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## Fault Lines to Trenches: Iraq 2003-2014.

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## **Fault Lines to Trenches: Iraq 2003-2014**

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**Lily Hamourtzidou \***

There were fault lines in Iraq before 2003. The state was weak economically, after years of wars and economic sanctions; it was weak politically, with an unpopular dictator, at home and abroad; it was weak societally, clearly divided into Sunnis, Shias and Kurds. The fault lines were to widen so much that they reached the size of trenches. Many factors contributed to that. The initial unprovoked attack of 2003 by one of the world's most powerful states was the first one. It was followed by years of occupation, insurgency, terrorism and increasingly competing interests. Internally, the interests of the Sunnis, the Shias, the Kurds, the religious fanatics, the secular, the non-Muslim; externally, the interests of the US and the UK, Iran and Syria, all of which want to expand their political and ideological sphere of influence at any cost. Those competing interests led to the internal collapse of Iraqi society and remain the sad legacy of the invasion.

National power is composed of quantitative and qualitative factors: geography, resources, industrial capacity and military capabilities; national character, national morale, quality of government. In all of these, Iraq has been stripped of any power it may have had. The resources it was lucky to have, due to its geographical location, are being exploited by others, while a third of the population live below the poverty line. Its army was dismantled by its occupiers and is still struggling to regroup and manage the daily violence. Whatever national character and morale it had before, it lost in a sea of betrayals, collaborations, mutual attacks and accusations, while its government, elected twice under occupation, only inspires mistrust and revolt among its people.

Iraq is now a fragmented state, where each party struggles to gain power, at the expense of the others, as they have incompatible security requirements, which means that the security of each cannot be assured at the same time as the security of its rivals or enemies. Thus they seek relative gains, where their own gain is a loss to another, rather than absolute gains, which require cooperation. In a state as weak and fragmented as Iraq, all sides see the struggle for power and its acquisition as a means to their survival.

Al Qaeda in Iraq has found fertile ground in all this discontent and has attacked the Iraqi government, as the Syrian government is being attacked this year, by killing members of its army, its police force, its politicians and journalists, as well as its Shia population. Indeed, the past year has seen the massacres of entire families, as they sleep, or travel to a holy place, sometimes 5, sometimes 12 family members at a time... The faults are now as wide and as deep as trenches.

### **“Operation Iraqi Freedom” and its victims**

There was no reason why Saddam Hussein should not be defeated swiftly and easily; Iraq was a country deeply divided by religion and ethnicity, broken by war and impoverished by years of

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economic sanctions. It was a vulnerable state. A weak state, one easily threatened militarily, politically and economically, one that could be controlled with little effort and few casualties. And so operation “Shock and Awe” began on March 19 2003. And the bombing of Baghdad commenced.

The bombing emerged from and was justified, in the minds of many, by the 20<sup>th</sup> century belief in the goodness of empire. For the imperialists, writes Beau Grosscup, “those outside the core of Western culture were deemed undeserving of or unprepared for self-determination... The European and North American collective and individual selves found their identity and place in the world in terms of privilege, dominance and hegemony” (Grosscup 2006: 29). Who but we the good, we the powerful, we the privileged, was best placed to intervene?

And so it began. Millions of us sat transfixed before our TV screens, watching in shock and awe as bombs and missiles exploded. The reports came with the warning they contained flashing images, and true enough the sky over Baghdad flashed orange and golden, the sounds of war filling our ears. On the ground, it must have been deafening. Terrifying. The narrative of terror that began on March 19 2003 was to last for years: terror from the sky, terror on the ground, terror from the foreign soldier, terror from one’s neighbour... It would become, in turns, a narrative of justifications, of explanations, of accusations. 11 years later, it continues.

It is a violence we have been powerless to stop –those of us who opposed the invasion, who opposed the 9-year occupation of Iraq, who oppose terrorism. As civilians started to get killed daily in their hundreds, we watched, we documented. Around 136,000 civilians recorded killed so far, 4,200 of them children, 14,900 known to have been killed by our coalition forces, according to Iraq Body Count (IBC) (Iraqbodycount 2014). Civilians such as those 17 members of one family, killed in an air strike on April 4 2003 [Iraq Body Count incident page(IBCip) 2003a]; the 2 children machine-gunned at a checkpoint on May 28 2003 (IBCip 2003b); 7-year-old Afrah Moneem, shot dead at a Baghdad market on September 10 2003 (IBCidp 2003a); the 2 killed in a helicopter strike on June 25 2007 (IBCip 2007a); the 2 elderly people killed in a raid as they slept on a rooftop in Sadr City on May 30 2007 (IBCip 2007b); the 17 killed in another raid in Sadr City on October 21 2007 (IBCip 2007c), 2-year-old Ali Hamed among them (IBCidp 2007a). Civilians like little Ali Hussein, the boy in the orange shorts, who died in a Sadr City air strike on April 29 2008 (IBCip 2008), where 30 people lost their lives; or 8-year-old Sa’adiya Saddam, shot dead in Diwaniya on February 7 2009 (IBCip 2009) ...Collateral damage.

The killings were committed by many different perpetrators and by a variety of methods; coalition forces, insurgents, terrorists, American soldiers, British soldiers, Sunnis, Shia have brought about the death of innocents through air strikes, suicide bombings, car bombs, shootings, IEDs... The victims, people from all walks of life: shepherds, street cleaners, construction workers, policemen, doctors, clerics, teachers, journalists, politicians, school children... Killed as they walked, shopped, worked, drove, slept, changed a tyre...

Dr Haidar al-Baaj was shot dead in Basra on October 15 2003 (IBCidp 2003b), one of 145 doctors and medics to be killed since the invasion. Other victims include:

- Hana Abdul Qader, politician, shot in Mosul on March 6 2005 (IBCidp 2005).
- Widad al-Shaml, teacher, shot in Baquba on May 11 2006 (IBCidp 2006a).
- Mohammed Shihab al-Dulaimi, politician, shot in Baghdad on September 16 2006 (IBCidp 2006b).
- Asmaeel Taher, teacher, shot in Mosul on May 2 2007 (IBCidp 2007b).

- Abdul-Amir Ezz Al-Din, labourer, shot in Kirkuk on August 10 2007 (IBCidp 2007c).
- Maron Awanis, taxi driver, shot in Baghdad on October 9 2007 (IBCidp 2007d).
- Salih Saif Aldin, journalist, shot in Baghdad on October 14 2007 (IBCidp 2007e).
- Paulos Faraj Rahho, priest, abducted and killed in Mosul on March 13 2008 (IBCidp 2008a).
- Ahmed Salim, cameraman, shot in Mosul on September 13 2008 (IBCidp 2008b).
- Mohammed Akeel, schoolboy, blown up in Baghdad on July 9 2009 (IBCidp 2009).
- Nazhan Isam Aziz, labourer, shot in Dubiz on April 21 2012 (IBCidp 2012).

Images of the last 11 years include the wooden coffins, the bodies in white shrouds, the names - foreign to our ears- the faces -some smiling in old photographs- the blood, the blown-out cars... The suspects -blindfolded and handcuffed... the heroes, like 18-year-old vendor Ahmed Draiwel, who picked up a bomb and ran with it, away from the busy market, in Sadr City, in March of 2007 (IBCidp 2007f), the only one who died when it exploded.

Thousands of civilians have been killed each year, since the night of the flashing images. At its peak, the terror claimed 29,027 in 2006; at its calmest, 4,073 in 2010.

Meanwhile Iraq was “liberated” and “democratised,” with elections taking place during the years of occupation. As the killing continued. Every day as I turned the page in my notepad and wrote the new date on top, I feared the daily count, the names and ages of the newly dead... Baghdad: 5 by car bomb... Mahmudiya: 4 children by IED... Karbala: 45 by suicide bomber... Mahmoud Modher... Junaid Mohammed Khairallah... Nora Sabah Gadan... family of Saler Hamzeh Ali Moussawi...

The narrative of terror is the narrative of justifications, the narrative of explanations, the narrative of accusations. It is the narrative of the names and faces of the innocent. It is the narrative of the helpless and the poor, the millions of refugees, the bodies found and picked up from the streets of Baghdad, buried in mass graves, unidentified, unclaimed. We are the lucky ones, who witness the horror from afar, our TV screens, our newspapers, our computer monitors. We can watch in shock and awe, as it all unfolds, less and less frequently now, safe from the missiles, safe from the car bombs, the only danger those flashing images hurting our eyes.

### **The blurring of war and peace, tyranny and democracy, captivity and liberation.**

11 years on and questions still remain about the decision to intervene in and declare war on Iraq, based on humanitarian claims made by the leaders of the US and the UK. After the WMD claims were proven to have been unfounded, the justification for the invasion increasingly focused on humanitarian concerns, Saddam Hussein’s cruel regime, internal insecurity, lack of freedom and violation of human rights.

11 years on and Iraq is officially at peace, it is officially a democracy and it has officially been liberated. Yet the lines between peace and war, democracy and oppression, freedom and entrapment have become so blurred, that doubt is cast on both past statements and current realities, even by well-meaning supporters of the invasion.

### ***The speeches***

On February 26 2003, 4 weeks before the invasion, George W. Bush stated: “The nation of Iraq, with its proud heritage, abundant resources and skilled and educated people, is fully capable of moving toward democracy and living in freedom” (Bush 2004). After the invasion, and after the war was officially over, in November 2003, he spoke of the American mission to spread democracy and freedom. “Freedom can be the future of every nation,” he said to the National Endowment for democracy. “The advance of freedom leads to peace” (The Baltimore Sun 2003)

In the UK, Tony Blair was also talking of a “roadmap for peace”... “a larger global agenda –on poverty and sustainable development, on democracy and human rights, on the good governance of nations” (Guardian 2003). He spoke of his “detestation of Saddam.” Before him, he said, Iraq was wealthy, but

*today it is impoverished, 60% of its population dependent on food aid. Thousands of children die needlessly every year from lack of food and medicine. Four million people out of a population of just over 20 million are in exile. The brutality of the repression - the death and torture camps, the barbaric prisons for political opponents, the routine beatings for anyone or their families suspected of disloyalty are well documented. I recall a few weeks ago talking to an Iraqi exile and saying to her that I understood how grim it must be under the lash of Saddam. "But you don't", she replied. "You cannot. You do not know what it is like to live in perpetual fear." And she is right. We take our freedom for granted. But imagine not to be able to speak or discuss or debate or even question the society you live in. To see friends and family taken away and never daring to complain. To suffer the humility of failing courage in face of pitiless terror. That is how the Iraqi people live. Leave Saddam in place and that is how they will continue to live (Guardian 2003).*

### ***War and peace***

Years later, Blair had “no regrets” over his decision, which he would take again, as he stated at the Chilcot Inquiry in January 2010. By then, over 110,000 civilians had been killed in Iraq...

Since the war has been “over” in Iraq, that is, since May 1 2003, not a day has gone by when people have not been killed in bombings and shootings. Not one day. Since the official end of the war, 128,600 civilian deaths have been documented by IBC, on top of the 7,400 recorded during the invasion, coming to a total of 136,000 so far. How peaceful is that? What sort of peace are the Iraqis living in?

The daily conflict has led to millions of Iraqis living as refugees, in poverty and disease, both internally and externally, in need, in fear, in uncertainty. The war-like conditions of their lives make a mockery of any claim to have brought them peace, security or a sense of safety and protection from violent death. War is not over for them. It has not been over since March 20 2003, but has been allowed to continue and flourish, adding more corpses of men, women, children, poor, wealthy, young, old, professionals, unemployed, educated, illiterate, hopeful and hopeless alike. The bombers and the shooters, American, British, Iraqi or any other nationality, have killed people of all ages, social class and religion. Almost indiscriminately.

Iraq is now as dangerous as it was in 2003, when our coalition planes dropped bombs every night, and no city, town or village is safe. No street, or building. No home, or school, or office. No mosque, no church and no market. It is what happens in war.

To say that a war is being fought on Iraqi soil in the last 11 years would be too simple. Since 2003 Iraq has, in fact, witnessed not one, but many types of war: preemptive, aggressive, civil, guerrilla, religious, proxy, as well as war of liberation.

The first was the “preemptive” attack on Iraq by American and British coalition forces, to, it was claimed, gain a strategic advantage in an impending war before that attack (by Saddam Hussein) materialised. This military offensive was a war of aggression, an invasion, which was illegitimate and unauthorised by the UN Security Council and which gave the coalition forces control of and authority over Iraqi territory. It was followed by 8 years of occupation and resulted in thousands of Iraqis losing their lives.

Civil war followed the 2003 invasion, as the fragmented Iraqi society started to further divide and as the cracks deepened. Alliances started to form against perceived enemies, on the basis of religion, political affiliation and ideology. Organised groups struggled to gain power over others to achieve independence and, later, to change government policies or to overthrow it, as the grievances increased. It was in 2006 and 2007 that Iraq experienced its highest levels of sectarian violence, when the fighting between Sunni and Shia peaked. The insurgency was to last to the present day.

Iraqi insurgency has taken several forms. It has been a fight against the occupying forces, a fight against the Iraqi government, as well as a fight against another faction, or even against former members of the same faction, as in the case of Sunnis who sided with US forces in 2008, during the “Sunni Awakening.” In short, those seen as either terrorists, or collaborators, or both. Following the American withdrawal in December 2011, a renewed wave of sectarian and anti-government insurgency swept Iraq, raising fears of another civil war.

This asymmetric warfare has had several actors. According to the Chief of the British General Staff, General Sir Richard Dannatt, speaking in September 2007,

*The militants (and I use the word deliberately because not all are insurgents, or terrorists, or criminals; they are a mixture of them all) are well armed – probably with outside help, and probably from Iran. By motivation, essentially, and with the exception of the Al Qaeda in Iraq element who have endeavoured to exploit the situation for their own ends, our opponents are Iraqi Nationalists, and are most concerned with their own needs – jobs, money, security – and the majority are not bad people (Dannatt 2007).*

### **The armed groups**

There are perhaps as many as 40 different groups, but the major groups of armed insurgency are:

- Ba'athists, supporters of Saddam Hussein's administration, including army or intelligence officers, whose ideology is a variant of Pan-Arabism. Their goal was the restoration of the former Ba'athist government to power, and later joined forces with guerrilla organisations that opposed the U.S.-led invasion. They are increasingly under Syrian influence.

- Iraqi nationalists, Iraqis who believe in Iraqi self-determination and advocate the country's territorial integrity. They also rejected the presence of the coalition forces and took arms against them.
- Sunni Islamists, Salafi/Wahhabi "jihadists." Salafis advocate a return to a strict understanding of Islam and oppose any non-Muslim groups and influences, and regularly attack the Christian, Mandaean and Yazidi communities of Iraq. They also attack Shia Muslims, whom they consider apostates.
- Shi'a militias, including the Iran-linked Badr Organisation and the Mahdi Army. Shia Islamists are thought to be Iranian-run groups, influenced ideologically and armed by Iran. The Badr Organisation was formed by the Iranian Government to fight the Saddam Hussein-controlled Iraq during the Iraq-Iran War 1980-88. Following the 2003 invasion, they moved back to Iraq, from Iran, to fight alongside the US-led forces against other insurgents. They now support the al-Maliki government. The Mahdi Army was made up of supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr. They were the first serious opposition to the US-led coalition from the Shia community and fought against the occupying forces for the next 5 years. At his most popular, Al-Sadr had the support of 68% of Iraqis, according to a poll by the Iraqi Centre for Research and Strategic Studies, as he fought to liberate Iraq. The Mahdi Army was also thought to have been trained by Iran: "There seems to have been a strategic decision taken sometime over late winter or early spring (of 2006) by Tehran, along with their partners in Lebanese Hezbollah, to provide more support to Sadr to increase pressure on the U.S.," according to a senior American intelligence official (New York Times 2006).
- Foreign Islamist volunteers, including those often linked to al Qaeda and largely driven by the Salafi/Wahhabi doctrine. They are mostly Arabs from neighbouring countries, Syria and Saudi Arabia primarily, Wahhabi fundamentalists who wish to assist the insurgency against western forces and their allies in Iraq. They are fighting a jihad under the ideological umbrella of Al-Qaeda and Ansar al-Islam.

The warring parties, including the US-led coalition forces and the current Iraqi government forces, have acted to and claimed to: liberate, occupy, subjugate, control, defeat, avenge and defend -territories (the Iraqi state, or parts of it), people (the Iraqis, or various religious and ethnic groups within Iraq) and values (western, muslim, democratic, national).

### ***Tyranny and democracy***

Iraq has had a democratically elected government since 2006. Nuri al-Maliki and his party were again elected in 2010 and another election is due to take place next month. It will be the first not to take place under US occupation.

Officially, Iraq is now a democracy... a far cry from the cruel dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, as echoed in the speeches of George W. Bush and Tony Blair, with its repression and brutality, torture, perpetual fear and terror. Or is it?

A tyranny is a cruel and oppressive government or rule, with unrestrained exercise of power and undue severity or harshness. Iraqi democracy has all the characteristics of a tyranny.

Since 2006 thousands have been arrested, imprisoned and tortured by the regime. Protesters have been shot at and killed, any insurgency is met with shelling that kills insurgents as well as civilians, while political opponents have been persecuted. In the past 2 years, since the US army has left Iraq, the situation has deteriorated to where now there are nightly shellings and mortar attacks by the Iraqi army, in addition to the terrorist acts which never ceased.

In Ramadi and Fallujah, residents have accused government forces of illegally detaining citizens, torturing and raping them, while doctors and NGO workers accuse the government of war crimes. The Iraqi army is reportedly preventing medical supplies from entering the cities.

On February 14, Nikolay Mladenov, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon's Special Representative for Iraq and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, expressed great concern about the deteriorating security situation in Fallujah. "More than 60,000 families have been displaced since the fighting broke out in the Anbar province," he said, and "the displaced families are running out of food and drinking water and suffer from poor sanitation and limited access to health care" (Jamail 2014)

Angry protesters have been demanding "an end to checkpoints," "an end to unlawful home raids and detentions," and "an end to gangsters and secret prisons." It sounds like something out of the Saddam Hussein era. It certainly does not sound like a democracy where the power lies with the people and the laws made to protect their rights, where there is equality and equal representation, where there is respect and where citizens are not subjected to torture and killing by the state.

It was this "democracy" Gilbert Achcar described in 2007:

*What Washington wants, and what it means by democracy, is the installation of governments under US control with democratic facades, and nothing more... The Bush administration used to say that a post invasion Iraq would serve as an attractive model in the region. Now, Iraq has definitely not become an appealing model in the Middle East; on the contrary, it has become an appalling model, because people now associate this democracy with deep insecurity and civil war (Chomsky and Achcar 2007: 51)*

### ***Captivity and liberation***

"The advance of freedom leads to peace," said George W. Bush. A liberated Iraq would, presumably, become peaceful. No internal threats and itself no threat to other states. As has already been established, there is no peace in Iraq, but is there freedom?

An essential feature of liberty is the freedom from external restraint. "The free man is the man who is not in irons, nor imprisoned in a gaol, nor terrorized like a slave by the fear of punishment," according to Helvetius (Berlin 1958: 122). The free citizen has freedom of movement, of religion, of speech; he/she is free from constraints put on their right to protest, to participate in government, to have their voices heard and their concerns recognised; finally free citizens are able to fulfil their potential.

In war-torn Iraq, where children are blown up on their way to school, where daily hunger torments nearly a third of the population, where fear rules in every town and every village, how free can people be? How free can people be when they fear for their lives, when they fear their neighbours, their rulers? How free can people be when they fear roadside bombs when driving,



car bombs when shopping, gunfire and suicide bombers when stopping at checkpoints or attending a funeral? How free can people be when they fear mortar fire and shelling as they go to sleep? And how can people, children, fulfil their potential in such a state?

The Iraqis, the “liberated” nation Bush had envisaged moving towards democracy and living in freedom, are captives of their own leaders, they are captives of their fragmented society and they are captives of the legacy left by American and British forces. Moreover, they are trapped in this captivity and are not allowed to escape it. They are not allowed by those in power and they are not allowed by those with the power of weapons -in Iraq, in the wider Middle East and in the West. Ultimately, it is the interests that are being fought on Iraqi soil that hold the population captive.

### **Security?**

“The core of security, the protection from harm, assumes a field of relationships, including a threatener, the threatened, the protector or means of protection, and the protected” (Fierke 2007: 46). In today’s Iraq the blurring of the lines between war and peace, tyranny and democracy, freedom and oppression has resulted in confusion as to who is threatened, who is the threat, who is the protector and what the means of protection are. The relationships between protector and protected, threatener and threatened, are in disorder.

Nowhere is this better illustrated now than in Falluja, a city under the control of militants. Al-Qaeda-inspired militants are “trying to show they can run it, providing social services, policing the streets and implementing Shariah rulings in a bid to win the support of its Sunni Muslim population. Gunmen in ski masks and Afghan-style tunics patrol the streets, but also perform a sort of community outreach. On a recent day, they were seen repairing damaged electricity poles and operating bulldozers to remove concrete blast walls and clear garbage. Others planted flowers in a highway median, and some fighters approached residents in the street and apologized for gaps in services, promising to address them.” (Legal Monitor Worldwide, March 24, 2014). In the last three months, control of Falluja rests with two groups: ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) and the Military Council for Tribal Revolutionaries, a mixture of tribal representatives and militants drawn from the Saddam-era army.

Hard as they try to show support for the residents and assume the role of protectors, they are still feared by many. They recently severed the right hand of a man accused of theft and paraded him through the city, to show who is the law. The hand amputation incident underlined their intention to demonstrate their toughness, which matches that of the government that arrests and tortures routinely.

In Buhriz, in the province of Diyala, militants have burnt homes and shops, targeting the families of security forces and those rejecting extremist organisations and cooperating with security forces. At the same time, those security forces are continuing the shelling of Falluja and Ramadi and the killing of civilians, under the direction of the government. In a tragic parallel, the line is once again blurred between the saviours and the aggressors, as it was in 2003, when our coalition forces came to Iraq as invaders and as liberators.

With all the different warring parties (religious, political, insurgent, terrorist, nationalist, foreign, government-led), when anyone could be the next victim of an attack, when

anyone can be an attacker, and when the means of protection –the Iraqi security forces- are causing harm to civilians instead, there is no security. As deep as the divisions have become since 2003, as much as the existing fault lines have been turned to trenches, Iraq remains unclear, undefined and deeply insecure, caught up in a perpetual war.

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