



“PLEASE TELL MR. BUSH”

Diaries from Iraq
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By Zainab Salbi

There is a high level of chaos, anarchy, frustration, and even anger in today’s Iraq. This is triggered by the lack of electricity, water, food, medicine, and most importantly security. Not only is the looting continuing, but so is the killing. Children as young as ten have real guns and Kalashnikovs, which they point at anybody at any time. A driver is vulnerable at any moment to a gunman forcing him or her out of the car. People are witnessing killings in public streets and in the middle of the day. Women are afraid to leave their houses for fear of rape and kidnapping. Mothers are afraid to let their kids walk to school on their own.

Drivers have to wait in line for an average of 12 hours in hopes that they may be able to fill their cars with gasoline. And when the temperature is about 110 degrees in the afternoon, this is not an easy task. These lines are becoming gathering spots where people share their frustration and their anger. “Why can’t they do what the former regime did in terms of regulating the distribution of gas?” some people murmur. Others ask for the American troops to protect the gas station for longer hours than they are doing now (8 am-4 pm) so the stations can be open longer. “We are the land of oil,” one man said, “How could that happen in this country?” Another man questioned, “How could America and Britain, the strongest countries in the world, be unable to reinstall security—and thus our ability to live our normal lives—in a timely manner?”

Iraqis are not only dealing with today’s chaos, but also with the trauma caused by the oppression they have faced for 35 years during Saddam Hussain’s regime. Tears are constantly dropping from everyone’s eyes. My father cried at the sight of me. He didn’t believe he would see any of his children after what he went through in this war, along with the previous two wars in Iraq. My uncle cried when we passed a house that had a sign in front stating it has been reclaimed by its original owners. The government-confiscated house was now restored to a family that has been displaced outside of Iraq for years. My friend cried at the sight of Shia’s pilgrims commemorating Hussain’s death in Karbala, where they chanted “Forgive us Hussain for the 35 years that passed without commemorating your memory.” A relative cried as he was telling me how Saddam executed his brother for no reason that he knew of. He was 18 when he was called to pick up his brother’s body. After many interrogations, they made him sign a paper saying he will not announce the execution to anybody, including his own family, and he will not have a funeral for the brother. He had to bury his brother on his own and keep

the secret for nearly a year until he finally told his family. And in one of my visits to my aunt on a very hot May day in Iraq, I found her crying as she sat in the garden with her granddaughter. “There is no electricity, there is no gas, and there is little water... We are going to die. We can’t continue to live in this hell,” she told me, wiping her tears.

There is an outpouring of emotions in Iraq now which veer between frustration at the lack of everything in one’s life and dealing with the misery of the past. These emotions can be summarized by what one woman told me as she described what she is going through: “Every minute that passes, I die over and over again. I have already suffered a lot. I can’t endure more suffering again.” Iraqis are grateful to America for liberating them from Saddam Hussain, frustrated at America for not dealing with running the country the day after Saddam Hussain’s collapse, and are now angry, tired, grateful, happy, and sad all at the same time.

This report was written after a ten-day trip to Baghdad, Najaf, and Karbala, during which I interviewed many Iraqi women and men from different ethnic, class, and political backgrounds. The purpose of this report is to share what many Iraqis asked of me: ***Please send this message to Mr. Bush.*** I was also asked to convey their stories, fears, hopes, and frustration to the world. “Forgive us for talking so much,” one woman told me, “but we have not spoken for 35 years and you are the first person to whom we are telling our stories. Please share them with the world. Let the world know what we have been through and what we are going through today.”

So here I am today trying to act on my promise to share the voices of tens of Iraqi women and men that I met on my trip to Iraq. On a personal level, I left Iraq wanting to appeal to humanity to help the Iraqi people, to do it yesterday if not today. We are on the verge of losing the peace in Iraq if we don’t act as soon as possible. As one man in Najaf told me, what Iraqis need most is economic and social liberty, before democracy. “A person who wakes up after years of being in a coma does not ask for democracy in the first moment. He probably wants food and some water before he can think of democracy,” he explained. The need to help the Iraqi people is urgent, both in order to avoid a humanitarian crisis in Iraq and for our (the US’s) long term national interest in the Middle East, and even the world.

On Schools

Most parents are afraid to send their kids to school but feel conflicted for they don’t want the kids to miss a whole school year. Fadila, a mother of four, is one of many mothers who walks her kids back and forth to school every day, each way taking her two hours. She can’t afford the bus fares as her household is dependent on daily wages and there is no work at the moment. But Fadila does not want her kids to lose this year of school so she does what she has to do to help them finish. Not all schools are open, and many students are at home talking about the possibility of having to repeat the year because of missing almost two months of school. Those who end up making it to school have to face many challenges, including the lack of electricity, shortage of students in the class, and confusion about what they will do for this school year.

I visit a 12th grade class at a high school for girls in the middle class professional neighborhood of Al-Zayoona. Out of a total of 21 students only 5 are attending school. They all talk about their fears in coming to school. Their parents are dropping them off, and sometimes waiting for them at school so they can walk them back home. They talk about a girl that was found slaughtered near their school and the rumors of kidnapping and trafficking women out of Iraq.

I ask them about the changes they've seen in Iraq and whether they are happy about them or not. "We haven't seen anything positive since the change that took place in the country. The only change we are seeing is random bullets at night, girls' kidnapping, and chaos. I talked to the girls about their dreams for the future...but they couldn't talk about the future as it was so hot. "We can't study," one girl commented. "We have no electricity and we can barely focus on what is being taught in this heat," she added. "We get about 1 to 2 hours of electricity every day and that is on good days. But we come to school and we will do our best in the hope that we can at least not lose this school year." No one knows the fate of the students for this year. Teachers are still confused about exams and unsure which exams to administer when half of the curriculum taught includes Saddam and the Baath.

As I get ready to leave the class, the students ask to send messages to the American people and students their age. "We want security and peace so we can pursue our careers in peace." Another student says, "We had nothing to do with this war yet we were the ones that suffered for it." I asked if any of the students had lost family members in this war. I quickly get a response from one student who talks about losing two family members in this war and an uncle in the first Gulf War. She does not manage to finish her sentence before tears fill her eyes. There is an awkward silence in the classroom as another student starts crying and the rest are silent and somber. I ask why they are crying but they don't answer. There is just silence.

I try to break the silence by asking again about the future, hoping their answers for the future will be more optimistic. And while some students talk excitedly about their dreams of being doctors, teachers and engineers, the teacher, Ms. Methal, reveals her frustration at living in the chaos that Iraq is in. "I wish I could leave the country now. I want to leave because I have not had a moment of peace in 35 years. We, as people, are nervous wrecks."

I leave the class to wander around the school during the students' break. I can finally hear some laughter among the students amid the somber silence of others. Mothers are waiting at the school for the girls. The walls are still filled with paintings of soldiers and "victorious battles." The principal, Umm Omar, follows me to tell me about the weapons she found in the school after the war. Apparently this school, as many other schools, was occupied by the Baathist party and used as its center and hiding place for ammunition during the war. The principal reported that to the US authorities, who are coming and taking the weapons.

The students complain about other things—the looting that took place in their school, the lack of electricity, and as usual the lack of security. “We can’t focus,” 16-year-old Shaheb tells me. “The heat is unbearable and we have nothing normal in our lives. The Americans promised us a lot, but so far we are not seeing anything...not even the security to go to school. We only have freedom at this point. But not the means to support it.”

On another occasion, I visit an elementary school for boys in the poor neighborhood of Al-Iskan. Students were complaining that they are afraid to leave their homes to come to school but that they don’t want to miss the school year. Besides wanting electricity and security back in the country, they ask for new books, as the books they have are more than 10 years old and all torn apart. They ask for school supplies so they can do their homework. “They get excited when they see a nice and clean piece of paper, they fold it and keep it for important homework. This is ridiculous, our students should at least have the basic supplies to be able to do their homework,” Ms. Amal, the school’s principal, comments.

On my way out, I meet the guard and his five member family who all live in one small room at the school. The guard’s daughter Bayda’a is a college student at Al-Musanseryya’ university. Bayda’a refuses to let me take her picture...not one of her friends knows the situation she is living in and she does not want anybody to know. I ask her about her dreams for the future, both personal and national. “On a personal level,” she exclaims, “I want to graduate and work...I worked really hard to go through college. I don’t want to lose the opportunity to graduate and work after all these years. As for the national level, I want democracy for Iraq. I want women’s freedom and not only talk about the concept of women’s freedom. In the old regime, women had no rights...Now, once and for all, I want the opportunity to work and to depend on myself to earn my living and contribute to the building of Iraq.” She expresses her views shyly but passionately. Bayda’a had not gone back to college since the war began and does not know what she will do this school year. She is worried that she may not be able to finish the year, which will have big economic impact on her and her family.

At the Health Clinic

As was reported in the US media, most hospitals and clinics were looted in the aftermath of the war. Patients talk about how they were taken off their hospital beds and dropped on the floor as the looters were stealing the beds. Doctors and pharmacists warn about the lack of medication, and along with all government employees they complain about the absence of salaries.

I got a chance to visit a public health clinic in the poor neighborhood of Al-Iskan. The clinic was reopened on April 14. Its guard and people from the neighborhood protected it from the looters. The staff has been coming to the clinic every day without any compensation. This might be fine if they had funds of their own, but the staff itself is poor to the extent that they can’t even afford transportation costs, so they walk every day just so they can be there for the 60 patients on average that visit them on a daily basis.

Dr. Al Ani explains that they are operating the clinic on a shoe string capacity and equipment: “We can’t even provide the most basic services to our patients when we don’t have basic equipment and medication.” Dr. Al Ani says they have medication to last them for about 10 days only if the distribution of medication is not resumed soon. Nashwan, the clinic’s head pharmacist, explains that while the former government did distribute medicine for free, the distribution often did not meet the clinic’s needs. “We would sometimes have plenty of one kind of medicine that we would not have much use for but have nothing of the medicine that we desperately need,” Nashwan explains. He insists that medicine distribution for the poor should continue to be subsidized by the ruling authority...something that the American administrator Bremer acted upon in his first week in Iraq.

Nashwan, who is Kurdish, is standing next to Mohammad, his Arab colleague, and soon switches the discussion to politics and the frustration he and his colleagues are feeling. “We are all the same people. There is no difference between Sunni and Shia’a and we are all frustrated by the lack of security in Iraq,” he says, repeating the slogans that fill the streets of Baghdad—“No Sunnis...No Shia’a...We are all Muslims.” Nashwan talks with increasing anger about the chaos in the country. “We have been cheated for 35 years by Saddam Hussain and we could not do anything about it. But we can’t stand any more lies whatsoever.” He continues, “If this situation does not improve within a month, I myself will go and fight the Americans. And I am not a Ba’athist. I am not a communist. I stand for myself. And when I see hunger and poverty caused by the lack of security, I will fight.”

In the clinic, I meet mothers who are complaining about their inability to bring their kids to the clinics when needed because of the lack of security in the streets. “It is really hard to take the kids to the doctors when needed. Now I have to think 100 times before I make the decision to take them out the house and have to depend on my best abilities to use some of the medicine I have at home in the hope it will help them,” Asma’a, a mother of three, explains. Another mother adds: “We want a normal life. We want to be able to take our kids to the hospital and have anything they need to be taken care of and not worry about security issues.”

On War Casualties

In the run-down house of Al-Washash, a poor neighborhood of Baghdad, Zainab Ahmed tells me about her sister-in-law who had a miscarriage in the 8th month of her pregnancy during the intensive bombing of the war. Zainab’s children sit next to her as she describes how they were afraid during the war. Her neighbor, Amal, a divorcee who left her husband because of domestic violence, introduces herself and asks me to send a message to President Bush. “I want to first thank Mr. Bush for changing the former regime and liberating us from Saddam Hussain’s oppression. Having said that, I need to explain that the bombs killed our children and Iraqi civilians. Only in Helah, 350 families died through cluster bombs. The war was not easy...We paid a price for it and we are still suffering. Please understand that. We need to feel that we have some life...some hope.”

What I heard from Zainab and Amal regarding the casualties of war was echoed in many houses in Iraq, including that of my own family. My father had dug a family-made bunker for the war. The bunker, however, was not sufficient to protect him and everyone around him from the intensive bombing... Shrapnel injured 5 of the 11 family members who were hiding in the bunker on a dark night. "Blood was all over the place and people were screaming and I just had a stroke at that moment and my left leg and arm went numb," my father tells me, his eyes filled with tears. It took three days before the injured were able to reach a doctor in order to receive stitches. My father cannot stop crying as he talks about that night.

But none of the stories I heard compares to that of Evanne, a Sabea'a¹ 32-year-old woman who lost her husband and her father in front of her on the same night. Evanne talks about how her family decided to leave Baghdad one evening as the bombing was getting very intensive and they were worried about the safety of her first-born, a 6-month-old boy. During their drive out of Baghdad, their car was attacked which ended up injuring her husband who was driving and then her father who was trying to help him out. Evanne had to drag her husband and father away from the car, and in the process of dragging them some of her husband's internal parts were dragged in the street. She managed to have a last word with her husband and give him a last kiss on her way to the hospital. Her husband was the first to die, and her father died soon after that same night.

"Don't cry for me," Evanne tells me as she sees my tears dropping from behind the video camera I was holding. "I just want my voice to reach Mr. Bush. I want him to know that the war took away the husband I loved so much," she says angrily. "What liberation," Evanne adds. "My father was killed the same day we were planning to have my brother's wedding. My father was only 53 years old." Evanne could not cry throughout this narration. Evanne, who was married to Sabah, her late husband, for only a year and a half, has only anger in her voice. She tells me she takes four Valium pills a day, "so I can get numb," she says. The fact that her late father hated Saddam Hussain and was waiting excitedly for the end of his regime does not matter much to her now.

Her mother interrupts amid her tears and talks about how her late husband had wanted the Americans to come to Iraq and liberate it from Saddam. She argues with Evanne about who is to blame for their misery. "It was our wish that Mr. Bush come to liberate us from Saddam's oppression. I had wanted to cook for him and make a party for him. Alas, what ended up happening is we lost everything...our loved ones...our fortune...and we are now left with nothing." The family had taken all their savings and gold with them in the car as they fled the bombing. Evanne's husband was a jeweler, and they lost all 2 kilos of gold and nearly \$15,000 of cash that same night.

The political debate between mother and daughter does not get any easier. They disagree on everything except the misery of their loss. Evanne interrupts to go and get her husband's trousers from the day he was killed. She shows me the wrapped piece as she tells me how much she loved him. "I loved my husband dearly and we dreamed about

¹ Sabea'a is one of the minority religious groups in Iraq.

living our lives together,” she says. “Mr. Bush’s so-called liberation took my liberty away...took my love away...took my future away.”

On Looting and the Taking Over of Properties

The looting and burning of public properties had not abated by the time I left Iraq. Buildings burning in the middle of the day are becoming a normal scene. Professors mourn the loss of years of records as some universities were burned. The head of the UNDP in Iraq is still in shock over losing everything in his office, including 40 years’ worth of records. The only thing the looters left behind was a peace sign given by an American civilian team that had visited Iraq a few years ago. Rumors alternate between blaming Saddam’s men and the Kuwaitis for this burning. “The looting is one thing,” one man tells me, “but why the burning? This can’t be a simple incident. Either Saddam is doing it to destroy all the records in the country or the Kuwaitis are sponsoring it to avenge what Iraq did to them back in 1990.”

The looting does not stop at the taking of furniture, equipment, and other government supplies, which incidentally can be found in what is known as the “thieves’ market” in the middle of Baghdad. The looting now extends to the takeover of public and private properties. Some families, like Abu Taha’s, are taking over public properties and using them as residences. Abu Taha heads a family of 11. He admits he moved into the place he lives in without any property rights. “I served in the army for 14 years,” he said, “and I never got anything out of it. I don’t have land, I don’t have a job, and I am living in a state of constant poverty. So I took this land. I was even forced to steal. I am not happy about it. But that is my situation and I have to feed my nine children.”

Some are marking public land and starting to build private properties on it. Others are taking over private properties that are either abandoned or sometimes even guarded by people other than the original owners. Fouad, a well-to-do businessman, has to chase looters away on an almost constant basis as they try to take over his restaurant, which has been closed since the war like many other restaurants in Iraq, his farm, and other properties he owns in Baghdad. So far he has succeeded in doing this without being harmed, but the question is how long he can continue to do so.

It is important to note that the looting of public property is not limited to the poor like Abu Taha’s family. It extends to many of the political parties. The Iraqi National Congress, for example, under the leadership of Ahmed Al-Chalabi has confiscated one of the biggest country clubs in Iraq, known as The Hunting Club. The club, which was built from membership dues, is worth millions of dollars in properties aside from the land. Other parties are taking over former government homes and palaces, but nothing compares to The Hunting Club in value. Rather than naming all the parties who are illegally confiscating public land, it is easier to name those who are not doing that as they are much smaller in number. In particular, the Pachachi political party and all the Kurdish parties are known to be the only ones who are paying rent for their political headquarters, and they are respected for that.

On Politics

Political Parties

Not one person I talked to likes any of the political parties that are presenting themselves in Iraq. Most importantly, no one likes Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress. There is graffiti all over Baghdad saying "Chalabi is a Thief." "We want a leader with ethics, not a Ph.D.," many people comment upon mention of Chalabi. No one knew much about the American administrators, Garner earlier in May and later Bremer. "We don't have electricity, the TV and the radio stations are very limited in the hours they are operating—how do they expect us to hear all these things?" said Sahera, a woman I met.

At the end of a press conference for the Iraqi Independent Democratic Group (Pachachi's party), I hear the waiters murmuring at the back as all the attendees are getting ready to leave the oppressively hot room. Instead of running to some of the people I know at the party, I turn to talk to the waiters about their political views. The staff, all from the poor neighborhood of Al Sadr's city, talked about their frustration with not only the chaos in the country but also the lack of attempts by the political parties to talk to them, the public, about their immediate needs.

"We have plenty of political parties but we don't have law and order and we don't have work. So what is the use?" Ahmed Najm said. Another Ahmed explains that he and his friends want a secular government. "But this is getting harder and harder to do as we have Imams advocating the free killing of Ba'athists." The mosque he is talking about is Al Muhsen Mosque in Sadr's city.

While they all agree on the need for immediate law and order and the desirability of a secular government, the men disagree on who should rule Iraq for the time being. "At this point, we even want America to rule Iraq...Anybody...we just need someone to rule the country and reinstall law and order." Muhaned says. Ahmed Khadi disagrees: "I don't want America to rule. Iraq is for Iraqis. I do want security and I want an Iraqi government."

Religious extremism

Ahsan is a 21-year-old who was part of the Republican Guard and whom I met during my visit to Najaf. I ask him about his training during his service. He explains that it was a very tough training, that they thought Saddam could never be defeated. Ahsan had been serving in the Republican Guard for almost four years. He was finally released two months before the last war and was lucky not to be serving in the army during it. His brother was one of the 11 people who were able to escape the war out of 15,000 who still have not been heard from. Some left, some were killed, and many were executed by their officers on the spot for suspicion of wanting to escape the war.

But that is not what is to be feared about Ahsan as much as his political views. Ahsan believes this war was a Zionist conspiracy against Iraq, of which Saddam was part. I ask him about Khouee's death and am surprised to hear his response. "He came with American protection," he explained. "And that is not allowed and not permissible," he continued. He volunteers his comments on the Americans. "Americans don't belong in this country," he said. "Americans got rid of Saddam and that was good. Now they need to leave." Ahsan vehemently defends Muqtadar Al-Sader, seeing him as a hero. Al-Sader's youth is not a problem; neither is his lack of knowledge. The fact that he is against America is the most important thing.

I leave Ahsan's house nervous about his views and the danger they pose for the future of Iraq. The house down the street brings another kind of experience that calms me down a bit. "Our lives are full of misery. We have no food, we have no gas and we are the people of gas, we have nothing. Before we could not talk whatsoever for every word could destroy the whole family. We finally can talk now," a woman whose brother had been executed explains to me. As Shia'a, the people of Najaf went through a lot of violence during Saddam's regime, sometimes simply for basic religious practices.

Her husband criticizes the Americans for starting with democracy before economic and social liberty. "We need food and security before democracy," he explains. "When you save someone from death, his first wish is not a car but basic needs to regain his energy. The Americans, God bless them, are more concerned with democracy than they are addressing their basic needs." He continues, "We are a hungry population. Our need for food is more important than democracy at this point in our lives. That does not mean we don't want democracy. Rather, we need economic liberty as a prerequisite for democracy."

On France and the United Nations

The French language may be popular in Iraq, but not French politics. The Iraqis see France's position against the war as a position bought by Saddam. Iraqi businessmen talk about a law passed by the previous regime that no imports were allowed in the country if they were not from France. The former French Ambassador to Iraq is notorious for telling on businessmen who tried to get around this law, often leading to their bankruptcy and land confiscation by the government, if not imprisonment.

Like France, the United Nations is not necessarily viewed in the best light in Iraq. The United Nations is seen to have been bought by the former regime and to have played a part in its corruption schemes. The only advocates for a UN role are some of the parties that came from exile, including Pachechi's party, who are advocating for Iraq to be administered by the UN as a more legitimate body than the United States according to international law.

Implications for Women

Iraqi women are falling prey to the chaos and anarchy in Iraq. Women and girls are now targeted for kidnapping, with some women kidnapped from their own homes. Rumor, confirmed by coverage in *The Economist*, has it that there is now a market to sell women and girls in Baghdad. Women single heads of households are particularly vulnerable as movement outside of the home is becoming a risk for women because of the lack of security in the streets.

Suha, a single mother who lives in a small room with her daughter on the rooftop of a building, talks about how her life is falling apart. Suha now has to walk her daughter to high school as she fears for her daughter's safety. Her small business of making a traditional Iraqi dish, known as Kubba, and selling it to local store owners is now paralyzed because of the lack of electricity and her clients' no longer having buying power.

Suha is left with only \$20 in her pocket, less than the amount she has to pay for rent, and enough food to last her and her daughter for a week. As she describes her situation to me, her daughter Salma complains with teary eyes about the lack of food. "No one in my school knows we barely have enough food to last us for a week," she says. "I asked my mother why we are in this situation," she added.

Suha tried going to the mosque to get some of the limited food distribution that is mostly coming from neighboring countries. But in order for her to be considered to get that food, she was now asked to cover from head to toe. "But I don't cover my hair and it would be hypocritical if I do that just to please the religious men," she explains. So instead she roams the market hoping to find a buyer for her Kubba so she can earn her own living.

Suha tells me about being a poor and a single mother. "In the previous regime," Suha explains "the Baathists distributed food and other supplies to their friends and families. Now the mosque is doing the exact same thing. And in both cases I, as a single woman, am marginalized from the process," she adds with a sigh. I offered her \$40 to assist her in this hardship, but she refused it. "I have worked all my life," she said. "And I can continue to work. I just need electricity to be able to do that," she explains. But she doesn't have any money and I know her hardship so I insist she take the money. "Only if it is a loan," she finally agreed. "This should be a loan that you can pay someone else who may be in need, when you can resume your business and your finances get better," I explain, and we agree on that.

Another Salma lives quite a different life in Najaf. She wears the traditional Abaya and is covered from head to toe. And she is yet another strong woman with a long struggle for survival. Salma is also a single woman...well, sort of a single woman as her husband disappeared for 22 years. She has been working as a nurse for 20 years to support herself and her two children as she looked for her husband. Her husband was one of the several hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who were deported to Iran because of their Iranian origins. Their families were never informed of their whereabouts and are still searching

for them. Salma spent seven years searching the graveyards to find her husband in case the government had executed him. She only heard that he is in Iran two years ago.

I met Salma in a small alley in Najaf as she invited me in to see her small room where she is now living. When I visited her, Salma was explaining that the only thing she can afford is fried bread. She had sent her teenage daughter to live with relatives north of Baghdad as there were several attempts by the Baathists and later the looters to rape her daughter. She took her daughter out of school for safety and for lack of money. “We are patient,” Salma said. “We just hope that we can get a better life now.”

Salma introduces me to Zahra, a 35-year-old woman who finished business school and now lives in a small room in a small mosque. Zahra complains about the violence and the threats of rape faced by her in years of dealing with the Baathists on a daily basis. The only thing that gives Zahra some privacy in her living in the mosque is a curtain that separates her from men who come to the mosque to pray. Zahra’s brothers asked her to leave their home because she was a practicing Shia’a. They feared that her religious practices could cause them to be fired from their jobs and take their living away from them. As I leave Zahra’s room in the mosque, she follows me into the alley, asking me to send a message to President Bush. “Tell him,” she appeals to me, “tell Mr. Bush that we are very grateful to him for kicking Saddam and his cruelty out of this country. If only he can resume the distribution of the food package, though, he can help us a lot. Tell him, please tell him we are very grateful for him. Please send him our regards. May God protect him,” she kept repeating her prayers until I disappeared from sight.

Regardless of their socioeconomic class, ethnic background, or religious or secular tendencies, all Iraqi women I met exhibited strong opinions on what is going on in today’s Iraq and the need to incorporate them in the political process.

Isma’a Ibrahim, a 40-year-old Sunni woman who identifies herself as an Islamist expresses her political views thus: “I want religious freedom and that is what I mean by wanting an Islamic state...those who want to practice their religion should be able to do so and those who don’t should be able to do so as well. We don’t want an Islamic state like Iran.” She continues, “I want Iraqi women to be part of every part of the process of rebuilding the country...in the army, in sport, in every single sector. Women need to have 50% representation in the country. I wish this could happen. We deserve that and we have the credibility to do that as well.”

Asma explains how Iraqi women have historically played a major role in the country from 1959, when Nazeeha Al Delaymee was assigned as the Minister of Provinces, to 1970, when Dr. Suad Abdul Allah Ismail was assigned as the Minister of Education. “We need to build on that and not be marginalized from the building of our nation,” Asma emphasized.

Addressing gender issues in the process of policy making, from the delivery of services to Iraqis to the establishment of a transitional governing body, is critical at this stage. Issues related to food distribution, police retraining, women’s membership in political

parties, and women’s security in the public sphere need to be addressed on an institutional level. Otherwise, women will once again be marginalized and negatively impacted in their immediate needs as well as their long term position in the society. Women are also at risk from religious extremists. Some women who work with the UN have been threatened with death if they don’t wear the traditional headscarf or quit working with “foreigners.”

As Umm Hamid, a 70-year-old woman from Al Washash, a poor neighborhood in Baghdad, explains: “Saddam took women’s future...he killed their husbands and their sons...leaving them scrambling to manage to keep the few who are left in their families safe. Women have suffered enough during Saddam’s time. They deserve every single chance for a better life and a better role in the new Iraq.”

On the American Military Presence

My feelings, like those of many Iraqis, veer between tears and laughter. As I arrived by the small and only plane that flies to Baghdad’s International Airport, my eyes filled with tears as I was landing in the country that is free from Saddam Hussain’s oppression. I had always dreamed about such a day but never knew if I could actually witness it. Amid these emotions, another set of emotions emerged at the sight of US soldiers in Iraq. They were polite as they surrounded us, the eight passengers who got off the plane, and walked us to what used to be the VIP section of the airport to process our papers. Everyone except me was European. I have yet to hear about the presence of more than a handful of American NGOs working in Iraq so far.

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The first question that came from David, one of the army personnel processing our papers, is about “the member from Women for Women International.” I identified myself as the one from the group and was soon surprised to learn that he is a supporter of the organization through the Combined Federal Campaign and through the Sponsorship program. Tears fill my eyes again as I hear that. Maybe this is a message for me to see some hope for Iraq and its people, I tell myself.

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While all the other Europeans, mostly French passengers, are nervously quiet, the American soldiers are constantly throwing jokes at the French surrounding them, and I chat with David comfortably. I ask him about his experience during the war and he tells me with complete honesty that it was an unfair fight. “It was really not an even-handed fight. For every bullet they (the Iraqis) shot at us, we threw three cluster bombs. It was not a fair war and some of the guys were even disturbed by the fighting. We killed them so easily and they were no match for us.” David was talking about the importance of rebuilding Iraq. He was very much aware of the significance of economic development and the fact that America needs to remain in and rebuild the country.

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David was not the only member of the US military that was nice to me. As a matter of fact, every single military person I encountered during my trip was polite and nice. But that is not necessarily the way the Iraqis are getting treated and/or perceiving the American soldiers. My cousin Ali, for example, was telling me about the day he watched

the pulling down of Saddam's statue: "We watched TV for an hour and a half to see the statues of Saddam being taken down right after the takeover of Iraq. But just as we were starting to celebrate, we stopped confused and disturbed at the sight of the American flag on his face, even if it was there for just one minute."

Yet Ali's feelings are not nearly as angry as those of many Iraqis I met during my trip. On one occasion, I stopped to chat with American soldiers who were protecting a gas station. The soldiers were very kind and nice to me and we even took some pictures together. When they saw me chatting with the American soldiers, several Iraqi men soon gathered around me to complain to me about the soldiers' mistreatment of some young children who were playing around them that same morning. When I asked the soldiers about the incident they said they had to do what they had to do to reinstall order. "But they were kids, and they handcuffed them and put them on the floor. They were only kids!" a young Iraqi man exclaimed. The soldiers smiled and denied the claim. I did not want to push the situation as there was already a crowd of people gathering and I did not want to cause any trouble. Since I had my video camera with me, an Iraqi man kept on shouting, asking me to tape him as he was cursing the US and Britain for what they did in Iraq and for the lack of security and chaos the country is in at the moment.

Away from the gas station and in a nice and air conditioned home in Al Kademya, Boutan—a well-to-do businessman who could afford to have a generator in his home—had similar complaints about American soldiers as those of the men I met at the gas station. "I cried when America liberated my country, but now I changed my mind," Boutan said. He was yelled at by a few American soldiers early that morning for a traffic related issue. "You are just like Saddam in your treatment of Iraqis. There is no difference between how he treated us and how you are treating us now," he comments as he explains that his frustration was not that he was stopped by the American soldiers but with the way they treated him. He continues: "You are in our country and you need to respect our traditions and culture. We expect that from you just as you expect that from us when we are in your country. There is no justification for your maltreatment and lack of respect for the people you are supposedly liberating."

Boutan's neighbor Suha has similar complaints as she sees American soldiers patting down Iraqi women during house to house searches in southern Iraq on Abu Dabi TV. "How could you not be sensitive to our norms and traditions? How could you send male soldiers to pat our women down without any concerns that the women may feel violated?" Suha asks.

On Saddam's Oppression

As they are trying to deal with the current chaos in Iraq, Iraqis are also dealing with the sorrow brought about by Saddam Hussain's regime. Those who were missing family members for twenty years are now able at last to look for them and to even talk about their disappearance. "He is probably dead now," a friend was telling a family who have not heard from either of their two uncles since the mid 1980s. The two brothers came from a family that had Iranian roots. The whole family was taken at gunpoint from their

homes in the middle of the night. They were given 15 minutes to pack their things for their permanent exile. Some were put in prison; others were dropped off at the borders, and some simply disappeared. Saddam Hussain's soldiers raped many of the women. One of the brothers was separated from his pregnant wife, who ended up giving birth in prison and was then dropped off at the Iran border without knowing the whereabouts of her husband. The only reason the Abu Haider family was able to stay in Iraq was because their father was not originally Iranian. These are just some of the stories of the crimes and ethnic cleansing committed by the former regime for more than 35 years.

Other families are finally talking about how they lost their ten-year-old boys to execution because they were found praying in the mosque during the 1980s. Lists of names are being published in new Iraqi newspapers about those who were executed; sometimes the list includes six brothers from the same family who were all executed in the same day. People are talking about the number of prisons that are underground in main sites in Baghdad...under a public park, under a shopping mall, under the city's main gate. The list goes on and one does not know how much of it is true and how much is exaggerated. But people are finally talking...are finally ventilating, and crying, and able to mourn their losses.

I decided to visit the Association for Free Prisoners as I saw hundreds of visitors in front of the association's office on a daily basis. It is a new association that was established right after the war in an attempt to locate those missing during Saddam's era. Photographs of young men fill the walls of the association. Men and some women are roaming around checking the walls filled with thousands of names that have been identified. Some have come from out of town and traveled for hours to see if they can find any information on their missing family members.

I meet a woman at the door of the association who is illiterate but keeps coming to the association in the hopes that someone can help her find out if there is any news from her son. "I need to hear something," she says. "I need to know if he is still alive or if he is dead. Even if he has been missing for 15 years, I need to know something about my son."

Another woman who is on her way out of the building tells me this is the seventh time she has visited the association hoping to hear something about her two brothers who have been disappeared since 1981. They were among 400,000 Iraqis who were deported because they had Iranian roots. Of these people, 170,000 disappeared; about 80,000 of them were young men aged 18 and above. While the families were deported to Iran, men who were 18 and older were kept in prison or sent to the front lines to fight. "Even if they are dead," the woman said as she left, "we need to find some evidence, anything, just so we can know whether to keep our hope alive or to accept their death."

I took only a few more steps when I met another woman looking for her son. He has been disappeared since 1991. He had just graduated from the Oil Academy when he was drafted into the army. Two weeks later the first Gulf War started, and she has not heard from him since. This is the fourth time she has visited the association trying to find news of her son's whereabouts. Another woman tells me she is looking for her two brothers

who have been disappeared since 1991. Her third brother had been executed. A woman standing next to her tells me “they” took her son from her front door. They took him on August 21, 1992. He was 18 at the time and had not even finished school. She showed me his picture that she has in her purse while the other woman showed me the papers she has regarding her brothers’ records.

Another woman interrupts us. She tells me her two brothers, her brother-in-law and six of his brothers were all executed by Saddam’s regime. Amid her tears, she tells me about her brother whom the Baathists had taken when he was 17 because he did not want to join the Baathist party. “Ask Watban!” one man shouts, “The Americans have him and as he was the Minister of Interior he must know where the records are.” “Five million people were executed by Saddam!” another man shouts. Another man shows me the execution certificate for his brothers.

“Saddam executed freely,” a woman who lost her 18-year-old son tells me, crying. As I tried to find my way around the small compound of the house, voices interrupted each other about the killings, the mass graves, the executions, questions about human rights groups, and appeals for the international community to help them. A young woman who is looking for her two cousins who have been disappeared since 1980 started talking to all the people surrounding me about the frustrations Iraqis are going through. “He took the best of Iraqis,” she said, referring to Saddam, “He took the best of our sons.” “I used to be scared of my brother, my neighbor, my friends. I would never express my opinion in front of them lest they hurt my family, and me,” she said. “It is not Saddam that killed our sons, it is the Baathists who were his supporters, it is the neighbors and the friends and the husbands and the wives who informed on each other!” another man shouted.

A man tells me about the mass graves he had seen earlier that week. “There are women, there are children, they buried them alive in mass graves,” he describes. “Someone save us from this situation!” someone shouts from nearby. “We need help, we need a government, we need security...someone please help lift us from this misery.”

As I walk through the crowd, I meet a woman who is resting with her granddaughter by the walls filled with the lists. She shows me her son’s graduation pictures. He was 25 when he disappeared, leaving three children behind. His daughter is now a young woman sitting shyly next to her grandmother. They have been coming here every day for the last two weeks, since the association was opened. He is one of the two sons that she has. The woman next to her starts crying as she tells me about her son who disappeared in 1992. She has his information on a piece of paper as she is illiterate and needs someone’s help to find him.

I try to rush out of the place to attend a press conference of one of the many political parties in Iraq. An old man grabs me and tells me, “We need a government. If we don’t have a government soon, we will fight anybody who stands in our way as we take things into our hands.”

The danger in today's chaotic situation is that it is leading some people to wish for the return of Saddam Hussain's days. This can be seen especially among the mostly although not exclusively middle class Sunni population. Some are actually fondly remembering Saddam's days. "We wish he were back. Alas for his days," says Muhsen. When I ask him about Saddam's oppression, his mother jumps in and explains: "Saddam only punished those who opposed him and got in his way. If you didn't do anything he left you alone." But what about the hundreds of thousands of Kurds and Shia'a who were executed, killed in mass graves, unjustly and only because of their ethnic origins?" I ask with vexation, which only increases when I hear Muhsen responding, "Anything is better than the situation we are in today."