

Eight Years of Occupation In Iraq, Eight Years of Misery

Guns ablaze, we went into Iraq for no other reason than to steal their oil and better control the region. Our sordid motives had little to do with our self-serving rhetoric.



Although soldiers represent the imperial muscle, they are the least guilty party in our criminal wars.

By David Bacon

The war in Iraq is supposedly over. The U.S. administration says the occupation, which began on March 20 eight years ago, is ending as well, with the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops. But as the U.S., Great Britain and France begin another military intervention in North Africa, their respective administrations are silent about the price Iraqis are paying for the last one.

Not so the Iraqi, however. Demonstrations have taken place in Baghdad, Basra and Kirkuk, among other cities, calling on the U.S. in particular to stop its escalating military

intervention in Libya. Iraqi unions have been especially vocal, linking the U.S. invasion of Iraq with continued misery for its working people. According to one union representative, Abdullah Muhsin of the General Federation of Iraqi workers, "Eight years have ended since the fall of Saddam's regime, yet the empty promises of the "liberators" – the invaders and the occupiers who promised Iraqis heaven and earth – were simply lies, lies and lies."

The GFIW, which supported the recent uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, says the U.S. should "allow the people of Libya, Bahrain and other countries to determine their own destiny by themselves." Falah Alwan, president of the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq, says violence directed against workers and unions is intended to keep a lid on protests against miserable living conditions. "We are still under occupation," he charges. "The new Iraqi army, created by the U.S. occupation, is doing the same job, protecting the corrupt government while we are suffering from the difficulties of daily life."

"There's no electricity most of the time, and no drinking water – no services at all," says Qasim Hadi, president of the Union of Unemployed of Iraq. Eight years after the start of the U.S. military intervention, "there's hardly even any repair of the war damage – there's still rubble in the streets. People are going hungry."

Despite often-extreme levels of violence in the years of occupation, Iraqis have never stopped protesting these conditions. When demonstrations broke out in other countries of the Middle East and North Africa, people in Baghdad, Basra and Kirkuk had been taking to the streets for years. In large part, protests continued in Iraq because living conditions never changed, despite promises of what the fall of Saddam Hussein would bring.

"There has basically been no change in the unemployment

situation since the occupation started," Hadi charges. "There are more than 10 million unemployed people in Iraq – about 60-70% of the workforce" According to the UUI, government unemployment statistics are artificially low because they don't count many people.. "Women aren't counted," Hadi says, citing just one example, "because the government says their husbands or fathers are responsible for supporting them."

Hadi was one of Baghdad's first protestors, leading marches of unemployed workers to the gates of the Green Zone, where U.S. occupation chief Paul Bremer had his offices, almost as soon as Bremer moved in. On July 25, following the May 2003 invasion, Hadi was arrested by U.S. troops for protesting. For the next six years, he led one protest after another, making the Union of the Unemployed a thorn in the side first of the U.S. occupation administration, and then of the Iraqi regimes that followed.

Some government representatives tried to stop the union's growth with bribes. "They said they'd give us a position in the Labor Ministry, and make us responsible for unemployed people," Hadi says. Those attempts were unsuccessful because, he explains, "we belong to the union because we want civil rights, not for ourselves, but for all people."

When bribes didn't work, threats followed. "A representative of the Dawa Party (the party of Iraqi President Nouri al-Maliki) told us to leave the union," Hadi recalls. "If we didn't, he said we'd be enemies of the people of Iraq. We know what this language means. They will kidnap you. They'll make holes in your body with a drill. They will kill you slowly, with lots of pain."

Hadi isn't exaggerating. During the years of U.S. occupation, many union organizers have been murdered, some, like Hadi Saleh, brutally tortured first. "People who get threatened like this change the place where they sleep many times," he says. "Sometimes they go live in another city. I don't care

what they do to me. I have a dream I'm fighting for. But when they threatened to kidnap my wife and children I couldn't stay." A year ago Hadi left Iraq.

He describes enormous economic pressure on families. "Prices are very high, and millions of people have no income at all," he elaborates. "Even for those who have a job, wages are so low you see people on the street selling all their furniture. If they get a sugar ration, they sell it instead. People stop drinking tea because they have to spend all their money just on the food they need to stay alive. It surprises me how people can survive."

The Iraqi government only counts 2 million unemployed, and pays unemployment benefits to a quarter of them. Benefits are low, about \$110 a month, and if there's more than one unemployed person in the family, they reduce the benefit. But the worst problem, the UUI says, is that you have to register with the governing political party at the same time you register for benefits. "If you oppose the governing party, you can't register," Hadi says. "Benefits are given out as political bribes."

Unemployment, hunger and corruption were the fuel that fed the rising wave of protest that culminated in Iraq's Day of Rage at the end of this February.

At the beginning of the month Baghdad neighborhoods saw rallies calling for dismissing and jailing corrupt officials, including those involved in election fraud. Al-Kuray'at neighbors protested declining services, while the people of Al-Mutanabbi Street demanded more freedom. Some held banners saying "The Baghdad Municipality is wasting billions and the capital is sleeping in trash." Other banners had warnings for the government: "O inhabitants of the Green Zone – think about the others," and "Remember the fate of Arab dictatorship regimes and how their people revolted." On Al-Fardaws Avenue in central Baghdad protestors accused a security company of

executing an Al-Ma'lif man in front of his children, and called for ending random arrests and home invasions by police.

One of the sorest points for Iraqis has been the lack of more than a couple of hours of electricity a day, and skyrocketing prices for gasoline and diesel oil, not just for vehicles, but for the small generators many people now use to run their air conditioners in summer heat that can reach 120 degrees.

Last summer Basra was rocked by protests over the lack of services. Police put down June demonstrations over blackouts, supported by the Iraqi Electrical Utility Workers Union, the first national union led by a woman, Hashmeya Muhsin. Haider Dawood Selman was killed and several others injured. Electricity and Oil Minister Hussein al-Shahristani then issued an order to shut the union down. A thousand Basra workers protested, shouting slogans asking Shahristani where the \$13 billion appropriated for electricity reconstruction had disappeared. Within days, the union was expelled from its offices as well.

A similar fate met Iraq's oil union after it too protested corruption, privatization, unemployment and bad housing. Hassan Juma'a and Falih Abood, president and general secretary of the Federation of Oil Employees of Iraq, were hauled into court and threatened with arrest. The government has never taken off the books the infamous Public Law 150, issued by Saddam Hussein in 1987, which makes unions illegal for public workers, including in the oil and electricity industries.

Both Qasim Hadi and Hashmeya Muhsin charge that the electricity blackouts are not simply the result of unrepaired war damage – the claim of the U.S. contractors like Bechtel Corp. that received billions of dollars for their (unsuccessful) reconstruction.

“Since 2005 there have been many projects to fix the electrical stations,” Hadi says, “but the money appropriated

for them has been stolen. Big generators are not repaired. The workers in the stations say they can fix them, but instead they're sold and government people pocket the money. Each new minister just demands more money and time." In addition, Hadi says, blackouts are used to punish communities for opposing the government.

Muhsin incurred the government's anger when she accused ministers last year of

using blackouts and repression to create an atmosphere of desperation. "If people are desperate enough, the government believes they'll accept anything to get electricity, including privatization," she charges. "It knows our union won't accept that, so it wants to paralyze us so we can't speak out."

Under Saddam Hussein power was free, and there were no blackouts. Today large private generators sell power on a thriving black market at 10-15 times the government's power price.

This year, as the February demonstrations grew, other workers joined in, including the oil and gas workers' branch of the General Federation of Iraqi Workers, which struck the refinery and fields of the North Oil Company in Kirkuk on February 13. The union demanded pay raises, especially for temporary workers who make only a tenth of a normal salary. The Mechanics and Printing Workers Union held a one-day protest in Baghdad, followed by a contingent calling itself the Youth of the 14th of February, who organized a big rally that day in Tahrir Square. In addition to the constant complaint of lack of services and corruption, young people demanded jobs.

As the month wore on, the government passed an \$82 billion budget, financed almost entirely from oil revenue. Endemic corruption, however, practically guarantees that little of that will reach the country's hungry and unemployed populace. The growing anti-government tone of the demonstrations was

displayed in one large banner at a Tahrir Square rally that read, "The oil of the people is for the people, not for the thieves."

Finally, unions, leftwing political parties and other organizations of Iraqi civil society announced a national mobilization for February 25, the Day of Rage. The Maliki government attempted to keep turnout low by arresting leaders of organizations calling for the protest. One was Jabbar al-Asadi, a member of the Executive Bureau of the Iraq Freedom Congress in Baghdad and a member of the People Protests Committee in Iraq. Another was IFC member Mahmood Khalis, who had applied for a rally permit for Tikrit (Saddam Hussein's hometown.) The offices of both the Iraqi Communist Party and the Iraqi Nation Party were closed by troops as well.

Nevertheless, Yanar Mohammed, president of the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq, reported that almost 70,000 people participated in the day's protest rallies. One demonstration in Samarra was the first tribal protest organized by women, in part because widows now make up a majority of the city's female population. "The army shot the demonstrators in the evening," Mohammed says, "attempting to disperse them. Seven were killed in Samarra, and 15 were wounded." According to the Iraqi Society for the Defense of Press Freedoms, 14 people were killed in Hawija, Mosul, Tikrit and Basra during the February 25 Day of Rage.

It's hard to measure the number of people even in the Baghdad protest, the largest, because the government used force to disperse people that day, and when even more protested on the day following, tanks closed off the square.

Marwan was an IFC activist who helped organize the demonstration. He told Hadi, "When we started they surrounded us with Hummers. We were shouting slogans – 'Give us 24-hour electricity! Give us a minimum wage! Raise the salaries of

those who work! Give us unemployment benefits!’ At first we thought the authorities would protect us, but then they suddenly withdrew. Then cars rushed in full of plainclothes police. They attacked us with knives, sticks and their fists. That’s when we began demanding that the government resign.” Marwan was shot in the neck.

The government closed streets leading into Tahrir Square. While 6000 people were able to assemble there, Hadi says, in every street around it there were many times the number of people in the square itself. Al Jazeera reported 20,000 in one street alone. “Everyone was shouting about their civil rights,” Hadi says. “Then the police and army began to attack them, so everyone sat down. They called out to the army and police, ‘There’s no reason to hit us!’ When the attacks continued people fled into the neighborhoods. The police followed, beating and shooting people. Residents let people into their homes, but then the army followed.”

If only several hundred people were brave enough to demonstrate in Baghdad’s Tahrir Square on March 4, a week later, the reason was obvious. Iraqis have never become inured to high levels of violence, even after eight years of occupation. But it is not likely that shooting demonstrators and a massive show of force will end the protests sweeping Iraq. Instead, the state’s violence has pushed protestors into moving beyond calls for better conditions to demands that the government itself resign.

“The government says we’re Baathists or Al Qaeda,” says Qasim Hadi. “That’s their main tactic – try to scare people, to say we’re going back to 2003. But it’s a lie. They know the people don’t want them. They’re just the government because the U.S. and Iran helped them get power with threats and militias and the military. But I believe people will lose their fear, and the protests will get bigger.”

For more articles and images, see <http://dbacon.igc.org>

See also *Illegal People – How Globalization Creates Migration and Criminalizes Immigrants* (Beacon Press, 2008)

Recipient: C.L.R. James Award, best book of 2007-2008

<http://www.beacon.org/productdetails.cfm?PC=2002>

See also the photodocumentary on indigenous migration to the US

Communities Without Borders (Cornell University/ILR Press, 2006)

http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/cup_detail.taf?ti_id=4575

See also *The Children of NAFTA, Labor Wars on the U.S./Mexico Border* (University of California, 2004)

<http://www.ucpress.edu/books/pages/9989.html>

David Bacon, *Photographs and Stories*

<http://dbacon.igc.org>
