

EDITORIAL

In his essay entitled “Aesthetic Testimony of the War”, the Iraqi author Hassan Mutlaq writes, “I came to realize through this experience of war... that what we write and say does not even come close to expressing this tremendous pain, the shock of being exposed to this war and coming face-to-face with death”.

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Iraq was once part of ancient Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization, and home to the famed Sumerian culture. A little over 1,000 years ago the Islamic Abbasid caliphs presided over what was then one of the world’s leading civilizations, where the arts, the sciences and literature flourished. As recently as thirty years ago, Iraq was among the wealthiest countries in the region, with a thriving economy, an educated population and a stable health-care system. Today, after three major wars and an embargo that lasted for 12 years, the country is largely divided and devastated. For decades to come, it will have to bear the costs of protracted violence and economic decline. While the numbers of Iraqi casualties claimed by the conflict that began in 2003 may be disputed, there is no doubt that, whatever the exact figures, well in excess of tens of thousands of Iraqis and thousands of foreigners have been killed and many more wounded. The population has been terrorized not only by indiscriminate attacks but also by the proliferation of criminal gangs involved in kidnapping, extortion, robbery and the wholesale looting of public property. As a result – and apart from the direct effects of such acts of terror – basic services such as health care, education and social services are at best unreliable, and many Iraqis are living in utter poverty. It is therefore not surprising that nearly one in five Iraqis has been internally displaced or has fled the country.

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In Iraq, the debate over the legality of the invasion by the coalition forces led by the United States was quickly overshadowed by concern about the behaviour of the warring parties. The relatively short military campaign brought the downfall of the regime of Saddam Hussein but also raised questions about the lawful conduct of hostilities and especially about the sensitive issue of collateral damage: the suffering inflicted on the civilian population and the destruction of the country’s infrastructure. Soon, questions involving the law of occupation moved to centre stage as coalition forces were changing Iraqi laws, installed a new interim

government and declared a formal end to the occupation, covered by a UN Security Council Resolution.

The brutal insurgency and the violent acts of sabotage that ensued contravened the most fundamental principles of humanity. Asymmetrical warfare between coalition forces and the armed resistance spread rapidly to the towns, culminating in the battle for Fallujah in 2004. The intolerable pictures of abuse suffered by Iraqi prisoners at the hands of US soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison denied the United States the moral high ground that it had sought to claim, even though the Abu Ghraib affair pales in comparison with the atrocities committed by other parties to the war.

For most Arabs, the pictures from Abu Ghraib provided confirmation of what they viewed as an overall pattern of dehumanization set by the US forces and of contempt for Arabs and for Islam. The photograph of a uniformed American woman holding a naked Arab man on a leash, like a dog, came to symbolize what was seen as cynicism and hypocrisy on the part of invaders, who were considered as showing no respect whatsoever for those they claimed to have liberated. The widespread feeling that people's basic rights were being trampled fuelled the radicalization of the formerly liberal Iraqi society. It also gave *jihadists* grounds for considering the occupation to be a *casus belli*. The struggle against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s had been justified on similar grounds and had provided a pretext for liberating this Islamic territory from "unbelieving intruders". This radicalization gave al Qaeda the opportunity to set up cells in Iraq, many of them home-grown. The most horrifying acts of violence, such as the beheading of hostages, gradually tapered off, however, as such acts caused ordinary Iraqi people to turn away from the groups responsible for them. Today most atrocities, including the suicide attacks with their appalling results, remain unclaimed.

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Throughout its history Mesopotamia was a melting pot, and Iraqi society today reflects the legacies of many different ethnicities, tribes, cultures, religions and sects that mixed and mingled for centuries. The invasion of Iraq did not only lead to the collapse of an autocratic regime, it changed the parameters of Iraqi society. After the bombings in Samara in February 2006, one of the principal features of violence was its sectarian nature – especially in the capital and beyond. As a result, Sunnis have moved, or been forced to move, to Sunni areas, Shiites to Shia areas. Kurds have fled to the calmer northern provinces and other minority groups, such as Christians, have sought refuge in various parts of Ninewah province. In the process people lost all their possessions, but at least they felt safer. Most of Baghdad and its surroundings have been carved up along sectarian lines, and radical armed groups continue to increase their power and consolidate their hold over parts of the territory – resisting government control and often fighting among themselves. Despite conflicting feelings, many Iraqis now consider that the US armed forces are, at least temporarily, the only thing standing between them and

an even bloodier civil war or a regional conflict – at a time when domestic support in the United States for the Iraqi war seems to be evaporating.

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The key issues confronting the present democratically elected Iraqi government are often examined from the perspective of sectarian, ethnic or tribal considerations. Necessary compromises with regard to national reconciliation and the constitutional review, the sharing of oil revenues, provincial affairs, the future of Kirkuk, security measures and governance – including the provision of basic services and the fight against corruption – are still being thwarted by the polarization of Iraqi society. Nevertheless, forces of cohesion are also present. The Kurds, although intent on retaining their special status, have an interest in keeping Iraq united and have muted their calls for independence. Likewise, demands for the independence of the southern – Shia – part of Iraq have virtually ceased. Many Sunnis formerly opposed to the government have shown – at least temporarily – a willingness to accommodate themselves to the new political realities of Iraq.

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However, the Sunni–Shia divide and, even more, the Kurdish–Arab divide threaten the cohesion of the country. Not only are Iraq's neighbours burdened with the bulk of Iraqi refugees; they also worry that the situation in Iraq may affect their own stability. The Sunni-majority states view with unease the extension of Iranian influence over a Shia-dominated Iraq, while the broad autonomy enjoyed by the Kurds in the north is a concern to Turkey, Syria and Iran. Should this situation continue to fester, it could fuel greater international tension. A break-up of Iraq – which the large majority of Sunnis and Shia would not welcome – could add a new dimension to the war and have serious international repercussions and even greater humanitarian consequences. Indeed, the conflict in Iraq is still an ongoing narrative and there is no end in sight to the immense suffering that it has brought the country.

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On 27 October 2003 the ICRC compound in Baghdad was attacked by a suicide bomber and eleven persons were killed. Every ICRC delegate was aware of the explosion that had ripped through the headquarters of the United Nations in the Iraqi capital two months earlier, killing Special Representative Sergio Vieira de Mello and many others. Clearly, nobody in Baghdad was safe from the horrendous attacks committed by people who did not distinguish between combatants and civilians but who, on the contrary, aimed their violence at innocent people. Yet, despite the warnings, the attack on the ICRC in Baghdad came as a terrible blow. It forced the ICRC to take a deeper look at the socio-political environment in which it was working, to reassess its role and its ability to function in such a volatile setting and to review its capacity to respond to needs in a place where impartial humanitarian help was apparently not always welcome.

In the midst of this tragic, dangerous and complex situation, international humanitarian organizations – including the ICRC – could only do so much to alleviate the suffering of the victims: the wounded and their families, the detainees, the hostages and the missing and displaced persons, to say nothing of an entire population that had been deprived of essential services. The lack of security and the direct targeting and killing of aid workers led to an overall reduction in humanitarian activities. As a result, the Iraqi people no doubt feel more abandoned than ever by the international community, exposed as they are to the seemingly endless violence.

Security is essential to providing humanitarian assistance. No organization can send its staff on suicide missions, even for the best of reasons. No agency can accept as a given such dereliction of duty. There is clearly a security gap that needs to be filled if aid workers are to continue doing their work. The most obvious countermeasure to armed violence is armed protection. This might be a valid choice for some, but it is an undisputed fact that armed protection raises more questions and problems than it resolves. The ICRC cannot accept armed protection from the parties to the conflict – including the multinational forces – as this would be construed as taking sides and thus could be perceived as violating the principle of neutrality.

The ICRC has concentrated its efforts on detention-related activities which enable it to monitor closely the situation of tens of thousands of people arrested in connection with the conflict. Although it has deployed expatriate staff in some of the safer areas, particularly in the Kurdish parts of northern Iraq, it is only through “remote-control operations” that it can provide assistance for people in the most dangerous areas. And although – with the help of its Iraqi staff – the ICRC provides essential water supplies, basic sanitation, minimal health care and some assistance in camps for the displaced, the overall insecurity throughout large swathes of Iraq has prevented it from implementing larger programmes for needy communities.

Driven by altruism and solidarity, Iraqi communities and Iraqi humanitarian organizations have done everything in their power to meet the needs of the people. Their work has been crucial in helping to alleviate suffering. The Iraqi Red Crescent, through its branches and its extensive network of volunteers, remains the only agency able to operate nationwide. It is not immune from attack, however; in December 2006, thirty staff members were abducted from the Society’s Baghdad office, and thirteen of them are still missing. Likewise, local communities support the displaced through informal committees established in neighbourhoods and mosques. Indeed – and this is a remarkable feature of a people’s response to the burning needs of others – the enormous weight shouldered by local non-governmental organizations has become a major feature of the Iraqi paradigm. Yet the incalculable dedication of scores of Iraqi volunteers who commit themselves to a risky endeavour is often sabotaged by the poison of a corrupt environment. Furthermore, while the central government is facing immense obstacles in trying to assert its authority across the entire country, radical groups of all sorts have been able to position themselves as both protectors and

providers within the vulnerable communities under their control. In addition, monitoring expenditure and ensuring the effectiveness of programmes are extremely difficult under present circumstances.

In such a divided country, with shifting and perilous front lines, the neutrality of humanitarian action is disputed and often even rejected. It has been impossible to guarantee the delivery of aid, however impartial and however much it responds to genuine and urgent needs. As a result, on the assumption that it is better to help some people some of the time rather than no one at all, aid has been handed out wherever permitted by the ethnic and sectarian boundaries that the political environment has imposed. Yet impartial humanitarian action could – if freely pursued – help to close the divide, build bridges and restore a measure of the humanity to which all Iraqis aspire.

Perhaps one way back to a stable Iraq, one that would serve equally the needs of its entire people, is through the unanimous acceptance of impartial humanitarian action. Such action, which makes no distinction between victims, could foster reconciliation and serve to counter the pernicious idea that human lives must inevitably be sacrificed – an idea that will only further encourage hatred and then more hatred, revenge followed by more revenge. A window of opportunity has opened up in recent months with the decrease in violence in some areas, and it should be seized before it is too late. At the same time, humanitarian action can and must be supplemented by political measures aimed at preventing the country's slide into a much vaster conflict that could engulf the entire region.

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The war in Iraq presents challenges to all those involved in it, including humanitarian actors. In this issue of the *Review*, various authors look at the socio-political and humanitarian environment in Iraq today and assess the impact of the conflict on humanitarian law and humanitarian action. It is hoped that their insights will contribute to a better understanding of the complexity of this conflict and point towards possible ways to alleviate the suffering of the Iraqi people.

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