

Iraqi Women After the War

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And now, after the dust of the momentous shift from Saddam Hussein's Iraq to a new, still undefined Iraq, has started to settle, Iraqi women have started their soul searching all over again. But their past wounds have

barely started healing when other wounds started to crack open; wounds from stories that occurred throughout the past decades, stories we are well familiar with, but avoid talking about because of our humanitarian weakness. And these stories we know are just a small part of what really happened.

As soon as Fatmeh entered Jalal's room, most of the friends who had been waiting for her failed to recognize her; she had become a

middle-aged, plump, and veiled woman. When her friends had left her, she was a young, beautiful woman, and the most life-loving member of the group. There she

stood before her longtime friends, whom she never replaced after they all left Baghdad, fleeing imprisonment.

The time they took to scrutinize her was long and solemn. Once they recognized her and rushed to embrace her, Fatmeh started crying. It wasn't the kind of loud crying we're familiar with, but rather, a silent weeping that made her entire body shake. It was the first moment in over 24 years – the time they had been apart – and it was like seeing herself in a mirror, as she realized what had befallen her all these years. She didn't tell them much about those years that she lived alone, far from them in that Iraq. She said that she wore the veil because it was the only protection she could have after her friends had left, and that she had put on weight because time had gone by.

The story of Fatmeh is a slow one, devoid of blood, death, murder, and it did not end in a mass grave. But it ate away the soul of this lady, just as death eats away the body.

The lives of Iraqi men and women are laden with daily bits of reality like this and even worse. Abdullah, who

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recently returned to Baghdad, says that if many remained alive, it was only by accident. He believes that those who remained in Iraq under Saddam's rule have lost their ability to reach out to others. Abdullah says that when he met again with his sister, who had been the closest person to him before he fled Iraq, he found her to be almost a complete stranger, with nothing in common with the person she had been. He felt that something had died between them.

The recurring stories in Iraq have no end. For instance, there is the story of the lady who hid her sons for nearly twenty years in a room she fixed below her home, after they had been sentenced to death. She took them food and water every day, for twenty years, in that mud room underneath her house. This story seems normal to Iraqis. For twenty years, this lady regularly paid visits to the security authorities asking about her sons, so that they wouldn't have any suspicions about her and to avoid having them come to her house to investigate.

If Iraqi women were busy under Saddam's rule protecting themselves or covering up for their sons, husbands, and brothers, who could be sent to the front to kill and fight, or be imprisoned or executed, they don't seem to fare any better today.

Today, women in Iraq occupy an abstract place in the public mind. There are many indications of this, as fear from women is only equaled by the fear over them, and they are always subject to a general existential delirium. It is no coincidence that Iraqis keep repeating stories about US soldiers having binoculars that allow them to see through women's clothes and show their naked bodies. These stories no doubt aimed at instigating feelings of hostility against the American presence in Iraq, but those who started them know very well how much they can affect Iraqis and create fears about the Americans.

Targeting Women

Ishtar Jassem El Yassiri was in a narrow office, at the newspaper where she worked in Baghdad when the air conditioning suddenly shut down. It took no time before a heat wave flooded into the narrow room, where a number of editors were working on four of the newspapers that have appeared since the fall of Saddam Hussein. Ashtar, who had her hair covered with a scarf that brought out the greenness of her eyes, was the only woman in the room.

There are many women reporters in Iraq, but the lack of security that struck the country after the war has forced many of them to stay home. Ishtar, however, says that it's not the lack of security that will stop her from working. Most of the time her father or brother accompanies

her whenever she leaves her house, which is something they never had to do before the war. She considers that the calls that are beginning to warn women to wear conservative garments will not force her to neglect her work and her personal progress. She says: "We are an Islamic country, but no one can force us to wear something we don't like. No group has the right to determine what we need to do."

The conservative calls are not the only thing worrying Ishtar and Iraqi women in general. The rising number of cases of abuses of girls and women, physically and sexually, is very worrying to Iraqi families and has terrified them. This has pushed a group of university students in Baghdad to create a committee for the protection of students.

A few months after the fall of Saddam Hussein, there are still no accurate statistics on the number of women and girls who have been victims of physical and sexual abuse. This is because most victims never notify the authorities and never even resort to medical care.

The lack of security in the Iraqi capital and other cities has an obvious impact on the daily lives of women and girls, hindering their participation in public life at this decisive time in the country's history. A story such as that of Saba, who is not yet nine years old, helps to explain why many families have stopped the girls and women in their families from working or leaving the house without a male escort. In May, Saba went out of her house. She hadn't gone beyond the stairs of her building that she was abducted and taken to a nearby building, where she was raped. Later on, one of the neighbors found her sitting on the stairs bleeding, so she was taken to an American medical center, where an American woman doctor examined her and confirmed that she had been raped.

This case is just one of the few documented cases about violence against women in Iraq, as many women are afraid to talk about what happened to them and as such it is impossible to have an accurate record of these cases.

According to the *Women's Freedom Organization* in Iraq, which was formed after the fall of Saddam, there are dozens of Iraqi women who were killed by their own relatives, ever since US President George Bush announced that he was going to wage his war on Iraq last May. This

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organization wrote to Paul Bremer, the American administration's civil governor, denouncing the wave of crimes against Iraqi women, including rape, abduction and honor crimes, but the group never received any response from the American official.

In Baghdad, where five million people reside, there are around 5,000 US trained officials. Under Saddam's rule, the rate of crime was low, mainly because the sanctions were extremely harsh and included capital punishment by hanging or firing. But today, car thefts, rape, armed burglary, and murders are widespread. This burst of violence could be explained by the fact that Saddam Hussein released 100,000 prisoners last October, including criminals and members of gangs. Today, with the

return of electricity and water, the lack of security is the number one reason for the Iraqis' resentment towards the American forces.

Last May, 463 people were taken to the morgue of Baghdad. Around eighty percent of them had died from gunshots, including some who died during celebrations. The number of casualties rose to 626 in June, to 751 in July, and 872 in August.

According to Amal, who is a 33-year-old woman: "Today, security is the greatest problem to us women in Iraq." She is on the run, fleeing from her brother and father who vowed to kill her. Amal adds: "Crimes against women are on the rise, because of the absence of law and order, and because of the presence of Islamic radicals who believe that a woman has no value, and because of those whose power has increased."

Amal realized that one day she would have to face her family's revenge, because she ran away three years ago with Ali, whom she fell in love with and later married. Ali had asked for her hand in marriage, but her family refused because he was divorced. After they married, Ali and Amal fled to the Kurdish stronghold in the North of Iraq, and settled there and had a daughter. The husband of Amal's sister divorced her because of the "shame" Amal brought upon her family. But in the Kurdish environment, Amal felt safe because she doubted that anyone from her family would have the courage to violate the travel ban that was imposed by the regime of Saddam Hussein and go to the North to take revenge on her.

But Amal's life quickly disintegrated after the war, as she no longer feels safe since Iraqis from Baghdad have now access to the North. She must remain on the run with her husband, changing her place of residence continuously, for fear of being pursued by her family. "I live in daily fear," she says, "I don't have a single doubt that my father and brothers will kill me and my husband if they find us."

Translated by Lynn Maalouf



Picture Credit: Ayman Mroueh