

The Devastation of Iraq

By [Dahr Jamail](#)

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The devastation of Iraq? Where do I start? After working seven of the past 12 months in Iraq, I'm still overwhelmed by even the thought of trying to describe this.

The illegal war and occupation of Iraq was waged for three reasons, according to the administration of US President George W Bush.

First for weapons of mass destruction, which have yet to be found.

Second, because the regime of Saddam Hussein had links to al-Qaeda, which Bush has personally admitted have never been proved. The third reason - embedded in the very name of the invasion, Operation Iraqi Freedom - was to liberate the Iraqi people.

So Iraq is now a liberated country.

I've been in liberated Baghdad and environs on and off for 12 months, including being inside Fallujah during the April siege and having warning shots fired over my head more than once by soldiers. I've traveled in the south, in the north, and extensively around central Iraq. What I saw in the first months of 2004, however, when it was easier for a foreign reporter to travel the country, offered a powerful - even predictive - taste of the horrors to come in the rest of the year (and undoubtedly in 2005 as well). It's worth returning to the now-forgotten first half of last year and remembering just how terrible things were for Iraqis even relatively early in our occupation of their country.

Then, as now, for Iraqis, the US invasion and occupation were a case of liberation from - from human rights (think: the atrocities committed in Abu Ghraib, which are still occurring daily there and elsewhere); liberation from functioning infrastructure (think: the malfunctioning electric system, the many-kilometer-long gasoline queues, the raw sewage in the streets); liberation from an entire city to live in (think: Fallujah, most of which has by now been flattened by aerial bombardment and other means).

Iraqis were then already bitter, confused, and existing amid a desolation that came from myriad (large number) Bush-administration broken promises. Quite literally every liberated Iraqi I've gotten to know from my earliest days in the country has had a family member or a friend killed either by US soldiers or from the effects of the war/occupation. These include such everyday facts of life as not having enough money for food or fuel because of massive unemployment and soaring energy prices, or any of the countless other horrors caused by the aforementioned. The broken promises, broken infrastructure, and broken cities of Iraq were plainly visible in those early months of 2004 - and the sad thing is that the devastation I saw then has only grown worse since. The life Iraqis were living a year ago, horrendous as it was, was but a prelude to what was to come under the US occupation. The warning signs

were clear from a shattered infrastructure, to all the torturing, to a burgeoning, violent resistance.

Broken promises. It was quickly apparent, even to a journalistic newcomer, even in those first months of last year, that the real nature of the liberation we Americans brought to Iraq was no news to Iraqis. Long before the US media decided it was time to report on the horrendous actions occurring inside Abu Ghraib prison, most Iraqis already knew that the “liberators” of their country were torturing and humiliating their countrymen.

In December 2003, for instance, a man in Baghdad, speaking of the Abu Ghraib atrocities, said to me, “Why do they use these actions? Even Saddam Hussein did not do that. This is not good behavior. They are not coming to liberate Iraq.” And by then the bleak jokes of the beleaguered had already begun to circulate. In the dark humor that has become so popular in Baghdad these days, one recently released Abu Ghraib detainee I interviewed said, “The Americans brought electricity to my ass before they brought it to my house.”

Sadiq Zoman is fairly typical of what I’ve seen. Taken from his home in Kirkuk in July 2003, he was held in a military detention facility near Tikrit before being dropped off comatose at the Salahadin General Hospital by US forces one month later. While the medical report accompanying him, signed by Lieutenant-Colonel Michael Hodges, stated that Zoman was comatose because of a heart attack brought on by heat stroke, it failed to mention that his head had been bludgeoned, or to note the electrical burn marks that scorched his penis and the bottoms of his feet, or the bruises and whip-like marks up and down his body.

I visited his wife Hashmiya and eight daughters in a nearly empty home in Baghdad. Its belongings had largely been sold on the black market to keep them all afloat. A fan twirled slowly over the bed as Zoman stared blankly at the ceiling. A small backup generator hummed outside, as this neighborhood, like most of Baghdad, averaged only six hours of electricity per day.

Her daughter Rheem, who is in college, voiced the sentiments of the entire family when she said, “I hate the Americans for doing this. When they took my father they took my life. I pray for revenge on the Americans for destroying my father, my country, and my life.”

In May 2004, when I went to their house, a court-martial of one of the soldiers complicit in the widespread torturing of Iraqis in Abu Ghraib had recently taken place. He had been sentenced to some modest prison time, but Iraqis were unimpressed. They had been convinced yet again – not that they needed it – that Bush-administration promises to clean up its act regarding the treatment of detained Iraqis were no less empty than those being offered for assistance in building a safe and prosperous Iraq.

Last year, the empty promises to bring justice to those involved in such heinous acts, along with promises to make the prison at Abu Ghraib more transparent and accessible, fell on distraught family members who waited near the gates of the prison to see their loved ones inside. Under a scorching May sun I went to the dusty, dismal, heavily guarded, razor-wire-enclosed “waiting area” outside Abu Ghraib. There I heard one horror story after another from melancholy family members doggedly gathered on this patch of barren earth, still hoping against hope to be granted a visit with someone inside the awful compound.

Sitting alone on the hard-packed dirt in his white dishdasha, his headscarf languidly flapping in the dry, hot wind, Lilu Hammed stared unwaveringly at the high walls of the nearby prison

as if he were attempting to see his 32-year-old son Abbas through the concrete walls. When my interpreter Abu Talat asked if he would speak with us, several seconds passed before Lilu slowly turned his head and said simply, "I am sitting here on the ground waiting for God's help."

His son, never charged with an offense, had by then been in Abu Ghraib for six months after a raid on his home that produced no weapons. Lilu held a crumpled visitation-permission slip that he had just obtained, promising a reunion with his son ... three months away, on August 18.

Along with every other person I interviewed there, Lilu had found consolation neither in the recent court-martial nor in the release of a few hundred prisoners. "This court-martial is nonsense. They said that Iraqis could come to the trial, but they could not. It was a false trial."

At that moment, a convoy of Humvees full of soldiers, guns pointing out the small windows, rumbled through the front gate of the penal complex, kicking up a huge dust cloud that quickly engulfed everyone. The parent of another prisoner, Mrs Samir, waving away the clouds of dust, said, "We hope the whole world can see the position we are in now," and then added plaintively, "Why are they doing this to us?"

Last summer I interviewed a kind 55-year-old woman who used to work as an English teacher. She had been detained for four months in as many prisons ... in Samarra, Tikrit, Baghdad and, of course, Abu Ghraib. She was never, she told me, allowed to sleep through a night. She was interrogated many times each day, not given enough food or water, or access to a lawyer or to her family. She was verbally and psychologically abused.

But that, she assured me, wasn't the worst part. Not by far. Her 70-year-old husband was also detained and he was beaten. After seven months of beatings and interrogations, he died in US military custody in prison.

She was crying as she spoke of him. "I miss my husband," she sobbed and stood up, speaking not to us but to the room, "I miss him so much." She shook her hands as if to fling water off them ... then she held her chest and cried some more.

"Why are they doing this to us?" she asked. She simply couldn't understand, she said, what was happening because two of her sons were also detained, and her family had been completely shattered. "We didn't do anything wrong," she whimpered.

With the interview over, we were walking towards our car to leave when all of us realized that it was 10pm, already too late at night to be out in dangerous Baghdad. So she asked us instead if we wouldn't please stay for dinner, all the while thanking me for listening to her horrendous story, for my time, for writing about it. I found myself speechless.

"No, thank you, we must get home now," said Abu Talat. By this time, we were all crying.

In the car, as we drove quickly along a Baghdad highway directly into a full moon, Abu Talat and I were silent. Finally, he asked, "Can you say any words? Do you have any words?"

I had none. None at all.

Broken infrastructure.

Everything in Iraq is set against the backdrop of shattered infrastructure and a nearly complete lack of reconstruction. What the Americans turn out to be best at is, once again, promises – and propaganda. During the period when the Coalition Provisional Authority ruled Iraq from Baghdad’s Green Zone, their handouts often read like this one released on May 21, 2004: “The Coalition Provisional Authority has recently given out hundreds of soccer balls to Iraqi children in Ramadi, Kerbala and Hilla. Iraqi women from Hilla sewed the soccer balls, which are emblazoned with the phrase ‘All of Us Participate in a New Iraq’.”

And yet when it came to the basics of that New Iraq, unemployment was at 50% and increasing, better areas of Baghdad averaged six hours of electricity per day, and security was nowhere to be found. Even as far back as January 2004, before the security situation had brought most reconstruction projects to the nearly complete standstill of the present moment, and nine months after the war in Iraq had officially ended, the situation already verged on the catastrophic. For instance, lack of potable water was the norm throughout most of central and southern Iraq.

I was then working on a report that attempted to document exactly what reconstruction had occurred in the water sector – a sector for which Bechtel was largely responsible. That giant corporation had been awarded a no-bid contract of US\$680 million behind closed doors on April 17, 2003, which in September was raised to \$1.03 billion; then Bechtel won an additional contract worth \$1.8 billion to extend its program through December 2005.

At the time, when travel for Western reporters was a lot easier than it is now, I stopped in several villages en route south from Baghdad through what the Americans now call “the triangle of death” to Hilla, Najaf and Diwaniyah to check on people’s drinking-water situation. Near Hilla, an old man with a weathered face showed me his water pump, sitting lifeless with an empty container nearby – as there was no electricity. What water his village did have was loaded with salt, which was leaching into the water supply, because Bechtel had not honored its contractual obligations to rehabilitate a nearby water-treatment center. Another nearby village didn’t have the salt problem, but nausea, diarrhea, kidney stones, cramps and even cases of cholera were on the rise. This too would be a steady trend for the villages I visited.

The rest of that trip involved a frenetic tour of villages, each without drinkable water, near or inside the city limits of Hilla, Najaf and Diwaniyah. Hilla, close to ancient Babylon, has a water-treatment plant and distribution center managed by chief engineer Salmam Hassan Kadel. Kadel informed me that most of the villages in his jurisdiction had no potable water, nor did he have the piping needed to repair their broken-down water systems, nor had he had any contact with Bechtel or its subcontractors.

He spoke of large numbers of people coming down with the usual list of diseases. “Bechtel,” he told me, “is spending all of their money without any studies. Bechtel is painting buildings, but this doesn’t give clean water to the people who have died from drinking contaminated water. We ask of them that instead of painting buildings, they give us one water pump and we’ll use it to give water service to more people. We have had no change since the Americans came here. We know Bechtel is wasting money, but we can’t prove it.”

At another small village between Hilla and Najaf, 1,500 people were drinking water from a dirty stream that trickled slowly by their homes. Everyone had dysentery; many had kidney

stones; a startling number, cholera. One villager, holding a sick child, told me, "It was much better before the invasion. We had 24 hours of running water then. Now we are drinking this garbage because it is all we have."

The next morning found me at a village on the outskirts of Najaf, which fell under the responsibility of Najaf's water center. A large hole had been dug in the ground where the villagers tapped into already existing pipes to siphon off water. The dirty hole filled in the night, when water was collected. That morning, children were standing idly around the hole as women collected the residue of dirty water which sat at its bottom. Everyone, it seemed, was suffering from some water-born illness and several children, the villagers informed me, had been killed attempting to cross a busy highway to a nearby factory where clean water was actually available.

In June, six months later, I visited Chuwader Hospital, which then treated an average of 3,000 patients a day in Sadr City, the enormous Baghdad slum. Dr Qasim al-Nuwesri, the head manager there, promptly began describing the struggles his hospital was facing under the occupation. "We are short of every medicine," he said and pointed out how rarely this had occurred before the invasion. "It is forbidden, but sometimes we have to reuse IVs [intravenous devices], even the needles. We have no choice."

And then, of course, he - like the other doctors I spoke with - brought up their horrendous water problem, the unavailability of unpolluted water anywhere in the area. "Of course, we have typhoid, cholera, kidney stones," he said matter-of-factly, "but we now even have the very rare hepatitis type E ... and it has become common in our area."

Driving out of the sewage-filled, garbage-strewn streets of Sadr City we passed a wall with "Vietnam Street" spray painted on it. Just underneath was the sentence - obviously aimed at the American liberators - "We will make your graves in this place."

Today, in terms of collapsing infrastructure, other areas of Baghdad are beginning to suffer the way Sadr City did then, and still largely does. While reconstruction projects slated for Sadr City have received increased funding, most of the time there is little sign of any work being done, as is the case in most of Baghdad.

While an ongoing fuel crisis finds people waiting up to two days to fill their tanks at gasoline stations, all of the city is running on generators the majority of the time, and many less favored areas such as Sadr City have only four hours of electricity a day.

Broken cities

The heavy-handed tactics of the occupation forces have become a commonplace of Iraqi life. I've interviewed people who regularly sleep in their clothes because home raids are the norm. Many times when military patrols are attacked by resistance fighters in the cities of Iraq, soldiers simply open fire randomly on anything that moves. More commonly, heavy civilian casualties occur from air raids by occupation forces. These horrible circumstances have led to more than 100,000 Iraqi civilian casualties in the less-than-two-year-old occupation.

Then there is Fallujah, a city three-quarters of which has by now been bombed or shelled into rubble, a city in whose ruins fighting continues even while most of its residents have yet to be allowed to return to their homes (many of which no longer exist). The atrocities

committed there in the past month or so are, in many ways, similar to those observed during the failed US Marine Corps siege of the city last April, though on a far grander scale. This time, in addition, reports from families inside the city, along with photographic evidence, point toward the US military's use of chemical and phosphorous weapons as well as cluster bombs there. The few residents allowed to return in the final week of 2004 were handed military-produced leaflets instructing them not to eat any food from inside the city, nor to drink the water.

Last May, at the General Hospital of Fallujah, doctors spoke to me of the sorts of atrocities that occurred during the first month-long siege of the city. Dr Abdul Jabbar, an orthopedic surgeon, said it was difficult to keep track of the number of people they treated, as well as the number of dead, because of the lack of documentation. This was due primarily to the fact that the main hospital, located on the opposite side of the Euphrates River from the city, was sealed off by the Marines for the majority of April, just as it would again be in November.

He estimated that at least 700 people were killed in Fallujah during that April. "I worked at five of the centers [community health clinics] myself, and if we collect the numbers from these places, then this is the number," he said. "And you must keep in mind that many people were buried before reaching our centers."

When the wind blew in from the nearby Julan quarter of the city, the putrid stench of decaying bodies (a smell evidently once again typical of the city) only confirmed his statement. Even then, Dr Jabbar was insisting that US planes had dropped cluster bombs on the city. "Many people were injured and killed by cluster bombs. Of course they used cluster bombs. We heard them as well as treated people who had been hit by them."

Dr Rashid, another orthopedic surgeon, said, "Not less than 60% of the dead were women and children. You can go see the graves for yourself." I had already visited the Martyr Cemetery and had indeed observed the numerous tiny graves that had clearly been dug for children. He agreed with Dr Jabbar about the use of cluster bombs, and added, "I saw the cluster bombs with my own eyes. We don't need any evidence. Most of these bombs fell on those we then treated."

Speaking of the medical crisis that his hospital had to deal with, he pointed out that during the first 10 days of fighting the US military did not allow any evacuations from Fallujah to Baghdad at all. He said, "Even transferring patients in the city was impossible. You can see our ambulances outside. Their snipers also shot into the main doors of one of our centers." Several ambulances were indeed in the hospital's parking lot, two of them with bullet holes in their windshields.

Both doctors said they had not been contacted by the US military, nor had any aid been delivered to them by the military. Dr Rashid summed the situation up this way: "They send only bombs, not medicine."

As I walked to our car at one point amid what was already the desolation of Fallujah, a man tugged on my arm and yelled, "The Americans are cowboys! This is their history! Look at what they did to the Indians! Vietnam! Afghanistan! And now Iraq! This does not surprise us."

And that, of course, was before the total siege of the city began in November. The April

campaign in Fallujah, which resulted in a rise in resistance, proved – like so much else in those early months of 2004 – to be but a harbinger of things to come on a far larger scale. While the goal of the most recent siege was to squelch the resistance and bring greater security for elections scheduled for January 30, the result as in April has been anything but security.

In the wake of the destruction of Fallujah, fighting has simply spread elsewhere and intensified. Families are now fleeing Mosul, Iraq's third-largest city, because of a warning of another upcoming air campaign against resistance fighters. At least one car bomb per day is now the norm in the capital city. Clashes erupt with deadly regularity throughout Baghdad as well as in such cities as Ramadi, Samarra, Baquba and Balad.

The intensification is two-sided. With each ratchet upward in violence, the tactics by the US military only grow more heavy-handed and, as they do, the Iraqi resistance just continues to grow in size and effectiveness. Any kind of "siege" of Mosul will only add to this dynamic.

Despite a media blackout in the aftermath of the recent assault on Fallujah, stories of dogs eating bodies in the streets of the city and of destroyed mosques have spread across Iraq like wildfire; and reports like these only underscore what most people in Iraq now believe – that the liberators have become no more than brutal imperialist occupiers of their country. And so the resistance grows yet stronger.

Yet among Iraqis the growing resistance was predicted long ago. One telling moment for me came last June amid daily suicide car bombings in Baghdad. While footage of cars with broken glass and bullet holes in their frames flashed across a television screen, my translator Hamid, an older man who had already grown weary of the violence, said softly, "It has begun. These are only the start, and they will not stop. Even after June 30." That was the date of the long-promised handover of "sovereignty" to a new Iraqi government, after which, US officials fervently predicted, violence in the country would begin to subside. The same pattern of prediction and of a contrarian reality can now be seen in relation to the upcoming elections of January 30.

Three weeks ago, a friend of mine who is a sheikh from Baquba, visited me in Baghdad and we had lunch with Abdulla, an older professor who is a friend of his. As we were eating, Abdulla expressed a sentiment now widely heard. "The mujahideen," he said, "are fighting for their country against the Americans. This resistance is acceptable to us."

The Bush administration has recently increased its troops in Iraq from 138,000 to 150,000 – in order, officials said, to provide greater security for the elections. Such troop increases also occurred in Vietnam. Back then it was called escalation.

What I wonder is, will I be writing a piece next January still called "The devastation of Iraq", in which these last terrible months of 2004 (of which the first half of the year was but a foreshadowing) will prove in their turn but a predictive taste of horrors to come? And what then of 2006 and 2007?

Dahr Jamail is an independent journalist from Anchorage, Alaska. He has spent seven of the past 12 months reporting from inside occupied Iraq. His articles have been published by the Sunday Herald, Inter Press Service, the website of The Nation magazine, and the New Standard Internet news site, for which he was the Iraq correspondent. He is the special correspondent in Iraq for Flashpoints radio and also has appeared on the BBC, Democracy

Now!, Free Speech Radio News and Radio South Africa.

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