

## Life after Saddam

**Raeid Jewad**

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*The toxic shadow of the dictator has fallen across all twenty-five years of this young Iraqi exile's life. From sinister visits to his nursery school to everyday chit chat, fear and paranoia infused his family's life; now return and freedom beckon, but can the occupying forces deliver the democracy they have promised?*

Tears of joy trickled down my cheeks as I watched Saddam's statue come crashing down. Who could believe that such a moment would ever come? The whole day was spent celebrating, talking on the phone, in joy, elation and happiness – feelings never before experienced, in all my life. Suddenly Iraqis all over the world have hope, and are talking about something that none of us ever dreamed would happen – “the day we go back home”.

Iraq, my birthplace and the land where I was conceived, the land of my ancestry, the land I am proud to belong to. I was denied the God-given right to live in this land, leaving my country at the tender age of three, although it still binds and pre-occupies me, breathing its air as if I had never left.

### [Everything is great, thanks to Saddam](#)

My earliest childhood memories are of portraits of Saddam Hussein adorning every wall in our house. He

was the great leader, the father, the conqueror of the Arab world. My parents told me stories of the greatness of our leader, and more brainwashing took place in school and on television. For until we were thousands of miles and many years away from Iraq, my parents kept the truth about Saddam Hussein away from me...

I was born in 1977 in Kerada, a wealthy district of Baghdad, two years before Saddam became the president of Iraq. At that time, Saddam was vice president and his cousin was president, although everyone knew Saddam was the main man in control. My parents were both teachers. My father came from a humble background, while my mother was from a wealthy and well-known Iraqi family. Her father, Aboud Al-Shalchy, was a famous judge and, subsequently, a famous writer. He was also family lawyer to the monarchy which ruled Iraq until its downfall by military coup in 1958.

My mother tells me stories of a Saddam who at this time used to stroll through her neighbourhood, surrounded by bodyguards. He mingled with the people, asking how they were doing and what they needed. He tried to project himself as a man of the people, an Iraqi caring about his fellow Iraqis. My mother used to line the street, alongside her sisters shrouded in their *abayas*, just to get a glimpse of Saddam. No one knew the truth about him back then.

As I say, I was not told the truth about Saddam. His portraits were all over the house. My parents told me he was a great man, a man who all Iraqis loved. They were scared to tell me how they really felt – how they despised him, how their hatred of him was so deep that my mother even now cannot bear to see his face on TV. But why were they so scared? I was only a child at the time. What harm could I possibly cause them if I knew the truth?

#### Suffer the little children...

One day, in my nursery school, Saddam paid us a surprise visit, his moustachioed entourage surrounding him like flies around faeces. He sat and beckoned one child to him at a time. It was my turn now. I walked over. He sat me on his knee and gave me a present. He asked me if I liked him. I said, “of course, I love you, you are the great leader”. He then asked me what my parents thought of him, and I told him, “they love you too, they praise you whenever you appear on TV, and we have pictures of you all over the house”. Next came my friend’s turn, with the same procedure. He sat on Saddam’s lap, and was asked, “what do your parents do when I appear on TV?”, and my friend said, “my father spits on the TV”.

I never saw my friend again. He was taken home, and the next day, along with his family and all his relatives, he disappeared. No one knows what happened to them, although one is able to hazard a guess. In a land where criticism will cost you your life, he had committed a grave error. But he was only a child.

No one could criticise anything in Iraq, not even a dozen eggs. My father recalls our neighbour in Baghdad, a well-known member of the security police. Every time he saw my father, he would try to draw information out of him, gathering intelligence on

whether my father was pro-regime. If my father bought groceries, our neighbour would ask him “how fresh were the vegetables in the market: how good were these eggs?” Obviously, my father would have to respond with the standard indoctrinated answer, “everything is great, thanks to Saddam”. Any deviations from this, even if the vegetables were rotten, could land you in the local security police headquarters.

In 1980, Saddam started a war with Iran, and that is when we left. The Iraqi government sent my father to Algeria to teach: we all went. This was supposed to be for three years. At the end of that period, we had to return to Iraq. We did not – a crime punishable by death.

During our time in Algeria, the Saddam posters adorned our house just as in Baghdad. I still knew nothing about Saddam. My parents were still fearful. A few other Iraqi families lived close by, some were also there under the pretext of teaching. But some, my parents now tell me, were Mukhabarat, the feared Secret Police, sent to Algeria to keep an eye on us and other Iraqi

families. So my parents couldn’t let anyone know how they felt, keeping up the charade for another three years in Algeria.

They lived those days in anguish, trying to decide what best to do. Would they return to Iraq to their stable jobs, their home, their family? Or would they risk losing all that, and flee to another country where they could live as free people. They chose freedom.

#### Gypsies

When they left Iraq, it was with only their basic possessions, not taking too many things in case the regime guessed that they did not intend to come back. I do not have any pictures of myself from I was born until I was 3 years old; they were left in Baghdad. My parents do not have any pictures of their wedding; they were left on the mantelpiece over the fireplace in Baghdad. I do not have anything to remind me of my life in Iraq.

We left Algeria in 1983, running away from our homeland, not knowing when we would see it again, risking our lives. We lived like gypsies for a few years,

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not having a country to turn to. A few years and two sisters later, we arrived in the UK, where we finally found a place where we could set up home. My father, possessing insufficient language skills, could not teach. He had to start again, rebuild his life.

At the age of 40 that is difficult to do. Once a respected teacher, he now became a laundry man, a minicab driver, a builder and a delivery driver. My mother, raised with a nanny, a driver, a cook in attendance and a backyard so big that once as a child she got lost in it for a few hours – now lived with the most basic of possessions.

We are the lucky ones. We have our freedom. We do not live in fear. My sister can walk down the street without running the risk of being carried off by the secret police and raped. There are currently four and a half million Iraqis living in all four corners of the world, exiled since 1979. There are between 200,000 and 500,000 Iraqis alone in the UK, and they top the chart of nationalities seeking asylum.

#### The republic of fear

We did not leave Iraq looking for better jobs, because of poverty. Pre-1980, one Iraqi dinar used to equal three US dollars. Iraq, the second largest oil producer, a beautiful country steeped in a wealth of history, culture and heritage, with many different, rich tributaries of ethnic culture enhancing its beauty, is all now destroyed by Saddam, the cancer of Iraq, the butcher of Baghdad. He ruled Iraq, along with his Tikriti clan, with an iron fist. Iraq became the 'republic of fear'.

In 1991, the Gulf war broke out, and Saddam was defeated. The people of Iraq were humiliated. Reaching their breaking point, they expressed their sheer frustration with a popular uprising; beginning in the south of Iraq, in Iraq's second city Basra. The uprising spread all over Iraq. At the end of two weeks, fourteen out of the eighteen provinces of Iraq fell to the people.

What next took place was one of the worst human rights abuses seen in the history of Iraq. Saddam brutally crushed the rebels, killing 500,000 Iraqis in a few days. The Republican Guard, staunchly loyal to Saddam, used every means possible to keep Saddam in

power. People were bombed, gassed and napalmed. Tanks entered cities with women and children chained to them, to dissuade people from attacking the tanks. On the walls of the holy Shi'ite cities of Najaf and Kerbala, Republican Guards scrawled 'No Shi'ites after today'. The marshes in southern Iraq, the biblical garden of Eden which housed the Marsh Arabs, one of the oldest living civilisations dating back to 5000 BC, was drained, to weed out any rebels still hiding there. This was not least an environmental catastrophe on the largest scale. Mass graves were dug.

Where, you ask, was the west? They looked the other way. Some reports even came out of Iraq saying that the Allies had confiscated rebel weapons. On 15 February 1991, George Bush senior had exhorted the Iraqi people to rise up against Saddam. When they rose up, Bush had gone fishing.

#### Deliverance

Ten years later, on 11 September, the USA was visited by catastrophe. I was in Houston, Texas, and watched the events live on TV. Shocked and angered by what I saw, I grieved with the families.

President George W. Bush's war on terrorism began on that day. The first target was Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. The next, as Donald Rumsfeld declared in August 2002, was Saddam Hussein.

Imagine the joy I felt when I first heard this. Overnight, my life had a purpose and hope. But I was simultaneously very sceptical. How could this not be the case, when we had been let down before? As time went by, it looked as if the US was indeed serious about regime change. During the months of protracted politicking that preceded the war, mass demonstrations took place all over the world. Imagine how this opposition felt for millions of Iraqis, who had waited twenty-three years for Saddam to be removed?

Let me clarify one thing, for those who think I am naive in assuming that the coalition was embarking on this mission for the love of the Iraqi people. I am well aware that they are following their own self-interested agenda in Iraq, only one interest being the removal of Saddam.

I am also aware of how many western and eastern powers helped arm Saddam. Saddam bought his first

*Tanks entered cities with women and children chained to them, to dissuade people from attacking the tanks.*

nuclear reactor from France in 1975; Russia's KGB taught Saddam's feared *Mukhabarat* (Secret Police) the essential art required to oppress people...I could go on. No country really cares about the Iraqi people. If they do, they would have helped them during these past long years.

#### With us or against us?

George W. Bush is on some kind of imperial drive to conquer the world, and this means ridding it of so-called 'terrorists' and 'rogue regimes'. 11 September is his excuse. If you are American, and speak out against what the US is doing now, you are branded 'unpatriotic', like the unfortunate Peter Arnett. As George W. Bush so eloquently put it to the whole world, "you are either with us, or against us". The 'pre-emptive strike' policy was born on 11 September 2001.

On the other hand, we have the anti-war movement. This includes so many varied opinions, from pacifists and anti-imperialists to environmentalists. The worst brand is in the Arab world, where Arabs on the streets clash with police, some even losing their lives. What is so shocking is when some of them may be seen carrying pictures of Saddam Hussein, praising him to the skies. Some are even naming their newborn babies, 'Saddam'. Militants have gone over to Iraq, to fight and die for Saddam. One demonstrator in Jordan, interviewed on TV asked, "what is wrong with Saddam? Nothing. He is a great man. He said *no* to America and Britain".

What do these people think they are doing? You can oppose the war: that is your right. But to support one of the most brutal dictators who have ever seen the light is beyond any comprehension. You are supporting a man who invaded and pillaged Kuwait, who has killed nearly two million Iraqis, gassed and poisoned his own people, who smuggles and sells the antiquities of Iraq destroying Iraq's history and heritage, who lets his people suffer under sanctions while he builds palaces and monuments. His son, Uday Hussein, is a serial rapist who drives through the streets of Baghdad looking for women to rape, then discard.

This is the man who bombed the mausoleum of Imam Ali (Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law) in Najaf and Imam Hussein (Son of Imam Ali and

Prophet Muhammad's grandson) in Kerbala, an abominable act for Shi'ite Muslims, since these places are amongst the holiest. Even the Allies, in the 1991 Gulf war, took care not to bomb anything held sacred; like a mosque. Saddam went the whole way. He became religious for the cameras and in times of war, in 1991 and again now. Yet Arabs and Muslims who support Saddam do so on the pretext that they are supporting a Muslim against the infidels. From time to time, the Arab satellite channels like al-Jazeera, al-Manar and Abu-Dhabi have all become podiums for the brutal Ba'ath regime. Have you lost your minds? Have you forgotten who Saddam is? He is evil, not because of the socio-economic situation in Iraq, but because he was brought up on crime. The first crime he committed was at the tender age of fourteen when he shot his teacher. The young Saddam used to stab hot flaming metal skewers into animals, for fun...

#### Remembering the forgotten people

Could it be true, that in a few months time, I will be walking the streets of Baghdad free from Saddam, conversing freely with my country folk? The thought brings tears of joy to my eyes and sends shivers down my spine. Yet now, again, my anxiety and fears begin anew. Mr Bush and Mr Blair – I urge you to stand by all the solemn promises made to the Iraqi people and reiterated at the Belfast conference a few days ago: your promises of giving Iraq a proportionally representative democracy unrivalled in the Middle East; your promise that Iraq will be ruled by Iraqi people.

I am trying so hard to be optimistic, hoping that for once in history, the US will keep its word and not let the Iraqi people down as they have done in the past. It is the innocent Iraqi people who have been forgotten in this calamity. They will never forget those who stood by them in their time of need. Nor those who are using this war for their own self-interest.

It is not enough to have toppled the regime. They promised us that: but they also promised us so many other things. This time, they have to deliver.

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*Raeid Jewad is studying for a PhD in Materials Science at the University of Cambridge. He has worked for Schlumberger Oilfield Services as a field engineer in Western Siberia, Germany, Scotland, and Offshore Gulf of Mexico in the USA. During his undergraduate studies, he spent longer periods of time on exchange programmes and internships in Canada and Belgium.*

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