

# Monumental Disrespect

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Somewhere in east Baghdad there is a brick wall bearing the names of the Iraqi soldiers who died in the Iraq-Iran war, launched by the regime of Saddam Hussein in September 1980. There is no reliable tally of the casualties to date, but the number of dead is estimated to be between 500,000 and 800,000. The wall surrounds, and is part of, the Martyr's Monument, completed in 1982, six years before the war itself would come to an end. The names were engraved on the wall later, after the 1991 Gulf war.

Undoubtedly, the monument was an essential component of the mythology around the eight-year war. The regime's official narrative exploited a mélange of Arabo-Islamic symbols, pan-Arabism and Iraqi nationalism to justify the costly war to the masses. Most telling was the name given to the war itself—*Qadisiyyat Saddam* (Saddam's Qadisiyya)—which drew an explicit parallel to the Qadisiyya of Sa'd, a battle of Arab Muslims against the Persians, then non-Muslim, in the seventh century. Though Iranians were Muslims in 1980, and though the Iraqi dictator enjoyed the generous support of the non-Muslim United States and its clients in the Gulf throughout the hostilities, the Islamic-sounding appellation legitimized the war by evoking powerful images from Arabo-Islamic history. This proved especially useful with Iraq's Shi'i majority, who, as an oppressed minority in socio-political and economic terms, supplied a disproportionate share of the cannon fodder. The power of pan-Arab and Iraqi nationalism made losers of those who bet that Iraqi Shi'a would turn against their own country in solidarity with their Iranian co-religionists.

## *Nusb al-Shahid*

The families of the war dead were given cars and monetary compensation. Equally valuable, however, was the designation of each dead soldier as a martyr (*shahid*), a word which gained much currency in those years. The Qur'anic verse, "Deem not those who were killed for God deceased, but alive with their

Lord," commonly used in reference to martyrdom, was emblazoned on the black banners one saw on Iraqi streets announcing the passing of a son of the neighborhood. The Martyr's Monument, designed by Isma'il al-Turk, obviously aimed to capture in stone and cement the moment of martyrdom itself. Its giant blue dome, whose color and shape are reminiscent of the traditional dome of the mosque, is split open, clearing the way for the soldier's soul to rise to the heavens. As if to represent his soul, an Iraqi flag rendered in sculpture ascends from the underground level of the monument, passes through the symbolic martyr's grave (which bears the Qur'anic verse) on the ground level and flutters upward a few feet to the center of the two halves of the dome.

Although the memorial is officially called "The Monument of the Martyrs of Saddam's Qadisiyya," Iraqis took to referring to it by the shorter name of *Nusb al-Shahid* (The Martyr's Monument). This unconscious gesture bespoke the general attitude toward the martyrs and the war. While many Iraqis were unconvinced by the regime's justifications for attacking Iran, the concept that those who died in combat were "martyrs" was generally accepted. After 1982, when Iraqi troops were expelled from the Iranian cities they had initially occupied, the conflict consisted by and large of massive Iranian assaults aimed at invading Iraqi territory. The shift in momentum helped make the war seem like a defensive one in which Iraqi national survival was at stake, complicating the skeptical attitudes held by most Iraqis at the outset.

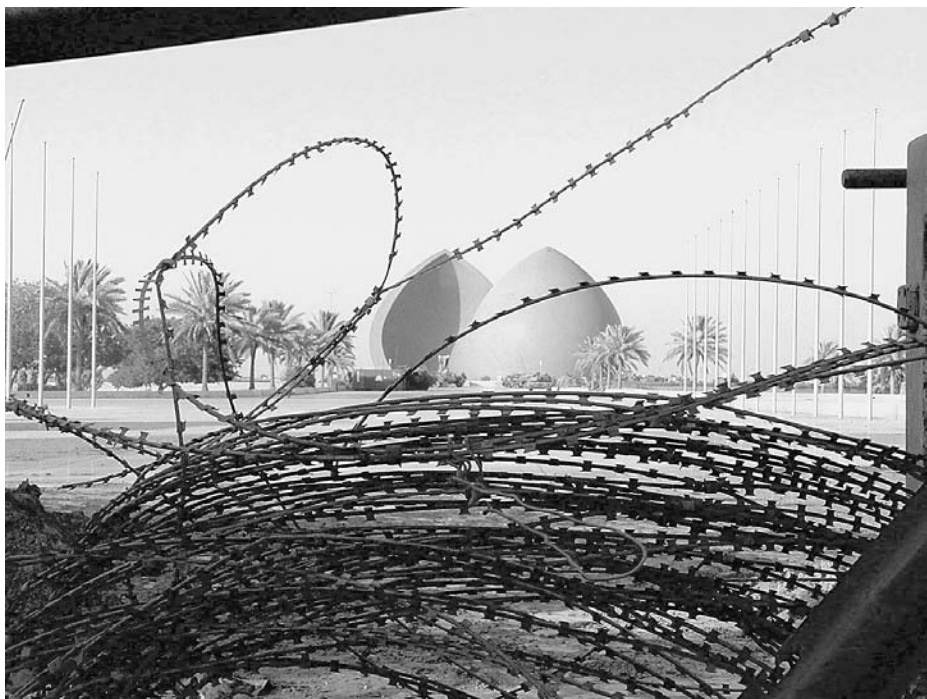
The Martyr's Monument stands out among the architectural symbols left by Saddam's era as the most pleasing to the eye. It is also the monument least associated with the persona of Saddam Hussein. Unlike the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, which, in addition to being Saddam's brainchild and to resembling a scar on Baghdad's space, is too close to the Presidential Palace, the Martyr's Monument, due to its inviting shape, its concept and surroundings, was frequented by average Iraqis. I vividly remember visiting the monument twice in the early 1980s. Though aware of its official meaning,

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I was in awe of its aesthetic power. What, I wondered, would befall the memorial when Hussein's regime was overthrown?

## Access Denied

My third visit came this past July when I returned to Iraq for the first time since 1991. I found the entrance sealed off with barbed wire, and the marble path leading to the dome lined with armored vehicles belonging to the US military. An American GI at the gate scrutinized our press passes, and called his commanding officer to inquire, but told us that since the place had become a military site, he was doubtful that anyone would be granted access. Plus, it was dinner time. We chatted with the soldier as we waited for an answer. Humvees rumbled in and out of the gate every few minutes, interrupting the dialogue as he told us that the occupation force in Iraq was about "liberating the Iraqi people and safeguarding their future." "For example," the soldier said, closing the gap in the barbed wire fence, "Iraqis were not allowed to come into this place before." Minutes earlier, two kids outside the gate had complained to me about how they weren't allowed to enter the memorial grounds to ride their bikes or play inside—something they



The Martyr's Monument, July 2003.

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were allowed to do before the Americans arrived.

What about the museum in the underground level of the monument? "There is nothing left there," the soldier said. "It was looted. This is off the record, but we're not sure if it was the Iraqis or some of our own soldiers who did it. Anyway, I came later."

We waited for about 40 minutes, and then we were told to come back the next morning to talk to the person in charge.

Two of our number returned the next morning and were told to come back in the evening. When we came back later that day, we were told that permission had been denied. We protested that we'd been promised entry, and that we would only film the monument itself—nothing related to the military. After some haggling, a soldier was assigned to escort us inside. It was already getting dark. Much of the marble on the path leading toward the dome was broken and scratched. The armored vehicles flanking us on both sides bore names such as "Arabian Knight," "Body Bag" and "Iron Maiden."

In the enclosure between the two halves of the dome that houses the soul-flag, boot prints scuffed the black granite at the bottom.



The Martyr's Monument at dusk.

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Workout instructions on the Martyr's Wall.

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An American finger had scribbled “Chrissy” and “Marty 03” into the dust on the surface. During my previous visits, we had been required to remove our shoes before stepping on this platform as a show of respect, not unlike the interior of a mosque.

We asked our escort if he thought it was appropriate that American soldiers occupy this space. He supposed it was. “We have great respect for those soldiers who gave their lives, because we’ve sacrificed a large number of lives. It represents the freedom that those soldiers died to protect...well, I don’t want to say freedom, because they didn’t really have freedom before.... These soldiers died for their country, for a cause, whether or not they believed in it. If Americans were an oppressed group and somebody came to liberate us and, based on security and operational needs, they had to stay at the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial, then I would accept that.” It was useless to argue. I moved away and started looking for the entrance to the “Martyr’s Wall.”

## Underground Garage

We descended the concrete steps in pitch blackness, the only light emanating from our video camera. The off-white walls of the wide walkway around the underground level listed the

name and rank of each dead soldier in alphabetical order. I spotted a white piece of paper on the wall, imprinted with what resembled the head of a wolf in black and red (the insignia of an army unit?) and the number A27. What was this? “It’s a sign for a parking space,” answered our guide. He was silent when we asked about the names inscribed underneath.

Every few feet there was another sign marking yet another parking space. Still another sign cautioned drivers to keep to “five miles per hour” and an arrow directed traffic. Further down a flyer, also papering over the names of a few who fell on the Iranian front, announced a “Country Dancing Ball,” and a second one set the time for a volleyball match. Other signs on the wall measured off jogging distances and reminded those on the workout trail to do their pushups. Trash and empty bottles were scattered here and there.

The families of the Iraqi soldiers memorialized on the wall cannot visit this makeshift garage and jogging track for invaders, who hail from the shores of the superpower that supplied Saddam Hussein with military intelligence and financial credit when he sent their sons to their deaths. They cannot chat with the foreign soldiers whose civilian boss in Washington shook hands with Saddam in Baghdad a few months after their monument was dedicated. For the time being, the only public space in Iraq where one can read the names of the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis killed during the war against Iran, is dissociated from its past and has become a tableau of Iraq’s occupied future.

We approached the entrance to the space directly under the monument. Once again, we were told not to film the living quarters or anything that would divulge the “layout of the place.” The museum, which had previously contained outdated weaponry, had been turned into a sleeping and living area for American soldiers. There was ample electricity and air conditioning, something most Iraqis would have been lucky to have for a few hours that day. There were TVs hooked up to satellite dishes and offices equipped with computers. On one of the doors was posted a flyer for an upcoming showing of *The Matrix*. Soldiers walked around in T-shirts and shorts, their slippers flip-flopping on the sparkling marble floor. Some smiled and greeted us, while others seemed nonplussed by our foreign presence.

In the era of US occupation, the Martyr’s Monument has become a mass grave of sorts, one diligently dug by the former regime, beneficiary of the friendly “tilt” from Washington, for eight long years. Today, as the US exploits Iraq’s mass graves and the memory of those buried therein for its own political objectives, its soldiers live in this mass grave, as it digs a bigger one for Iraq as a nation-state. Climbing the stairs, we saw two Black Hawk helicopters hovering in the darkening sky. The familiar strains of Mozart—not “Requiem,” but a sprightly violin concerto—wafted from inside an armored vehicle parked to our right. It seemed too joyous a piece for the night that had cloaked Baghdad. ■