

By Murtaza Hussain

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American journalists and soldiers have published countless memoirs about their experiences in the Iraq War. But a new book by Ghaith Abdul-Ahad provides a radically different perspective: that of an ordinary Iraqi who witnessed firsthand the decimation of his country.

"The occupation was bound to collapse and fail," Abdul-Ahad writes of the U.S. invasion in his remarkable memoir, "A Stranger in My Own City: Travels in the Middle East's Long War." As Abdul-Ahad goes on to explain, "A nation can't be bombed, humiliated and sanctioned, then bombed again, and then told to become a democracy."

Abdul-Ahad is among a generation of Iraqi writers and journalists who lived through the conflict and, two decades later, are finally being heard. What he has to say not only confronts the self-serving narratives of the war's supporters and revisionists, but also bitterly confronts how the Iraqi people were used as pawns in a war that was launched in their name.

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"Why were the only options for us as a nation and a people the choice between a foreign invasion and a noxious regime led by a brutal dictator? Not that anyone cared what we thought," Abdul-Ahad writes. "We were all merely potential collateral damage in a war between the dictator and American neocons adamant that the world should be shaped in their image."

Abdul-Ahad grew up under the rule of Saddam Hussein, a man whose power was so omnipresent that as a youth Abdul-Ahad pictured the dictator as "God or Jesus, or maybe both of them." Prior to the invasion, Abdul-Ahad eked out a living as an architect as Iraq reeled from economic sanctions. He witnessed the first U.S. troops invade the country in March 2003 in his hometown, the capital of Baghdad.

Like most Iraqis, Abdul-Ahad was against the war and fearful of its consequences, but at the same time, many considered a Faustian bargain in which the U.S. removal of Saddam might be accepted if it transformed Iraq for the better. As one old man in a decrepit alleyway in Baghdad insisted to him that May, before the war turned sour, "The Americans who had brought all these tanks and planes would fix everything in a matter of weeks." The cautiously hopeful would soon be brutally disappointed.

[Listen here to The Many Lives and Deaths of Iraq, as Witnessed by Ghaith Abdul-Ahad](#)

"The initial guarded optimism of the Iraqis — who were promised liberation, prosperity and freedom with the removal of Saddam — shattered with the first car bomb," Abdul-Ahad writes. "It became evident that the long-awaited peace was not coming — and that the occupation had unleashed something far worse."

Instead of freedom from Saddam's predictable tyranny, the U.S. invasion delivered violent anarchy: extrajudicial killings, torture, warrantless detention, and the destruction of Iraq's basic infrastructure. Following a chance encounter with a British reporter covering the invasion, Abdul-Ahad became a journalist himself, bearing witness to the total destruction of his country.

Much of this havoc was catalyzed by foreign soldiers and mercenaries, Abdul-Ahad writes, who were often openly racist toward the people they claimed they were liberating. With no one in charge, save for a trigger-happy foreign occupier with no plan to restore basic services, Iraq slowly descended into "Mad Max"-style chaos.

Abdul-Ahad describes how the war sectarianized the Iraqi social order with devastating consequences. Religion, once a minor detail of Iraqi identity, suddenly became the most crucial affiliation for navigating the new Iraq, as the new politics of the country were organized around sects. Growing up, Abdul-Ahad writes, he never knew the religious backgrounds of any of his school friends. Post-invasion, it became the most vital detail one needed to know about others, whether as a reporter or ordinary person simply trying to survive.

Waves of horrific violence emerged from the security vacuum created by the war. Competing gangs and militias carried out abductions, murders-for-hire, and mass killings that tore the country's social fabric to shreds. Kidnapping, mostly of innocent members of other sects,

became a lucrative business of militia gangsters. "We ask the families of the terrorists for ransom money, and after they pay the ransom, we kill them anyway," a militia leader tells Abdul-Ahad, with each hostage reaping between \$5,000 and \$20,000 for an enterprising commander.

Unlike Americans who tend to divide the Iraq War into distinct periods, for example, separating the 2003 invasion from the later war against the Islamic State group, for Iraqis like Abdul-Ahad, the conflict has been experienced as long and unrelenting, starting with U.S. economic warfare in the 1990s and into the present day.

Over 2,500 American soldiers remain in Iraq, mostly to fight the remnants of ISIS, a terror group the nihilistic violence of the war helped produce. With millions of Iraqis killed or displaced and entire cities in ruins, Iraq today, Abdul-Ahad writes, is "a wealthy, oil-exporting country, whose citizens live in poverty without employment, an adequate healthcare system, electricity or drinking water."

In his analysis of the legacy of the war, he notes a perverse outcome among Iraqis: a sense of nostalgia for authoritarian politics. Many who suffered the horrors of post-Saddam Iraq have come to yearn for a new strongman to come along and simply restore order. The war also undermined democracy throughout the region, Abdul-Ahad writes, giving neighboring dictators an example with which to frighten their own people from demanding political change. However bad dictatorship may be, the argument goes, few people would want to suffer the fate of Iraqis.

In the initial years of the invasion, Iraqi voices were scarce in American public discourse, save for hand-picked figures close to the U.S. establishment, like the notorious exile dissident [Ahmad Chalabi](#)

. While some [recent accounts](#)

have sought to help rehabilitate the image of the war and its proponents, Abdul-Ahad's book stands firm on the realities of this horrifying conflict and the permanently altered futures of Iraqis.

"The Iraq of this new generation is an amalgam of contradictions, born out of an illegal occupation, two decades of civil wars, savage militancy, car bombs, beheadings and torture," he writes. "Men — and they were only men — shaped this new metamorphosis of a country based on their own images and according to the whims and desires of their masters, with no

regard for what actually may have been good for its people.”