

# Hope in a Land of Uncertainty

## *The Untold Story in Iraq*

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The Iraqis talking with me were barely fazed by the intense afternoon heat, but I could taste the salt streaming down my face as I tried to concentrate. Sweat was soaking through my pants, and dehydration was beginning to take its toll. In spite of the heat, I realized that the Iraqis were offering me valuable information about their remarkable perspectives. They told me that Iraq did not need to be reconstructed; instead, it was their souls that needed repair. Restoring buildings, fixing roads, and even developing an infrastructure seem relatively easy when compared to the difficult task of mending spirits crushed by over thirty years of Ba'ath Party rule.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein, stories from Iraq highlight economic ruin, poverty, and attacks on American soldiers. Pictures show angry protests against U.S. occupation and a country devastated by war, but few stories relate how years of state-sponsored fear, violence, and murder have affected Iraq's citizens. News reports do not show the faces of the Iraqis up close—full of thankfulness that Saddam is gone, hope for the future, and determination to improve their lives. Their untold story of resilience leaves me optimistic about the future democratic transition of Iraq.

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(DART), I spent nearly four months, from March to July 2003, working in Iraq. My specific job on the DART was to identify, monitor, and respond to human rights abuses in the immediate post-war context. Prior to entering Iraq, the DART had no idea what to expect. Would we be treated as liberators? If not, would it be safe enough to work? It was a

by oil spills; lush marshlands had become uninhabitable toxic sites. Grimy children, waving and begging for food and water, came running from shacks that intermittently lined the road. Near the city of Basra, pipes spewed water where thirsty people had punctured them. One of my colleagues remarked, "We're back in the Stone Age."

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relief when entire villages came to greet our arrival with delight. The Iraqis were inquisitive, cheerful, and thirsting for information, asking, "Is Saddam dead? When will electricity be restored? Where are the prisoners of war?" Every town credited their newly-found freedom to President George W. Bush, and people often chanted, "U.S.A." and "Down Saddam!" At first the crowds were so numerous that it was difficult to drive or walk in the streets; assessing the food, water, sanitation, and human rights situation seemed nearly impossible. However, I soon found that reprisal killings were not occurring on the scale originally predicted, and it was heartening to find very little ethnic tension among the Shia, Sunni, and Christians in the south.

Despite my best preparations, I was astonished by the degree of devastation wrought by Saddam's regime. On my first drive to Basra from Kuwait in mid-April, the landscape was scarred with long-abandoned fighting positions, skeletons of burned-out vehicles, and forgotten military equipment. Swamps were littered with trash and contaminated

The city of Basra was a disaster. Trash littered the roads. Residents had cut down trees that once lined the streets. Sewers were overflowing and many buildings were dilapidated from years of neglect. The windows and doors of most stores were bricked and barricaded to prevent looters from helping themselves. Rickety bridges spanned dirty canals that led to the once thriving Shatt al Arab river. Fires were still smoldering in looted buildings.

Feelings of pity for the people quickly turned to anger towards Saddam as I approached his palace in Basra. He had ordered the sanctuary built for his close friends and family, but had never personally visited it. I found it absurd that the Iraqi people were left to scratch out a living, always in fear of imprisonment, while Saddam and the party elite enjoyed extravagant lifestyles. The stark contrast between the plush palace and the filthy, barren city spoke volumes. From the palace grounds, perched on the river and surrounded by manmade lakes, rose exquisite buildings with columns, ornate doors, and grand rooftops. Quaint bridges crossed the well-kept canals that

connected the grounds. The entertainment building, with its marble floors and walls, intricate moldings, ornate mosaics, and high ceilings, served as a dining facility for British forces. Soldiers with salt-stained uniforms, dirty faces, and blackened hands wandered in and out. A terrible stench (water for showers was very limited) and the relentless heat made dining in the crowded grand ballroom a memorable experience—one that I prefer not to relive.

With at least twenty-five palaces around the country, how many did Saddam actually use? My anger recurred with each palace visit. Saddam forcibly kept his people poor and stole their well-deserved opportunities to prosper. Unfortunately, with all the palaces occupied by Coalition forces, to the Iraqis it seemed that the foreigners had simply replaced Saddam's regime. Not much had changed: the palace grounds were still off-limits to common Iraqis, and the people had little influence on decisions made on their behalf. The little interaction Iraqis did have with the Coalition was primarily through the soldiers, most of whom could not clearly articulate its goals or give simple answers about when electricity would be restored. Many Iraqis questioned the existence of the so-called democracy that the West had promised. Lack of communication, understanding, and, above all, interaction compounded a growing sense of suspicion and unease.

Traveling north from Basra to towns such as Nasiriyah, Rifa, Najaf, and Hillah, I observed a recurring dichotomy in the sentiments of Iraqis: gratitude and joy that Saddam was gone combined with growing impatience that no one seemed to have an answer to the question: what next? Although civil affairs units were feverishly working to establish town

councils and restore basic services, the lack of reliable information gave way to rumors, conspiracy theories, and general misinformation. For example, some Iraqis believed that, since U.S. technology was so advanced, the only reason electricity was not working was because they were being punished. Indeed, Saddam had turned off the power to coerce Iraqis into obeying him. Rumors spread of subversive groups loyal to Saddam killing interpreters and other Coalition collaborators. Without an effective media strategy to describe the transition plans and combat misinformation, discontent slowly spread.

In early May, I arrived in Baghdad and was surprised to experience positive receptions similar to those in the smaller villages. War damage was restricted mainly to facilities used by the former regime, but rampant looting was evident. Doors, windows, hinges, wiring, and even pipes had been taken from public buildings. Somber frames, blackened by fires that no one had attempted to douse, were all that remained of most office buildings. In the notorious slum Sadr City (formerly Saddam's City), piles of garbage three meters high filled some streets. The places where children played were covered by lakes of black sludge so putrid that I nearly became sick while driving near them. The entire grounds of an elementary school were covered in fluorescent green sewage. Despite these depressing circumstances, we often found it difficult to work without being surrounded by optimistic and curious citizens.

Iraqis' incredible resilience despite dreadful conditions led to encouraging results. Many began removing the bricks from storefront windows, and small businesses quickly became operational. Only weeks after the war ended, Iraqis were

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cleaning streets and repairing buildings. Commerce began to emerge, bringing with it a sense of normalcy. In cafés, I overheard conversations about freedom and listened to anecdotes of tragedies that would never again occur. Satellite dishes went up all over Baghdad. For the first time, Iraqis had unfettered access to the outside world. Human rights organizations and groups of former prisoners formed; these units began to collect intelligence documents, information on the missing, and locations of mass graves. All of this would have been unimaginable just weeks prior.

Due to my focus on human rights, I concentrated my efforts on responding to the mass grave situation and helping devise a suitable response. Sadness overwhelmed me as I witnessed grieving families frantically digging to find their children. Skeletal remains of children, women, and the elderly were common in the graves. Many skulls, still blindfolded, had holes in the back of the head. One mother fell prostrate in grief after finding the remains of three of her five missing children. As an observer, I did not know how to express my condolences. At all the gravesites, I felt uncomfortable and sensed I was intruding on a private Iraqi experience. I put my camera away, embarrassed by the reporters and photographers snapping pictures, stealing moments of grief.

It was alarming to learn that Iraqis typically held the United States responsible for the bodies in the graves. It seemed

perplexing at first, but the Iraqis recounted how President George H.W. Bush had urged them to rise up against Saddam after the first Gulf War. Encouraged by the wishes of the most powerful man in the world (at least in Iraqi eyes), the rebellion began in the South and succeeded all the way to al-Hillah—just sixty miles from Baghdad. After citizens killed and expelled Ba'ath Party loyalists from cities, Saddam unleashed the Republican Guard. Although depleted by the war, it was still able to quickly and brutally crush the rebellion. Young men suspected of taking part were rounded up, often with their families, and summarily executed in droves. Bulldozers dug trenches big enough for one hundred people. Blindfolded soldiers and civilians were crowded into pits and shot at point-blank range.

Although Iraqis held the United States responsible, I found that even those who had suffered tragic losses were still thankful that the United States finally finished the job of overthrowing Saddam. I worked with communities affected by the trauma of mass graves, helped them to prioritize their needs, and incorporated this information into a holistic mass grave response plan. USAID gave grants to local human rights organizations that collected names of missing persons and helped coordinate some local exhumations. In some cases, volunteer diggers received training on proper exhumation techniques from the international forensic team that eventu-

ally arrived.

To develop a Coalition mass grave policy, our first goal was to devise an integrative response that took into account local concerns. We gathered advice from internationals with expertise in the field; then, using minimal assets, we developed a policy that would both successfully address the situation and be politically palatable for the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). In the end, coalition governments were invited to send forensic teams to assist, and the CPA ultimately took the lead in coordinating the entire response.

The sobering reality in Iraq is that the majority of families have personal, traumatic stories of violence, abuse, disappearances, or outright murder. Despite their unimaginable losses, Iraqis personally pained by the mass graves did not erupt in violence, lash out against the international community, or even carry

innocent civilians. It was an admirable choice, and USAID supported them with basic office equipment and training so that these groups could effectively implement the projects they had already started.

What does all this mean for a successful democratic transition in Iraq? Over thirty years of fear and oppression have left the people ripe for democratic change. The recent explosion of political parties and civic groups represents a solid foundation for the blossoming of a homegrown civil society. Although Iraqis lack understanding of the nature of civil society, its role in a democracy, and the role of NGOs, they thirst for this knowledge. These people are well-educated but woefully behind in modern development literature, technical training, and business practices. Their future looks positive: modernizing the education curricula is a priority for the Ministry of Education, training workshops for

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out large-scale reprisals against former Ba'athists. On the contrary, some Iraqi human rights organizations that had taken the lead in collecting, recording, and safeguarding former regime documentation pertaining to the imprisonment, abuse, execution, and disappearance of political detainees did not reveal the names of the perpetrators. They sought to prevent further bloodshed by withholding information concerning the torturers, executioners, and soldiers ordered to shoot

emerging Iraqi NGOs are standing room only, and frequent requests for Internet connection exhibit genuine ambition towards global integration. Most encouragingly, Iraqis are not waiting for hand-outs; rather, they are actively engaging the international community and seeking the professional expertise necessary to participate in a democratic process.

Iraq's comparative advantage lies in its ample natural resources. Apart from large oil reserves, plentiful water exists

within reach of wells. The fertile soil between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers is ideally suited for agricultural production. A national rail system and navigable waterways lead to large ports in Basra and Umm Qasr. Although industrial production uses out-of-date Russian technology, the abundance of cheap labor will inevitably attract foreign investment. Home to Babylon and other cities of ancient Mesopotamia, the tourism industry alone could generate enormous revenue. Iraq contains more than enough components for economic success; now the challenge is to build legitimate government institutions in the face of increasing attacks against the Coalition, internationals, and Iraqis alike.

Some argue that the deteriorating security situation will prolong the transition to democracy and might eventually derail the process. Conversely, in the streets of Baghdad and elsewhere, Iraqis feel the crime situation is improving. As the police gain increasing responsibility from the Coalition, they are making arrests, filling new prisons, and recapturing the hardcore criminals released by Saddam's amnesty prior to the war. Terrorist activity, however, is on the rise. As one rather astute Iraqi put it, "Iraq is like an open wound and germs are pouring in."

The local police force and new Iraqi National Army currently have neither the capacity nor the will to prevent terrorism from fostering a climate of fear and con-

tinuing instability. But this is changing: Iraqi police are gaining confidence and numbers; the new army is taking shape and assuming border duties; and citizens, feeling threatened by recent bombings, are more forthcoming with information on terrorists. International pressure on Iraq's neighbors—specifically Syria, Iran, and Saudi Arabia—is key to stopping terrorists from making Iraq their playground. As nation-building becomes an increasingly international affair, the European Union and Russia will take more active roles.

I have met too many optimistic Iraqis to believe they are in the minority. From my experience, Iraqis overwhelmingly want a better future, free from oppression and abuse. They recognize that the U.S. occupation, at least in the short term, is instrumental to achieving these goals. When asked if they truly want U.S. forces to withdraw, the Iraqis' criticism stops, albeit temporarily, and they give a resounding "No!" The consequences of the resulting political and security vacuum are too dire to contemplate. The impatience for tangible progress that I observed throughout Iraq is a byproduct of Iraqi resourcefulness and resilience. Saddam Hussein repeatedly told them they were the greatest people on earth; while it was state propaganda then, this is what they aspire to be today. The criminals, terrorists, and temporary instability cannot dampen the repressed Iraqi spirit.