

The New 'Forgotten' War: Iraq Occupation Falls Into Media Shadows

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"The Western world that slaughtered Iraq and Iraqis, through 13 years of sanctions and seven years of occupation, is now turning its back on the victims. What has remained of Iraq is still being devastated by bombings, assassinations, corruption, millions of evictions and continued infrastructure destruction. Yet the world that caused all this is trying to draw a rosy picture of the situation in Iraq."

-Maki Al-Nazzal, Iraqi political analyst

As Afghanistan has taken center stage in U.S. corporate media, with President Barack Obama announcing two major escalations of the war in recent months, the U.S. occupation of Iraq has fallen into the media shadows.

But while U.S. forces have begun to slowly pull back in Iraq, approximately 130,000 American troops and 114,000 private contractors still remain in the country (Congressional Research Service, 12/14/09)-along with an embassy the size of Vatican City. Upwards of 400 Iraqi civilians still die in a typical month (Iraq Body Count, 12/31/09), and fallout from the occupation that is now responsible, by some estimates, for 1 million Iraqi deaths (**Extra!**, 1/2/08) continues to severely impact Iraqis in ways that go uncovered by the U.S. press.

From early on in the occupation of Iraq, one of the most pressing concerns for Iraqis-besides ending the occupation and a desperate need for security-has been basic infrastructure. The average home in Iraq today, over six and a half years into the occupation, operates on less than six hours of electricity per day (**AP**, 9/7/09). "A water shortage described as the most critical since the earliest days of Iraq's civilization is threatening to leave up to 2 million people in the south of the country without electricity and almost as many without drinking water," the **Guardian** (8/26/09) reported; waterborne diseases and dysentery are rampant. The ongoing lack of power and clean drinking water has even led Iraqis to take to the streets in Baghdad (**AP**, 10/11/09), chanting, "No water, no electricity in the country of oil and the two rivers."

Devastation wrought by the occupation, coupled with rampant corruption among the Western contractors awarded the contracts to rebuild Iraq's demolished infrastructure, are to blame (**International Herald Tribune**, 7/6/09). Ali Ghalib Baban, Iraq's minister of planning, said late last year (**International Herald Tribune**, 11/21/09) that the billions of dollars the U.S. has spent on so-called reconstruction contracts in Iraq has had no discernible impact. "Maybe they spent it," he said, "but Iraq doesn't feel it."

Last January, the **Los Angeles Times** ran a story (1/26/09) that highlighted the lack of electricity: "As elections near, people say it's hard to have faith in leaders when they don't

even have electricity,” was the subhead. But most other large U.S. papers have avoided the topic-unless it is brought up in such a way as to blame Iraqis for the problem, as the **New York Times** (11/21/09) did with its piece, “U.S. Fears Iraqis Will Not Keep Up Rebuilt Projects.”

Further complicating matters, a drought that is now over four years old plagues most of Iraq. In the country’s north, lack of water has forced more than 100,000 people to abandon their homes since 2005, with 36,000 more on the verge of leaving (**AP**, 10/13/09).

Corporate media coverage of the ongoing Iraqi refugee crisis-the U.N. estimates that more than 4.5 million Iraqis in all have been displaced from their homes (UNHCR.org, 1/09)-continues to be scant. The stories that do appear tend to be local stories about Iraqi refugees in the newspaper’s home city (e.g., **Chicago Tribune**, 10/25/09).

For Iraqis who remain in the country, another critical story is cancer. The U.S. and British militaries used more than 1,700 tons of depleted uranium in Iraq in the 2003 invasion (**Jane’s Defence News**, 4/2/04)-on top of 320 tons used in the 1991 Gulf War (**Inter Press Service**, 3/25/03). Literally every local person I’ve ever spoken with in Iraq during my nine months of reporting there knows someone who either suffers from or has died of cancer.

The lead paragraph of an article by Jalal Ghazi, for **New America Media** (1/6/10), is blunt:

“Forget about oil, occupation, terrorism or even Al-Qaeda. The real hazard for Iraqis these days is cancer. Cancer is spreading like wildfire in Iraq. Thousands of infants are being born with deformities. Doctors say they are struggling to cope with the rise of cancer and birth defects, especially in cities subjected to heavy American and British bombardment.”

Ghazi reported that in Fallujah, which bore the brunt of two massive U.S. military operations in 2004, as many as 25 percent of newborn infants have serious physical abnormalities. Cancer rates in Babil, an area south of Baghdad, have risen from 500 cases in 2004 to more than 9,000 in 2009. Dr. Jawad al-Ali, the director of the Oncology Center in Basra, told **Al Jazeera English** (10/12/09) that there were 1,885 cases of cancer in all of 2005; between 1,250 and 1,500 patients visit his center every month now.

Babies born to U.S. veterans of the 1991 war are showing birth defects very similar to affected Iraqi babies (**Sunday Herald**, 3/30/03), and many U.S. soldiers are now referring to Gulf War Syndrome 2, alleging they have developed cancer because of exposure to depleted uranium in Iraq (**New America Media**, 1/6/10).

How has this ongoing story been covered by the corporate media? It hasn’t, at least not in the last five years, with the exception of an article in **Vanity Fair** (2/05) and a few isolated **Associated Press** stories, like “Sickened Iraq Vets Cite Depleted Uranium” (8/13/06). While smaller publications like the **Washington Report on Middle East Affairs** (11/05) and the **Public Record** (10/19/09) have taken it on, none of the other big outlets have touched the story.

While U.S. newspapers have been following the lead-up to the Iraq elections, there has been virtually no coverage of the mass arrests Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki’s government is busy conducting in predominantly Sunni areas of Iraq. As the Iraqi daily **Azzaman** (1/4/10) reported:

“Iraqi security forces have launched a wide campaign in Sunni Muslim-dominated neighborhoods of Baghdad and towns and cities to the north and west of the capital.... The campaign is said to be the widest by the government in years and has led to an exodus of people to the Kurdish north.”

Family members of those being arrested are not told where their loved ones are being held, only that those arrested will remain behind bars until after the elections. These sweeps have collected members of the formerly U.S.-backed Awakening Councils, Sunni militias once paid off by the U.S. to stop their attacks on occupation forces. The cutoff of U.S. support for the Councils is another underreported story.

Meanwhile, the hardship for Iraqis continues unabated, along with the need to find alternative sources for accurate information-or any information-about an occupation that continues to involve as many troops as when Iraq dominated U.S. headlines in 2004 (Congressional Research Service, 7/2/09).

(Please note that some of the statistics in this article have changed since the time it was written.)

Dahr Jamail's new book, *The Will to Resist: Soldiers Who Refuse to Fight in Iraq and Afghanistan*, is now available. Order the book here <http://tinyurl.com/cnlgyu>. Visit Dahr Jamail's website <http://dahrjamailiraq.com>

As one of the first and few unembedded Western journalists to report the truth about how the United States has destroyed, not liberated, Iraqi society in his book *Beyond the Green Zone*, Jamail now investigates the under-reported but growing antiwar resistance of American GIs. Gathering the stories of these courageous men and women, Jamail shows us that far from “supporting our troops,” politicians have betrayed them at every turn. Finally, Jamail shows us that the true heroes of the criminal tragedy of the Iraq War are those brave enough to say no. Order *Beyond the Green Zone* <http://dahrjamailiraq.com/bookpage>

“International journalism at its best.” –Stephen Kinzer, former bureau chief, New York Times; author All the Shah's Men

Winner of the 2008 Martha Gellhorn Award for Journalism

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