

Eye witness account of the impact of war and sanctions on Iraq

"It's an attempt to destroy the country's psyche, its historic soul"

Part Two

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Felicity Arbuthnot is a freelance journalist, who has visited Iraq on many occasions since the end of the Gulf War. She has just returned to Britain from her eighteenth visit. In the second of this two-part interview she explains to Barbara Slaughter the social and cultural impact of the war and sanctions on Iraq and Yugoslavia.

I think the biggest disaster is what we are laying down in the Middle East. There's this sort of bewilderment, particularly about Britain. They have all written off the US as a maverick crazy state. But they say, "You know, all the ties we have with Britain. We know about colonialism, we know about the spying that went on over the years, we know about the manipulation. But deep down we have had cultural ties, trade ties, historical ties. So many families have had somebody who came to Britain for postgraduate study." And now there's both bewilderment and a sort of hate, that a country, with which they have had these historic ties—and history is very strong in Iraq—has just trashed them and abandoned them.

You wonder about the number of educated people who tell you in different ways, how their children repeat at night how much they hate Britain. How are these children going to grow up? How are they going to lay this thing to rest?

There is talk about lifting the embargo. Britain and Holland have put a motion to the UN, which the US has agreed to. But basically it turns Iraq into a mandate state. The big powers will be able to keep financial control, virtually forever. If Iraq doesn't comply with whatever conditions they impose, however unreasonable they are, the plug will be pulled again. It also puts the onus on Iraq to prove that they haven't got weapons, rather than UNSCOM having to prove that they have. It really is a New World Order that is being imposed by Britain and the US.

The parallels are so stark between Yugoslavia and Iraq, whether it's the weapons used, whether it's Rambouillet, which again meant the complete takeover of the country, making Yugoslavia into a mandate state. The Vienna Convention states that no treaty is valid if people are threatened and coerced into it. At Rambouillet, Britain and the US said, "If you don't sign we are going to bomb you!" so it was an invalid treaty. They have imposed totally impossible conditions on both countries. When the Gulf War started the British parliament was in recess and so was the equivalent in the US. George Bush announced the war when he was on a fishing trip. When they decided to bomb Iraq last December, there was absolutely no discussion in parliament.

They are now operating an entirely illegal war against Iraq. George Robertson and others have said, "We were not at war with Iraq last December and we are not at war with Iraq now". And Robertson and Blair say the same about Yugoslavia; "We are not at war."

In both countries the entire infrastructure has been destroyed. Yugoslavia relies on the bridges over the Danube and all the tributaries, for international trade, commerce and travel. They have bombed all the bridges. In Iraq also, just like Yugoslavia, they have cut the country in two, by bombing all the bridges. All this is prohibited under the Geneva Convention. But they bombed five electricity stations, whilst preaching about human rights.

At a press conference on May 3, Jamie Shea made this extraordinary statement:

"The fact that the lights have gone out over seventy per cent of Yugoslavia shows that NATO has its finger on the light switch and we can turn off the power whenever we need to and whenever we want to."

The lights have gone out all over Iraq and the lights have gone out all over Yugoslavia and with it the jobs, the normality. They bombed the telecommunications. Again it's illegal, under the Geneva Convention. They used Iraq as a blue print and went further in Yugoslavia. If you remember, Wesley Clark said that if the media didn't run six hours a day of western propaganda, they would bomb the broadcasting centre and they did. The western journalists were warned not to file their reports from the television centre that night. But nobody warned the Yugoslavs.

When I was in Baghdad this time I went to what is called the Reconstruction Museum, which is in a huge, very beautiful Ottoman building beside the Tigris. They have minutely reconstructed every public building, from Mosul in the north to Basra in the south, that was damaged in the Gulf War. Then they show how they have been reconstructed. I was stunned to see that in every city the television station was bombed. In Yugoslavia they bombed every radio and television centre. We heard about a couple of them, but in fact there were 27.

They also targeted education. In every single town in Iraq, the educational establishments were targeted. On the same day the stores that provided educational materials were also targeted. This can only be described as a kind of cultural or historical cleansing

During the Gulf War I remember a report from a Spanish journalist going round with a very old man who was an expert on the historic

sites of Iraq which appeared to have been deliberately targeted. The old man was saying, "Even during the Iran-Iraq War, with all its carnage, we had this common heritage. We respected each other's history. There were real efforts made to avoid these sites."

In Yugoslavia again the NATO spokesmen were actually boasting that they would teach them a lesson about history if that's what they wanted. In Iraq this meant destroying the ancient monasteries, the ancient sites, the world heritage sites listed by UNESCO. It's an attempt to destroy the country's psyche, its historic soul.

There are allegations that new weapons are being used, which they simply don't know the end result of yet. Maybe they will run on down the generations.

Another parallel is the unprecedented environmental degradation in both Iraq and Yugoslavia. We have seen the terrible toll in Iraq of the use of depleted uranium weapons—the spiralling birth deformities, the up-to ten-fold cancer increases amongst children, the toxicity which has been released and all the things that we don't know about yet.

On the way back from Mosul we visited hospitals and found the same sort of deformities that you see in Basra. One woman was there with an incredibly deformed child and she had two others at home equally deformed. They had been born since the Gulf War. The doctor said that in her whole family, even the extended family, there had never ever been a deformity. What we were seeing was acute lymphoblastic leukaemia, which very often results in horrendous growths behind the eyes. You see these children, who had previously been beautiful kids, who look as if their eyes are literally going to pop out of their heads because of the pressure behind them. The doctors can't treat them and these kids just die in agony.

Given the intensity of the bombing of Yugoslavia, we are going to see birth deformities there within a year, amongst the people and amongst the animals, and very quickly the cancer rates will rise. All these things are parallels and future generations if they survive, are going to have to live with them and with the consequences.

On the way back from Mosul, I realised that if we made a small diversion there was Hatra, which was built at the same time as Petra in Jordan—the "rose red city half as old as time"—and Baalbec in the Lebanon. It was one of the great historic sites in an area that has been consistently inhabited for the past six thousand years.

I said to the driver, "We've got to go to Hatra, we absolutely have to." So we went off the road and we arrived there at five in the morning, with this azure blue sky. And there were these great columns like the Parthenon in Athens. It's almost untouched and it is so incredible with this golden stone. We walked round in the early morning and everything was absolutely still. It was like travelling back in history. It was beyond anything you can imagine.

An archaeologist came running out. He had been looking after this remote site for 10 years, all on his own and he was just steeped in it. And he was so proud to have people there and to show us round. At the very end he asked if we could take a photograph so that he could believe that people had actually come to see it again. Then this man, who had come out at five in the morning, with his immaculate white shirt and his pressed trousers, said, "But please don't take a photograph of my shoes." His shoes were so battered, because shoes cost about two years salary. This proud and educated man, who spoke five languages and is a world acknowledged authority in archaeology, said, "Don't take a photograph of my shoes."

As we walked round he told us that there had been a bombing nearby, but Hatra hadn't been affected except for the vibrations. We saw this beautiful statue, about three feet high. It was like something

in the Uffizi Museum in Florence, but from the original time when Hatra was built, and it had lost its head in the bombing. I just stood there in the wonderful early morning light and I thought of Flecker's poem about the British Museum, which of course has robbed countries all over the world. Flecker wrote:

*There is a hall in Bloomsbury
That no more dare I tread,
For all the stone men shout at me
And swear they are not dead.
And once I touched a broken girl
And knew that marble bled.*

In that dawn light in Hatra, a place that screams at you, "This is the cradle of civilisation", I thought, "That's what this statue says, that the Americans have blown the head off."

I don't know where it all unravels, where we go from here. The Iraqis are not going to accept this new mandate that the UN is proposing. So we have reached an impasse, where 7,000 children a month are going to continue to die until the country is bereft of its youth, bereft of its future, bereft of its hope, of its education.

The bus journey out of Iraq to Oman takes 26 hours. People who have got the money to go there for proper medical treatment sometimes die on that bus. Iraqis have to pay a huge exit fee because there is such a haemorrhage of talent from the country. Everybody who gets themselves on the bus has a story. We talked to two Shia women in their black garb—very elegant, very beautiful. They had this two-year-old boy with them, in a baseball cap and little shorts and a tee shirt. It looked very odd to see the two traditions meeting. They were actually mother and daughter and they were travelling to Jordan to look for work because the little boy's mother had died of burns. She had been lighting one of these makeshift lamps and it had exploded. She burned to death in front of the little boy.

The other person we spoke to was a sheikh, with large horn-rimmed glasses, dressed in long white robes. He spoke better English than you or me. He told us that half his family lives in Kuwait and the other half in Iraq and there are no phone links between the two countries. He said he was fortunate because he has a little money, so every six weeks he makes the 26 hour journey on the bus, to telephone his family in Kuwait and then gets back on the bus for another 26 hours.

These are just two examples of the human cost. What has happened to the UN Declaration of Human Rights that we were trumpeting last year? What has happened to the Declaration on the Rights of the Child? And what has happened to our common humanity? It seems to me that if anybody is charged with war crimes at the International Criminal Court at the Hague, it should be the leaders of NATO, the leaders of Britain and the United States.



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