# Iraqi refugee speaks of Washington's proxy war against Russia and the destruction of her home country by US imperialism

**Barry Grey**
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*The following interview was conducted recently with a student at the University of Michigan who, along with her family, lived through the truly genocidal US invasion and occupation of Iraq. Out of concern for the security of family members living in the Middle East, she asked that we use a pseudonym.*

Barry Grey: I would first like to get your response to the present war being waged in Ukraine and the attempt by the US and NATO to present it as a war for freedom, democracy and national sovereignty.

Adila: As a refugee from Iraq, having been born at the dawn of the Iraq War and my parents, my family having lived through the 13-year sanctions imposed by NATO and the US, we are not foreigners to the propaganda surrounding war.

In recordings of President Bush's old speeches we hear repeatedly how the US invasion and occupation was a war against terrorism, a war to protect the people of Iraq and the Middle East from the weapons of mass destruction that Saddam Hussein supposedly had.

President Bush at a Washington D.C. event made a joke about the weapons of mass destruction, saying, "We're still looking for them." It was kind of like him making a mockery of the propaganda he upheld for so many years and then later retracted in a laughing statement, after having essentially murdered over 625,000 children between 2003 and 2006.

The propaganda that is being pumped out today in support of the war against Russia in Ukraine feels like a repeated episode. The same emotions are being evoked—that the war is being fought to preserve freedom. Images of children running away or in bomb shelters are used to insinuate that we need to act fast. The propaganda is being used to push the largest corporate enterprises to place sanctions and holds on their businesses in Russia.

Even my university—I go to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor—has basically divested from Russia. We as Arab and Muslim students have been fighting for the divestment movement since 2002 on this campus, to divest against the apartheid in Palestine. We were always told this is complicated, it cannot happen, you cannot place sanctions on a place because of political views.

But this is exactly what is happening now and you see how it is happening so quickly and easily. All of the corporations and the politicians who are funded by these corporations are showing us how easy it is to divest resources from that region.

BG: The remarks by Bush to which you referred were at the White House Radio and Television Correspondents Association Dinner in 2004 and ironically you just had the one the other night where Biden congratulated the press for lining up 100 percent behind the government propaganda and refusing to allow the slightest dissenting view on the war against Russia. And in the name of press freedom, they are sanctioning the banning of Russian artists, musicians, media outlets and even cultural treasures.

What is the reality, from your own experience in Iraq and that of your family and since then, of American militarism and imperialism?

Adila: I was born in 2002 in Raffah Hospital, central city Baghdad. It's where my mother was born and her mother before that. It is a really old hospital and one of the really well known hospitals in Iraq.

But after 1990, when the US and NATO placed sanctions against Iraq, essential food, water and medication was not able to reach Iraq for some 13 years. The medical devices were not updated. No medications, including epidural anesthetics, were allowed to be imported into the country.

When my mother gave birth to me, it was her first birth and she had complications during birth. She was in a very bad condition. She had an emergency C-section. I was born in breech, she was in labor for 12 hours without medication and during the procedure she was also unmedicated. So she felt every single cut of the scalpel, every single pain that came with childbirth through a C-section.

My mother is one of hundreds of thousands of women who had to undergo the same ordeal. The death toll we have for the sanctions, before the violent occupation that began in 2003, circles around 623,000. But Iraqi data analysts and physicians expect this number to be around a million.

There was an immense death toll. I think it is referred to as the essential death toll, which means the death toll that we know can be attributed to the violent deaths that occurred. It does not include the slow death from famine, it does not include all the children and mothers who died in childbirth as a result of the ban on medications and imported devices.

One day in 2003, when I was a couple months old, US soldiers barged into my family home and took seven of my uncles and my father and my grandfather to Abu Ghraib prison. They were held there for some time. They were tortured, electrocuted, sexually assaulted, whipped. My father lost an eye.

My father and my uncles were released after several years and pardoned. They were told, "Oops! Sorry, wrong name."

They were let go without reparations, without anything. My father was 22 at the time and when he was released he was 25-26. So that whole period of his youth, when he was supposed to make something of himself and live, did not happen. I essentially did not know I had a father until I was about seven years old.

Right away after his release, my father went back to work, until he was attacked by a proxy militia for his name. It is one that is not preferred in sectarian terms. He was on his way to Friday prayer when this happened. He was lying on the floor in a pool of blood and all he could think about

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was me and my now orphaned three cousins, whose father, my father's brother, had died three months before due to a suicide bombing. He expected his death at that point, before a woman came out of nowhere. She looked at him and called his relatives to come.

After this, we left Iraq. My father formally adopted my three cousins and we were living in Damascus, Syria. We moved to Syria, I believe, in 2009.

My family moved to Syria at the time of a big surge of Iraqi refugees coming there. We lived in Damascus. In my family, there were about 13 of us living in a flat. There was no privacy. We had mattresses laid out on the floor. In daytime we would use the mattresses as couches. My father and his two brothers who were living with us used to work at a restaurant and that is what they did for several years before our family was granted asylum in the US.

BG: Were you there during the civil war in Syria?

Adila: We were there at the very beginning. We had been living in Damascus, but my father moved us to Aleppo, which is in northern Syria. But my father and my uncles were living in Damascus. There they were treated very badly because of their Iraqi nationality by some Bashar al-Assad Syrians, who were Shiite Muslims.

This was the time of the breaking of the Pan Arab movement. The Pan Arab movement on the literary front was the inspiration that the Arab populace used to continue forth with the revolution and continue standing up for themselves and their lives. It was the fuel behind the Arab revolt.

During the violent military occupation and even during the 1990s, the first emergence of proxy militias occurred, and many people who were targeted were people of literature, educated people, like the poets.

My family is Sunni Muslim. We are one of the biggest families in Baghdad known to be Sunni. Most of my uncles' wives are Shia. Most of my cousins today are Shia. Our neighbors, our best friends, people we break bread with are Shiites. My mom and my dad used to tell me stories that when they were younger they would go light candles in the churches on their Christian neighbors' holidays, their Chaldean and Assyrian brothers and sisters and they would go visit the shrines in the south during the Shiite holidays.

This sectarianism never really existed until imperial intervention, and they first broke down the literary movement that unified us. They capitalized on the things that make us different. This became fuel for division, for blaming each other for the traumas that we individually endured, rather than seeing the bigger picture.

BG: Your family came to the United States. Can you explain when that happened and how it happened? You were granted refugee status?

Adila: Yes. My aunt had been living here since the '80s with her husband, who is Kurdish. We applied through them as our sponsor in the states. We applied in 2010 and were granted asylum in 2012.

What we were told in Syria, what we heard from other Arab refugees we encountered at the US embassy, was that when we moved to America we would all be given a house with a pool in the back yard, we would all have money, we would all have a job. We would be financially secure. There would be a Thanksgiving Day meal every day. The sun would shine all the time.

Then we moved to the US in 2012 and we did not receive a house with a pool, we did not receive food, we did not bask in perpetual sunshine. Instead, the five of us lived in a two-bedroom flat.

It was very hard for my dad to find work. When we first moved here we did not have any generational wealth and my father was basically unemployed. He got various jobs like dishwashing. It was very hard for my dad. In Iraq we were not well off, but we were middle class. He had restaurants and he was like the head chef.

Now when we moved to America he was waiting, washing dishes and making kabobs. He was very hurt by this.

This echoes the experience of a lot of people, even people with degrees. My uncle, he was an engineer in Iraq. His diploma is from the University of Baghdad, which is a 500-year-old institution, where people from the West used to come to study. His degree is not recognized in the US. My aunt, who was a teacher, the same thing. My cousin, who is a lawyer and wants to come here, her certificate will not be recognized.

My father would go to work at five in the morning and come back at 12 at night, completely drenched and he would sleep just a few hours and go back and repeat it and he was paid $8 an hour.

BG: I believe you visited Iraq last year. What is the situation there now? What is the ongoing impact of the US intervention in Iraq?

Adila: I went there expecting—I knew the war would have done a number, but I did not at all expect it to be this terrible.

I entered the Baghdad airport, an area that I later found out was one of the more clean and well-off areas of Baghdad. But I went there and there was garbage everywhere, like literally everywhere. Baghdad was littered with posters of the likes of Suleimani and Moqada al-Sadr and Sistani.

I expected to feel a connection to my land because it is something I have always held close to my heart. I expected to feel pride when I walked in there, but all I felt was disappointment.

I went to the market the second day I was there and it was raining really heavily. Whenever it rains in Baghdad now it floods like with two-three feet of water. There was sewage water everywhere and the electrical lines that connect buildings are essentially made by people, so they are very dangerous. Several people die a month from electrocution.

When I was in Baghdad there were probably only 10 buildings standing all the way straight. There were a lot of burned down buildings even on main streets. There were cars that had been there since 2014, residues of suicide bombs, and the cars are just parked there and no one cleans them out. It is the road my cousins have to take to school every single day. Imagine, you are 17 and every single day you walk past this van your dad died in and no one wants to pick it up.

Even the air is different, there's a yellow hue. And the water is different.

All of the great empires of ancient times were built along the Tigris and the Euphrates and I kind of expected them to have clean water but they did not. The people had multiple filters on their faucets. The water is unsafe.

All over Iraq, especially Baghdad, it is now just full of factories producing all types of plastic materials, including in residential neighborhoods like al Gobche, where I lived.

The residential neighborhoods are extremely unsafe with regards to air quality and it is very overcrowded, including with immigrants who work in Baghdad, like workers from India and Bangladesh.

My cousins who go to school there literally have to walk through piles and piles of garbage just to get to school. I am talking about piles like a dumpster.

My family's graveyard, the graves were destroyed. Some people were buried on top of others. There's no space to walk. When you enter the graveyard you have to step on people's graves.

So many people have died, there's no space. The largest graveyard in the world is in Najaf. People live in the graveyard.

There are over 50,000 people in Baghdad living under bridges. These people live in tents. It's basically a dumpster and they gather material and build houses.

There is a very high unemployment rate in the city. And they exclude temporary, pick-up jobs from the tally of unemployed, so the real rate is much higher.

West of the Euphrates we have Fallujah. Fallujah was hit in the beginning of the violent military occupation with depleted uranium. That is a chemically manufactured substance that has the ability to alter human genetics.

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So depleted uranium has seeped into our ground water system and into the Euphrates in this town called Fallujah. This has given Fallujah the first, and in some studies the second, highest rate of congenital birth defects in the entire world.

There are babies being born with tumors twice the size of their head. There are children being born with half an arm, weird facial disfigurations.

I actually worked with a baby, her name was Nada. My uncle is a surgeon, he wanted me to know about it and report it to people here. This little girl, Nada, who was two years old and she had a tumor that was two or three times bigger than the size of her head attached to her head.

So my people are sick from factories in residential neighborhoods, they are sick from depleted uranium in our water system, they are sick from the lack of resources and health care training.

MIT did a study in 2016 showing that before the 2003 occupation there were 35,000 active physicians in the country. After the occupation, 12,000 physicians were able to leave the country and 2,000 were murdered. This leaves you with roughly 20,000 physicians in a country with 40 million people. So the ratio is 2,000 patients for one physician. In Michigan, the physician to patient ratio is one to 324, just to put things in perspective.

The reasons I listed for why my people are sick do not include ongoing violence. They do not take into account other types of pollution and war-linked respiratory illnesses.

The health care system is extremely monopolized, almost all private-sector. There are only a handful of public hospitals and even in them you have to pay fees. Socialized medicine does not exist. It did exist under the Baathist Party.

BG: At one time Iraq was known as one of the most developed countries infrastructure-wise in the Middle East.

Adila: For years we were, but since the war and the privatization of the health care system, health care is a luxury that many cannot afford. Gall bladder surgery costs around $2,000. That's big money in Iraq. You would have to labor for two, three years to afford survivability.

Even for COVID vaccines you have to pay. Even though they were donated from outside, they are sold for profit in the country. So President Trump's herd immunity theory was actually applied in Iraq. People could not afford to get vaccinated. So everyone was walking around maskless. Corona was surging, killed thousands of people and it still continues today.

When COVID happened, schools closed down. The time that I went to Iraq, 12, 13 months after COVID began, schools were still closed. Schools actually opened up just this year and while they were closed there was no online substitute. So kids have been home without any online substitute for three years.

BG: Previously you spoke to me about the situation in the south of the country, in the marsh country.

Adila: The quality of life among the marsh Arabs is terrible. A very large percentage of the marshes are drying up. A lot of species have gone extinct, like native species of groundhogs.

A lot of the farmers who live in the marshes, who are Shia, are unemployed and facing mass hunger because their entire economy in the South is built on ancient fishing, farming techniques they have used for centuries that are now inaccessible. So there is mass famine in the South.

BG: How is that related to the US war and occupation?

Adila: It is related because, how do I even start?

Last year, Kuwait demanded that Iraq pay it $52 billion in reparations for the negative impact Saddam Hussein had during the Gulf War. The UN backed this and it made the Iraqi government pay $52 billion to the government of Kuwait, which is currently an extremely stable economic state while we have people starving and literally walking about barefoot.

But the people of the South and the people of Iraq in general have yet to receive reparations for the extreme loss and violence inflicted on them by the US and NATO for the past 30-plus years. If they were able to secure these funds, they could reestablish their communities, they could afford new devices and techniques to carry out farming and other things that once stood at the center of their economy. They could rebuild the infrastructure of their cities and find sustainable ways to produce electricity and food with the money that was essentially stolen from them.

One more thing to add to that: archeological exploitation of the South. It is a very historically significant hub, where anthropologists and archeologists from the West like to collect trophies and so there is a lot of land exploitation for archeological purposes.

**Mass protests in 2019-2020 against the US-installed regime**

BG: What do people think about the government and the bourgeois parties that are running things?

Adila: People have been protesting the government since 2019. We have had a series of revolts from 2003 onward but people began to consecutively, every single day hold mass protests in Tahrir Square, Freedom Square, where my uncle once sold newspapers. It was a youth-led movement. Activists, lawyers in tents, engineers in tents, doctors that are unemployed in tents all across Freedom Square and people stayed for three years.

The organizers of the protests were brutally murdered, some in their own homes, some left in dumpsters, some who were the brightest of their class. One who was the brightest of her graduating class, who led the protests, she was dismembered. Her body parts, except for her head, are still not found.

These atrocities were carried out by people that the clergy and the government hired.

So all the people—Sunnis, Shia, Christians—from 2019 onward were united, were completely united against the capitalist system, the system that continually sells our labor, our lives and our land for their profit.

During the protests when there was mass unity against the common oppressor, the government was not happy about this newfound unity. It worked to instrumentalize the deaths of the activists and say, "Hey, this sect killed this person."

But to this day—I went to Baghdad in 2020, like a whole year and a half after the first protests emerged—there were still tents of professionals lined up against the bridges and lined up in the square. It is heavily militarized and policed. If the people got out of line they were arrested right away.

To this day people are fear-mongered to not leave their homes because of the examples made of the activists who decided to carry forth with the revolution. Their deaths and the brutality that fueled their deaths are used to control people.

Besides the direct murder of activists, people's families were targeted. So that one person said something about one clergy member and the following week his family was gunned down, kids too.

Every person I have spoken to is anti-government, without exception or exemption, regardless of sect or religion or color.

BG: Getting back to the present war, the question of US imperialist propaganda. As everyone knows, the justification for the US invasion in 2003 was the infamous lie of weapons of mass destruction and yet the government and the media expect everyone to accept as true all of the claims they are making about Russian atrocities in Ukraine, to the point of genocide, without any independent investigation. In Iraq, at least a million people died as a result of US sanctions, two invasions and a brutal occupation.

Adila: I am witnessing for the second time in my 20 years of living the propaganda that is being pumped out to establish mass support for a war.

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It is very hard because I know many people are going to think it is true. Most of these people are exploited. They will most likely be the ones fighting on the front lines of wars that are being waged without benefit to them.

And so I am just very scared at this point. I have been very scared for months that a situation is going to blow up and cause a third world war because of the immense military strength that is head to head between Russia and the US and its allies. And all of this is being fought by capitalist governments and politicians. They will never see the battle in person.

All of the decisions they make, they do not impact them. Their sons and daughters are not going to be on the front lines, their sons and daughters are not going to be the ones lost in these wars. And so I really urge people to reassess history and revisit the claims put forward.

The war impacts the generations of your family, my family, our families, us being the working class people. It has not been that long since the crisis in Iraq and it has not been that long since we saw the implications of what the sanctions did to my people, what the military occupation did to the family dynamic of the people of Iraq, how it impacts me and how it impacts millions of people and how it will impact my children and generations to come.

Generations of children that exist in the Diaspora will never know what it feels like to speak their mother tongue or to eat a dish made by their grandmother’s hand because of a war that rich, capitalist, imperialist people were pushing.

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