

Activist's Memoir of the Iraq War: It Goes Back to 1990

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“Liberators, leaders, wise men ... all I ask of you is a miracle: Just for you to know how to say goodbye, Just a miracle: a goodbye.”
— `Ali Ahmad Sa`id (Adonis), Victims of a Map

After five years of slaughter and destruction at the hands of the invasion led by the US and Britain (perpetrators of this “supreme international crime,” as defined by the Nuremberg Principles), Amnesty International has described Iraq as in a state of “carnage and despair.” In modern history, this act of near-unequalled criminality is in danger of eclipsing earlier wickednesses at the hands of these two countries.

Life stopped for the majority of Iraqis when the most draconian embargo ever administered by the UN was imposed on Iraq on Hiroshima Day, 1990. Ostensibly devised to prevail on Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait, the embargo grounded on for 13 years until the 2003 invasion. Iraq had imported — broadly — 70 percent of everything, ironically upon the advice of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

“The Price Is Worth It”

Withdrawal from Kuwait generated further conditions. Under US and UK pressure on the UN, sanctions became the war of the moving-goal posts. The real aim became clear when former president Bill Clinton announced that sanctions would never be lifted until President Saddam Hussein was no longer in power. Legalities were abandoned long before blatant lies, dodgy dossiers, and President George W. Bush’s “crusade” of March 2003.

By 1991, less than a year after the imposition of the embargo, a threefold increase in under-five mortality was recorded. By 1995, a fivefold increase was recorded. The same year, wasting and stunting in children were comparable to those in poverty-stricken Mali. Iraq’s children, however, were dying, lying, and limping atop the second largest oil reserves on earth (sales and supervision are now administered by the UN).

The then top administrator of the world organization in Iraq told me on one visit that the UN’s involvement in this silent infanticide was more financially worth to the world body than all its other commitments across the globe combined. Killing kids had become a nice little

earner for the organization whose founding vow was “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.”

Iraq’s domestic water system had been deliberately targeted upon orders from the US Central Command in the 1991 war, according to the Interfaith Network of Concern for the People of Iraq and Citizens Concerned for the People of Iraq (1). Spare parts were denied by the Security Council’s sanctions committee. Nearly eradicated cholera and typhoid returned, with all waterborne diseases spiraling. Imported medications were blocked, with those allowed shamefully inadequate or too late for many. In spite of their extraordinary ingenuity, the Iraqis slid from the impossible to the apocalyptic.

On the TV program 60 Minutes (May 12, 1996), when it was pointed out to Madeleine Albright, then US ambassador to the UN, that “half a million people have died ... more than at Hiroshima,” she replied that it was the price. “We think the price is worth it,” she said, referring to the price to rid the Iraqis of their leader. The “sovereignty and territorial integrity” of the country governed by this leader were guaranteed by the same UN, for which Albright was a senior bureaucrat — an ambassador of Jewish background ironically endorsing a silent holocaust.

Pitifully few visitors travelled to Iraq, threatened with imprisonment and draconian fines if they were US citizens, especially if they took life-saving medication or equipment with them. Britain, as ever, was following with similar threats if medications and even copies of medical-specialty journals and publications were involved. Toys, books, stationary, and blackboards were also vetoed, along with even women’s sanitary appliances. Anything taken for granted in a civil society fell foul of the sanctions committee.

Yasmin Failed UN Resolutions

Would Albright have felt the same if she had watched the mother of seven-year-old Yasmin? This mother ran screaming from a hospital’s ward across a busy road, aware only of her agony at the death of her seven-year-old daughter moments before. Yasmin, named for the sweet-scented yellow flower, had developed a minor heart ailment when she was two. As soon as the embargo was lifted, the doctors said the ailment would be fixed and Yasmin’s life would be normal; there was nothing to fear.

Five years later, the minor ailment had become major and Yasmin died as I walked into the ward with an Iraqi friend — another child sacrifice to the UN’s venom. “I hope, before she died, they told her that she had failed to comply with the United Nations’ resolutions,” said my friend, with bitter fury.

Ali Lazam was a three-year-old who stayed in another hospital. On another visit, he had a five-year-old friend in the ward. Both were suffering from acute myeloid leukemia. They were covered with bruises and capillaries bleeding under the skin. They were bleeding internally. Lazam lay rigid, his eyes filled with unshed tears. There was no medication, no pain-killer, nothing. In horror, I realized that his unshed tears and rigid body were because, in his intractable pain, he had taught himself not to cry — it would wrack his little body further.

Leaving, I bent to stroke the face of the five-year-old, puffy with edema, just to realize that his agony was equally tangible. Responding to affection, he clutched my hand in a gesture of children everywhere. It was an act that must have pained beyond belief. I left the ward,

leaned against a wall, and as I wrote at the time I knew that it was actually possible to die of shame.

Families sold their all to survive or to try to provide their sick with black-marketed medicines, which could not be tested for safety. Laboratory equipment had long collapsed. Blood banks also rarely existed. The lack of laboratory equipment, along with sporadic electricity, ruined the blood products and limited pharmaceutical stocks, which need refrigeration.

In Iraq, which once had paramount education and literacy estimated at 94 percent in 1990, children begged and became shoeshine boys. They became items sold on the streets instead of students at school. And when there was nothing left to sell, whole families committed suicide.

The US and Britain also routinely (and illegally) bombed the country throughout the 13-year embargo, terrorizing even further this “most traumatized child population on earth,” according to experts.

Then, as the millennium approached, the national psyche underwent a near-miraculous metamorphosis. Baghdad airport, and shortly afterwards those of Basra and Mosul, reopened. Despite the embargo and the shortages, they had quietly and determinedly been rebuilt bit by bit from the rubble of their 1991 destruction. If anything had illustrated Iraq’s isolation, it was to wander year after year through the area of Baghdad where the closed airline offices were. Peering through the security grills, piles of airline schedule manuals still lay on now dusty desks. All were dated August 1990.

With the airports’ opening, it was as if the national psyche regenerated. Shops were repainted, windows glistened, and sidewalks washed at dawn. Evening pavement life flourished again; board games were played with animatedly clicking pieces, and tiny glasses of aromatic tea were served. Iraqi-style fast-food aromas wafted through the streets, cooked on improvised stoves in the warm air. Families socialized in parks and squares as the fountains danced and the illuminations reflected on the great rivers again. Baghdad glowed once more for sporadic hours like a city of light. It seemed a decade-long collective depression had lifted.

“There are tears in our eyes every time a plane lands,” said a friend. “For us the embargo is over” was the refrain throughout Iraq, as the embargo did crumble. Goods were again seen, and new businesses grew. Only a few could afford to buy, but everywhere was regeneration. Galleries of superb local sculpture and paintings flourished, and evocative buildings sprang up in traditional, lovingly fashioned materials. Hope had returned.

Then Came Liberation

Threats from America and Britain, though, were growing, and from early 2000, the Iraqis knew only a miracle would avert a massive bombardment or worse. The lies justifying this from the Bush administration and Blair government keep the dock at the International Criminal Court in the Hague occupied for decades to come.

I was in a small hotel on the corniche of Mosul on February 5, 2003, when Gen. Colin Powell presented his stunning untruths justifying the invasion to the UN, where he asserted, “My colleagues, every statement I make today is backed up by sources — solid sources. These

are not assertions. What we're giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence."

The hotel staff and guests were glued to the TV. When Powell finished, we all gazed at each other, speechless, knowing Iraq had nothing with which to defend herself. Nowhere was the country's vulnerability more evident than on the Baghdad-Mosul road, where America and Britain had bombed military bases to rubble and flattened every last tank and military vehicle over the preceding years. There was no air force.

The following month, "Shock and Awe" decimated the land and people, and according to Gen. Mark Kimmitt, it was "not productive to count" the Iraqi deaths. The British then entered Basra, with the Crusaders (St. George) flag flying on their tanks and vehicles. Shortly afterwards, photographs of British soldiers torturing and abusing Iraqis emerged.

The "liberation" has cost 1.25 million lives in five years, according to polls by the respected Oxford Research Bureau (ORB) and by Bloomberg School of Public Health at John Hopkins University. There are an estimated five million orphans, up to two million widows, and four million displaced since March 20, 2003. The country's legitimate president, his sons, and grandson were murdered by the American troops. Colleagues have been lynched and others of the government held, while others have disappeared.

Ailing former deputy prime minister Tareq Aziz was held untried, and the international law lay trampled in the dust of Mesopotamia. An entire civil society has been destroyed, with the very history of humanity itself, in the "cradle of civilization."

The illegal immigrants inhabiting Iraq have introduced the Abu Ghraib torture chambers to the world, a stigma that should haunt America and the Bush Administration for all time. Now, there are further allegations of prisoners packed in ice and forced in water-filled garbage cans. Allegedly, incinerated bones have also been found at this monument, to America's shame. One wonders what it might be like in the other eleven Iraqi prisons under the Americans' deviant command.

The Same Old Lies

The disaster of America's murderous campaign in Vietnam is frequently compared to that in Iraq. Lately, the fortieth anniversary of another American atrocity has been commemorated: the massacre at My Lai. The then Major Powell lied about that too, and his and others' statements from Vietnam could come straight from the Pentagon's guide to quotes on Iraq.

Powell wrote after My Lai that the soldiers were instilled with the importance of treating the Vietnamese with courtesy. The Vietnamese, he said, were truly appreciative of the many civic projects of improvement undertaken by the Americans. He said, "We occasionally rebuild a school, hospital, facility we had blown to bits."

Powell was sanguine about "isolated cases of mistreatment of civilians and POWS [prisoners of war]." According to him, "[This] by no means reflects the general attitude throughout the division Relations between American soldiers and the Vietnamese people are excellent." (2) Atrocities, added the army secretary, were an "aberration."

As Fallujah, Tal Afar, Haditha, Baqubah, Najav, and numerous towns, the massacres never affected community relations. The victims were clearly the "grateful dead." The late, great war correspondent Martha Gellhorn saw it differently: "Hearts and minds," she wrote from

Vietnam, “after all, live in bodies.” (3)

Random slaughters were an “aberration,” “tragic events,” and “wholly unrepresentative of the manner in which our forces conduct military operations in Vietnam,” and then as now, when word of the unspeakable barbarity of what happened at My Lai surfaced, “America focused on the nation’s regret on what the war had done to its boys almost to the exclusion of what its boys had done to the Vietnamese.” (4)

In fact, America’s boys regarded themselves as “there to kill dinks,” just as in Iraq where they say they are there to kill “sand niggers,” “rag heads,” and “hajjis.” It is also from Iraq where they post photographs of dead Iraqis on pornographic sites in exchange for access.

“The Americans are destroying everything,” said a Vietnamese officer, “They get one shot from one village and they destroy it.” (5) Then, as now, the standards required for joining the army were dropped so low in standard intelligence tests that those recruited would have been excluded in normal circumstances.

Even the delusional platitudes were the same. As Vietnam descended into disaster, Gen. William Westmoreland announced “a new phase.” “we have reached an important point where the end begins to come into view,” (6) he said. Marking the fifth anniversary of the unmitigated disaster Operation Iraqi Liberation (OIL), President Bush said, “the successes we are seeing in Iraq are undeniable.”

“Do Bush and Blair want all our children as child sacrifices?” a father asked me as he watched his dying 10-year-old son, days before the war. Five years on, the answer is inescapable. And that symbol of freedom and hope, Baghdad International Airport, is now a vast prison — a metaphor for all of “liberated” Iraq.

NOTES

1 . *Interfaith Network of Concern for the People of Iraq and Citizens Concerned for the People of Iraq*. “ [On Destroying Civilian Infrastructure During the Gulf War and Consequences for the Civilian Population](#) .” Seattle Community Network. 12 Jan. 2003. Accessed 25 Mar. 2008.

2. *Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, Four Hours in My Lai : A War Crime and Its Aftermath*, (Penguin, 1993).

3. *Ibid*.

4. *Ibid*.

5. *Louis A. Wiesner, Victims and Survivors: Displaced Persons and Other War Victims in Vietnam, 1954–1975* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988).

6. *Daniel C. Hallin, The “uncensored War”: The Media and Vietnam*, (Oxford University Press US, 1986).

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