

Iraqi Women Under US Occupation

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“Respect for women... can triumph in the Middle East and beyond!” President George Bush at the UN, September 2002.

Under the US Occupation, the situation of Iraqi women has continued to deteriorate. In addition to torture, sexual violence and rape by U.S. Occupation forces, a great number of Iraqi women and girls are kept locked up in their homes by a very real fear of abduction and criminal abuse. Since the invasion of Iraq, Iraqi women have been denied their human right, including the right to health, education and employment.

Prior to the 1991 U.S. war and the 13 years of the genocidal sanctions, Iraqi women enjoyed unquestionable quality rights to education and health. Iraqi women had the most progressive human rights in the region and Iraqi women were the first Arab women to hold high positions in academia, law, medicine and government. Before the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, Iraqi women made up 40 per cent of the public-sector work force. Men and women received equal pay for work, education and health care were free at all levels.

In addition, Iraq's Constitution with regard to women's rights was the most advanced in the Middle East, if not of the Muslim World. Women rights were enshrined in the Constitution, which was dissolved (together with Iraqi Police and Security) by the U.S. Occupation and replaced by a U.S-crafted “Interim Constitution” that deprives Iraqi women of their rights and dignity. In today's Iraq, crimes and abuse against women are back to the levels before independence from colonial Britain in 1958. The crime of rape was capital offence under Iraq's Constitution.

Since the beginning of the U.S. Occupation, there has been a dramatic increase in sexual assaults and violations of women's rights by U.S. forces in Iraq. Many women have been taken hostage, tortured, and sexually abused. The sexual abuse, rape and torture against Iraqi women is not confined to the Abu Ghraib prison, parroted by the Western media, is “happening all across Iraq”, said Amal Kadhim Swadi, an Iraqi lawyers representing women detainees at Abu Ghraib. “Sexualized violence and abuse committed by U.S. troops goes far beyond a few isolated cases”, she added.

Crimes of sexual violence, rape and torture by U.S. forces against Iraqi men, women and children were kept secret from the public until Seymour Hersh of the New Yorker magazine

published photographs alongside extracts from the damning report of General Antonio Taguba. The U.S. administration blamed the crimes on a few black sheep. Of course this is not true. Orders come from the top of U.S. military and civilian leaderships. Unfortunately there has been no public outrage in the U.S. or in Europe to condemn these appalling practices against Iraqi women. Is it because of the European-American “shared values”?

There is credible evidence that the highest echelons of the Pentagon and the civilian Bush administration approved the carrying out of these brutal acts against the Iraqi people.

According to ‘The Torture Papers’, edited by Karen Greenberg, director of the Centre on Law and Security at the New York University School of Law, the U.S. government is guilty of a “systematic decision to alter the use of methods of coercion and torture that lay outside of accepted and legal norms”. “It is ironic that a person such as [Lynndie England, who pleaded guilty], with little education, no authority, and zero training as a prison guard, becomes the poster child for our depravity, while the authors of the American policy toward Iraqi detainees remain virtually untouched by the scandal”, reported Paul Vitello of Newsday. The U.S. Justice Department essentially immunized military and intelligence officials from liability for physical torture. “In fact, some officials who either knew of the abuse or should have known about it have been retained or promoted”, reported the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on April 30, 2005. Systematic torture and sexual abuse were used to interrogate prisoners in U.S-run prisons in Afghanistan and at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba and elsewhere.

Several documents released on 07 March 2005 by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) show 13 cases of rape and abuse of female detainees. The documents revealed that no action was taken against any soldier or civilian official as a result. “We have to start to ask the question of whether there is a whole layer of abuse out there that we are not seeing because the evidence of abuse has been covered up”, said ACLU staff attorney Jameel Jaffer. The documents also provide further evidence that U.S. troops have destroyed evidence of abuse and torture in order to avoid a repetition of last year’s Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal.

Aidan Delgado, a 23-year-old U.S. Army reservist with the 320th Military Police Company told Bob Herbert of the New York Times recently, that he “had witnessed an Army sergeant lashed a group of children with a steel Humvee antenna, and a Marine corporal planted a vicious kick in the chest of a kid about 6 years old”. After he was deployed to Abu Ghraib Prison, Mr. Delgado told Herbert: “The violence [in Abu Ghraib] was sickening, some inmates were beaten nearly to death”. In one of the many detainees’ protests at Abu Ghraib, the “Army authorized lethal force. Four [unarmed] detainees were shot to death”, said Delgado.

An eyewitness female detainee at Abu Ghraib, who identified herself as ‘Noor’, told Al-Jazeera that ‘U.S. soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison raped women and, in many occasions, forced them to strip naked in public’. She admitted seeing ‘many female detainees got pregnant’. Iraqi lawyer Iman Khamas, of International Occupation Watch Centre, said; “One former detainee had recounted the alleged rape of her cell mate in Abu Ghraib.” “[The detainee] had been raped 17 times in one day”, said Khamas.

Professor Huda Shaker Al-Nuaimi, of Baghdad University Political Science Department, told Luke Harding of the Guardian on 12 May 2004, that; ‘U.S. soldiers in Iraq have raped, sexually humiliated and abused several Iraqi female detainees in the notorious Abu Ghraib prison’. Al-Nuaimi told Harding that she knows of ‘Noor’s’ case and other Iraqi females that

were arrested, taken to Abu Ghraib prison and raped by the US Military Police. 'Iraqi women here are afraid and shy of talking about such subjects', she added. Crimes of rape were very rare before the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. Rape is shameful crimes, and was introduced to the Muslim World by Western colonialists as a tool of coercion and intimidation.

The U.S. Army report on Iraqi prisoners abuse by Maj. Gen. Antonio Taguba (the Taguba Report) confirmed these accounts, including 'Noor's' account and said that U.S. guards sexually abused female detainees at Abu Ghraib. The report found "numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses" constituting "systematic and illegal abuse of [Iraqi] detainees" at Abu Ghraib.

In addition to sexual violence, rape and physical torture, a new comprehensive report documents the use of psychological torture on Iraqi men, women and children by U.S. forces released on May 01, 2005 by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), a British independent organization. The report shows that "psychological torture has been at the centre of treatment and interrogation of detainees [in Iraq and elsewhere]". The most inhumane and damaging "[t]echniques of psychological torture used have included sensory deprivation, isolation, sleep deprivation, forced nudity, the use of military working dogs to instill fear, cultural and sexual humiliation, mock executions, and the threat of violence or death toward detainees or their loved ones", reveals the report.

Moreover, Iraqi women and their children are being taken hostages by U.S. forces and used as 'bargaining chips'. On 11 April 2005, the Guardian reported, that U.S. forces were accused of violating international law by taking Iraqi women hostages to force their male relatives to surrender. After taking the women (mother and daughter) from their home in Baghdad, U.S. soldiers left a note on the gate: "Be a man Muhammad Mukhlif and give yourself up and then we will release your sisters. Otherwise they will spend a long time in detention". One wonders who is the one to "be a man", U.S. soldiers who are abusing defenceless women or Mr. Muhammad, who is only defending his country against foreign invaders?

Iraqi women are arrested, detained, abused and tortured not because of anything they have done, but to force their close relatives (spouses, sons and brothers) to collaborate with the Occupation and to inform against the Resistance. Contrary to the Geneva Conventions, which stipulate that no one can "be punished for an offence he or she has not personally committed". The practices, which have been condemned by the UN and human rights organisations, are widely used by the Israeli Army against Palestinian men, women and children in occupied Palestine.

The Italian journalist, Giuliana Sgrena, of the Italian daily Il Manifesto, reported that, as usual U.S. Occupation forces raided the home of Mithal Al-Hassan, a 55 years old engineer, and arrested both her husband and son. "The soldiers later ransacked the apartment and stole their saving. Denounced as part of a vendetta, Mithal was condemned without trial to eighty days of horror in the company of other women prisoners who, like her, were subjected to abuse and torture. She has since spotted her tormentors on the internet". The courage and clarity of Mithal substantiate the ongoing U.S. brutality against the Iraqi women.

In another interview, Mithal added; "After that, they took me to a detention centre [near Baghdad International Airport]. There, I heard a young woman crying out from her cell,

telling an American soldier to leave her alone. She said, 'I am a Muslim woman'. Her voice was high-pitched and shaky. Her husband, who was in a cell down the hall, called out, 'She is my wife. She has nothing to do with this'. He hit the bars of his cell with his fists until he fainted. The Americans poured water over his face and made him wake up. When her screams became louder, the soldiers played music over the speakers. Finally, they took her to another room. I couldn't hear anything more", Ms. Mithal told Tara McKelvey of American Prospect. The courage and clarity of Mithal substantiate the ongoing U.S. brutality against the Iraqi women.

Nicole Choueiry, of Amnesty International, said: "I do not think it is the first time. It is against international law to take civilians and use them as bargaining chips". U.S. officials do not admit to any female inmates, but evidence shows that women imprisoned in U.S-run prisons including Abu Ghraib and were subjected to abuses including evidence of sexual misconduct, rape and psychological torture against women.

"Overall, 90 women have been held in various detention facilities in Iraq since August 2003", Barry Johnson, a public-affairs officer for detainee operations with the U.S. told McKelvey. "More women may be in captivity", he added, "[U.S. Army] units can capture and keep them up to 14 days". In addition, "approximately 60 children, or 'juveniles', are being held", noted Tara McKelvey.

There were nearly 625 women prisoners in Al-Rusafah and 750 women prisoners in Al-Kazimiyah alone, including girls of twelve and women in their sixties. Besides, Iman Kamas head of the Occupation Watch Centre affirms that there are five unknown U.S-run prisons in Iraq apart from the well known ten, which include Abu-Ghraib, Al-Kazimiyah, and Al-Rusafah prisons in Baghdad and Um-Qasir and Al-Nasiriyah prisons. The number of innocent Iraqi prisoners and detainees are increasing every day, together with dramatic increase in the abuse, torture and rape of Iraqi men, women and children.

According to Amnesty International, there are new reports of torture carried out by U.S. soldiers and the new U.S-trained Iraqi security forces, or the 'Occupation dogs' as Iraqis call them. As usual, the crimes against the Iraqi people continue because as Ignacio Ramonet, editor of the French monthly, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, rightly wrote; "The characteristics of colonial war are usually arrogance on the part of the occupiers, who believe that they belong to a superior race (more civilised, more advanced), are contemptuous of the colonised and sometimes refuse to admit that the colonised are even human". Reports from Iraq show that racism by U.S. soldiers fuel their violence against the Iraqi people. It is just the Western mainstream media complicity in the crimes prevents reporting them. It should be borne in mind that, Western mainstream media is the second front of the war on Iraq.

Western mainstream media, led by the Washington Post, The New York Times, The Christian Science Monitor and CNN in the U.S. and the BBC in Britain, not only fail to report the horrific crimes against Iraqi women, but also continue to publish fake stories depicting the rape crimes as "hoax" or "conspiracies" which led many people in the West to accept torture as an established policy. With hundreds of newspapers subscribing to these "News Services", the distortions become replicated and amplified throughout the U.S. and the world.

Moreover, stories of cultural differences were deliberately distorted to put cloud on the crimes of U.S. soldiers committed against defenceless Iraqi women and girls. Western mainstream media, American in particular, is full of misleading stories such as; "Arab-Muslim patriarchy" culture with its "honour killings" is worse than rape". Although it is very

rare and unheard of in Iraq, “honour killings” is amplified and used to justify the abuse and rape of Iraqi women and girls by U.S. soldiers. The media provides ‘a diversion and an attempt to blame the victims by finding the locus of the problem in the victim’, to use Ward Churchill analysis. In other words, the media and politicians are deliberately shifting the blame on the victims with increasing sophistication.

The new wave of so-called “true stories” of “honour killings” has been proven to be fraudulent. The trends of dehumanising the ‘others’ are aimed at a receptive (Western) audience, who shares the perpetrators frame of reference, to exploit an overarching climate of fear and prejudice, and in the process encourage more racism and Islamophobia. For example, “Burned Alive” and “Forbidden Love”, to mention just recent two, were proved to be fabricated lies and removed from sale. Unfortunately, the damage has already been done to an already victimised Muslim community. The sad thing is that the perpetrators have been rewarded handsomely. They were not only escaped criminal libels; they became celebrities within the anti-Muslim publishing industry in the West.

Meanwhile, violent crimes against women are increasing in the Western World and hardly published. “It should be not forgotten that in America, not in the Muslim world, between 40 per cent and 60 per cent of women killed, are killed by their husbands and boyfriends, but such murders of course are no longer even called ‘passion’ crimes, much less ‘honour’ crimes”, wrote Professor Joseph Mossad of Columbia University. “For European women aged 16-44 violence in the home is the primary cause of injury and death, more lethal than road accidents and cancer.... Between 25%-50% of women are victims of this violence”, wrote Mr. Ignacio Ramonet.

It is this Islamophobic trait of imperial American-Western culture and its anti-Muslim racism, propagated both by the media and the governments, not to mention several prominent intellectuals, that propels the abuse and torture of innocent Iraqi men, women and children in U.S-run prisons in Iraq. The obsession of Western society with sex and sexual exploitation of women as sex objects, further substantiate the crimes of sexual abuse and rape against women in Iraq.

We know now that “Abu Ghraib was only the tip of the iceberg”, said Reed Brody, special counsel for the U.S.-based Human Rights Watch (HRW), because Abu Ghraib is not the only prison in Iraq, and there are hundreds more. The “crimes at Abu Ghraib are part of a larger pattern of abuses against Muslim detainees around the world”, added Mr. Brody.

The number of prisoners in Iraq today is far greater than that under the former regime of Saddam. The level of sexual abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners and detainees by the former regime was just a fraction in today’s Iraq. Prior to 2003, Western human rights organisations were very vocal and continued to monitor and report the situation in Iraq under the former regime. Iraq was portrayed as a pariah state. But since the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, they follow the U.S. orders and stop their human rights work.

When asked about investigating U.S. crimes against Iraqi civilians, Hania Mufti, an investigator with HRW told Phillip Adams of Australia’s Radio National on Tuesday 26 April 2005, that: “The Agency is not concerned to investigate U.S. crime against the Iraqi people, because U.S. crimes against Iraqis are happening now in front of our eyes. The Agency is more concerned to investigate crimes committed by the previous regime which took place in 1990s so we can pursue the ‘genocide’ charges”. Her allegations against officials of the previous regime are supported by “evidence” collected from refugees in Jordan, Iran,

Turkey, and Britain. The refugees were enticed to make allegations. She also admitted that U.S. forces in Iraq and Iraqi expatriates are assisting the agency in making a case of genocide against the former Iraqi officials.

The most disturbing and misleading allegations of Hania Mufti's is; "The majority of Iraqis welcomed the invasion". Of course this is a falsehood. Most Iraqis (92-98 per cent) opposed the invasion and occupation of their country. The immediate uprising of Iraqi Resistance against the Occupation was a guide. According to Iraqi pollster Saadoun Al-Dulaimi of the Iraqi Institute of Strategic Studies, the overwhelming majority of Iraqis (+85%), favours the immediate withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. A U.S-sponsored poll in May 2004 shows that 92 per cent of Iraqis viewed the invaders as "occupiers" rather than "liberators", 85 per cent wanted them to leave immediately, and only 2 per cent (2%) of Iraqis viewed the U.S. as "liberators". The Washington Post survey revealed that; "Public opinion polls show 80 per cent [of Iraqis] want the Americans out of their country. In the election campaign, one common theme among candidates was the withdrawal of occupying forces". The Iraqi people have rejected this U.S-imposed form of colonial dictatorship.

The miseries of the Iraqi people have more than doubled in the last two years, and Iraqis viewed the Occupation as the cause of their miseries. In addition to the crimes of sexual abuse, torture and rape committed by U.S. soldiers against Iraqi women, all other aspects of Iraqi women's rights have also deteriorated. Women health and women education have fallen significantly. Unemployment, prostitution and malnutrition, have increased dramatically, and are now widespread among Iraqi women today.

A report by Women for Women International reveals that 57 per cent of Iraqi women and their families do not have adequate healthcare, and that the maternal mortality rate have tripled when compare to the period between 1989 to 2002. Iraq's infrastructure has been reduced to rubble. The health care services and the education system are on the brink of total collapse. Iraq had one of the highest standards of living in the Middle East' prior to U.S. war and sanctions. Under U.S. Occupation at least 200 children are dying every day. They are dying from malnutrition, a lack of clean water and a lack of medical equipment and drugs to cure easily treatable diseases. This traumatic situation has significant psychological effects on the health and welfare of the children's mothers. Electricity blackout is as long as 15 hours a day, much longer than that of pre-war level.

As a result of the U.S. dismantling of the Iraqi state, many women lost their jobs. Unemployment among Iraqi women is more than 70 per cent and rising. The dismantling of the Iraqi Security and Police led to increase in violence and crimes against women. Women are no longer leaving their homes unaccompanied by relatives. The Bush administration's promotion of religious fundamentalism and sectarianism mean the worst for Iraqi women rights. U.S. foreign policy preys on religious fundamentalism.

Iraqi women have also suffered great loss in lives. U.S. aerial bombing and destruction caused the death of great numbers of women and children. In November 2004, the reputable British medical journal, the Lancet, reported that from March 2003 to October 2004, U.S. forces have killed more than 100,000 Iraqi civilians. The number of Iraqis killed is increasing daily. The Lancet authors acknowledge that most of the victims were innocent women and children killed by U.S. bombing of population centres.

To increase the atrocity, the U.S. provides its soldiers with "self-immunity" from prosecution making it very easy for them to kill Iraqis with institutionalised impunity, as if Iraqis were not

human beings. In addition, evidence shows that the U.S-British forces use banned weapons such as napalm and weapons of mass destruction (WMD), which contaminated and polluted Iraq's environment, and caused health hazards.

Doctors in Iraq have reported a significant increase in deformities among newborn babies that could be due to radiation passed through mothers following U.S. wars of 1991-2003. 'After studying family history of couples with deformed babies, they concluded that radiation and pollution [caused by 'depleted' uranium dust, DU] were the main causes of the deformity', Dr Lamia'a Amran, a paediatrician at the Iraqi Red Crescent Society (IRCS) hospital in Baghdad, told IRIN News. "Since 1991 the number of children born with birth deformities has quadrupled", said Dr Janan Hassan, who runs a children clinic in Basra in southern Iraq. If DU is the cause of the cancers, which is most likely, the crisis could become infinitely worse for women and children in Iraq.

"The depleted uranium left by the U.S. bombing campaign has turned Iraq into a cancer-infested country. For hundreds of years to come, the effects of the uranium will continue to wreak havoc on Iraq and its surrounding areas", said Iraqi artist and author of 'Baghdad Diaries', Nuha Al-Radi before she died of leukaemia on August 13, 2004.

The U.S-Britain used thousands of tonnes of DU in their wars on Iraq and over a wide range of areas. It took three to five years for the cancers to begin manifesting after the first Gulf crisis. Iraqi women and their newborn babies expecting bleak future as a result of the U.S-Britain use of WMD.

The pretexts for the war were proved to be just lies. Iraq had no WMD and Iraq had no relations with terrorism. The war on Iraq was an illegal act of aggression, designed to increase the threat of terrorism and violence, in order to exert control. The continuing Occupation of Iraq is to rob Iraq of its oil resources, and enhance U.S. imperialist doctrine.

So, as news of the appalling miseries of Iraqi women has piled up, where are Western feminists? Aren't women rights a universal demand? Are Western feminists allowing George Bush to steal their rhetoric to occupy Iraq and torture Iraqi women? Where is this international women solidarity? The setting up of an international war crimes tribunal to investigate and prosecute those who committed these crimes against Iraqi women should be the aim of the world community to. It will enhance human rights and democracy worldwide.

George Bush "colonial feminism" and his use of women status in the Middle East is merely to denigrate Islam and Islamic culture, and serving U.S. imperial doctrine. The best way to redress U.S. crimes against Iraqi women and end the suffering is the immediate and full withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. This will allow Iraq to progress toward full sovereignty and national independence.

The Occupation has had both immediate and long-term negative implications for the safety of Iraqi women and for their participation in post-war life in Iraq. The end of the Occupation will stop the chain reactions of violence, and may allow the victim's wounds to heal.

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