

Iraq : Are there any Tears Left?

By [Felicity Arbuthnot](#)

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#)

In the Inquisition-scale horrors, inflicted upon Iraq, since a month short of five years ago, the ghosts of the Western-imposed human cull over the previous thirteen years – from life's dawn, to those in its twilight – sometimes, very temporarily, briefly flicker and fade slightly, in the light of another immediate atrocity of enormity. They always return, as they must, in a sight, a scent, a phrase, a 'phone call. Reminders of sins of overwhelming enormity in high places, as Washington and Whitehall bleat about their infantile 'war on terror' and 'rogue states'.

Terror and rogues are by the Potomac and at the Dispatch Box of the 'Mother of Parliaments' – and a telephone call has awoken again, spirits which should forever whisper in the footsteps, scream at the shoulder, of these inhumans, to their graves and beyond. Most of these mass-murderers-by-proxy, of course, profess their devout Christianity, a faith their deeds may have sullied for generations to come.

As the nineties were drawing to a close and Iraqis were already anticipating another massive bombing or invasion, an international symposium was held in Baghdad, on health and the embargo's effects. Whilst eminent international experts presented factual papers, woeful statistics and practical wish lists, inevitably denied by the United Nations Sanctions Committee – which, if implemented, would have slowed or even stemmed some of the tide of human tragedy – it was, as ever, when slipping away, alone, to talk to families, wander streets and hospital wards, that the statistics came to life – or manifested, as always, in preventable deaths.

There were again, the tiny mewings, of small children in intractable pain, denied pain relief – vetoed or delayed by the Sanctions Committee. There was the brief leap of hope, in the eyes of parents, vigilant by a child's bed. A foreigner would, perhaps, be able to wreak a miracle and provide what their precious creation needed. The look, as almost always, died. Even with hard currency, stocks, mostly, simply did not exist. It was the terror of women in labour, wondering if they would give birth to baby barely recognizable as human, due to the depleted uranium and other poisonings, polluting the 'land between two rivers', since the 1991 bombings and topped up by subsequent, ever ongoing ones. Scanners, ultra-sound, being vetoed, there was no way of knowing the state of the baby for certain, until birth.

It was the stories of parents selling all they had, to provide for their children – and when there was nothing left to sell, whole families committing collective suicide. And the children's' fears of the bombings will travel for ever, with anyone who has witnessed – and which will stay with the child and the child within, throughout their lifetime. Some children so traumatized, that during bombings, in the absence of tranquilizers, they had to be held, or even tied, down, to prevent them harming themselves during the grip of their terror.

The journey back to Jordan was another poignant insight. I had planned to travel the 1,200 km journey back to Amman by bus. They were as reasonably serviced as possible in the circumstances, spares available in Jordan, where local garages turned a sympathetic blind eye to the embargo. Iraq's taxis were run on little more than faith and the love of their owner for his four wheeled bread winner. M., however, friend and London based Iraqi businessman, said he had hired a taxi and suggested we share. The drivers needed the money desperately and the Jordan journey fare was a life saver for some months. 'It will break down', I said somewhat shrilly, thinking of the remote road, with no help in a crisis and the vast excess on the air ticket from Amman to London, should we miss the flight.

Looking at the vehicle's tires, I knew this was a really bad idea. They were bald, near down to the canvas - as most cars in Iraq - and in temperatures over a hundred degrees Fahrenheit, disaster seemed inevitable. M., was unshakable, the driver was desperate for the money, was proud, reliable and he had done the deal and could not let him down. I gave in. Four hours out of Baghdad, on the empty six lane highway, desert stretching to the horizon both sides, a tire blew.

We all got out, the driver looking distraught. I, ungraciously, muttered to M., 'I told you so'.

The driver opened the trunk and we peered in. The spare 'tire' was actually through to the canvas. There was no jack. Somehow though, with that Iraqi ingenuity which never ceases to amaze, he changed the wheel with a home-fashioned wrench, raising the car, bit by bit, on bricks balanced under it, one on the other. He adamantly refused help with the lifting. We were his guests. It was incumbent upon him to look after us - and under the dignity, the pride, unmistakably, was the terror that his precious fare might disappear, should another vehicle pass by and we give up, flag it down and take it instead, to the border and on. M., and I looked at each other. We both knew. We would have stayed with him had we had to walk.

Back in the car, as we limped slowly onwards, we sought to ease his embarrassment - and tangible misery. M., talked of the Province we were driving through, the tranquil, Anbar, where, from the main Baghdad-Jordan border highway, the desert seems to stretch until it meets the sky. Anbar is now of course, 'a terrorist stronghold', 'restive', hosts 'Al Qaeda' and 'foreign fighters' - the latter, indeed : in their great, squatted bases, wielding their lethal weapons, missiles and grenades, from before Falluja, to Trebil, on the border.

As M., and the driver talked, the desert came alive. Both seeped in their country's history, they talked of the region's ancient settlements, long gone, of battles, from the Sumer to the Crusades and onwards. They talked of the ancient trade routes, the silk, gold, spices, on camel trains, which had traversed the desert in time's mist, across Anbar. The customs of the Bedouin, whose great ornate tents could often still be seen in the distance, came to life, their homes, carpets, belongings, disappearing with their flocks, seemingly in moments, to spring up again, on newly fertile land, as if by magic, the carpets rehung again on tent interiors, laid on the ground, recreating the familiar warmth, as if they had never moved. Listening, I wondered if there was even a grain of sand which could not have told a story.

As they talked of their great history (including the British finally slinking from their base in Habbaniya, also in the Province now occupied by the U.S.) the driver straightened again. Mesopotamia's griefs and glories have been its historic destiny, its glittering history. Flat tires pale. A couple of hours on, we spotted a garage and pulled in. The driver had

announced he would buy a spare tire, clearly a crippling investment. M., quietly bought him a whole set, securing his precarious income for probably another year. It was then I asked, as we waited for the changes, to divert from his clearly overcome state, whether he had always been a driver.

No, he had been in a different trade until the 1991 war, when all collapsed and he had walked back from Kuwait to Baghdad, over five hundred kilometers, surviving the carnage of the Basra Road, with the remnants of his Unit. It was he, I have written of before, who then said: 'We had no tears left'.

When we arrived in Amman, after a journey of about seventeen hours, rather than waste his precious fare and tips on a bed, he turned the car and headed back for the border, in the spirit of the indomitable, courageous, toughness, of the ghosts of Anbar and Iraq.

Being made of lesser stuff, I persuaded M., to come on a fantasy shopping spree with me, to Amman's Gold Quarter, to briefly escape the images, before I returned to them to write of them. We gazed, in shop after shop, at intricate, impossible, beauty, a world away from the pains of Jordan's geographical neighbor.

As we left, an old man, in worn clothes and shoes, approached, holding out a hand. I put mine in my pocket, seeking some change. M., suddenly extended his. It was an old friend he had momentarily not recognized. His friend had been a senior engineer with Iraqi Airways, seconded to many overseas airlines, his brilliance known throughout the industry. There was no Iraqi Airways now and he had come to Jordan to earn hard currency, to send back to support to his wife and children. He was working as an engineer on elevators, on anything, where his skills could be used, but Jordanians too needed work, having taken in nearly half their population after the displacement of 1991 and things had become very hard.

We were going for a meal, would he join us? We talked for a long time of Iraq's plight and he finally, hesitantly, of his fear of anything happening to him. If it did, what would happen to the wife and children he loved above all. He looked very ill and utterly exhausted, but refused to allow hope to be diminished. That pride could be, was unthinkable.

We left the restaurant as the sun was setting. He thanked us, shook hands and turned to walk up the steep, darkening, narrow street, to his lodgings. I had asked if there was anything I could do for him, a clumsy euphemism for the remaining money I had left. He said no, he would be fine, something would turn up. I had promised to telephone his old contacts, at airlines he had worked for, on my return home.

We watched him fading, bent, as the light fell. Suddenly he turned and walked back to us. He, straightened, took my hand, then : 'You can do something for me. You can adopt my son'. Make him safe, away from the tenuous life of bombs, sanctions, return him some childhood normality. With British Embassies across the Middle East refusing visas to Iraqi passport holders, even for medical treatment to those with potentially life-threatening illnesses, there was no way to give an Iraqi child sanctuary for the embargo's duration. Iraqi children, anyway, belong with Iraqi parents, not subject to situations, dictated by the evils of foreign driven illegalities and political pressures.

This seemingly frail, old, man, was forty seven, his son, then, eleven. Back home, I called the airlines, as promised, but Iraqis, however respected formerly, were now non-people. Unemployable.

Two days ago, M., telephoned. He had been working in the Gulf and had met up with his friend again, now, finally, in better financial times and again working for airlines, still mostly separated from, but able to provide for his family in the manner he would wish to. Except for his son. In a taxi, in Baghdad one day, a stolen childhood, rooted in nothing but fear of bombings, actual bombings, uncertainties, deprivation – in spite of his father’s immense sacrifice and endeavors – caught up. He collapsed and died, a teenager, just, tentatively, entering the threshold of his aspirations.

M., hesitated, then: ‘ My brother, we were born a year apart. He was my dearest, closest friend. He managed to flee, with his family, to Damascus, after the invasion.’ Last November, he, too, simply collapsed and died. Another victim, who will not be added to those of the embargo and invasion. How many countless more?

‘ You know us’, said M., ‘ We do not cry ... I cried for a week. I do not know if I will ever come to terms with losing him.’ M’s., ‘baby’ sister and her family live in Mosul, now the latest city to be razed, raped, desecrated, homes ‘cleared’, families, children, toddlers, assaulted, shot, rounded up. The portal to the sanctuary of their homes blown, or kicked in, during night’s witching hours, when door and walls, should represent all that is safe, not uninvited thugs, wrecking, unaccountable raiders, defiling even the carpets with their boots. M., cannot reach Mosul by telephone or email, communications seemingly cut, reportedly sabotaged. ‘ Perhaps no news is good news ... but if anything happens’ His voice trailed off.

For Iraqi’s – apart from the quisling traitors, laughing all the way to their Geneva, Cayman, or equivalent, bank accounts – are there any tears left? And could I, somehow, have saved just one child?

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