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Daniel Rothenberg

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THE IRAQ HISTORY PROJECT: UNDERSTANDING THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL IMPACT OF SYSTEMATIC HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

*Daniel Rothenberg**

INTRODUCTION

The psycho-social impact of violence on individuals, families, communities and nations represents one of the most complex issues for societies that have suffered systematic human rights violations. While substantial advances have been made in understanding the impact of atrocities and the treatment of victims, the overwhelming majority of those traumatized by political violence do not receive acknowledgment, reparations, or adequate medical treatment.

From 1968 until 2003, Iraqis lived under Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime, which was responsible for severe human rights violations that impacted all members of society. The government engaged in mass killing, the use of chemical weapons, institutionalized torture and rape. In addition, the Ba'athist regime used surveillance, threats, extreme physical coercion, and fear as central mechanisms of rule. Three and a half decades of terror impacted the psycho-social well-being of Iraqi society, leaving many Iraqis physically and psychologically traumatized.

The International Human Rights Law Institute (IHRLI) of DePaul University College of Law has documented and analyzed detailed personal narratives of serious human rights violations committed in Iraq. Since late 2005, IHRLI has been working on the Iraq History Project (IHP) documenting violations committed from 1968 through 2003.¹ Beginning in 2007, IHRLI adapted the IHP methodology to focus on violations committed from 2003 through the present.

This essay provides a brief overview of the IHP's documentation of past and current violations, presents some excerpts from personal narratives, and considers the value of this work for the psycho-social health of the Iraqi people.

* Daniel Rothenberg is Managing Director for International Projects, International Human Rights Law Institute, DePaul University College of Law

¹ See IRAQ HISTORY PROJECT, TESTIMONIES (International Human Rights Law Institute, 2007) [hereinafter IHP, Testimonies]; see also www.iqhp.org (last visited March 31, 2008).

I. OVERVIEW OF THE IRAQ HISTORY PROJECT

The IHP collects and analyzes testimonies of victims, their families, witnesses, perpetrators, and others regarding human rights violations committed during Saddam Hussein's regime. The personal narratives document the experiences of torture, massacres, assassinations, the use of chemical weapons, rape, disappearances, and other acts of violence committed against the Iraqi people.

The IHP has collected 7,018 testimonies from throughout the country regarding past violations, making it one of the largest independent human rights documentation programs in the world and the largest such initiative in Iraq. The project gathers detailed, open-ended interviews that are carefully recorded by hand, reviewed several times for accuracy, and later entered into a specially designed, secure, and searchable database.

The IHP uses an all-Iraqi in-country staff working out of a central office in the north of the country, with interviewers gathering material in every governorate from all major religious and ethnic groups. At peak levels, the IHP had a staff of over sixty including project managers, analysts, interviewers, data entry staff, translators, and administrators. The Iraqi-based staff works closely with IHRLI staff based in Chicago.

In order to identify potential interviewees, IHP staff use social networks, victims' organizations, and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Interviews are conducted where the individuals feel most comfortable, generally in private homes or NGO offices. Interviewers are paired with interviewees based on gender, ethnic/religious background and linguistic preferences. For example, women are interviewed by other women, Kurds are interviewed by other Kurds, and Assyrians are interviewed by other Assyrians. Iraq History Project staff found Iraqis throughout the country to be very interested in telling their stories.

Beginning in mid-2007, the Iraq History Project began presenting material widely to the Iraqi people through publications, radio broadcasts, newspaper inserts and a website.² As interviewers continue to gather material on current violations, project analysts are reviewing the material gathered on past violations. The final report will be widely distributed in Iraq and around the world and will present a

² See www.iqhp.org (last visited April 24, 2008).

series of policy recommendations regarding transitional justice and programs to assist victims.

II. EXCERPTS FROM MATERIAL GATHERED BY THE IRAQ HISTORY PROJECT

The IHP is a victim-centered initiative. The project gathers and analyzes victims' stories to provide an understanding of how the Iraqi people experienced decades of systematic human rights violations. The methodology is fundamentally qualitative and seeks to direct society's attention to the complex and devastating nature of severe political violence.

The IHP team in southern Iraq gathered a story from a woman named Widad (all names presented here are pseudonyms), whose father was disappeared by the Iraqi intelligence services and who, later, was herself targeted. She begins her story by defining her present in relation to past violence:

When we look at life, we discover how cruel it is.

I know this because I lost the most precious things.

When I was younger, I was happy. Then, after they took my father away, I lost my love for life. They deprived our family of the force that held us together, and afterwards, only tragedy remained—and injustice, oppression, and tyranny.

I was once a young girl, proud of my honor and virtue.³

The IHP staff found that many victims described their lives before becoming victims as calm, pleasant and joyful, regardless of the challenges they faced which were often substantial. This makes sense in light of the absolute shock and destruction of atrocities in relation to even the most difficult of prior circumstances, such as extreme poverty. Human rights violations of the type experienced by hundreds of thousands of Iraqis shattered their prior lives and, for those who survived, these acts redefined their future.

³ IHP, TESTIMONIES, *supra* note 1, at 9 (Story of Widad).

A reader reading Widad's words would likely see the line, "I was once a young girl, proud of my honor and virtue,"⁴ as foreshadowing of rape and sexual violence. A young woman's "honor and virtue" in her context can be read as an indication of her virginity and all that it signifies within her socio-cultural context. Widad goes on to describe how she made a negative off-hand remark about the Ba'athist regime to a classmate who was the daughter of a party official. A few days later, intelligence agents swept into the classroom and arrested her. She was held for months, beaten, and raped:

He attacked me like a monster. I was screaming and fighting with my hands, but he was like a wild animal. He was strong. It was impossible for me to stop him.

He stripped off my clothes. I was crying and begging him to leave. I was screaming as loud as I could.

I was unable to stop him and his cruel desires.

Then, he beat me with a cable and I lost consciousness.

I woke up when he put some smelling salt under my nose. When I came to, I saw that I was naked. I began to scream. I beat myself. I broke down like a crazy person.

He was so cold. He sat there as if he had done nothing. He looked at me.

"Put your clothes back on, bitch! You insulted the President and the Party. This is what you deserve!"

After I put my clothes on, he opened the door and went out. Then, the same man who brought me to the room came to take me back to my cell.

The same thing happened every night for four months.⁵

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.* at 13.

The IHP team gathered 935 testimonies from Iraqi women from throughout the country who had been raped. Many Iraqi staff has been surprised by the willingness of victims to openly discuss rape and sexual abuse, particularly given the damaging consequences of admitting to having been raped.

Like many other victims, Widad goes on to explain the immediate impact of systematic abuse on her physical and psychological state:

I began to wither, day after day. My health went from bad to worse. My nerves broke down. The officer used to give me pills so I could sleep at night and be more relaxed for him.⁶

She eventually signed a confession and was released.⁷ She was pressured to work as a spy for the regime, but she fled the area and moved in with a relative, living there until the fall of the regime in 2003.⁸

Another victim, named Banaz, was a victim of the mass repression against the Kurds in what is known as “the Anfal Campaign.”⁹ In 1988, Iraqi army units supported by Kurdish *jesh* surrounded the village where she lived with her husband and three children. She begins her story in this way:

We were a happy family and everyone was jealous of our good fortune. But, this happiness ended quickly. Our wonderful life together turned to misery because of Saddam.¹⁰

Banaz was taken to a military prison filled with Kurds from various villages.¹¹ She was interrogated and then separated from her husband.¹² Along with other women and children, she was transferred to another location:

They took us to a camp. They forced us to get out of the vehicles and moved us through a narrow passage with barbed wire on both sides. The guards said, “Hurry up.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.* at 14.

⁸ IHP, TESTIMONIES, *supra* note 1, at 14.

⁹ *Id.* at 79.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 81.

¹¹ *Id.* at 81-82.

¹² *Id.* at

Move along!” It was very dark. We could see a dim light from the camp. Everyone held on to the person in front of them. We walked forward to the sound of crying children, screaming women, and the wind.

As we entered the camp building, they turned off the electricity. We were very scared We stayed in the darkness until around midnight when they turned on all the lights.

Then, we saw the bones of dead people.

There was blood on the walls and there were pieces of bloody cloth that no one dared touch.¹³

She was interrogated repeatedly, humiliated, beaten, tortured, and raped (although she chose not to go into details about the experience). While in prison, her baby died of an illness.

She was released from prison after the government issued a general amnesty. While she was in jail, her husband had been killed. So, she went to her husband’s family, but they refused to take her in:

I went to my brother-in-law’s home. He took in my daughters, but rejected me.

My family said that I dishonored them in prison. Some said I collaborated with the regime. Others said I failed to wear black clothes as a symbol of mourning for my husband and had broken Kurdish tradition. They hit me and insulted me. They took my children and forced me out of their home.

I went to the house of some other relatives. They begged my brother-in-law to let me be with my children, but he refused saying. “They’re not her children. I don’t care where she goes. If she returns I’ll kill her.”

Eventually I found a man who took me to my father’s new home. He was very kind to me. I spent six months there,

¹³ IHP, TESTIMONIES, *supra* note 1, at 83.

far from my children. I was like a mad woman. I fainted many times each day. I saw my children in my dreams.

Later, we sent several respected, elderly men to my brother-in-law's home to convince him to let me see my children. It was useless.

I began to suffer from a psychological illness. My life was full of misery and suffering.¹⁴

After suffering terribly in a series of government prisons, Banaz is then rejected by her own family. Many Iraqis suffered various types of secondary trauma, particularly women who were raped in prison and then blamed for having allowed or accepted the violation. Banaz goes on to describe the way these events impacted her psychological state as she becomes, "like a mad woman."¹⁵

Many years later, Banaz returned to her family's home and began working for an organization that helps women who were victims of the Anfal campaign. By the time she was interviewed by the IHP team, almost twenty years had passed between the time of her detention, torture and rape, yet she remains traumatized:

I will never forget what happened to me. I think constantly about the brutality I suffered and remember how I was beaten. I often think of my baby who was taken out of my arms by security agents and who died alone, without me.¹⁶

Banaz's story draws attention to the complex nature of human rights violations as experienced by victims. While these violations are crimes, it is not useful from a victim-centered perspective to consider atrocities only in this way. Banaz's rejection by her family is as much a part of her story as a victim as is the beating she suffered at the hands of the Ba'athist intelligence services.

The IHP gathered a number of testimonies from perpetrators, as well as victims. While it was not easy to gather these interviews, they provide insight into how ordinary Iraqis became agents of cruelty, violence, and repression against their fellow citizens.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 85.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ IHP, TESTIMONIES, *supra* note 1, at 86.

One former torturer, Jasim, begins his testimony full of remorse about his actions.¹⁷ Iraq is a nation full of professional interrogators, torturers, and others whose direct actions enabled decades of violent repression. In this way, Iraq is like many nations whose governments utilized severe human rights violations as a key mode of governance and rule. While it is unclear how many Iraqi perpetrators are willing to come forward and tell their stories, the IHP discovered a substantial amount of interest on the part of many lower-level perpetrators who would like to re-integrate into society.

I cry when I speak about what I have done. I know that nothing I can do would be enough for me to deserve forgiveness. I only hope that my willingness to confess my crimes is proof that I am truly repentant.

I used to live in a body of a criminal. I was a beast. I had a damaged soul in which everything beautiful had been destroyed. I killed the mercy and love within my heart and left, in its place, hatred and injustice.¹⁸

Jasim grew up poor with a highly abusive father. He describes his childhood as a way of explaining how he was recruited to become a torturer:

I grew up in difficult circumstances. My father worshiped liquor. He couldn't live without it. He lost his mind whenever he got drunk and beat my mother. My two sisters and I would search for a place to hide. If he found us, he would tie us to a date palm and lash us with a leather whip. My mother would try to help us and he would beat her, leaving us tied to the tree. He would tear her clothes and whip her. We had scars on our bodies I grew up full of suffering and anger.¹⁹

Through family contacts, he was introduced to those working for the security services.²⁰ He was desperate to succeed and in need of both money and a sense of security. He describes the situation as if he was brought in to work in a security directorate prison with no

¹⁷ *Id.* at 27.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ IHP, TESTIMONIES, *supra* note 1, at 27-28.

knowledge of his role.²¹ Like many statements from perpetrators and others after the fact, there is no way to determine if this was true. However, his initial reluctance is part of the way that Jasim needs to tell his story.

He describes his first day as follows:

While I stood there thinking, two men brought a young man into the room. One of the men said, "Show no mercy until he confesses."

Abu Husam beat the young man with heavy blows. He kicked him. Then, he started to undress him. He began to beat the man's private parts with a cable. The man was screaming and begging Abu Husam to leave him alone. This only made Abu Husam increase the beating until the man's skin broke and he started to bleed. The man fainted. Abu Husam left the young man on the floor and called the two guards. They came and carried him back to his cell.

Minutes later, they brought in another man who was in his thirties. Abu Husam started to torture him by hanging him by his legs from the ceiling and beating him with a cable until his shoulder was displaced and he fainted. Then, Abu Husam let him down to the floor.

I felt ill as I watched Abu Husam torturing these people.

It was hard for me to control myself.

A short while later, they brought in a woman who refused to inform on her husband, who was a member of the Dawa Party.

Abu Husam undressed her. He made her sit on a chair and tied her down. He connected electric wires to her hands, feet, and breasts. He began to shock her. She was shaking and screaming. She began to drool and then, she fainted. Abu Husam took her out of the chair, dressed her, and called the guards to take her away.

²¹ *Id.*

At that moment, I hated myself.

I knew that soon I would become like this man.²²

In fact, that is exactly what happened. Soon, he was a professional torturer. He acknowledges his responsibility for many terrible actions over years of work for the regime:

One day, the officer ordered me to torture a man who was a member of the insurgents. The officer asked me to use electricity. I connected his penis to very high voltage. I was merciless. When he fainted, I disconnected the wires and he urinated. His urine was mixed with blood. Then, I broke one of his legs.²³

Over time, Jasim's life collapses: He drinks heavily, divorces his wife under compulsion from his superiors and loses contact with his children. His hand is amputated from an infection he contracts from one of his victims. Finally, after being forced to retire, he begins to reflect on his life:

I became very lonely. When I was alone, I faced my thoughts, sorrows, and past crimes. They began to haunt me. It made me almost crazy to remember the voices of all the people I had tortured, screaming and begging. I spent my nights crying for what I did and for the injustice I committed by harming so many people. I saw myself as a monster.²⁴

Jasim then visits the local imam and asks for assistance, who tells him that he must turn to God and declare his "true repentance to God."

I began to ask God to forgive me for having done wrong and making so many people suffer. I believed that God's will was stronger than man's will and that God was punishing me for what I had done . . . I now spend most of my time at home, trying to be closer to God. I ask God to forgive me for my sins, to have mercy upon me, and to free my conscience from its suffering.

For God is forgiving and merciful.²⁵

²² *Id.* at 28-29.

²³ *Id.* at 31.

²⁴ *Id.* at 34.

²⁵ *Id.*

Severe violence can only occur where there are high level perpetrators that design and manage repressive policies as well as lower level perpetrators who commit the acts of torture, killing, and rape. In societies like Iraq where political violence was institutionalized, there are tens of thousands of lower level perpetrators. Their stories are part of the larger history of violence in the country. And, even though they are less likely to receive sympathy and support, perpetrators also suffer trauma and long-term physical and psychological consequences of their role in atrocities.

III. CONCLUSION: TRUTH-TELLING AND PUBLIC HEALTH

The IHP uses people's stories to document the impact of political repression, emphasizing the importance of understanding past atrocities through the voices of victims. Experience in other countries demonstrates that when these stories are publicly presented, they enable an interpretation of the present in relation to the past. This counters a convenient and highly politicized rewriting of history and also encourages the implementation of responsive state policies that serve victims' needs and help prevent a return to authoritarian rule.

The IHP has broad public health relevance since its victim-centered approach to human rights documentation focuses not only on the specific data linked to particular violations, but also on the way in which political violence has impacted victims and others, including the long term experience of physical and psychological trauma.

The IHP final report will provide a series of recommendations to the Iraqi government regarding the importance of creating programs to assist victims of violence both past and present. These programs may include various types of reparations, as well as focused programs designed to address the physical and psychological impact of severe violations. While addressing certain physical consequences tends to rely on existing medical models (such as artificial limbs for amputees), many physical and psychological symptoms (such as depression or trouble concentrating) require complex and context-specific programs. These may include developing treatment programs that link community reintegration with psychological assistance, religious support, and state-funded aid.

The Iraqi state has a moral, and possibly legal, responsibility to care for victims of past and present violence. Some elements of this commitment can be found in the nation's new constitution and a

number of transitional justice policies, which it has instituted. However, much remains to be done. Iraq is a very rich country and possesses substantial oil wealth which, if used appropriately, can allow the government to substantially improve the lives of its people, including directing resources to aiding victims of past and present violence.

The prior regime linked the exercise of political power with brutality, violence, and a rejection of human dignity, basic rights, and fundamental Iraqi values. Since 2003, Iraq has become a nation defined by severe violence of a different type involving a number of distinct, often competing parties including: the U.S.-led Multinational Forces in Iraq (MNF-I), Al-Qaeda, the Mahdi Army, militias supporting the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, various Sunni armed groups, and others. IHRLI is integrating its analysis of past violations with large scale data collection on current violations.

While the future of the country remains uncertain, the possibility of genuine peace and responsible governance requires serious reflection on the systematic atrocities committed over the last three decades, as well as those committed in the last five years. IHRLI's work on documenting and analyzing human rights violations in Iraq is designed to contribute to an improved understanding of the experience of violence, aid national reconciliation, assist victims, and support the long-term defense and protection of fundamental human rights in Iraq.