

By Salah Al-Ejaili

From [Middle East Eye](#) | Original Article

**An Iraqi journalist who was detained by US forces in 2003 without ever being charged reflects on his experience at the notorious prison and his ongoing search for justice**

I was working as a journalist for Al Jazeera when I was arrested in Baghdad by US forces in November 2003.

In the months prior, I had been travelling throughout [Iraq](#), documenting the suffering I saw following the [US invasion](#) of my country.

The devastating impact of the war on Iraqi civilians was immediate and large-scale. Repeatedly, a family's property would be destroyed not because they did anything wrong but because American soldiers would operate from a place of fear and vengeance - a shoot first and ask no questions later approach.

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For example, I covered a story in which a farmer was killed on his land just because US forces mistakenly thought he was armed. In another instance, they destroyed a family's house just because a single shot came from it.

US forces also practised collective punishment, responding to even minor resistance with disproportionate force. In the same village I visited, I recall people being arbitrarily arrested because armed groups attacked US forces nearby – not because the villagers themselves did anything against them.

As Iraqis, we had no power to stop these human rights violations carried out mercilessly against the entire population, whether old or young, in an endless manner by the most powerful country in the world that claimed to bring "democracy" as our liberator.

But what we were able to do - what I did personally as a journalist - was speak out and report what was happening. The Americans could not stop us from telling the truth.

My arrest, therefore, did not come as a surprise to me.

To the US forces, I was an annoying journalist who needed to be disciplined and so prison was the best solution. Without any charges ever brought against me, I was imprisoned in the notorious [Abu Ghraib](#) prison.

## **Intentional abuse**

At first, I thought the horrendous treatment of prisoners by Americans that I heard about was the result of individual mistakes made by some untrained and unscrupulous soldiers. Once I arrived at Abu Ghraib prison, however, it became clear to me that the abuse was intentional - a structured and organised policy carried out by those operating the prison.

I don't want to tell the whole story of the torture and humiliation I endured since it's known to everyone by now, 20 years later. The photos from Abu Ghraib, seen around the world, have forever captured the utter lack of humanity in our captors.

I'll just say this: I was tortured. I was also a witness to the torture of others, and others witnessed what was done to me. I can recall the methods of torture and other cruel and inhumane abuse the prisoners and I suffered. The sound of their screams still haunts me.

When I was released from prison nearly two months later, I was in a complete state of shock. Even after all of this time, the physical and psychological trauma of that experience continues to be present in my life. Hearing the name "Abu Ghraib" alone is sometimes enough to awaken the living nightmare and flood my mind with the horrific scenes that unfolded before me. I can never escape those memories.

The torture at Abu Ghraib is just one part of the larger damage caused by the US invasion and occupation of Iraq - untold damage that is difficult to put into words.

The situation in my home country has drastically changed. Iraq is no longer a place that enjoys safety, not even to any extent.

The horrors inflicted on Iraqis at Abu Ghraib prison were just the beginning of such widespread abuse. Since then, the number of prisons - where the use of torture is systemic - and prisoners have increased significantly. An estimated [100,000 people](#) were unlawfully detained by US forces and had no means to challenge their imprisonment.

## Seeking justice

I find myself asking again and again: what was the reason for this destruction? Why did the US - a country that claims to value human rights and democracy - invade my country and leave behind a legacy of death, torture, displacement, damaged infrastructure, environmental degradation, and sectarian violence?

The US must reckon with what it did, or at least clean up its mess and acknowledge the harm it inflicted on the Iraqi people - but it doesn't appear to be taking those steps.

Despite international condemnation of the torture at Abu Ghraib, the US government did not adequately account for what it did to the thousands of Iraqis it imprisoned there and at other detention centres following mass-rounds ups of civilians who did nothing but try and survive at a time of massive disruption and violence.

Rather, the US sought to suppress the story and scandal by "investigating" a few soldiers and simply moving on. The US must stop and consider its legacy in Iraq, and in the many other countries where it has used or supported military force. One way it can begin to do this is by hearing directly from us - the victims and survivors - by making our names and stories known, and digging deeper into who bears responsibility for the cruelty we faced.

After my detention and torture, I wondered: how could I and other torture survivors get justice? Would that even be possible? In 2008, an [opportunity](#) arose for some of us to sue [CACI](#), a private military contractor that was hired by the US government to provide interrogators at Abu Ghraib prison.

