

Biopiracy and GMOs: The Fate of Iraq's Agriculture

By [Ghali Hassan](#)

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While the Iraqi people are struggling to end the U.S. military Occupation and its associated violence, the fate of their food sources and agricultural heritage is being looted behind closed doors. Unless the colonisation of Iraq ends, the U.S. Occupation of Iraq will continue to have lasting and disastrous effects on Iraq's economy and Iraq's ability to feed its people.

Iraq is home to the oldest agricultural traditions in the world. Historical, genetic and archaeological evidence, including radiocarbon dating of carbon-containing materials at the site, show that the Fertile Crescent, including modern Iraq, was the centre of domestication for a remarkable array of today's primary agricultural crops and livestock animals. Wheat, barley, rye, lentils, sheep, goats, and pigs were all originally brought under human control around 8000 BCE. Iraq is where wild wheat was once originated and many of its cereal varieties have been exported and adapted worldwide. [1] The beginning of agriculture led inexorably to the development of human civilization. [2]

Since then, the inhabitants of Mesopotamia have used informal seed supply systems to plant crops, suited to their particular environment. The saving and sharing of seeds in Iraq has always been a largely informal matter. Local varieties of grain and legumes have been adapted to local conditions over the millennia. While much has changed in the ensuing millennia, agriculture remains an essential part of Iraq's heritage. Despite extreme aridity, characterised by low rainfalls and soil salinity, Iraq had a world standard agricultural sector producing good quality food for generations.

According to the Rome-based UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), 97 percent of Iraqi farmers in 2002 still used saved seed from their own stocks from last year's harvest, or purchased from local markets. This despite the criminal sanctions — maintained by the U.S. and Britain for dubious reasons — which destroyed Iraq's agricultural sector. The 1997 FAO report found that "Crop yields . . . remain low due to poor land preparation as a result of lack of machinery, low use of inputs, deteriorating soil quality and irrigation facilities' and the animal population has declined steeply due to severe shortages of feed and vaccines during the embargo years."

Unlike other Middle Eastern countries, Iraq has both water and oil. In addition, Iraq has one of the most educated societies in the region. Iraq was once self-sufficient in agriculture and was also the world's number one exporter of dates. About 27 percent of Iraq's total land area is suitable for cultivation, over half of which is rain-fed while the balance is irrigable. Wheat, barley, and chickpeas are the primary staple crops, and traditionally wheat has been the most important crop in the country. Prior to the U.S. war on Iraq, average annual harvests were 1.4 million tonnes for cereals, 400,000 tonnes for roots and tubers, and 38,000 tonnes for pulses. [3] The U.S. war and the US-Britain sponsored sanctions have

devastated Iraq's agricultural sector. Only half of the irrigable area is now properly utilised. Food shortages and malnutrition were less of a problem before the war and the criminal sanctions.

After the 1991 U.S. war, Iraq was denied its right to rebuild its war-shattered economy and infrastructure. U.S.-Britain used the criminal sanctions to destroy what was left of Iraq and kill its children. In plain language, the sanctions were used as a vehicle to terrorise Iraqi civilians.

"I went to Iraq in September 1997 to oversee the UN 'oil for food program'. I quickly realized that this humanitarian program was a Band-Aid for a UN sanctions regime that was quite literally killing people. Feeling the moral credibility of the UN was being undermined, and not wishing to be complicit in what I felt was a criminal violation of human rights, I resigned after thirteen months," Denis Halliday, former humanitarian aid coordinator for Iraq, told an audience at Harvard University on 5 November 1998. Mr. Halliday called the sanctions "genocidal," because of the number of Iraqi children killed.

Following the illegal Occupation of Iraq, the suffering of the Iraqi people has increased. A recent report by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), which monitors the distribution of rations, found the majority of the Iraqi population lack the required daily calories to survive and remain healthy. The new WFP Emergency report revealed that "there are significant country-wide shortfalls in rice, sugar and milk and infant formula." It added; "Some governorates continue to report serious shortfalls of nearly every commodity." Another report prepared by UN Human Rights rapporteur, the reputed Swiss professor of Sociology, Mr. Jean Ziegler, reveals that acute malnutrition among Iraqi children between the ages of six months and 5 years has increased from 4% before the invasion to 7.7% since the US invasion of Iraq. And more than a quarter of Iraqi children do not get enough food to eat. Indeed, Mr. Ziegler accused the U.S. and British forces of using food and water as weapons of war in besieged Iraqi cities.

Just before announcing his departure from Iraq and handing "power" to the U.S.-installed band of discredited quislings (the so-called "transfer of [fake] sovereignty"), U.S. proconsul and head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), Paul Bremer issued "100 Orders" to transfer Iraq's economy and legal ownership of Iraqi resources into the private hands of U.S. corporations. Then, to encourage the looting of Iraq's wealth and increase the suffering of the Iraqi people, the Bush administration issued an "executive order" to indemnify not only the corporate looters from prosecution, but also provides protection to soldiers and private security guards committing crimes against Iraqis. A closer examination of these "100 Orders" and U.S. policy in Iraq shows that the war on Iraq had nothing to do with WMD, terrorism, "democracy" and "liberation," but to colonise Iraq and enrich U.S. corporations at the expense of the Iraqi people.

Order 81 deals specifically with Plant Variety Protection (PVP) because it is designed to protect the commercial interests of corporate seed companies. Its aim is to force Iraqi farmers to plant so-called "protected" crop varieties 'defined as new, distinct uniform and stable', and most likely genetically modified. This means Iraqi farmers will have one choice; to buy PVP registered seeds. Order 81 opens the way for patenting (ownership) of plant forms, and facilitates the introduction of genetically modified crops or organisms (GMOs) to Iraq. U.S. agricultural biotechnology corporations, such as Monsanto and Syngenta will be the beneficiaries. [4] Iraqi farmers will be forced to buy their seeds from these corporations.

GMOs will replace the old tradition of breeding closely related plants, and replace them with organisms composed of DNA from an altogether different species, e.g., bacterium genes into corn. In the long run, there won't be a big enough gene pool for genetic viability.

Upon purchasing the patented seeds, farmers must sign the company's technology agreement (Technology User Agreements). This agreement allows the company to control farmers' practices and conduct property investigation. The farmer becomes the slave of the company. Like U.S. farmers, Iraqi farmers will be "harassed for doing what they have always done." For example, Iraqi farmers can be sued by Monsanto, if their non-GMO crops are polluted by GMO crops planted in their vicinity. [5] The health and environmental consequences of GMO crops are still unknown. GMO-based agriculture definitely encourages monoculture and genetic pollution. Moreover, this will further increase the already polluted Iraqi environment as a result of tens of thousands of tons of 'depleted' uranium dust, napalm, chemical weapons, and phosphorous bombs.

Farmers will also be required to buy fertilisers, herbicides and insecticides, against plants disease. Iraqi farmers will be required to pay royalties for the new seeds and they will be forbidden from saving seeds. In other words, Iraqi farmers will become agricultural producers for export, a recipe for the introduction of hunger in Iraq, not unknown in many developing countries. Unless an independent sovereign Iraqi government repeals these edicts, they will override Iraq's original patent law of 1970, which, in accordance with the Iraqi constitution, prohibited private ownership of biological resources.

Furthermore, Order 81 ignores Iraqi farmers' old traditions of saving seeds, and using their knowledge to breed and plant their crops. It also brutally disregards the contributions which Iraqi farmers have made over hundreds of generations to the development of important crops like wheat, barley, dates and pulses. If anybody owns those varieties and their unique virtues, it is the families who bred them, even though nobody has described or characterized them in terms of their genetic makeup. If anything, the new law — in allowing old varieties to be genetically manipulated or otherwise modified and then "registered" — involves the theft of inherited intellectual property, the loss of farmers' freedoms, and the destruction of food sovereignty in Iraq.

Iraqi traditional plant varieties, which were kept in Iraq's gene bank at the town of Abu Ghraib — the town where the Bush administration used the prison to abuse, torture and murder Iraqi prisoners and detainees — may have been looted and lost during the invasion. There is hope that the Syria-based Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) and the affiliated International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA) still holds accessions of several Iraqi varieties in the form of germplasm. Evidence shows that Western "bio-prospectors" have been using indigenous genetic material taken from their traditional owners. [6] It is this kind of looting or "biopiracy" that is contributing to the destruction of farmers in the developing world, because they have lost control of what they sow, grow, reap and eat.

The man who is in charge of dismantling Iraq's agriculture is Daniel Amstutz, formerly an executive of the Cargill Corporation. Cargill is well known for having the reputation of being one the worst violators of the rights and independence of family farmers throughout the world. Amstutz appointment is designed to undermine Iraqi farmers and destroy Iraq's ability to produce food to feed its people. His service has been to advance U.S. agribusiness corporations. [8] For his task, Amstutz will be assisted by no others than Cargill, Monsanto, Dow and Texas A & M's Agriculture Program and its subsidiary the Arizona-based agriculture

research firm, World Wide Wheat Company. All are known to have innately unjust records doing business in developing countries and enslaving farmers there.

According to Focus on the Global South and GRAIN report: "Iraq has the potential to feed its people. But instead of developing this capacity, Washington is shaping the future of Iraq's food and farming to serve the interests of U.S. corporations." [7] The aim of the U.S. is to undermine Iraq's food security, and remove all the contributions Iraqi farmers have made to development of agriculture and important crops like wheat, and barley. [9] Iraq's agriculture will be re-engineered to produce high yields agricultural products for export, and force Iraq to depend on importing food, and on Western "aid."

"If Iraq's new administration truly wanted to re-establish Iraqi agriculture for the benefit of the Iraqi people it would seek out the fruits of their knowledge. It could scour the country for successful farms, and if it miraculously found none could bring over the seeds from ICARDA and use those as the basis of a programme designed to give Iraq back the agriculture it once gave [to] the world," writes Jeremy Smith. [6]

Consistent with agricultural research, what Iraqi farmers need urgently is not GMOs and chemicals, but the opposite. Iraq needs ways to better control pathogens and pests by greater use of natural enemies and crop diversity. As accurately described by Vandana Shiva, "The miracle varieties displaced the diversity of traditionally grown crops, and through the erosion of diversity the new seeds became a mechanism for introducing and fostering pests." Shiva added; "Indigenous varieties are resistant to local pests and diseases. Even if certain diseases occur, some of the strains may be susceptible, but others will have resistance to survive." [10] Diversity of seeds is the best natural defence. Without diversity, plants are very susceptible to disease.

Finally, the U.S. and its allies, including the UN are illegally transforming Iraq's law and the Iraqi economy. The US action in Iraq is in breach of *The Hague Regulations* of 1907, the 1949 *Geneva Conventions* — both ratified by the United States — as well as the U.S. Army's own code of war, as stated in the Army field manual, *The Law of Land Warfare*. Article 43 of *The Hague Regulations* requires that an occupying power "re-establish and insure, as far as possible, public order and safety, while respecting, unless absolutely prevented, the laws in force in the country." Resolution 1483 of the *UN Security Council* issued in May 2003, specifically instructs the occupying powers to follow *The Hague Regulations* and the *Geneva Conventions* in Iraq. In fact, the British attorney general, Lord Goldsmith, was very clear about the illegality of the Iraq's invasion and rightly warned Tony Blair that "the imposition of major structural economic reforms would not be authorized by international law." [11]

Any new Iraqi government is obliged to repeal the illegally enacted Bremer's 100 Orders, including Order 81 and demand that the US pays compensation for the criminal damages that resulted from the Occupation. Iraq will never be sovereign and independent, unless its wealth and resources are protected and the sole property of the Iraqi people. The end of U.S. Occupation and colonisation of Iraq must be total and immediate.

Resources:

[1] GM Free Cymru, "[Iraq's Crop Patent Law: A threat to food Security](#)," Countercurrents.org (03 March 2005).

[2] Jared Diamond, "*Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*," Norton, 1997.

- [3] U.S. Department of Commerce, "[Overview of Key Industry Sectors in Iraq](#)" (July 2004).
- [4] CPA, "Patent, Industrial Design, Undisclosed Information, Integrated Circuits and Plant Variety Law" [Order 81](#) (26 April 2004).
- [5] Centre for Food Safety, "[Monsanto vs. U.S. farmers](#)," percyschmeiser.com (2005).
- [6] Jeremy Smith, "[Order 81](#)," The Ecologist 35(1) (2005). Article available on GlobalResearch.ca.
- [7] Focus on the Global South and GRAIN, "Iraq's New Patent Law: [A declaration of War against Farmers](#)," (November 2000).
- [8] Heather Gray, "[Home Grown Axis of Evil](#)," Counterpunch.org (22 July 2005).
- [9] Ghali Hassan, "[Undermining Iraq's food Security](#)," Newmatilda.com, (23 February 2005).
- [10] Vandana Shiva, "*Biopiracy - the plunder of nature and knowledge*," Between the Lines, 1997.
- [11] Antonia Juhasz, "[The Economic Colonization of Iraq](#): Illegal and Immoral," (8 May 2004); Global Policy Forum, "[International Law Aspects of the Iraq War and Occupation](#)," (2003-2005). The Forum includes several reports related to U.S. war crimes committed against the Iraqi people.

Global Research Contributing Editor Ghali Hassan lives in *Perth, Western Australia*.

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