

Baghdad Central on Hulu: Where is the outrage?

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Baghdad Central, a six-part series streaming on Hulu, is a crime drama set in the wake of the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Produced by Britain's Channel 4 and based on the novel of the same title by Elliott Colla, the series was adapted by Stephen Butchard and directed by Alice Troughton. Its central figure is a former policeman under Saddam Hussein who goes in search of his missing daughter, in the course of which he interacts with British and American occupiers.

Remarkably, the mini-series, set in a country that has experienced the most heinous assault over the last 30 years led by the US, resulting in mass death and destruction, manages to take no position on this imperialist atrocity. That the word "oil," a simple three-letter word, appears nowhere says a great deal.

The creators are not necessarily supporters of the occupation, but their opposition or criticism is so amorphous and passive that it amounts to prostration before the accomplished fact. Bending over backward to be "fair-minded" to everyone, they end up giving the benefit of the doubt—or more—to the most prominent American military character in the series.

Baghdad Central opens in 2003 when Iraq is already occupied by a US-led military coalition. In Baghdad, Muhsin al-Khafaji (Waleed Zuaiter), a former police inspector in the Iraqi Police Service, learns that his elder daughter Sawsan (Leem Lubany) is missing. His younger daughter Mrouj (July Namir), suffering from kidney disease, tells him that Sawsan got a job through her university professor Zubeida Rashid (Clara Khoury) working as an interpreter for the occupation forces in the Green Zone.

Once in the Green Zone, the Iraqi ex-cop is offered a position by a slimy British policeman Frank Temple (Bertie Carvel). Khafaji becomes a collaborator in order to obtain medical aid for Mrouj and, surreptitiously, to

look for Sawsan. He is soon the object of a tug-of-war between Temple and the no-nonsense US military policeman John Parodi (Corey Stoll), who wants Khafaji's services as an investigator.

A few dead bodies surface and so does Temple's illicit hoard of cash, revealing that the British official, along with his murderous mercenary cohort Evans (Neil Maskell), has been running a prostitution and sex slavery ring. Sawsan comes out of hiding with a vengeful determination to kill Temple.

A showdown ensues and the US military saves the day!

It is appalling that a high-level member of the American occupation ends up the "voice of reason" and the virtual hero of the series. Of course, *Baghdad Central* wants to eat its cake and have it too, since the creators know full well that wide layers of both the British and American populations are hostile to the invasion of Iraq, an illegal act under international law based on out-and-out lies.

Along these lines, as the series opens, there is some lip-service paid to anti-occupation sentiment on the part of the Iraqis. One character says, "If you can wear sunglasses and chew gum, you can be an American soldier ... They believe we should kiss their arse and be grateful ... I'm never sure if they're going to shoot me in the head."

In addition, the university professor Rashid, who sends Sawsan and two other of her students into the Green Zone as information gatherers, identifies the occupiers as oppressors and invaders. But these few utterances evaporate into almost nothingness. While Stoll/Parodi performs the American dirty work in Iraq, he is nonetheless portrayed as an honorable man.

Furthermore, the choice of making the central character, Khafaji, a policeman is already telling. Not even an inch can be given to Washington's justification for the war, but the Hussein regime was a vicious dictatorship and his police force carried out brutal repression of left-wing

forces and the working class.

This is not, in fact, a series done from the point of view of “ordinary Iraqis,” as its makers claim. The American-hating taxi driver is virtually the only sympathetic Iraqi.

What’s more, the British production can’t help itself, bringing in gender politics as a critical issue. Rashid is the representative of feminism and, indeed, in so far as an Iraqi opposition is identified, its central concern seems to be women’s rights, not liberating the Iraqi people from neo-colonial domination. Butchard, the screenwriter, told an interviewer from Channel 4, “As soon as war breaks out, one of the first casualties is always women’s rights.”

In *Baghdad Central*, the biggest crime in the series is Temple’s prostitution ring. No doubt this is foul and involves the oppression of women, but there is relatively little reference to the mass slaughter, the sociocide, that was already underway.

In the same interview, Butchard refers to the fact that, by the time of the 2003 invasion, “ten years of sanctions had broken Iraq and left its people suffering.” But in this and other statements about post-invasion Iraq, he never seriously indicts US imperialism for its savaging of the country. Where is the outrage?

Butchard’s central conception apparently is that “family is all we have,” as one of his characters laments. Butchard told *Variety*: “The backdrop of Iraq in 2003 adds a real and constant danger, as well as a political and global event that has rarely been explored from the viewpoint of an ordinary family; this adds texture, intrigue, suspense and of course threat—but the family remain front and centre.” One banality piled upon another.

“What was important,” the screenwriter explained, “was to identify and show that the love and fractures within this family are no different to the love and fractures within families worldwide.” Then why set the film in Iraq if you have nothing substantial to say about the titanic events unfolding in that country? In fact, once the viewer is clued into the series’ preoccupation with family at the expense of the invasion, it falls entirely flat.

From the first Gulf War of 1991 through the 2003 invasion and subsequent military occupation of Iraq, US imperialism carried out the systematic destruction of what had been one of the most advanced social infrastructures in the Arab world. The second war claimed the lives of over one million Iraqis, turning another five million into refugees. This butchery is seen by the creators of *Baghdad Central* as a mere “backdrop.”

At one point, Khafaji says to “never forget we are the cradle of civilization and the land of poets.” What the

series shies away from, however, is what Iraq has become.

Another interview with Butchard confirms this. *The Agency* claims that the writer was “keen to avoid writing polemically about the aftermath of the invasion.” (Why? How is such a thing possible in the face of these events?) Butchard concurs: “It’s very easy to tell this story in black-and-white terms with no grey but that would be wrong. There are people on all sides who are doing right and people on all sides doing wrong and people who are simply trying to get through the day and do a job in difficult circumstances.”

It is entirely inappropriate and irresponsible to apply the term “grey” to such matters. Individual human behavior, emotional life and moral choices cannot be treated in simple “black-and-white terms,” but there is nothing murky or obscure about the monstrous conduct of the Bush and Blair governments and their military forces. They committed war crimes, crimes against humanity. Would Butchard suggest there were “people on all sides ... doing right and ... wrong” during Britain’s colonial rule in India and Africa, or during French imperialism’s bloody war in Algeria, much less in Nazi-occupied Europe?

The series makers’ attitudes speak to the mood and outlook in what passes for the “intelligentsia,” a bit of hand-wringing and futile protest, but, in general, acquiescence all down the line with “human rights” imperialism in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya and elsewhere.

This complacent, affluent layer is 1,000 miles away from taking a principled anti-imperialist stance.



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