

# ERASING IRAQ

THE HUMAN COSTS OF CARNAGE

MICHAEL OTTERMAN AND RICHARD HIL WITH PAUL WILSON

FOREWORD BY DAHR JAMAIL



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MICHAEL OTTERMAN  
and  
RICHARD HIL

with Paul Wilson



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To Helena Hil, mother of Richard Hil, who died on July 12, 2008 as the fieldwork for this book was being completed in Sweden. Born in Poland, Helena was subjected to forced agricultural labor in Germany (1943–45) and, as a displaced person following her release, she experienced the hardships of violent upheaval and dislocation. She would have empathized deeply with the plight of millions of Iraqis traumatized by war and conflict, and perhaps wondered why the innocent continue to suffer so needlessly.



The names of some interview subjects have been changed for their safety.

# FOREWORD

*Dahr Jamail*

What lengths men will go in order to carry out, to their extreme limit, the rites of a collective self-worship which fills them with a sense of righteousness and complacent satisfaction in the midst of the most shocking injustices and crimes.

—Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*

On Wednesday, March 25, 2009, Major General David Perkins, referring to the frequency of attacks on US military targets in Iraq, told reporters in Baghdad: “Attacks are at their lowest since August 2003.” He added, “There were 1250 attacks a week at the height of the violence; now sometimes there are less than 100 a week.”

While his rhetoric made headlines in some mainstream US media outlets, it was little consolation for the families of 28 Iraqis killed the following day in attacks across the country. Nor did it bring solace to the relatives of 27 Iraqis slain in a March 23, 2009 suicide attack, or to the survivors of a bomb attack at a bus terminal in Baghdad which killed nine people that same day.

Having recently returned from Iraq, I experienced life in Baghdad where people were dying violent deaths on a daily basis. Nearly every day of the month I spent there, a car bomb exploded somewhere in the capital city. Nearly every day, the so-called Green Zone was hit by mortars. Every day there were kidnappings. On good days there were four hours of electricity on the national grid, in a country

approaching its eighth year of being occupied by the US military, and where roughly 150,000 private contractors and 124,000 US troops still remain.

Upon returning home, I experienced the disconnect between that reality, lived by approximately 25 million Iraqis, and the surreal experience of living in the United States—where most media either pretend the occupation of Iraq is not happening or use the yardstick of decreased US military personnel deaths as a measure of success. In the words of Major General Perkins: “If you take a look at military deaths, which is an indicator of violence and lethality out there, US combat deaths are at their lowest levels since the war began six years ago.” But this is a less useful metric when one looks at the broader picture inside of Iraq: the ongoing daily slaughter of Iraqis, the near total lack of functional infrastructure, the fact that one in six Iraqis remains displaced from their home, or the fact that at least 1.2 million Iraqis have died as a result of the US-led invasion and occupation of their country.

More than 80 months of occupation, with over \$800 billion spent on the war (by conservative estimates), has resulted in 2.2 million internally displaced Iraqis, 2.7 million refugees, 2615 professors, scientists, and doctors killed in cold blood, and 341 dead media workers. Over \$13 billion was misplaced by the current Iraqi government, and another \$400 billion (with some estimates as high as \$1 trillion) is required to rebuild the Iraqi infrastructure. Unemployment vacillates between 25 and 70 percent, depending on the month. There are two dozen car bombs on average per month, 10,000 cases of cholera per year, 4352 dead US soldiers, and over 73,000 physically or psychologically wounded soldiers.

There is no normal life in Baghdad. While it is accurate and technically correct to say that there is less violence now compared to 2006, when between 100 and 300 Iraqis were slaughtered on a daily basis, Iraq now more than ever resembles a police state. It's impossible to travel longer than five minutes without encountering an Iraqi military or police patrol—usually comprised of pickup trucks full of armed men, horns and/or sirens blaring. Begging women and children wander between cars at every intersection. US military helicopters often rumble overhead, and the roar of fighter jets or transport planes is common. There's no talk of reparations to Iraqis for the death, destruction and chaos caused by the occupation.

Neighborhoods, segregated between Sunni and Shia largely as a result of the so-called “surge” strategy, provide a blatant view of the balkanization of Iraq. Many neighborhoods are still completely surrounded by 10-foot-high concrete blast walls, rendering normal life impossible. The fear of a resurgence of violence weighs heavily on Iraqis, as the current so-called lull in violence feels tenuous, unstable, and possibly fleeting. Nobody there can predict the future, and to hope for a sustained improvement in any aspect of life feels naive, even dangerous.

*Iraq in Fragments*—the title of a 2007 Academy Award-nominated film by James Longley—aptly describes Iraq today. The country has been destroyed by decades of US policy. Looking back only to 1980, we see the US government supporting both Iraq and Iran during their horrible eight-year war. In 1991 we see George H. W. Bush's war against Iraq, followed by his, Bill Clinton's, and George W. Bush's oversight of twelve and a half years of genocidal economic sanctions which killed half a million Iraqi children.

Today, under President Barack Obama, what is left of Iraq smolders in ruins, with no real end of the occupation in sight. “We’re going to have ten Army and Marine units deployed for a decade in Iraq and Afghanistan,” General George Casey told reporters in May 2009—a time frame far surpassing the original December 31, 2011 deadline for US withdrawal.

All of the recent talk of withdrawal from Iraq seems like empty rhetoric indeed to most Iraqis, who can see with their own eyes the giant “enduring” US military bases now spread across their country, or the new US “embassy” in Baghdad the same size as Vatican City. The gulf between the rhetoric of withdrawal and the reality on the ground spans the distance between Iraq and the United States, while the truth is pressed in the faces of the Iraqi people each day that the occupation continues.

During the darker moments when my work in Iraq feels like a heavy burden on my soul, I am always able to find solace in the fact that documenting what the US government has done to the Iraqi people over the decades is of critical importance. The Iraqi people must be given a voice. The facts of the US agenda in Iraq, and the astronomical cost paid by the Iraqi people, must be recorded. The realities of life in Iraq must be recorded for history, despite their ongoing denial in the West.

Thus I felt a great sense of relief when I learned of the book *Erasing Iraq: The Human Costs of Carnage*, and even more so when I was asked to pen this foreword.

*Erasing Iraq* is the rare book about Iraq that is bold enough to describe, in no uncertain terms, the US project in Iraq as a genocide, and also uses a term that most people are likely unfamiliar with, “sociocide,” previously used by

author Keith Doubt in *Understanding Evil: Lessons from Bosnia*. Sociocide is the decimation of an entire way of life, and, as Doubt explains, entails a “coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of the essential foundations of society.” As the authors of the present book make clear, this concept can also be used in the case of Iraq:

The willful destruction of Iraq and her people by the United States and allies during the Gulf War, UN sanctions period, and second Gulf War—especially in light of US-condoned looting in April 2003 and support of violent fundamentalists—constitute attempted sociocide.

We should all feel grateful that the articulate, extremely well-researched *Erasing Iraq* exhaustively documents the decades-long US war against the country. Whilst logging quotes, statistics, and mountains of facts, including blatant corporate press complicity in the crimes against Iraqis committed by the US government and military, the human element is not forgotten.

We hear the voices of Iraqi refugees scattered around the globe, from Australia to Syria, along with the words of Iraqi bloggers who have done what most mainstream media outlets in the West refuse to do: humanize the Iraqi people, allowing them to speak, and tell the truth about what has been done to their country, their culture, their society, and their lives.

If I could recommend only one book that provides a comprehensive overview of both the situation in Iraq today and the decades of US-backed policy it took to create this nightmare scenario, *Erasing Iraq* is it.

The late Harold Pinter was England’s most influential modern playwright and winner of the 2005 Nobel Prize for Literature. During his acceptance speech, an ailing Pinter

offered a scathing critique of the denial by the corporate media and Western governments of the suffering of the Iraqi people. Pinter said that, from the perspective of those in power, Iraqis are “of no moment. Their deaths don’t exist. They are blank. They are not even recorded as being dead.”

In the postscript, the authors of *Erasing Iraq* express hope that their work, in Pinter’s words, contributes to “restoring what is so nearly lost to us—the dignity of man.” *Erasing Iraq* has done exactly this, and then some.

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The authors would like to thank Tamara Fenjan, for her tireless efforts translating and empathizing with countless Iraqis we met in Syria and Jordan. Antony Loewenstien, without whose vital guidance and ample links this book could not have taken shape. Tony Murphy of the Plumbing Trades Employees Union of Australia for his enthusiasm and gracious financial support. Karim, our humble host in Sweden, for his warm and giving nature. Scholars and staff of the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Sydney, who provided a nurturing work environment. Robyn Lincoln and Jo Jones for their considerable assistance with research, plus the undergraduate social science students at Southern Cross University, Tweed/Gold Coast campus for their insightful comments. Jessica and Jen for their enduring encouragement. Finally, we'd like to thank Samer, Ahmed, Fadila, Basel, Ahlam, Rafed and all the other Iraqis that spent the time and energy sharing their stories with us. Our hearts remain with you along the new roads ahead.

**Special note from Tony Murphy, Federal President,  
Plumbing Trades Employees Union of Australia:**

Whether speaking out against the atrocities committed to the indigenous population of Australia or those on Iraqi civilians by the West, the Plumbing Trades Employees Union of Australia has always maintained a strong stance on justice and human rights.



Following a chance meeting with co-author Paul Wilson in Phuket, Thailand, it became very clear to me that a strong partnership could be formed to help give a voice to Iraqi civilians who have suffered so much at the hands of Western states vying for control of Iraqi oil.

Destiny demanded this book be written. All who have contributed towards it have enabled this to happen.

Tony Murphy

Federal President

Plumbing Trades Employees Union, Australia

December 23, 2009

## INTRODUCTION: HEARTS OF STONE

The idea for this book started with a simple question: What do Iraqis think? While exceptions existed—especially online—Western mainstream media failed miserably in conveying Iraqi perspectives on the run-up to the 2003 invasion. What did Iraqis think of Saddam Hussein? Did they want the United States to bring about a regime change? How did they envision their country in the post-Saddam era? In the space of these unanswered questions, imperial ambitions sheathed in propaganda proliferated. Behind the babble about weapons of mass destruction, shock and awe, and deadlines for capitulation were the aspirations of the United States to invade, occupy, and remake the Iraqi state. Lost were the voices of 25 million Iraqis whose “liberation” was ostensibly intended. A failure to know what these people thought inspired us to write this book. Through interviews with Iraqi refugees scattered across continents and blog posts written by Iraqis amid shattering explosions and chaos, we were able to piece together a general narrative of loss. Most Iraqis were quick to point out a crucial fact: the US war on Iraq did not start in 2003, but in 1990. This fact explains—perhaps more than any other—why many Iraqis were cynical about US intentions in 2003. Amid rampant unemployment and a breakdown in law and order, already-skeptical Iraqis turned to the insurgency to rid their country of foreign occupiers. Only

by speaking with Iraqis and engaging with Iraqi narratives did we begin to understand and fully empathize with the plight of the Iraqi people. It is their thoughts, feelings, and experiences—and the mechanisms of their suppression—that we hope to share with you in this book.

“I don’t own a thing and even if I owned the world, if Iraq would become a country again, I would never return,” said Sadi as he clutched a tattered handkerchief between his dry, twisted fingers.<sup>1</sup> Sadi is only one among the millions of Iraqis displaced by US-sponsored war and aggression in his country. More than 4.8 million remain displaced, while over 1 million have died since the 2003 invasion. To understand the tragedy of Iraq, one must look to the experiences of those like Sadi. His story is tragic, but not unique.

Sadi, partly paralyzed by arthritis on his right side, lives with his wife and two children in a run-down concrete apartment block off a dusty lane in Jeramana—a crowded hub for Iraqi refugees in Damascus, Syria. As we spoke to him during a crisp February afternoon in 2008, his wife nervously served us black tea and salted nuts—ubiquitous treats in the Middle East. On the wall behind Sadi was a frayed drawing of a symbol of the Mandaean religion: a wooden cross draped by a white cloth. Called a *darfash*, the points of the cross are said to represent life, love, purity and knowledge while the contours of the white fabric symbolize the meandering flow of water.

In Baghdad, Sadi owned a jewelry workshop that produced gold necklaces and rings. The shop was one of the first things he lost in 2003. “It was bombed by a car loaded with explosives. I lost everything, my workshop with all my gold and the things inside,” he said. The war then found its way into Sadi’s home. In early 2005, four

masked men barged into his living room. “They were not after my money—they were after my faith,” Sadi recalled. They wanted him to convert, but Sadi refused. “Every man should be free to keep his religion,” he told them. “All religions should be respected, and every man should be respected for his religion.”

The last surviving Gnostic religion, Mandaism predates Christianity. Adherents venerate John the Baptist as their great teacher. Water is central to the religion—it is believed necessary to purify the mind and body. Weddings, funerals and other religious ceremonies are held on riverbanks in waist-deep water. The most devout Mandaeans even baptize their food before eating. The Mandaeans have lived for over two millennia in marshlands where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers meet. They survived Mongol invasions, bloody massacres at the hands of Sultans and Shahs, and the brutal reign of Saddam Hussein. Under Saddam, higher education and jobs in government were closed to Mandaeans, some of whom were bullied in school or ridiculed while performing river rites. But after the invasion the situation grew deadly as sectarian chaos engulfed Iraq. As the *Washington Post* explained: “In their quest for stability in Iraq, US officials have empowered tribal and religious leaders, Sunni and Shiite, who reject the secularism that Saddam Hussein once largely maintained.” In turn, these leaders enforced strict interpretations of Islam that encouraged violence against Iraqi minorities. In 2003, the late Shia leader, Ayatollah al-Hakeem, decreed Mandaeans “impure” and approved their killing or forcible conversion. In 2005, another *fatwa* reportedly issued by the Information Foundation of Al-Sadr Office in Basra reiterated this edict, accusing Mandaeans of “systematic adultery” and “trickery.” Since then, hundreds

have been killed, kidnapped, and forcibly converted. While their community in Iraq numbered up to 40,000 before the war, today the figure has dipped to only 5000.<sup>2</sup>

The masked men left that day, but returned two weeks later. This time they were armed. “The men were full of hatred and aggression and with hearts of stone,” Sadi recalled as his small brown eyes welled with tears. He then began to speak quickly. He said the men gathered his wife, daughter, and two young sons into the living room and demanded that he convert. Again he refused. “They then took my son out of my wife’s hands,” he said. Abed was only four years old. “We were screaming and crying,” Sadi said, as he watched the men run from the house with his boy. Three days later Sadi received a phone call. “You will find the corpse behind the *Bilat el Shohadah* school by the motorway,” said a man’s voice. Then the line went dead. Sadi rushed to the place along the busy road. Our translator, Tamara, herself an Iraqi-Swede, paused to let Sadi calm down and have a sip of tea. Sadi reached for his handkerchief again and dabbed his eyes. “We found the dead body of my son,” he said in high-pitched moans. “He had been beaten and shot in the head.”

Iraqis of all religions, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses have been cruelly affected by US-sponsored war, sanctions and occupation, but their voices have largely gone unheard. In *Denial: History Betrayed*, Tony Taylor tracked how rogue historians, calculating politicians, and nationalist and ethnic leaders promote selective historical narratives in order to serve their agendas, while denying other accounts of the past.<sup>3</sup> Resistance to claims of an Armenian genocide, denial of the Nazi holocaust, the attempted cover-up of the Japanese massacre in Nanking, and refusal to acknowledge

ethnic cleansing in Palestine illustrate the lengths to which deniers will go to silence victims' narratives. To this list of denied atrocities we add the deliberate decimation of Iraqi society by the government of the United States of America.

The *new* Iraq—a phrase often used in the post-invasion period by the occupying powers—is, at least from the standpoint of most Iraqis, a cruel euphemism for death and destruction. For the US political leadership—especially under the administration of George W. Bush—the *new* Iraq was an expression of optimism based on the mistaken belief that Iraq would become a US-style democracy, provide secure oil supplies to the US, and create new business opportunities for multinational corporations. According to Canadian author and journalist Naomi Klein, the aim of the US was not simply to topple a brutal dictator—once a close ally and consumer of American military hardware, intelligence, and chemical and biological weapons—but to create an entirely new country ripe for free market capitalism. As Klein wrote:

A country of 25 million would not be rebuilt as it was before the war; it would be erased, disappeared. In its place would spring forth a gleaming showroom for laissez-faire economics, a utopia such as the world had never seen. Every policy that liberates multinational corporations to pursue their quest for profit would be put into place: a shrunken state, a flexible workforce, open borders, minimal taxes, no tariffs, no ownership restrictions. The people of Iraq would, of course, have to endure some short-term pain: assets, previously owned by the state, would have to be given up to create new opportunities for growth and investment. Jobs would have to be lost and, as foreign products flooded across the border, local businesses and family farms would, unfortunately, be unable to compete. But to the authors of this plan, these would be small prices to pay for the economic boom that would surely explode once the

proper conditions were in place, a boom so powerful the country would practically rebuild itself.<sup>4</sup>

The US takeover of the Iraqi economy began well before the invasion of 2003. Its roots lie in the fact that by 1970 US oil production had peaked, which led to a growing reliance on supplies from Middle Eastern states. The first major restrictions on oil supplies to the US came in 1973 when OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) placed an embargo on shipments, followed by the 1978 Iranian oil embargo which led to rising inflation and interest rates. These factors—coupled with the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan—prompted the United States to adopt a policy of using military force to ensure access to Middle East oil. “The region which is now threatened by Soviet troops in Afghanistan is of great strategic importance: It contains more than two-thirds of the world’s exportable oil,” Jimmy Carter said in his State of the Union address on January 23, 1980. Uninterrupted access to oil in the Persian Gulf was of paramount concern. “The Soviet effort to dominate Afghanistan has brought Soviet military forces to within 300 miles of the Indian Ocean and close to the Straits of Hormuz, a waterway through which most of the world’s oil must flow,” Carter stressed. “Let our position be absolutely clear,” he added, outlining what would later be termed the Carter Doctrine:

An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.<sup>5</sup>

Carter expanded US naval operations in the Gulf, acquired new bases in the region, and launched America's "ghost war" against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Successive presidents also followed the Carter Doctrine. Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush introduced trade policies and other measures to ensure that the US would have continued access to Middle Eastern oil supplies. This was linked to an increasingly strident American unilateralism designed to advance and protect US interests in the Middle East. In 1992—a few months after the first Gulf War (which dislodged Iraqi forces from oil-rich Kuwait)—top officials in the senior Bush's administration issued the "Defense Planning Guidance" directive, a policy document stating that the US would "remain the predominant outside power in the region and preserve US and Western access to the region's oil." Many of the neoconservative architects of this directive—Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, Zalmay Khalilzad, "Scooter" Libby, Eric Edelman and Colin Powell—helped formulate the blueprint for US "global leadership" contained in the 1997 "Statement of Principles" published by the Project for the New American Century, an influential conservative think tank. Based on proposed increases to military spending and closer ties with allies in opposition to "hostile" regimes, the statement highlighted "America's unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to our security, our prosperity, and our principles."<sup>6</sup>

For Paul Wolfowitz, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and others, the salient threat to US interests resided in the Middle East—especially in the volatility of the Iraqi regime under Saddam Hussein and the consequent threat to oil supplies. The 1991 Gulf War failed to drive Hussein from



power, which, as it turned out, proved the perfect pretext for George W. Bush and his administration to call for regime change in Iraq. From the date of his inauguration, Bush Jr. was determined to remove Saddam Hussein. As former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill told *60 Minutes* in early 2004: "From the very beginning, there was a conviction that Saddam Hussein was a bad person and that he needed to go," and that the invasion was topic "A" on the President's to-do list. Concrete plans to invade Iraq were drawn hours after the 9/11 attacks. According to notes taken that day by aides to Donald Rumsfeld, at 2:40 p.m. the defense secretary demanded "best info fast. Judge whether good enough hit S.H."—shorthand for Saddam Hussein—"at same time. Not only UBL"—the initials of Osama bin Laden. Top Bush administration officials made at least 935 false public statements about the threat posed by Iraq in the two years following September 11, 2001. The US invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003, and President Bush—awkwardly donning a snug pilot's uniform—announced the "end of hostilities" on board the *USS Abraham Lincoln* on May 1, 2003.<sup>7</sup>

The intentions of the United States in Iraq were clear from the start of the occupation. The Ministry of the Interior and the Oil Ministry were the only ministries secured by US troops in Baghdad while museums, libraries and even ammunition dumps were left unguarded. According to Yaroslav Trofimov of the *Wall Street Journal*, the Pentagon permitted the looting to undermine the Iraqi state. "Lots of military commanders at the time told me that looting is a good thing. Looting is liberating; looting undermines the old regime," Trofimov later recalled. Amid the looting of Iraqi cultural property, public resources, and military goods,

the newly appointed viceroy of Iraq, L. Paul Bremer, set about dismantling the Iraqi state, in contravention of the rules of occupation set forth in the Geneva Conventions. Armed with sweeping executive powers, Bremer disbanded the Iraqi Army—creating a deluge of angry, military-trained, out-of-work men who soon turned to the insurgency—and issued orders designed to create a free-market nirvana suitable to US interests. Order 39, for example, allowed for privatization of Iraq’s 200 state-owned enterprises, 100 percent foreign ownership of Iraqi businesses, unrestricted, tax-free remittance of all profits and other funds, and 40-year ownership licenses. As noted by Antonia Juhasz, senior analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus and author of *The Bush Agenda: Invading the World, One Economy at a Time*, the orders forbade

Iraqis from receiving preference in the reconstruction while allowing foreign corporations—Halliburton and Bechtel, for example—to buy up Iraqi businesses, do all of the work and send all of their money home. They cannot be required to hire Iraqis or to reinvest their money in the Iraqi economy. They can take out their investments at any time and in any amount.<sup>8</sup>

To ensure that the directives were implemented, Bremer’s Orders 57 and 77 called for “US-appointed auditors and inspector generals in every government ministry, with five-year terms and with sweeping authority over contracts, programs, employees and regulations.” To ensure that the new free market was properly policed, Bremer issued Order 17, which granted “foreign contractors, including private security firms, full immunity from Iraq’s laws.” According to Juhasz: “Even if they, say, kill someone or cause an environmental disaster, the injured party cannot

turn to the Iraqi legal system. Rather, the charges must be brought to US courts.” Order 17 was repeatedly cited in the wake of the September 16, 2007 Blackwater rampage in Baghdad’s Nisour Square—an attack that killed 17 unarmed Iraqi civilians. Other orders allowed for “foreign banks to purchase up to 50% of Iraqi banks,” significant reductions in the tax rate on corporations, the lowering of income tax and the deletion of “all tariffs, customs duties, import taxes, licensing fees and similar surcharges for goods entering or leaving Iraq.” According to Juhasz, “this led to an immediate and dramatic inflow of cheap foreign consumer products, devastating local producers and sellers who were thoroughly unprepared to meet the challenge of their mammoth global competitors.” All these orders, it should be remembered, were issued unilaterally by an interim administrator with extensive executive powers, without any serious consideration of the needs and desires of the Iraq people. As Juhasz concluded:

The result of these orders was to create an economic environment more favorable to U.S. corporations than laws in the United States. As a result Iraq corporations, and Iraqi workers have been excluded from the rebuilding of Iraq. And, the Iraq reconstruction has failed to provide adequate electricity, food, sewage treatment and even gasoline - but U.S. corporations have profited handsomely from this failed reconstruction.<sup>9</sup>

In “erasing” Iraq, the Bush administration set about a revisionist project that involved dismantling Iraq’s social and economic infrastructure so as to open the door for US companies to access Iraqi natural resources and reassemble the country in its own image. The radical economic restructuring plan failed because no thought was made to legitimacy and social reconstruction. Iraq soon shattered