

A graphic depiction of everyday life in Iraq

By Robert Stevens
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Iraq: A report from the inside , by Dilip Hiro, published by Granta (ISBN 1-86207-627-8)

The war against Iraq has witnessed heroic resistance from the remnants of the Iraqi military and the civilian population, clearly opposed to the invading US and British armies. This opposition, seen at every stage of the invasion and carried out in the face of the overwhelming military superiority of the coalition forces, is a testament to the deep-going hatred and hostility felt by the Iraqi people towards their supposed “liberators”.

What is the basis of this opposition from the people in this impoverished nation? The recently published *Iraq: A report from the inside*, by the writer, journalist and commentator Dilip Hiro, offers some valuable insights.

It devotes a number of chapters to the last war against the country in 1991 and the ongoing 12 years of bombardment and impact of economic sanctions. It reveals how a 20 million-plus population has been systematically devastated.

The book is divided into a number of sections and encompasses a concise chronicle of Iraq’s history, the Ba’ath Party, Iraq and the United Nations, the role of the US—including how it staffed UN inspection teams with spies—the war in 1991, the brazen lies related to the issue of “weapons of mass destruction” and the alleged close links between Al Qaeda and the regime of Saddam Hussein. Another chapter discusses the fundamental issue of oil that Hiro refers to as the “defining element of Iraq”.

Chapter nine and the postscript are largely concerned with the long planned decision to invade Iraq by the Bush administration following the terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. The latter includes several pages on the National Security Strategy of the United States, published by the White House in 2002, in which the aggressive global military ambitions of American imperialism were made clear by the Bush administration.

There follow two appendices containing frequent and “infrequent” comments and questions. The basic facts and figures cited serve to answer a substantial portion of the barrage of lies perpetrated hourly and daily by the US administration, Britain and oft-repeated by a compliant and servile media.

In the first chapter, *Life in Iraq*, the author recollects from his firsthand experiences and interviews with people in Iraq how

everyday life has been fundamentally changed for the worse in its villages, towns and cities. Hiro cites an interview he held with a resident in the Arab Quarters of central Baghdad, Yasim Hamid, a 68-year-old head of a family of 14. He said, “Before the sanctions this refrigerator was full of everything. Now it has only water and bread. No more fish or meat or chicken. Before the sanctions we ate fish almost daily.”

Hiro points out that many of the residents he spoke to refer to life “before the sanctions” and “after the sanctions”. So severe were the UN sanctions in the initial period that commodities such as chickens and eggs became currencies, with people paying rent at “60 eggs a month”, for example. Such conditions are typical of many urban dwellers, who form 70 percent of the population of Iraq.

Hiro points out that Iraq has essentially been de-industrialised over a 10-year period as many city dwellers returned to villages to grow crops under conditions of a ban on seeds, pesticide, fertiliser and spare parts for farming machines. Such a state of affairs was a recipe for mass starvation. The author states, “No wonder that the proportion of those engaged in agriculture doubled in less than a decade to 40 percent—a unique phenomenon in the Third World.”

The daily sustenance of virtually the whole population has been based on a rations system provided by the Ministry of Trade. This costs the government some \$1.2 billion a year raised through the sale of oil. The weakening of Iraq’s population has been a deliberate result of the sanctions scheme. Hiro points out that the money that Iraq was able to raise through oil sales was slashed by having to pay into a “compensation scheme” to Kuwait, while the revenue is cut further by a 13 percent deduction that goes to the Kurdistan region and a further 7 percent to cover UN “administration” costs. After this is taken into account the amount of money the Iraqi government was able to spend on food was cut by about 50 percent.

This is reflected in the meagre rations that were distributed to the population. Each person received the bare necessities needed to survive, including just 20 pounds of flour and 7 pounds of rice per month. No meat, fruit or vegetables were included. The World Health Organisation recommends that people should eat at least five pieces of fruit or vegetables per day as part of a healthy diet.

All aspects of life for the Iraqi population have reflected a

terrible collapse in living standards and conditions. The book points out that rudimentary sanitation and building maintenance is not carried out.

The education system has been gutted. Following the war, budgets for maintaining and cleaning educational buildings were cut by 90 percent.

Hiro spoke to an Italian social worker living in Baghdad who had studied the educational system thoroughly. She told him, "Before the Gulf War there were free school meals for children, which were stopped after the conflict, when they were needed most. Also after the war the authorities ended the free bus transport for the pupils they had before, which was especially helpful in rural areas. Before the war, only 6 percent of the children were not enrolled in primary school. Five years later the figure shot up to 16 percent. School age children are being put to work for family business or sent out by their parents to vend in the streets or beg."

The social worker informed Hiro that a 1994 study by UNICEF showed that two thirds of Iraqi children "went to school on an empty stomach": "Another UNICEF study in 1997 shows that about a third of Iraqi children are chronically malnourished, a figure higher than that of Ghana or Mali. That is about a million children." The social worker adds, "There is a direct correlation between lack of nourishment and learning ability."

Hiro then refers to the "psychological damage done by the American bombardments, which occurred in 1991, 1993 (twice), 1996 and 1998." A UNICEF study revealed that four out of five primary school children feared losing family or friends due to bombing: "Thus we have a new generation growing up in Iraq with hatred for the United States that stems from their personal experiences."

Even access to paper, pens and pencils does not exist in Iraq. Before the Gulf War the education ministry paid for textbooks and stationary. Now it covers only half the cost and many parents cannot afford the rest. "The UN has withheld permission for producing paper in Iraq, so teachers have resorted to teaching orally with the aid of audio and videocassettes," one former geography teacher tells Hiro. With the cuts in education budgets and pay many teachers have left education to take manual labour or semiskilled jobs, such as repairing household commodities.

Education at university level has a 30 percent dropout rate.

Referring to the toll of the economic sanctions on the poverty stricken country, Hans von Sponeck, the German head of the UN Office of Humanitarian Co-ordination in Iraq, says, "It is not only about food and medicine. But it is also about intellectual genocide—with professional journals, international newspapers, books, writing materials, computers, all considered non-essential by the Sanctions Committee and vetoed."

The UN 661 Sanctions Committee in New York time after time vetoed Iraq's requests to import medicines, vaccines, and

even the most basic purifying chemicals required for and necessary to produce clean drinking water—chlorine and aluminium sulphate. Under the auspices of the resolution, Iraq had to go through 14 separate steps before it was able to import any item from abroad. Following this process, most of the vetoes were then actioned by US delegates to the committee.

These policies were designed to cripple Iraq and resulted in or contributed to hundreds of thousands of deaths and daily suffering for the majority of the population. The author points out that in 1997 alone, 70,000 children under five years of age died due to the lack of basic medicines.

Many of the dysentery or typhoid deaths could be directly traced to the fact that because of broken down pumps, raw sewage spilt over into the country's rivers—the main source of drinking water. Pumps are banned from being exported into Iraq by the UN 661 Sanctions Committee.

Among other examples given by Hiro of the devastating impact of the UN 661 Sanctions Committee is the barring of vaccines for foot and mouth disease for Iraqi livestock on the grounds that the vaccines could be used for producing biological warfare agents. This led to the deaths of almost half of Iraq's livestock by 1999.

Many Iraqi civil servants and professional employees such as teachers, engineers and doctors have had to leave their occupations and take up to three separate jobs in order to survive. Many now work in the "repairs" sector—running "repair shops for cars, air conditioners, refrigerators, transistor radios, and television sets, and draft their sons into the trade." The result of this is that "Iraq's class composition is transformed. Its salaried middle class shrinks by half."

Prostitution in Iraq became widespread, as millions faced previously unheard of poverty and privation.

In the section of the book entitled "Iraq after 9/11", Hiro prophetically opposes claims that an invasion of Iraq would meet no resistance from the population and dismisses notions of a "cakewalk". He again points to the impact of the sanctions as a critical factor in this. "To imagine that a people who have suffered grievously at the hands of the United States for 12 years, and have grown deep hatred for it, would turn out in thousands to greet American soldiers and their Iraqi cohorts as liberators seems unrealistic."

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