

The US war and occupation of Iraq—the murder of a society

Part two

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This is the second part of a three-part series. Part one was posted May 19. Its purpose is to examine a series of recent reports establishing the immense scale of death, destruction and oppression that have been wrought by the US occupation of Iraq, now in its fifth year. Taken together, these reports confirm that US operations in Iraq have amounted to sociocide—the deliberate and systematic murder of an entire society. The third and concluding part was posted May 22.

Desperate plight of Iraq's children

Iraq's Ministry of Health estimates that fully half of the country's children suffer from some form of malnutrition. According to a recent study by UNICEF, 10 percent of Iraqi children under five are acutely malnourished, while another 20 percent are chronically malnourished.

With the heat of Iraq's summer coming on, medical authorities fear a sharp rise in child deaths from dehydration, cholera and infections, and they warn that the shattered Iraqi medical system is virtually powerless to stop it.

The desperate plight of Iraqi children and their families was summed up by one Iraqi mother. "Last year I lost my daughter and my mother because of dehydration," Zahra Muhammad, 35, told the UN news agency IRIN. She said that the family had been forced from their home last May.

"We couldn't afford cooling systems in our tent. My daughter was only four years old and couldn't stand the hard living conditions in addition to the very hot weather," she continued. "I have two more children and they are already sick because of malnutrition. The doctors have told me that without proper cooling and drinkable water, I should expect serious consequences in the coming months. If I lose another child for lack of electricity and clean water, then I would prefer to die with them."

As many as 260,000 children have died since the March 2003 invasion, according to one estimate reported by the British daily *The Independent* in January.

For those children who do live to see their fifth birthday, Iraq has become a hostile and often deadly environment.

Less than a third of Iraq's children now attend school, compared to 100 percent attendance before the March 2003 invasion. The principal reason students are staying out of the classrooms is fear of the endemic violence that makes a trip to school a deadly risk their families are unwilling to take.

At the same time, the relentless killing has left countless thousands of Iraqi children orphans, who have become a new and tragic fixture of life in Baghdad and other major cities, sleeping and begging in the streets. As

the UN's IRIN news agency reports: "Thousands of homeless children throughout Iraq...survive by begging, stealing or scavenging garbage for food. Only four years ago, the vast majority of these children were living at home with their families."

The desperate conditions confronting Iraqi children led a group of 100 prominent British physicians to address an open letter to Prime Minister Tony Blair in January expressing their extreme concern over the impact of the occupation. "We are concerned that children are dying in Iraq for want of medical treatment. Sick or injured children, who could otherwise be treated by simple means, are left to die in their hundreds because they do not have access to basic medications or other resources. Children who have lost hands, feet and limbs are left without prostheses. Children with grave psychological distress are left untreated."

There are fears that this last issue—the wholesale traumatization of an entire young generation—may have the most far-reaching and devastating effect upon Iraqi society. "Children in Iraq are seriously suffering psychologically with all the insecurity," the Association of Psychologists of Iraq declared. Based on a survey of 1,000 school children, it found that 92 percent had learning impediments caused by the climate of violence and fear. "The only things they have on their minds are guns, bullets, death and a fear of the US occupation," Maruan Abdullah, spokesman for the association told reporters.

The hellish conditions that have been imposed upon Iraqi children constitute a war crime. As the occupying power, the United States is enjoined by the Geneva Conventions to ensure "preferential measures in regards to food, medical care and protection" in favor of children under 15 years, expectant mothers, and mothers of children under seven, and to "maintain all institutions devoted to the care and education of children."

A catastrophic decline in the status of women

The US war and occupation have driven Iraqi women back generations, condemning millions to statutory second-class citizenship and nightmarish conditions in which they are virtually prisoners in their homes.

This development is closely bound up with the record rise in infant mortality and is just as vital an indicator of social progress—or retrogression. It was Charles Fourier, the French utopian socialist, who wrote 155 years ago, in a passage cited by Marx and Engels: "Social progress and changes of a period are accompanied by the progress of women towards freedom, while the decay of the social system brings with it a reduction of the freedoms enjoyed by women." He concluded: "Extension of the rights of women is the basic principle of all social

progress.”

A report released in April by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) on human rights in the country recorded 40 cases of “honor killings” of women over a three-month period in the governorates of Erbil, Duhok, Sulaimaniya and Salahuddin. These women were murdered by their own family members, in some cases burned alive, for alleged “immoral” conduct.

A report by the Iraqi news agency Awena indicates that this hideous practice is even more widespread. Basing itself on data obtained from the Duhok criminal court and the Duhok Azadi Hospital, Awena reported last January that in this governorate there were 289 burning cases resulting in 46 deaths of women in 2005, and 366 burning cases resulting in 66 deaths in 2006. Meanwhile, the Emergency Management Center in Erbil cited 576 burning cases resulting in 358 deaths in that governorate since 2003.

Also in Erbil, the UN report found that the number of reported rapes quadrupled between 2003 and 2006.

The Iraqi constitution, drafted under US supervision, declares Islam the official state religion and establishes that no law may be enacted that “contradicts the immutable rulings of Islam.” This principal sets the stage for the overturning of Iraq’s more liberal civil laws governing divorce, family property and child custody, substituting in their place *sharia* law, which denies women most rights.

Already, these principles are being imposed in the streets by armed militias of the Islamist parties, which have killed women for daring to hold professional positions as professors or doctors or to play a visible directing role in a business. Vigilantes have also forced the use of Islamic dress, including the hijab, or veil, backed by the threat of violence. Such groups in some areas have also demanded that women not leave their houses after midday, not drive automobiles or walk outside without a male relative.

A report issued by the Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq on the fourth anniversary of the US invasion declared: “Women of Iraq have gradually let go of most of their 20th century gains and privileges in the last 4 years of occupation. Iraq turned from a modern country of educated and working women into a divided land of Islamic and ethnic warlords who compete in canceling women from the social realm. Millions of women’s destinies are wasted between the destructive US war machine and different kinds of Islamic rule which have turned women into helpless black objects of no will or worth.”

The report cited growing violence against women, including gang rapes of female detainees and assaults on women by militias of other sects as an instrument of sectarian warfare. Kidnappings of women have also become rampant. A report issued by the group in March of last year found that the crime, virtually unknown under the regime of Saddam Hussein, claimed 2,000 female victims in the first three years after the US invasion, many of whom were raped or tortured. Such incidents, together with all other forms of violence, have escalated markedly over the last year.

Four women are on Iraq’s death row, waiting to be hanged, two of them imprisoned together with their young children.

The eradication of Iraq’s minorities

Also a telling sign of the social disintegration in Iraq is the status of minorities. A report issued this month by Minority Rights Group International warns that minority communities in Iraq are being systematically eradicated. It ranks Iraq as the second-worst country in the world in terms of the threat posed to minorities—better only than Somalia and worse than Darfur.

The report, entitled “Assimilation, Exodus, Eradication: Iraq’s Minority Communities Since 2003,” tracks the situation confronting Iraq’s Armenian and Chaldo-Assyrian Christians, Bahais, Faili Kurds, Jews, Mandaean, Palestinians, Shabaks, Turkomans and Yazidis, who together make up 10 percent of the country’s total population.

“Iraq continues to see targeted killings of people from minority groups, including Christians, Yazidis and Mandaean. Other minority groups in Iraq face daily violence, torture and political assimilation, which has led to an exodus of these communities from the country,” the report states. Last year, Iraq ranked the worst in the world. Its decline to the second worst is a reflection of the marked deterioration of the situation in Somalia, where a US-engineered intervention has unleashed rampant violence.

Some of Iraq’s minorities predate the Arabs in terms of their presence in the country, which dates back to ancient Mesopotamia. Now, victims of violence and intimidation, they are disappearing from Iraq, many killed and the rest fleeing into exile.

The report’s authors blame the US occupation for this disaster. They write: “Following the occupation of Iraq in 2003, the coalition authorities established an Iraqi Governing Council in which membership was strictly apportioned along ethnic and sectarian lines. Political patronage ensured that whole ministries became dominated by officials from the minister’s own sect or group, and sectarian politics quickly became the defining feature of the new Iraqi state.” As a result, minority populations were excluded and subsequently repressed.

The decimation of Iraq’s medical professionals

The murderous violence in Iraq and the flight of millions of refugees have decimated the ranks of key professions who are indispensable for the maintenance of society.

The British non-governmental organization Medact, citing the official figures of the Iraqi Medical Association, reported in March of last year that 18,000 of Iraq’s 34,000 doctors have left the country. Another 2,000 have been murdered and at least 250 have been reported kidnapped.

In his article on the exodus of refugees from Iraq in the May 13 *New York Times Magazine*, Nir Rosen interviewed one such doctor, a family medicine specialist, who had fled to Damascus with her five children.

She left after her husband, a thoracic surgeon and a medical school professor, was dragged from his car by armed men, abducted and later found murdered. She told Rosen that when she asked the Iraqi police to investigate, they said, “He is a doctor, he has a degree and he is a Sunni, so he couldn’t stay in Iraq. That’s why he was killed.” Both the police and the Ministry of Health are controlled by Shiite Islamist factions. She was subsequently ordered by letter to leave her neighborhood.

The lack of trained medical staff, together with the shortage of basic supplies and the overwhelming burden of mass casualties, has left Iraq’s healthcare system in a shambles.

In an article published last October in the *British Medical Journal*, three doctors from the Diwaniyah College of Medicine in Iraq estimated that nearly half of the hundreds of thousands who have been killed since the 2003 US invasion could have survived if they had received adequate medical care.

“The reality is we cannot provide any treatment for many of the victims,” they wrote. “Emergency departments are staffed by doctors who do not have the proper experience or skills to manage emergency cases. Medical staff...admit that more than half of those killed could have been saved if trained and experienced staff were available.”

The article added: “Our experience has taught us that poor emergency medicine services are more disastrous than the disaster itself. But despite

the daily violence that is crushing Iraq, the international medical community is doing little more than looking on.”

It is not just the international medical community. The state of the Iraqi healthcare system constitutes a US war crime. The Fourth Geneva Convention demands that an occupying power “[e]nsure the effective operation of medical services, including hospitals and public health programs, with special focus on preventing the spread of contagious diseases and epidemics, and allow medical personnel to carry out their duties.”

The Geneva Conventions also require that an occupying power guarantee the neutrality of hospitals, protecting them from attack and ensuring that all are able to seek medical care. Yet US occupation troops have repeatedly attacked hospitals. Moreover, militias have been given free rein in the medical facilities, often dragging away patients of other sects for execution.

The killing and kidnapping of doctors and their wholesale flight from the country are phenomena common to virtually every profession in Iraq. The Iraq Index, maintained by the Brookings Institution in Washington, estimates that 40 percent of Iraq’s “professional class,” including doctors, professors, pharmacists and other university-trained personnel, have left the country since 2003.

To be continued



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