

Inside Iraq

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Maria Mohammed sat down at the side of the road as the crowds eddied around her, slid her hijab to the side and began to breastfeed her youngest son. It was midday during a cold spring in Chamchamal, the border town between the northern Iraqi oil city of Kerkuk--Maria's home--and the autonomous Kurdish zone in northern Iraq, where she now sought shelter.



In Chamchamal in northern Iraq, refugee Maria Mohammed nurses her infant son. Photo by Newsha Tavakolian.

That day, Maria and her husband, Osman Karim arose before dawn and brought out their shortwave radio. They tuned it to Radio Sawwa, a U.S.-sponsored station broadcasting into Iraq. They could have gone to jail for having the radio, but they needed to hear George Bush's plans. The announcer was reading an Arabic translation of the U.S. president's address to the nation, and through the static Maria heard the crucial words: thamenia wa arba'een saaya- 48 hours. The president was giving Saddam and his sons 48 hours to leave Iraq. Maria knew that meant there would be war, and it was time for her to get her family out of their house.

She woke her three small sons and packed two sacks of clothes, and her husband found a taxi to take them to the edge of town. They walked past an Iraqi check post, and found a bus, already to bursting with refugees.

The bus left them in Chamchamal, and Maria, 25, sat down to nurse the fussy babe, Omar, 10 months old, while Mr. Karim tried to find another taxi to take them on to her brother's home in Suleimaniya, where they hoped to wait out the war.

Maria was a startling sight there, an oasis of stillness in the throng of refugees. I sat beside her and asked how she was doing that day, with so much tension in the air. "I'm afraid," she said simply. "I was so afraid of the Iraqi soldiers when we crossed. I was afraid they would take us a prisoners to the jail. We have experiences with them--with chemical attacks, with arrests and torture and disappearances."

Her husband came back, transport arranged, unable to suppress his excitement. "We had to leave home, but I think it's the end of the Iraqi regime," said Osman. "It's the end of Saddam."

Maria, though, took a more stark view. "We left the house and the furniture and the car and everything, and now the American air force is coming," she said. "It's worth it, of course, to leave, to save people. But I'm not sure the regime will be finished--just care about my husband and my children."

The regime, of course, really was finished. In the next month, Kerkuk would come under continual U.S. air bombardment. The last-minute gas attack that Maria feared never materialized, but the city would be ransacked by looters and fought over by Kurds and Turks before she could come home.

Nursing Omar in the dust, as the trucks roared past and her two older sons huddled close, Maria was the image of the victims of this war: a person with no say in what was happening to her city or her country, no choice but to flee, no idea when she could go home.

And she became emblematic for me of the women who were missing in this conflict. In the three months I spent in Iraq covering the war and the lead-up to it, I struggled to record women's voices. But no women stood at the podium in the Pentagon's Central Command briefings in Doha, Qatar. No women spoke for the Iraqi government (while it lasted). I saw no female soldiers. In the days before the war began, women and children fled to the villages or to the mountains to take shelter, and then whole days would pass when I never laid eyes on a woman.

When the war was over, a handful of women appeared in the street celebrations. Most Iraqi women, though, stayed at home with their children, wondering, like Maria, where the politicking and the warring would leave their families. Victim was the only role that women were permitted.

I met Khorman Abdul Qader, 53, while she was hard at work sorting through the smashed concrete and crumpled metal remains of her grocery store in the eastern Iraqi town of Biyara. An American bomb had demolished the small shop as part of the joint attack by U.S. and Kurdish forces on Ansar al-Islam, a radical Islamist splinter group that had waged war on the Kurdish government. The group had held Biyara and 17 other Kurdish villages under a Taliban-like regime for the past three years.

Accusing them of ties to al-Qaeda and Saddam, the White House went after Ansar as part of the war in Iraq, devastating Khorman's small shop in the process.

"The Ansar fighters had a position near here," she said, gesturing with the remains of a metal shelf. "But they left a week ago. Still, the Americans bombed us yesterday."

It was hard work, cleaning up the shop, and a few of Khorman's black curls slipped loose of her deep blue head scarf. A week earlier, that would have been enough to get her fined two weeks' earnings- or perhaps landed her husband in jail- for the Ansar mullahs demanded that women not leave their homes unless totally enveloped in black. This day, Khorman was out in public for the first time in almost three years without the veil and gloves.

"It was not a life, living like that," she said. She was delighted to see the group gone, saying that when Ansar sealed off the villages they destroyed her business. "We couldn't trade, we were sitting here like dogs."

Yet she was skeptical that any new government would be better. "The Iraqis or the Kurdish parties or Ansar, it's all the same for us," she said. Nobody, for example, was offering to fix her store. Her whole inventory- of rice, sugar, tinned tomato paste and spices that now trailed yellow dust over the smashed cement--was destroyed. She estimated that it could cost 20,000 dinar (\$3,000), what she earns in a year, to rebuild. "I would be angry," she said, "but if I am angry, what can I do? I have no power."

Two weeks later, the Iraqi army deserted the country's third city, Mosul. Within hours, the streets were choked with men--looters and those seeking revenge, sacking buildings and stealing cars. It was only at Saddam's lavish Palace of the Lances that I finally found some women: Whole families had come to gawk at the dictator's bedrooms.

"He was living in heaven, and we live in hell," said Amina Majid Bisa, marveling at the inlaid marble floors and the ornate ceilings. She brought her 11 children to see the palace. "I never imagined I would walk in this place," she said. "This is like a dream--how he lived here and what it cost, when all the people are poor. Because Bush supported us, we have a chance now."

I asked her if she thought life would be better in the new Iraq, and Amina, 43, pulled her youngest

daughter close. "We know our rights," she said uncertainly. Would she get them? "God willing," she said. There was little conviction in her voice.

As the war came to an end, Iraqis began to hold meetings to organize a provisional government. I searched the pictures and the TV footage: There were few women's faces at the table.