the international stage is strongly felt in the societies of the Arab world. This country of immense culture and ancient wisdom, traditionally a defender of just causes in the Middle East, is bound to regain its independence and rise again. From the Mashreq to the Maghreb, the voice of the dignified people of Iraq will resound once again.

⁶ French Xinhuanet, *Les BRICS, un puissant moteur pour l'économie mondiale (SYNTHESE)*, <http://french.xinhuanet.com/>, 17/10/2016.



Syria



"Forced towards Hope" by Sundus Abdul Hadi (original photo by Tamara Abdul Hadi) - Iraq. Mixed media on canvas, 2010.

The Implications of the Invasion of Iraq in Syria

Samir Aita

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Translated by **Yasmine Haj**

Bashar al-Assad fell into the trap set by the Israeli withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in 2000. A deliberate Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, however, could have ensured continued Syrian influence in Lebanon. This influence, initially greenlit by the United States, remained equally unchallenged even after the US invasion of Iraq and its aftermath, despite the event leading to the complete destabilization of the region and the collapse of one of the most important Arab countries.

The Arab Mashriq had been fraught with turning points even before the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Hafez al-Assad had departed with Rabin's "deposit" leading nowhere, with no peace on the horizon for the Occupied Golan Heights. Hafez's son, Bashar succeeded him, with clear support from the French President at the time, Jacques Chirac, and Rafic Hariri's intervention. The latter had reassumed his position as Lebanon's prime minister, despite the beginning of the country's financial downturn. Israel withdrew from Southern Lebanon, leaving the Syrian army in an uncomfortable position as the only remaining "occupying" force. Despite their uselessness at the time, the Syrian security forces possessed sweeping influence in Lebanon. While Iraq was being stifled by US sanctions, Syria and Lebanon were benefitting from the UN Oil-For-Food Programme (OFFP), even manipulating its measures.

9/11 and pre-invasion

Then, in 2001, 9/11 happened. It wasn't clear, however, whether every party in the Mashriq had truly realised the implications that those attacks would unfold, especially under an already arrogant and domineering US administration. Consequently, a US-led "tempest" of revenge appeared on the horizon, with its first stop being the invasion of Iraq.

Notably, in Syria, those attacks coincided with the termination of the Damascus Spring, where a certain open-door policy was adopted with the arrival of the young president. Baath party officials and figure heads were particularly growing impatient with these "spring" policies and began to severely critique the ruling regime. It is also worth noting that as US Secretary of State Colin Powell communicated with President al-Assad, the US was escalating its warnings against smuggling Iraqi oil. In the meantime, the Syrian security forces were closely working with US intelligence to watch and arrest Al-Qaeda operatives in "America's war on terror". It is equally worth noting that the Paris II conference was then held, under the auspices of the French government, in November 2002. It aimed to implement the Paris I conference resolutions and secure funding to support Lebanon's economy and avoid a financial collapse.

The implications of the invasion in Syria

Preparations to invade Iraq unfolded. France played a leading role in the efforts to stop the Security Council from reaching a resolution that would justify and sanction the invasion. Syria lined up behind France, contrary to the position al-Assad assumed in 1991, where he pro forma took part in the Gulf War alliance. Baghdad eventually fell in April 2003. As US forces arrived to the Syrian borders and threatened to continue

all the way to Damascus, Michel Aoun, and other lobby groups, took the opportunity to push for US sanctions on Syria under the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act.

The strategic trap set up by the Israelis worked. The Syrian army withdrew, humiliated, in April 2005. Rafic Hariri had already been assassinated in February 2005. Others fell victim to this trap and the interregional geopolitical conflicts that the invasion of Iraq caused.

The atmosphere in Damascus became tense. A Syrian immigrant in the US was visiting Syria in the summer of 2003. Sitting in a local restaurant, she spoke loudly on the phone with her son, whom she had pushed to join the US marine forces, thinking that would help him overcome his drug addiction. Her son was close to her, serving at the Iraqi borders, but his army commander wouldn't allow him to visit her in Syria. Her friend sarcastically commented: "They won't let him come alone; they'll have the entire US army enter Damascus with him!" Another lady, who had never travelled abroad, watched from her balcony as a Syrian official's son and his men attacked a young man from the neighbourhood, only because he was standing in the way of their convoy. She yelled before the gathering crowds: "I hope the Americans come and save us from you, as they have done in Iraq!" Those are scenes and words that were virtually impossible to entertain in Syrian minds before.

Soon, the US occupation was tampering with Iraq, showing leniency towards Iran and putting severe pressure on Syria. Bashar al-Assad asked Jacques Chirac for help, by trying to speed up a partnership agreement with Europe that the two countries had long hindered. However, there were two significant stumbling blocks: the first was the Syrian regime's lack of desire to liberalise the communications sector, controlled by the Makhoulouf family (Bashar al-Assad's relatives) and the Mikati family (Lebanon's prime minister); while the second was that Europe insisted that Syria, but not Israel, pledged to abandon any weapons of mass destruction.

France: from major ally to lead opponent

The negotiations were doomed to fail in any case, however, as France was also under US pressure due to its position on the invasion of Iraq. As such, a rift was formed between Syria and France, with contradicting interpretations of the reasons behind it. France spoke of a gas agreement that the Syrian authorities refused to give to Total Energies, knowing that it was part of a larger enterprise that the French authorities had halted in the mid-1990s and that the newly implemented US sanctions would hinder

its implementation in any case. The French authorities also didn't allow for a French-Lebanese bank to join the first wave of private banks in Syria in 2004, knowing that establishing private banks was one of the most important expressions of economic openness that the new presidency adopted, under the premise of "economic reform precedes political reform".

In fact, France's opposition to the Security Council's adoption of the resolution to invade Iraq had a significant effect on US-French relations. Americans boycotted French goods and changed the name of "French Fries" to "Freedom Fries!" The historic rift between the two countries would only be contained a year after Baghdad fell: first in June 2004, during D-Day commemorations in Normandy, then at the G8 Summit on Sea Island, off the coast of Georgia. One of the main ways to restore those relations was an agreement between Jacques Chirac and George W. Bush to "re-establish Lebanon's independence and sovereignty." And so, cooperation began by issuing the Security Council's Resolution 1559, which would call for all foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon (mainly the Syrian army) and for disbanding and disarming all Lebanese militias (Hezbollah being intended).

Dealing with the seismic events of 2001 and 2003 wasn't easy on the political opposition either, which had begun to gain momentum with the dawn of a new political era in Syria. The biggest challenge the opposition faced, however, was juggling the criticism of the government's socio-political practices, and its former and current approaches, with growing sectarianism, religious extremism, and regional and international shifts.

Just a few months earlier, Chirac had linked, in his speech before the Lebanese parliament, the Syrian army's withdrawal with Israel's withdrawal from the Shebaa Farms. As such, the shift in France's position - which also stemmed from Chirac being "tired" of the deadlock with Bashar al-Assad and his lack of initiative to do anything about the implications of the invasion of Iraq - finally led to a political "earthquake" in terms of Lebanon and Syria.

Hariri's assassination and the Syrian withdrawal

It appears that the Syrian regime knew about the agreement between Chirac and W. Bush even before voting on the Security Council resolution, and so chose direct confrontation in Lebanon. Headed by Rafic Hariri, Lebanese deputies then backed a constitutional amendment that allowed for then President Émile Lahoud to extend his term in September 2004. Hariri voted in parliament for the amendment "so that Syria

isn't humiliated in Lebanon". He later resigned as prime minister in October 2004.

This is how the strategic trap set up by the Israelis worked. The Syrian army withdrew, humiliated, in April 2005. Rafic Hariri had already been assassinated in February 2005, while others fell victim to this trap and the interregional geopolitical conflicts that ensued as a result of the US invasion of Iraq.

Impacts of Iraq's civil war on Syria

The developments in Iraq were no less seismic. The UN Special Representative for Iraq, sent by the UN after the collapse of the Iraqi state and the disbanding the Iraqi army, was assassinated. A series of sectarian and "resistance" bombings thus began against the occupation. Shiite militias appeared, backed by Iran, while an alliance was formed between Al-Qaeda and the rest of the former Iraqi military and security personnel. The Iraqi civil war broke out.

Saddam Hussein's arrest in December 2003 impacted the Syrian Jazira (Upper Mesopotamia, bordering Iraq). In a football match in Qamishli in March 2004, Deir Ezzour team fans (Ftuwwah) raised Saddam Hussein's photos in the face Kurdish Qamishli fans (Al-Jihad), who, in turn, raised signs that said: "We'd give our lives for Bush!" This unfolded in violent clashes that spread throughout the city and lasted six days. Syrian security forces and the army had to intervene, and dozens of people, mostly Kurds, fell victim to the violence. Thousands of Syrian Kurds thus sought refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan, while sectarian and ethnic conflicts spilled over from Iraq into Syria.

Even before the invasion, Syria (and Jordan) began to see waves of Iraqi refugees. Their numbers increased significantly following the battle of Fallujah, and especially after the bombings of the Shrines of Imam Ali al-Hadi and Hassan al-Askari in Samarra in 2006. By 2007, the number of Iraqi refugees in Syria had reached 1.5 million Sunni, Shiite, Christian, Assyrian, and Yazidi refugees.

In fact, Syria assumed, along with the rest of the region, the logic of "creative chaos" and the so-called "New Middle East" (!), which was being reshaped based on the politics of the US administration, as declared by the US Secretary of State at the time, Condoleezza Rice, starting from Iraq, then Lebanon and Syria.

However, in September 2006, the Syrian security forces thwarted an attempted bombing of the US embassy in Damascus, which was allegedly planned by al-Qaeda-backed Jund al-Sham. The incident somehow restored US-Syrian relations, though the US

administration accused Syria of facilitating access of fighters and arms into Iraq. The situation looked extremely complicated: Syria, an ally to Iran, was also cooperating with Saudi Arabia to support Sunni “resistance” in Iraq.

On the other hand, Syria (as well as Jordan) began to witness waves of Iraqi refugees, starting even before the invasion. At first, small numbers of influential, well-to-do, and middle-class Iraqis began to arrive. They headed to Syrian cities where they joined those Iraqis who had already fled the oppressive regime of Saddam Hussein and his men. However, in 2004, the numbers saw a significant increase, following the battle of Fallujah, and again in 2006, after the bombing of the Shrines of Imam Ali al-Hadi and Hassan al-Askari in Samarra. By 2007, the number of Iraqi refugees in Syria had reached 1.5 million, and included Sunni, Shiite, Christian, Assyrian, and Yazidi refugees (in the aftermath of the battles with the Iraqi Kurdish forces near Mosul). Huge refugee camps were set up for Iraqi refugees of popular classes in the Syrian Jazira, which had significant repercussions on Syria’s economy.

Turkey and Qatar: Syria’s allies?

Amidst all these turning points, Turkey invited Bashar al-Assad to visit in January 2004. It was the first visit that a Syrian president had paid to Turkey since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The Turkish parliament had refused to make use of its territories or its NATO military bases to invade Iraq. That same year, Turkey’s then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Syria to sign a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the two countries. Despite strong US opposition, Turkish president Ahmet Necdet Sezer followed suit, visiting Syria in April 2005, during Lebanon’s Cedar Revolution, in the wake of the assassination of Rafic Hariri. Such a regional political earthquake couldn’t have happened without the invasion of Iraq, even if those moves were theoretically grounded in the advice of Ahmet Davutoglu, then advisor to the prime minister, of adopting a principle of “zero problems towards neighbours”.

Turkey, blocked from joining the EU for fear that it would end up “bordering Syria and Iraq”, set out on a policy of adopting a free movement of goods and individuals with neighbouring countries. Turkey’s policy depended on Syria to overcome the conflict with the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), and on Iraq, whose production capabilities collapsed and became dependent on the competing Iran and Turkey for the majority of its supplies. Turkey also targeted Iraqi Kurdistan, specifically because of its relative stability and impact on the Kurdish question. It also established a solid economic cooperation with Iran.

The Syrian-Turkish rapprochement accelerated with the breakdown of the EU-Syria partnership agreement talks, followed by the fallout with France. In 2007, the FTA between Syria and Turkey came into effect, with major repercussions to the detriment of the industrial sector in Aleppo, which was not on a par with Turkish production and unprepared to compete with it. Bashar al-Assad paid an official visit to Turkey, which was followed by Turkish mediation for Syrian-Israeli negotiations, with the aim of normalizing relations between the two countries and resolving the question of the Golan Heights. Turkey's mediation efforts began following the Israeli assault on Lebanon in 2006 and collapsed following the Israeli assault on Gaza in 2008, resulting in the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations. In April 2009, Turkey and Syria conducted joint military manoeuvres, which were followed by a visit from President Abdullah Gul to Syria.

The international climate changed, as the EU was experiencing its own challenges. In 2007, French president Nicolas Sarkozy launched a Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). And in 2008, Bashar al-Assad was invited to attend the national celebration of the 14th of July in France, as Turkey brokered the Syrian-Israeli negotiations.

In parallel, as soon as he began his term, the Emir of Qatar Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani and his prime minister Hamad Bin Jasim consolidated their relations with Bashar al-Assad. It seems that their relations weren't significantly affected by the US army's intensive use of the Khawr al-Udayd air base in their invasion of Iraq. Rather, their relations strengthened with France's change of position and the deteriorating relations between al-Assad and Saudi Arabia, following the extension of Lahoud's term in Lebanon and Rafic Hariri's assassination. The Prince of Qatar even began the construction of a huge palace on a hill on the road between Damascus and Beirut. Additionally, Qatar played the role of a mediator during the assault on Lebanon in 2006 and on Gaza in 2008. Even when Bashar al-Assad insulted Gulf and Egyptian leaders by calling them "half men", the Qatari Prince wasn't bothered.

ISIS and French reconciliation

"Creative chaos" in Iraq backfired on the US army, which began to suffer many human losses and critique, especially as the Islamic State emerged. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi formed an alliance with al-Qaeda, run by Oussama bin Laden, who together founded al-Qaeda in Iraq, which became an umbrella organization for many others. Together, they controlled large expanses of Iraq, extending from Mosul to al-Anbar to Diyala Governorate, all the way to Baqubah, their "capital" city, close to Baghdad. Although

al-Zarqawi was killed in 2006, the US administration deposed Donald Rumsfeld, who engineered the invasion of Iraq, and executed Saddam Hussein, while significantly increasing the number of its troops in Iraq and establishing militias of Sunni tribes, known as “Sahwat” (“the Awakenings”). It was apparent that Iraq had become a quicksand swamp with the US itself sucked into its chaos.

The international climate thus changed, as the EU was experiencing its own challenges. In 2007, the newly-elected French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, launched a Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), which aimed at “guaranteeing peace, stability, and prosperity” for nations at the shores of the Mediterranean, whose peoples’ fates are linked. The project obviously included Syria and Israel. And so, in 2008, Bashar al-Assad was invited to attend the national celebration of the 14th of July in France, as Turkey brokered the Syrian-Israeli negotiations. Three months later, Barack Obama, who promised the complete withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, was elected President of the United States.

Iraq and the Syrian regime, opposition, and society

To Bashar al-Assad, dealing with the 9/11 aftermath and the implications of the invasion of Iraq wasn’t an easy feat. The apparatus of power that he had inherited from his father was in a transitional and unstable phase, as Syrian society woke up from a long slumber with the “departure of the dictator” and the “Damascus Spring”. The country was also transitioning from state capitalism to crony capitalism, which Bashar al-Assad worked on establishing in line with the economic zeitgeist. Although no real competition threatened al-Assad’s presidency in the foreseeable future, the domestic open-door policy was swiftly aborted due to the confusion in decision-making processes regarding power structures, Baath party, and external challenges.

While the beginning of Bashar’s term was characterised by a positive domestic climate, the young president failed to take advantage of it to achieve “national reconciliation” and heal the wounds caused by the Hama and Palmyra events (1979-1982). Likewise, in 2004, following the Qamishli events, al-Assad failed to resolve the Kurdish question in Syria, which had been pending since 1962. He faced his father’s old guard, who were involved in the corrupt dealings of the Lebanese warlords, but couldn’t form a vision or draw a plan regarding the imminent financial collapse in Syria and its internal political repercussions. He also thwarted the open-door approach within the Baath party in 2005, in an aim to keep the latter at the disposal of power and security apparatuses.

Bashar al-Assad fell into the trap set by the Israeli withdrawal from Southern Lebanon

in 2000. A deliberate Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, however, could have ensured continued Syrian influence in Lebanon. This influence, initially greenlit by the United States, remained equally unchallenged even after the US invasion of Iraq and its aftermath, despite the event leading to the complete destabilization of the region as one of the most important Arab countries collapsed.

Al-Assad also wagered on a confrontation between France and the United States, knowing that it was baseless, despite the “folly” of the US administration in invading Iraq. Likewise, while his father ensured stability by assuming a balanced approach to both Saudi Arabia and Iran, Bashar opposed Saudi Arabia. Still, the invasion of Iraq and growing Iranian influence there would have inevitably led to a clash between the two countries.

Syrian society was experiencing a “youth tsunami”, marked by massive numbers of young people looking to join the job market and a mass migration from the countryside to urban centers. Likewise, large numbers of Syrian Jazira residents migrated into other provinces. Although Syria had paid off its foreign debts and maintained a notable reserve, there was no clear solution to the pressing social and economic questions.

Dealing with the seismic events of 2001 and 2003 wasn’t easy on the emerging “political opposition” either, which had begun to gain momentum with the dawn of a new political era in Syria. The opposition parties had inherited a 1950s discourse of ideology and divisions, but sought to liberate public discourse through the Tuesday Seminars of the Economic Sciences Association, the Atassi Forums, and the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society. The biggest challenge the opposition faced, however, was juggling the criticism of the government’s socio-political practices, and its former and current approaches, with growing sectarianism, religious extremism, and regional and international shifts.

The opposition tried to address the Hama events by advocating for rapprochement with the Muslim Brotherhood, but the latter chose to join the old guard (Abdul Halim Khaddam, who defected split from the regime following Rafic Hariri’s assassination), before directly moving into direct conversation with the regime, hoping to normalize with it. The opposition then opened up to Lebanese movements (The Damascus-Beirut Declaration in 2006), ignoring the particularity of Lebanon and the exploding regional conflict at the time. Some of its leaders also fell into sectarianism, already pervasive in Lebanon, and exacerbated by the civil war in Iraq.

In the meantime, Syrian society was experiencing a “youth tsunami”, marked by massive numbers of young people looking to join the job market and a mass migration from the countryside to urban centers. The major cities became overcrowded due to the influx of newcomers. Likewise, large numbers of Syrian Jazira residents migrated into other provinces. However, although Syria had paid off its foreign debts and maintained a notable reserve, there was no clear solution to the pressing social and economic questions.

The invasion of Iraq thus deepened the existing gaps within the Syrian power, opposition groups, and society at large. Those gaps were some of the main factors that led to the Arab Spring’s mutation into a civil war in Syria. The impacts of the invasion continue to affect the region, plunging Syria’s future, territorial integrity, and regional status, as well as those of Lebanon and Iraq, into the unknown.



**Testimonials
from Iraq**



Serwan Baran - Iraq

The Generation of Loss

Dima Yassine

Journalist from Iraq

Translated by **Sabah Jalloul**

I belong to the generation that celebrated the war's conclusion in the summer of 1988. For three consecutive days, the streets teemed with Iraqis singing and dancing in response to the ceasefire announcement. Joyfully, we splashed each other with water on the streets of Baghdad, reviving an ancient Assyrian celebratory tradition. We were a group of strangers brought together by the shared hardships of war and eight long years of closed borders, which had turned Iraq into one giant prison for the millions of us who lived inside.

I belong to the generation of loss, a generation of shattered dreams and innocent, unfulfilled love stories. We were born in the seventies and came of age during the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq war. Our youth was marked by the grave sight of black banners, bearing the names of those who had been killed at war, hanging on the walls of homes in our neighborhoods. On our way back from school, we often quenched our thirst with berries and buckthorn from the towering trees that shaded the city's streets, and drank cold water from the communal fountains people built in front of their homes, so passersby could have a drink and offer their prayers to the souls lost in the senseless conflict.

I belong to the generation that celebrated the war's conclusion in the summer of 1988. For three consecutive days, the streets teemed with Iraqis singing and dancing in response to the ceasefire announcement. We joyfully splashed each other with water on the streets of Baghdad, reviving an ancient Assyrian celebratory tradition. We were a group of strangers brought together by the shared hardships of war and eight long years of closed borders, which had turned Iraq into one giant prison for millions of us.

Our joy was fleeting, however, and our celebration was cut short by the ominous return of the war drums. Instead of joyful water splashes in the streets, our country was engulfed in a torrent of bloodshed, just six days shy of the second anniversary of the war's end. Under Saddam Hussein's command, the Iraqi army was dispatched to occupy Kuwait. When the people of Iraq revolted, they were met with ruthless brutality, with many executed and even buried alive. Eventually, the Iraqi army withdrew from Kuwait, only to face an orchestrated attack by international coalition forces, resulting in massacring its soldiers and destroying its military vehicles on the infamous Highway of Death.

Our lives were given names straight out of a Hollywood script: "The Desert Storm", "shock and awe", "the mother of battles", "The First Gulf War", "economic sanctions", and various others. As if all that had befallen us could be neatly summed up in an attractive label to vindicate our spilled blood and our stolen future.

I belong to the generation of escape - those forcibly torn away from their homeland, driven by the desperate hope of escaping hunger during the days of the embargo.

We packed our bags with things that were "light in weight and precious in value", boarded buses and cars, and set out toward Jordan. This was the only crossing point open to Iraqis, after the rest of the world had shut its doors and windows in our faces. I can still vividly recall the image of houses and palm trees gradually receding from my view until they vanished entirely on the horizon.

I remember my mother's words as she cautioned us to keep silent and answer any questions we might be asked with brief phrases that would not divulge any information about the gold jewelry we had hidden in our clothes. My mother had painstakingly sewn these valuables into the folds of our clothing so we could smuggle them out of Iraq's borders. Our government had imposed strict restrictions on transporting "valuable private possessions", leaving us no choice but to smuggle them to avoid destitution in a foreign land.

At the Iraqi border, a group of men of various ages, stood in a single endless queue, wearing only their undergarments. Meanwhile, within the women's inspection room, a female inspector subjected us to an invasive examination. When we reached the Jordanian border, the unsettling scenario was repeated - a long line of half-naked men and a designated room for women, where the inspector groped our breasts and patted our inner thighs, in search for our hidden gems.

Our lives were given names straight out of a Hollywood script: "The Desert Storm", "shock and awe", "the mother of battles", "The First Gulf War", "economic sanctions", and various other titles. As if all that had befallen us could be neatly summed up in an attractive label to vindicate our spilled blood and our stolen future.

It was the beginning of our somber tale... Or, was it the end? It was the story of an entire generation of Iraqi children, women, and men born into a world where the specter of war seemed to be lurking, waiting down every street and around every corner. One war would end, only for another to begin. We were teenagers, or on the brink of our twenties, witnessing a deep kind of sorrow in our parents' eyes and their anxious fear for us and our fate in foreign lands where they knew and had no one. We suddenly became a heavy burden on them, particularly the girls among us, who turned into a generation of diasporic brides. Almost overnight, our fathers and mothers assumed the role of matchmakers, diligently seeking out a "suitable match" for their daughters. In that time and place, "a suitable match" was often defined by the potential groom's passport and country of residence. Those men who had managed to flee the hellscape of their homeland became highly sought after, as they represented the perfect escape from the war-torn land to the safety of a brighter future.

This marked the dawn of the so-called "salon marriage". Interestingly, even though many of the parents of that generation had married for love and had beautiful romantic stories to tell their children, they were the ones who inadvertently propelled this phenomenon

of arranged marriages. They would show their sons and daughters colorful pictures of potential partners, as if marriage were just an insurance policy for the future. Needless to say, many of these marriages ultimately ended in divorce.

I belong to a generation of migrants who never returned. We left our homeland, which had been engulfed by war, while those who stayed behind became wood for the fires of conflict. We carried our diasporic dreams to faraway lands and spoke in unfamiliar tongues that we labored to master. We lived in alienating environments, the kindest of which took advantage of our need for stability. We needed a roof, so landlords hiked rent prices. Many made us feel like “thieves” who had stolen the jobs, livelihoods, and tax money of the “real citizens.” On our TV screens, we watched the occupation and destruction of our homeland unfold in real-time. We were in a state of confusion, shaken to our very core. Perhaps everything that was happening was a “logical” outcome of the wars and crises we had witnessed, but we couldn’t help but wonder how this spiral of decay could continue to grow deeper and darker with each passing day.

“Death among your kin is more merciful than death alone”, we used to say in Iraq, and I was looking for mercy. I found a large group of people gathered around a big TV screen in the cafeteria, where silence and tension filled the air. Between his hurried, panting breaths, the news correspondent repeatedly mentioned Baghdad’s name.

Our eyes, their sleep long forgotten, remained hopelessly fixed on TV screens that couldn’t capture the depth of our memories and knowledge of the cities that were part of us. These cities had been transformed into cinematic landscapes of fire, smoke, and raining bombs, erasing every last trace of our existence: our footprints, our fingerprints, our breaths... Ironically, at the time, I was working for an American university in an Arab country. Just a few days before Baghdad fell, we, Iraqi personnel and students, were organizing protest groups against the occupation, fully aware that our efforts represented a mere moral stand that could not change an inevitable reality.

My mind fell quiet. I couldn’t even think of my extended family, my friends, and our home back in Iraq. All I could imagine at that moment were the mulberries, buckthorns, and palm trees. It was as if all my memories of Iraq were contained in these things.

The occupying forces were advancing into Iraqi territory, steadily approaching the capital. For non-Iraqis, the clips on the news must have looked like scenes from an exciting

new video game or an enthralling war series that had everyone hooked. People were making expectations, bets, and promises that Baghdad would not fall. Baghdad was at the center of all attention, almost as if the rest of Iraq falling under the US occupation was normal. We heard, over and over again, the phrases “Baghdad will resist! They will never set foot in Baghdad. Those “oulouj” will never conquer Baghdad!”... “Oulouj¹”, a mysterious term that meant something like “uncivilized mercenaries”, was coined by the then Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs, Muhammad Saeed al-Sahhaf, to describe the US forces. The world mused and puzzled over the origins of the word, while some believed al-Sahhaf’s narratives, as he insisted, while clad in his military uniform and projecting unwavering confidence, that US tanks had not even reached the outskirts of Baghdad.

In his military uniform, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein made a public appearance on a Baghdad street and was warmly greeted with cheers and chants by people who gathered around him. Those of us who acquainted with the state’s TV channel and the President’s street tours were accustomed to these staged appearances, in which the President would appear to generously offer his blessing and charitable contributions to his people, while they lived in silence and subservience, completely convinced that “the walls had ears”. Most of us knew, however, that the person walking the street in the leaked video was, in fact, Saddam Hussein’ “stand-in”, a lookalike who filled in for the “original” President, who had survived numerous assassination attempts.

I searched for those who had survived and discovered a chilling collection of stories of death, displacement, kidnapping, and assassinations. The violent events had taken a toll on everyone. I did not return to Iraq until 2019, 27 years after my departure, and I found myself walking down streets I could no longer recognize. People were protesting against those who had assumed power following the occupation.

When I heard that the US forces had entered Baghdad, I quickly retreated to my university office and shut the door. It felt as though I had been plunged into a bottomless, dark whirlwind. The air weighed down on my chest like a heavy boulder and my brain shut down, unable to process what sort of twisted logic justified all this injustice. Hadn’t the world already seen enough of our spilled blood? I dashed from my office as if fleeing from myself, and headed towards the student cafeteria, where fellow Iraqis usually

¹ Muhammad Saeed Al-Sahhaf had explained that his epithet for the coalition forces, “oulouj,” meant wild asses, and that it had been used in some historic instances by caliphates to describe mercenaries who attempted to conquer Muslim lands and were ultimately defeated. [Translator’s note].

gathered to seek solace in one another's company.

Among bewildered faces, I looked for my people, those who would understand the pain weighing down on my chest. "Death among your kin is more merciful than death alone", we used to say in Iraq, and I was looking for mercy. I found a group of people gathered around a large TV screen in the cafeteria, where silence and tension filled the air. Between his hurried, panting breaths, the news correspondent repeatedly mentioned Baghdad's name. Or, maybe I was imagining it. The camera then showed the tired and destitute figures of Iraqi citizens, frantically carrying chairs and other items they managed to haul from government buildings and offices, while US army tanks and soldiers stood by, watching the country's decay.

It was the beginning of our somber tale... Or, was it the end? It was the story of an entire generation of Iraqi children, women, and men born into a world where the specter of war seemed to be lurking, waiting down every street and around every corner.

I sought solace in the few familiar faces in the cafeteria; "a merciful, collective death". My voice choked as I asked, "What's happening?", to which someone replied with a grim expression, "They're looting government offices." I robotically blurted out, "Why?" Among the group was a young Iraqi student who couldn't have been older than 19, and had never set foot in Iraq before. He was one of the most enthusiastic participants in the daily Iraqi gatherings we had set up in the university after the invasion began. His voice was cold and eerily distant as he replied, "Our time has come. Did you think your time would last forever?" Time seemed to stand still in that moment, and I heard my own voice asking, "Who do you mean? Who is "we"?"

My mind fell quiet. I couldn't even think of my extended family, my friends, and our home back in Iraq. All I could imagine at that moment were the mulberries, buckthorns, and palm trees. It was as if all my memories of Iraq were contained in these things alone. The mournful cries of our neighbor in Baghdad who had lost her brother in the Iran-Iraq war, reverberated in my ears. Her weeping laments seeped through my window, which sat across from hers, every day for many years. Sometimes, I saw her quietly seated under the big buckthorn tree in their garden, staring at nothing. I don't recall ever seeing her shed tears, but her wailing cries filled the neighborhood. People told stories about how news of her twin brother's passing at the beginning of the war had broken her. She had lost her mind, they said.

"Did you really think your time would last forever?" he said. Who was "we"?

The incessant, wretched wail of the sirens echoed in my ears for years, haunting me each time I entered a dark room or turned off the lights to sleep. For years, I couldn't eat meat because its smell would bring back harrowing memories of the smell of burnt human flesh that lingered heavy in the air in our neighborhood, after the coalition forces bombed Al-Amiriyah shelter in 1991, cold-bloodedly murdering over 400 innocent civilians. To this day, I can't help but shudder at the sound of fireworks and the sight of smoke, despite my persistent efforts to remind myself that they signify celebration, not death.

I searched for those who had survived the US occupation and discovered a chilling collection of stories of death, displacement, kidnapping, and assassinations. The violent events had taken a toll on everyone. I did not return to Iraq until 2019, 27 years after my departure, and I found myself walking down streets I could no longer recognize. People were protesting against those who had assumed power following the occupation.

It seemed that everyone I had met carried countless tales of loss. They had lost loved ones in the civil war and bombings. On their way to school, they had seen countless lifeless bodies on the sides of the road. Two decades after the occupation, I still don't know who the "we" the young Iraqi man mentioned referred to. What I do know is that, sometimes, I feel that the darkness experienced by my generation pales in comparison to the darkness endured by the generation of the occupation and civil war. To them, we represent a generation that found some kind of salvation. Loss and diaspora, perhaps, were kinder than the "merciful, collective death" in Iraq. The country which was once whole became fragmented and splintered into "us", "you", and "them". Groups begetting groups. Though our indoctrinations may divide us, we all remain undeniably bound together in the same dark vortex, swallowed into its bottomless pit.



Mobeen Al-Khashani - Iraq

Ommetaphobia: The Gouged Eyed of Childhood

Mobeen Al-Khashani

Writer from Iraq

Translated by **Sabah Jalloul**

It was the first year of the occupation. In that atmosphere filled with the smoke of bombings and the fumes of fires, even the healthiest of eyes suffered. What, then, could be expected of eyes as delicate and susceptible as mine? Everything around me seemed to pave the way toward my impending blindness: the doctor's awkward questions and his clinic's painful lighting, pollen dust mixed with toxic gases, the sharp blades of knives pointing at me at garage stalls and shops, the harsh sun and its searing rays piercing through layers of my eyes' aching membranes, the suffocating military color palette wherever I turned... And, finally, there was the school fence, strangled by barbed wire much like our own lives were.

Spring, the crowned king of all seasons, a much celebrated time of the year, earnestly awaited by the yards and gardens everywhere, was the absolute bane of the existence of a child suffering from a severe kind of pollen allergy. That child was me.

The type of allergy I suffered from caused uncontrollable itching in the eye balls and annoying watery eyes that never cease to overflow with tears. Minute, white granules sat in the insides of my eyelids, turning the fresh spring breeze into a thousand sharp blades cutting through my eyes. To me, the colorful flowers of spring were thorny, spark-spewing ejectors to be avoided at all costs.



Pollen dust has always deprived me of the simple joy of playing outside in the spring, or even enjoying watching its delightful colors, while every kid I knew was playing popular games in the outdoors, next to some palm trees or wild plants. I remember the game of “Hah and Yeddah¹”, a spin-off on baseball that older kids from our street used to play near the “Gasbah²”, the pit where sewage water accumulated, and where unwanted natural plants grew, with their reeds sticking out like rusty spears.

This was my struggle... A suffering that went beyond the maddening itching caused

¹“Hah and Yeddah” is a spin-off on baseball, played with makeshift equipment and relaxed rules. The “Hah” is a plastic soda bottle filled with a sand to make it heavier, and the “Yeddah” is a wooden bat made from surplus wood.

² In some overpopulated slums or rural areas that lack infrastructure and proper sewage systems, sewage pipes drain into an empty pit situated on the streets where most houses are located. This pit collects wastewater, and certain types of reeds, known as “Gasbah” (from which the pit derives its name), and other thorny plants grow on its sides. Some animals, including frogs, hedgehogs, and moorhens, typically inhabit this “Gasbah”.

by allergies and the involuntary over-blinking that made me vulnerable to bullying in the streets and later at school. The condition triggered in me an abhorrent phobia that poisoned my childhood with a deep apprehension of sharp-edged or pointy objects and shapes. The mere mention of these things or seeing them conjures up vivid images of their pointy ends gouging out my eyes. The unpleasant impacts of this phobia remain with me to this day.

Any pointed, blade-like or sharp-edged object, from sewing needles and knives to prickly plants, and even the sharp edges of otherwise harmless pieces of furniture like tables, had turned the gift of sight into a curse and the light of my eyes into my personal torment.

The condition is known as Ommetaphobia, a rare kind of phobia from which no one I have ever met appears to suffer. In fact, I myself had been entirely unfamiliar with this particular phobia until recently, when I researched the symptoms that had plagued my childhood. It was only then that I realized they precisely matched the characteristics of this uncommon phobia.

Any pointed, blade-like or sharp-edged object, from sewing needles and knives to prickly plants, and even the sharp edges of otherwise harmless pieces of furniture like tables, had turned the gift of sight into a curse and the light of my eyes into a personal torment.

This was my private hell. I struggled as a child to articulate what I was experiencing to my own mother. That's why even my doctor couldn't understand my repeated descriptions of the daunting fantasies that would haunt me whenever I encountered pointy shapes or objects. He asked my mother if I were perhaps experiencing jealousy of a younger sibling, to which she answered that I was the youngest and therefore the center of attention in the family. The doctor, perplexed, fell silent for a moment, glanced at me, then sufficed to advise me to resist the temptation of over-blinking my eyes and to practice self-restraint to the best of my abilities.

I cannot deny the doctor's kind attempt to help, despite the harshly painful lighting in his clinic. However, he was simply unable to pinpoint the reason behind this condition that left me sleepless every night with an itch that was too uncontrollably aggressive to resist. I realized that he just couldn't comprehend the gravity of my condition, and that the problem was more complicated than a regular pollen allergy. After that visit, I stopped trying to explain.

With time, I came to terms with the itchiness and the allergy meds that my mother religiously reminded me to take every night before bed. Later on, I managed to come up with defense mechanisms to avoid the horror of sensing the eye-gouging effect that closed in on me as a result of seeing the US occupation army vehicles and weapons of everywhere.



The defense mechanisms I created were also illusory. I fought illusion with illusion. Whenever I felt a strong panic attack approaching, I imagined a cold stream of water running through my eyes, cleansing them as water might clean a glass surface from any impurities. This was the only way I could fall asleep at night, only to find my pillow soaked in my own tears the next morning.

I was five years old, and it was time for me to enroll in school in the city of Al-Najaf in Wasit Governorate. After a long journey that included a medical examination and buying registration forms from the street of bookstores, I had to endure a difficult walk through the city streets with my mother, wearing huge sunglasses that covered most of my face. Every now and then, I raised my fingers to adjust my glasses, but they kept sliding down my face. Most of the streets were blocked and filled with convoys of occupation forces, making the journey longer and more challenging than usual.

After I took my exam, I was required to present an official personal photograph for my school document. And so my family quickly mobilized their efforts to instruct me on the matter. My siblings gave me lessons on how not to blink my eyes while taking the

picture, cautioning me to keep my eyes open when the camera flashed its light.

They were making sincere efforts to help me, and I responded with my best behavior to their attempts to teach me. I even practiced with my sister to keep my eyes open for as long as possible. They encouraged me, saying I would make an excellent student, and they asked me to count from one to a hundred. When I reached twenty, they stopped me, offered a reassuring pat on the shoulder, and then returned to emphasizing the importance of keeping my eyes open in front of the photographer's lens.

Their relentless warnings burdened me with a heavy sense of responsibility. Anxiety began to creep in, making me restless. My mother accompanied me to the photographer's studio, and as I tightly clutched her hand, she could feel the unusual warmth of my own hand. She asked me if I was feeling sick, but I told her I was just fine.

Due to the presence of occupation vehicles and military checkpoints that sealed most of the city's streets, we were forced to take the lengthy school street to reach the photographer's studio. This street stretched endlessly and at its end was a school that the occupation had turned into an army base. Military vehicles and armored Humvees were scattered alongside the road, and helicopter blades were visible beyond the school's low fence.

The school fence was lined with barbed wire. Every few meters, there were more piles of sharp, piercing wires. The occupation soldiers used these wires to mark the allowed walking path and prohibit vehicular movement. Soldiers were scattered in the area, with knives attached to their military uniforms and their weapons aimed at passersby.

I came to terms with the itchiness and the allergy meds that my mother religiously reminded me to take every night before bed. Later on, I managed to come up with defense mechanisms to avoid the horror of feeling the eye-gouging effect that closed in on me as a result of seeing the US occupation army vehicles and weapons of everywhere.

At the street's entrance, my mother removed my sunglasses to avoid arousing any suspicion among the soldiers. I firmly shut my eyes and tightened my grip on my mother's hand. We started walking, and I began counting silently from one to one hundred. However, midway through, I stumbled and hit the ground in pain. My mouth filled with dirt, and I scraped a small piece of skin under one of my eyes, resulting in a minor bleeding. I managed to hold back my tears, but I was in real pain. My mother wiped away the dirt and cleaned me up, then we continued walking along a path that my eyes vehemently despised.

It was the first year of the occupation. In that atmosphere filled with the smoke of bombings and the fumes of fires, even the healthiest of eyes suffered. What, then, could be expected of eyes as delicate and susceptible as mine? Everything around me seemed to pave the way toward my impending blindness: the doctor's awkward questions and his clinic's painful lighting, pollen dust mixed with toxic gases, the sharp blades of knives pointing at me at garage stalls and shops, the harsh sun and its searing rays piercing through layers of my eyes' aching membranes, the suffocating military color palette wherever I turned... And, finally, there was the school fence, strangled by barbed wire much like our own lives were.



Despite all that, I had to cross that lengthy street, holding my mother's hand, all the way to the photographer's studio. And after that arduous experience, I was still expected to open my eyes wide for a picture that would identify me for the rest of my life.

In the photographer's chair, at last, I found myself facing a storm of cold air conditioner wind-blades blowing at me. The photographer, his cigarette dangling from his lips even as he spoke, asked me to hold my chin up and stare at the camera. I straightened my back and opened my eyes wide, but at that moment, I was without my sight. Darkness engulfed me, sharp blades cut through my retina and caused a terribly intense itch. It was as if my eyes were being punished. I held my breath through the torment until I finally heard the sound of the camera click. The photographer chuckled and told me

that the flash light wouldn't hurt me: "It's just a picture, not a needle." Little did he know that everything around me had the effect of eye-pricking needles.

Due to the presence of occupation vehicles and military checkpoints that sealed most of the city's streets, we were forced to take the lengthy school street to reach the photographer's studio. This street stretched endlessly and at its end was a school that the occupation had turned into an army base. Military vehicles and armored Humvees were scattered alongside the road, and helicopter blades were visible beyond the school's low fence.

My photograph was finally developed. It showed a child with a small scar, his eyes bulging in a manner that would make any onlookers laugh. However, the laughter couldn't alter the reality that it was a picture of a miserable child of war, his gaze seemingly mummified, his vision impaired. To this day, sharp objects continue to scar my vision, and every camera click carries with it a stern warning: "Open your eyes as wide as you can."

***Text and collages by Mobeen Al-Khashani**



Serwan Baran - Iraq

We Waited for “The Matrix” to Fill Our World with Justice

Amani Al-Hassan

Journalist from Iraq

Translated by **Sabry Zaki**

Everything seemed to come to a halt in the period leading up to the US occupation of Iraq in April 2003. Everyday life, educational institutions, and government offices all came to a standstill, almost as if a child had hit the pause button during a particularly terrifying scene in a movie.

My aunt used to stretch her little blanket which barely fit our tiny bodies, trying to cover all eight of us - her nieces and nephews. It was sometime between the end of March and the beginning of April 2003. Explosions flashed with intensity and snuck under the small blanket with us, as my aunt tried to lighten the mood by asking us to count the number of light flashes with each “boom”. Sometimes, she told us to smile, because God was taking a group photo of us and we had to look good so we could cherish the moment later.

Despite her frailty due to illness and pregnancy, her mere presence was enough to dispel our fears. With her little arms and gentle voice, she turned the chaos of bullets and explosions into a game that gave us some comfort. It was thanks to her that we were able to, for the most part, survive the ordeal.

Before the invasion

Everything seemed to come to a halt in the period leading up to the US occupation of Iraq in April 2003. Everyday life, educational institutions, and government offices all came to a standstill, almost as if a child had hit the pause button during a particularly terrifying scene in a movie.

“Vacate your homes immediately,” they instructed us via loudspeakers. Some people sought refuge in distant villages such as Hadd Mazyad, Shahraban, and Al-Sawa'id, where multiple families crowded into one house. Those without access to alternative shelter took a risk and stayed put.

I was just a few days over six years old when Baqubah, the capital city of the Diyala Governorate, was struck with fear and chaos. The “Baathist comrades” had already started building military barracks, digging trenches, and strategically placing sandbags and weapons. They forced the young men in the residential neighborhoods to take up arms, and the streets teemed with soldiers clad in olive uniforms. They placed machine guns and medium weapons on the rooftops of factories and government buildings, while we, the people, became human shields.

Adults could not stop talking about the different characteristics of various weapons, so I memorized the names of every firearm and learned their functions and specifications.

Upon hearing that the Baath Party mandated the enlistment of all individuals 15 and older, many youths who had previously gathered on the streets quickly dispersed. Some even said their final goodbyes to their loved ones, while mothers wept and

wailed. The scars of Saddam's past wars on the Iraqis were still far from healed.

Later, it became clear that the purported decision was merely a rumor orchestrated by the "comrades" to smuggle certain Baath Party officials to the Saladin Governorate. Notably, among those individuals was the Iraqi scientist Huda Salih Mahdi Ammash¹, famously known as "Mrs. Anthrax" by the US occupation forces.

During the occupation, the residents of Iraq's southern regions, who fought the battles against the US forces, often derisively referred to Diyala as the "white chicken" due to its perceived weakness and tendency to surrender easily. They also gave this derogatory label to other governorates, including Wasit, Samawa, and various parts of larger cities that coexisted with the US troops.

But there were other reasons for our anxiousness than the rumors about compulsory military service. As the ship of our nation navigated towards danger, we listened intently to the passionate orations declaring that Saddam "would not surrender Iraq until it was a pile of dust." At that moment, we realized that our fate was going to be a mixture of blood and dirt that that Saddam would leave for the Americans.

Diyala, the white chicken

The US forces initiated their attack on our governorate with a series of missile strikes. The initial target was the intelligence bureau in the New Baqubah area, followed by a military facility and Buhaira Garage, then Saad Camp near our home.

Diyala did not resist.

Despite the intense displays of bravado from the "comrades" before the arrival of US forces, their efforts proved to be in vain. The occupying troops took hold of the entire area in no more than two days.

During the occupation, the residents of Iraq's southern regions, who fought the battles against the US forces, often derisively referred to Diyala as the "white chicken" due to its perceived weakness and tendency to surrender easily. They also gave this derogatory label to other governorates, including Wasit, Samawa, and various parts of larger cities that coexisted with the US troops.

All Diyala wanted, in that tumultuous time, was to make it through the havoc without

¹ Huda Salih Mahdi Ammash, an Iraqi scientist, was arrested in May 2003 by the US occupation forces on charges of involvement in the revival of the Iraqi nuclear program. She was released in 2005.

losing any of its citizens. Despite suffering heavy casualties, the city strived to prevent further harm from befalling its people. However, the arrival of US troops only exacerbated the fear and unease felt by residents living near Saad Camp in Baqubah, situated in the heart of the Diyala Governorate. The tragedy had a profound impact, leaving the citizens of Diyala to grapple with the aftermath.

During that period, rumors circulated that the camp stored missiles, weapons of mass destruction, and nuclear bombs. There were also whispers that it was haunted by jinn and goblins. So the Americans bombed the place to purify it and us from its many curses.

“Vacate your homes immediately,” they instructed us via loudspeakers. Some people sought refuge in distant villages such as Hadd Mazyad, Shahraban, and Al-Sawa’id, where multiple families crowded into one house. Those without access to alternative shelter took a risk and stayed put.

Initially, my family of eleven sought refuge in Hadd Mazyad, a village 15 kilometers away from home. Despite the distance, we could still hear the sounds of detonations in the air.

Amidst testing times, we were forced to grow up quickly and leave our childhood behind. We learned to tune out the deafening sounds of explosions and take safety measures, such as replacing our windowpanes with bags of dirt to avoid being struck by shrapnel in the event of a blast. In the absence of modern amenities, my siblings and I had to embark on long treks to remote areas to collect firewood for our mother, who relied on a neighbor’s clay oven to bake for us.

To us, children, the time when we sought refuge with our families in the villages was our fondest memory of that period. We were too young to fully comprehend the events unfolding around us, unlike the adults who were preoccupied with the Al-Alam² channel’s broadcasts, which told them about the US army’s strength and its mission to topple the Iraqi regime. It was a beautiful time, nonetheless, for us, because all we cared about was that we got to spend time together while schools were closed, and our playtime extended well into the wee hours of the morning.

After nearly a month of traveling between villages, we eventually had to make the tough call to head back home. Our family’s finances were running low, and we couldn’t

² A news television channel in Iran that broadcasts in Arabic.

afford to keep going. We were left with two options: risking getting caught in one of the frequent bombings or waiting in the villages until the weapon depots were cleared.

The complete guide to survival

Amidst testing times, we were forced to grow up quickly and leave our childhood behind. Every day was a struggle for survival. We learned to tune out the deafening sounds of explosions and take safety measures, such as replacing our windowpanes with bags of dirt to avoid being struck by shrapnel in the event of a blast. In the absence of modern amenities, we had no choice but to draw on the wisdom of our forebears, reverting to age-old methods to get by. My siblings and I had to embark on long treks to remote areas to collect firewood for our mother, who relied on a neighbor's clay oven to bake for us.

My siblings were braver than I, as they would venture out to the camp in broad daylight to retrieve the wooden crates and bring them home to be cut into smaller pieces. These green crates were of immense worth as they were crafted from the most exquisite wood and spared us the tedious task of scouring for twigs and cartons to use for fire. Our meals were prepared atop a rudimentary fire constructed by arranging “tabouk” bricks³ in a circular formation and igniting the wood underneath the cooking pot.

Many joined jihadist movements that emerged from Baathist remnant cells and new armed groups. The US army launched a campaign of arbitrary arrests as a response, which led to the arrest of teenagers and young men in hastily constructed detention centers. Many of these youths entered prison while still on the fence regarding joining jihadists, but they left it either closer to extremist ideologies or completely broken.

Beside collecting firewood, my favorite leisure time activity was running away to play a game where I aimed to hit US army tanks with stones. My peers and I were deeply influenced by the tragic death of the Palestinian child, Muhammad al-Durrah, and we wanted to resist, too, by throwing stones. However, the sight of a tank's machine gun turning towards me made me acutely aware of my vulnerability and insignificance.

Before each blast, we would witness eerie green lights illuminating the sky and a fighter aircraft, which we dubbed “the ghost”, hovering above our houses. Amid these signals, the bloodcurdling screams of innocent children echoed throughout the area, filling us

³ A kind of clay brick traditionally used in Iraqi architecture.

with fear. Nevertheless, my aunt's calming voice continued to fill our home, as we grew more cautious and knowledgeable about how to survive the relentless bombings. The explosions shattered our windows, prompting us to peer through the remaining fragments to catch a glimpse of the aircrafts. We would venture outside and gather in the middle of our garden, seeking refuge under my aunt's "abaya".

Escaping the gallows

Everyone in the house was running in circles. My father, tears of joy running down his face, walked room to room yelling out "Saddam has fallen! The regime has fallen!" My mother and aunt erupted in cheers, and the elders shed tears of joy. We, children, didn't understand what was happening until my uncle arrived a couple of days later. He sat down and explained in a calm voice: "we are going to the gallows, now that the Americans have come to liberate us."

My father, uncle, and cousins had all been part of the opposition against Saddam's regime for many years - something we had only learned later, as the family had never discussed the matter in our presence during Saddam's time, when "walls had ears". My uncle returned home happy with the victory of his lifelong cause against the dictator's regime, but his joy was short-lived. The very next day, he was walking in his son's funeral, a young man who was killed by the Baathists with thirty shots to the head.

Our house in troubled times

During that chaotic period, many individuals raided and looted government buildings, refugee camps, financial institutions, and grocery stores. The looting was either their way to assert the public's rights or an assault triggered by their anger towards the Baath regime. The belief was that anything owned by the state was rightfully the property of the citizens and anything owned by Saddam Hussein should belong to the people. In some instances, individuals even went as far as taking mattresses and blankets from hospital beds.

As new markets for arms trade emerged, so did random shootings and conflicts. In Baqubah, a feud between two gangs left three people dead. Following this, a religious fatwa was issued, prohibiting theft and declaring all looted items as "haram", and beseeching people to return what had been taken. Mosques opened their doors, not for worshippers, but to receive stolen items.

Before the fatwa, my brother had taken advantage of the chaos to seize a Kalashnikov.

Upon his return, a confrontation ensued between him and my father, as my father demanded that my brother surrender the weapon. Despite their opposition to the Baath regime, many people like my father were steadfast in their belief that theft was not the answer. My father was not against the state itself, but rather the oppressive Baath that had taken control.

Before each explosion, we would witness eerie green lights illuminating the sky and a fighter aircraft, which we dubbed “the ghost”, hovering above our houses. My aunt’s calming voice continued to fill our home, as we grew more knowledgeable about how to survive the relentless bombings. The explosions shattered our windows, prompting us to peer through the remaining fragments to catch a glimpse of the aircrafts. We would venture outside and gather in the middle of our garden, seeking refuge under my aunt’s “abaya”.

My father, along with others who shared his mentality, had faith that Iraq would change for the better. They believed this especially after the war ended in two months, imports began to flow and new goods entered the country. Furthermore, employees’ salaries were being paid in US dollars instead of the Iraqi dinar. It was a big relief for many Iraqis to see the image of “that American old man” on the US dollar banknotes, instead of Saddam’s face on the Iraqi currency.

“The Matrix” in our house

As young children, we were extremely excited about the arrival of color television and CDs. Every Thursday night, we rented some CDs and gathered to watch our favorite hero on the small screen. We were blown away by the hero’s strength as he effortlessly blocked all the gunshots with his bare hands.

My younger brother used to say that we needed The Matrix hero in Iraq to shield us from the constant gunfire. We had become well aware of what shots can do to person’s body, so we all shared his sentiment, except for my father, who laughed heartily at the naivety of our innocent wishes.

As the hero of The Matrix fought the villains on TV, there were real plans in place to turn us, children, into soldiers of the future and convince us that fighting against evil was our duty.

During that period, religious centers and mosques emerged that encouraged young children to memorize the holy Quran and offered them rewards for their dedication.

Intrigued by the buzz among my peers, I resolved to look into the matter. It felt like a recruitment drive, as the instructor expounded on the significance of prayer, fasting, and combating non-believers. I was taught how to recite Quranic verses and was handed a hijab to wear. When I came home from classes, I discussed my choices with my father, who left the choice to me. It did not take me long, though, to decide against continuing with those classes. I know now that those who had stayed ended up joining the Al-Qaeda in 2006.

Our society was gripped with fear and apprehension as extremist religious ideologies dominated the atmosphere. Diyala had progressed from the phase of the “chicken” to this new state of extremism. The sounds of religious recordings and Quran recitations flooded the streets, and many mosques and centers started attracting children and teenagers, brainwashing them with jihadist notions. Both Shiite and Sunni groups appeared to employ the same methodologies.

Children were the main target. They were seen as easy to manipulate, like chess pieces on a board. The ideas were spread through loudspeakers on the minarets of mosques, while many parents did their best to cleanse their children’s ears and minds of any unwanted influence at the end of the day.

My younger brother often wished the Matrix hero could come to Iraq to shield us from the constant sound of gunfire. As the hero fought against the villains on TV, there were real plans in place to turn us, children, into soldiers of the future and convince us that fighting against evil was our duty.

Many of us were influenced by the overwhelming discourse and joined jihadist movements that emerged from Baathist remnant cells and new armed groups like the 1920s Revolution Brigades and the Naqshbandi Movement, among others.

The US army launched a campaign of arbitrary arrests as a response, which led to the detention of teenagers and young men in hastily constructed detention centers. Many of these young persons entered prison while still on the fence regarding joining the jihadists, and came out of prison either much closer to extremist ideologies or weakened and completely broken.

Amid all these horrors, my aunt’s voice and words continued to offer us protection and a sense of safety, even though the war took the biggest toll on her. The child in her womb died due to her severe panic attacks, and shortly after, she joined him.

لائحة دفاتر «السفير العربي»

2018

- الاقتصاد الموازي: ما الذي تنتجه هذه المنظومة ؟
- الهجرات: العالم يسيل - قصص العالقين في دول العبور
- الهجرات: العالم يسيل - قصص الحرّاقة
- اليسار في المنطقة العربية وسؤال مكامن العطب - دراسة حالات

2019

- مسألة الأرض - مصر، السودان، تونس، الجزائر والمغرب
- إدارة الموارد الطبيعية: نهب وتبديد وزبائنية وقلة كفاءة - مصر، الجزائر، تونس، المغرب، السودان وموريتانيا
- إشكاليات في مقارنة دراسة العشوائيات - مصر، الجزائر، السودان، اليمن، تونس، المغرب والعراق
- تأنيث العمل الهش - مصر، الجزائر، السودان، المغرب وتونس

2020

- 2019: انتفاضات مبتورة النتائج، السودان، العراق، الجزائر ولبنان
- انتفاضات 2019: ابداع تأسيسي

2021

- مجابهة كورونا في المنطقة العربية: الفصل الأول
- مواجهة كورونا وفداحة إصاباته ليست تقنية أو طبية فحسب
- اللقاحات ما بين التباهي الفج والظلم المعيب
- التفاوت: مكانة النساء بين الاعتقاد الشائع والسائد، وبين الواقع والوقائع

2022

- مبادرات النساء: قدرات وعازمات
- سيرورات معارك النساء الكبرى
- التغيّر المناخي: لقد آن الأوان!
- هل مخططات مواجهة التغير المناخي صحيحة وكافية؟

2023

- كرة القدم: لماذا تهّمنا؟
- عشرون عاماً على الحرب على العراق

Assafir Al-Arabi Folders

2018

- Informal Economy: What Does this System Produce
- Migrations: The World is Flowing - Stories of those caught in the transit countries
- Migrations: The World is Flowing - Stories of the borders burners (Harraga)
- The Left in The Arab Region and The Questions of Deficiencies - Case Studies

2019

- The Question of Land in Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco
- Problematics in the Approach to Studying Informal Settlements
- Natural Resource Management: Looting, Waste, Clientelism, and Incompetence
- The Feminization of Precarious Labour

2020

- The 2019 Major Uprisings: Severed Outcomes
- The 2019 Uprisings: A Constituent Creativity

2021

- Confronting Corona in The Arab Region: Act one
- Covid-19 Response: More than just a technical-medical issue
- Vaccines: Between Blunt Ostentation and Shameful Injustice
- Disparity: The Status of Women Between Prevalent Beliefs and Reality

2022

- Capable and Determined: Women Take Initiative
- Women's Major Battles: And Still They Fight
- Climate Change: It's about time!
- Are Climate Action Plans Effective and Sufficient?

2023

- Why Does Football Matter to Us?
- The War on Iraq Two Decades On

This folder underscores the enduring impact of the war on Iraq, as its aftershocks persist and continue to interact and reverberate, like a bouncing bomb that strikes multiple times over, each time regenerating new crises and situations - first in the plundered and ravaged Iraq, then in its neighboring region, and ultimately in the world at large.

The war on Iraq was, indeed, a global event, and it remains one!

The first text, written by Mizar Kemal, addresses Iraq itself and its subsequent devastation. Raja Al-Khalidi then explores how this devastation affected the Palestinian struggle for liberation. Mona Sleem examines the impact of the Iraqi issue on Egypt, and how it contributed to circumstances which eventually led to the January 2011 revolution. Omar Benderra reflects on the lessons learned by Algeria, a nation with a longstanding revolutionary tradition, namely that oppressive regimes constitute the shortest route to weakening societies and stifling their capacity to resist. Samir Aita sheds light on the state of turmoil that overcame Syria following the “fall” of Iraq. Finally, in collaboration with Jummar, the young Iraqi media platform whose founders emerged from Assafir Al-Arabi, we present three texts that provide living testimonies from Iraqis who witnessed the event. The first is by Dima Yassine, who was a young woman coming of age at the time of the invasion. The second is by Mobeen Al-Khashani, who was a five-year-old child witnessing the bewildering omnipresence of US weapons around him, which metaphorically gouged his already ailing eyes. Lastly, Amani Al-Hassan, who was only six during the war, reflects on how she had coped with and endured the horrors of that unforgettable event.

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