

“Madam, How Can I Have Any Plans?”

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Theme: [History](#), [Science and Medicine](#)

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“I am searching for medicine for my mother; I’ve no money to repair my car; I have my sister asking me to help her son; I have come to the end of our food ration for this week.”

A reply Americans, Italians, Indians, Brazilians, or Iranians—everyone across the globe—might offer a curious (or naïve) journalist covering the crisis. (Not to exclude testimonies from exhausted healthcare and other service workers.)

However, the respondent I quote here lived his uncertainty in a different era:—a quarter of a century ago, in Iraq. He’s Ali Al-Amiri, erstwhile poultry inspector for Nineveh’s provincial department of agriculture. We met in 2001, in Mosul, at the height of an epidemic there, namely the 13-year embargo imposed on his nation.

I’d been covering the devastation created by that global blockade since 1990. So my question was indelicate, if not guileless.

I knew conditions there well.

During a decade of assignments to that besieged, forlorn place, I’d witnessed deaths resulting from a scarcity of medicines and stress-related diseases; I’d been recording burn victims scarred by fires from makeshift stoves, rising cancer infections, low-birth-weight newborns, unchecked spread of infectious diseases, the collapse of industry and the flight of desperate young people. (All well documented for anyone caring to investigate (including [my account from Iraq](#) joined early field reports from the [International Action Center](#) and a belated [Harvard Study](#) based on secondary sources.)

Yes, my question to this and other besieged Iraqis may have been misplaced. Nevertheless Al-Amiri’s reply was instructive to those with a limited perception of war. It pointed to a frightfully blank tomorrow.

If Americans (and others who complied with Washington’s policy to force Iraq to its knees) did not grasp the concept then, today we know it: “What are your plans for the weekend?

Your graduation prom? Your annual colonoscopy? Your son’s wedding? Grandfather’s 80th birthday?” They’re all on hold; we’re just trying to keep the children entertained, get through another day with a testy partner, stock up on non-perishables, learn to connect by Zoom, gather papers for an insurance claim or patch a cracked windshield.

This blank calendar is as intimate for us as it was for Iraqis. Of course it’s not the same; Iraq was completely cut off through a media blackout, a ban on flights, and by diplomatic and economic blockades. By contrast, in the midst of COVID-19, we have teleconferences and phone networking apps; we have sympathizers around the country and across the world; we can learn from others’ experiences; we can share resources and expertise.

My point here is not to assign blame or compare sufferings. It's to question the war model invoked by media commentators and politicians to interpret our dilemma; this hinders our understanding of what we're experiencing. That embargo on Iraq was a fierce assault but it wasn't interpreted by outsiders as war; embargo-deaths were largely unseen and uncounted by western historians. Just as 20 years of sanctions imposed on Vietnam after the U.S. defeat there, just as decades of embargo against Cuba, Iran and Syria continue, just as the crippling of Venezuela intensifies. Those sieges, like the current pandemic raise deeper moral questions.

It would help to drop our concept of war in this crisis where media commentators and politicians invoke '911' and the 1941 Pearl Harbor attacks. The military model (including the commander-in-chief criterion for president) is the U.S. default solution to a problem, whether drugs or a pandemic or a perceived threat to national interests. 'Smash it to bits. Hit them with all we have.'

Let's see if Americans can emerge from today's dilemma with a newly defined compassionate model of responsibility and leadership?

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