



PETER BOUCKAERT/HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

An identity document found in the mass grave in Hilla. Such evidence could help reconstruct Iraq's violent past and hold former leaders accountable. May 2003.

# Of Graves and Grievances

**Sinan Antoon**

## I. Graves

I was going back home. Two weeks after the ceasefire in March 1991, the minibuses had just returned to the streets, and I had taken the opportunity to visit my cousin's house to check on her family. A man in his thirties boarded the minibus a few minutes after I did and sat next to me. The driver turned on the radio, shattering the heavy silence with blabber about "the meaning of victory" and "the example Iraq set for future gen-

erations." Quickly adjusting the dial, the driver searched the stations until he found a maudlin love song. It was a sign, I thought, of how things had changed. Before the war, he would have thought twice before changing the station.

"Excuse me," the man next to me asked in a subdued voice. "Do you know where al-Amin al-Thaniya is?"

"There is a bridge coming up in 15 minutes. You get off there and once you cross it, you'll be in al-Amin al-Thaniya."

"Do you live there?" he asked, as if to verify my knowledge of the area.

*Sinan Antoon is an Iraqi poet living in Cairo.*

“No, I live in al-Amin al-Ula, on this side of the canal, but I must get off at the bridge. I will show you how to get there.”

Silence reigned again. The man was holding a small paper bag in his hands. His fingers pressed it firmly shut. He caught me looking at the bag.

“I have to deliver something. I have the address, but...”

He opened the paper bag and showed me its contents—an ID card with burnt corners. Almost half of the photograph in the upper right-hand corner had been consumed by flame.

“I didn’t know him before the war. We were together in the same trench. We survived the bombing. It was a miracle. I swear to you. Everyone else in our unit died. I went to take a leak the day we decided to flee and the spot was bombed. When I came back, he was burning like a tree. I tried to save him, but I couldn’t. It was too late. I had to bury him there with my own hands. We’d given each other our addresses, just in case. What will I tell his family?”

I had no answer.

## II. Black Rain

Her eyes were like two green question marks. She was trying to hide a tear that had started to crystallize. But it was frozen, or delayed, by fear. It hesitated a bit, and stumbled on her eyelids, before resting on the threshold of crying. The child extended her hands and held on to the crease of her father’s pants. Her father was trying to keep his own fear invisible.

“Baba, Baba, what is that noise?”

He answered with an air of necessary self-assurance:

“Rain. It’s just rain, sweetie.”

Violently, the bombing had smashed the silence hiding inside us and broken its windows. The windows we had closed to look into ourselves. The sirens howled. Waking up late and unable to fulfill their functions, like underpaid and overworked bureaucrats.

“When will it be over, Baba?”

“Soon, sweetie, very soon. It will be OK.”

The child held on tightly to her father and repeated “rain... rain” as if she knew, with the wisdom of a three-year old, that this was a different kind of rain. One that could steal people away from their loved ones.

The clouds, that night, had squatted in one of the corners of Baghdad’s sky. They hid behind the stars, making way for a different type of human-made clouds with names like “B-52” and “Stealth.” These were clouds that never tired or bothered to migrate between the sky and water surfaces. Nor were they interested in listening to the sun’s whispers, or being subject to the winds’ whims. All they needed was a temporary concrete nest, here or there, to refuel and continue handing out the gifts of the New World Order. The clouds rained gifts of various sizes and shapes. Cactuses of death that would thrive inside us for decades to come. They diminish seasons and defy almanacs. They bury time and spread their shards on maps and in bodies. As for those on whom death does not trickle through the holes it makes in skulls, its thunder keeps

howling and running in the nights of their heads and years. It keeps laughing in their nightmares and smiling through their invisible wrinkles.

“Rain...rain.” The child kept on repeating the word.

Many rain clouds later, we woke up to find Baghdad’s sky covered with crowds of black clouds. Saddam had ordered that Kuwait’s oil wells be torched. I heard on the radio that these clouds translated into billions of dollars in compensation. As the ink of dollars crept northward, the hunger of future generations took shape on the sooty horizon. The smoke stood still, as if watching Baghdad’s four million. Environmentalists and animal rights activists condemned this crime as it blackened and choked the rare birds and animals of the desert. As for us, there were so many of our species. And we were already a bit darker.

Bombs had muted phone lines from the beginning. So I spent that night at a friend’s house, having visited to check on him. I rushed home the next morning on the bike I had bought in the third week of the war. The bike business was booming after the war, as the lack of fuel had paralyzed cars. The war had ended a few days before and there was an uprising in most of the country’s governorates. Bush Senior had called upon Iraqis to “take matters into their own hands.” Even the *mukhabarat* cars usually parked in major Baghdad intersections had disappeared. Black rain started pouring as I pedaled down Palestine Street. The two halves of the split blue dome of Nusb al-Shahid (Martyr’s Monument)—all that remained of the million or so who died in the eight-year war against Iran—looked like a screaming mouth gaping at the sky. I stopped to catch my breath and hid under one of the palm trees they’d planted along both sides of the street. The monument was erected close to the amusement park we frequented on school trips or with our parents, taking over a site for burning the city’s garbage. Millions of dollars and tons of marble had turned the dump into a space where human carnage was rendered aesthetic.

I continued my trip back home. The streets were empty, except for a car rushing by every ten minutes to shower me with puddled black rain. I saw the Olympic Committee’s complex, Uday’s headquarters, to the right. There were no guards whatsoever. This was my daily route to and from college and I had memorized every little detail. A sign reading “God safeguard Iraq and Saddam” adorned the entrance of the complex, but now someone had removed “Saddam.” He was dangling from the edge, trying to hold on. There was graffiti all over Baghdad those days in solidarity with the uprising. One of Saddam’s murals in Baghdad al-Jadida was even defaced with red paint.

Immediately after the end of the war, the regime formed a committee to identify those of His Excellency’s totems which needed a makeover. Saddam climbed back up to his sovereign place with the help of the US, which helped him crush the uprising by allowing him to use helicopter gunships and slaughter the thousands of brave Iraqis whose



Bedouin girl outside Mosul, March 2002.

DALIA KHAMISSY

mass graves are now being exhumed. The Iraqi Olympic Committee was one of the first public buildings to be looted and torched after the fall of the hated regime in April, part of the catharsis. But at what cost? US occupation troops made sure the Ministries of Oil and Foreign Affairs were protected, but watched the whole infrastructure of the Iraqi state and much of the country's heritage be looted and destroyed. Why not? It will only increase the profits to be made rebuilding. Another looting, equally devastating and lethal, carried out by white men in three-piece suits oceans away had started much earlier than April, but most of it is off-camera. Perhaps it produces cigar smoke amidst clouds of that invisible kind reserved for smokescreens. Baghdad's and Iraq's skies, s(oil) and waters are all clear for Bechtel and its partners.

When I reached our house that day I was soaked with black rain, I got off the bike and opened the iron gate. Our 70 year-old retired neighbor was trying, bowl in hand, to scoop the rain from one part of his garden and pour it on another. There, after the sanctions were imposed, he had planted cucumbers and tomatoes instead of roses.

He heard me closing the gate and stood up: "What are you doing out in this weather? Have you ever seen anything like it?"

"I was visiting a friend. No, nothing like this before!"

"It's the best fertilizer ever, though!"

I had nothing further to say. Inside, my aunt said what she always says when I'm caught in the rain. "You look like a wet bird!" She covered me with a towel.

I remembered all this as the announcer on TV praised the accuracy of the beautiful birds about to approach Iraq's skies.

My aunt and our neighbor are buried 50 kilometers east of Baghdad, in a cemetery covered with dust and the tranquility of death. The sanctions probably hastened their departures, as they did for perhaps a million Iraqis, mostly children. Grass or wildflowers may grow beside their graves. I don't know for sure, but I will check if and when I go back to "liberated" Iraq. As for the little child, she is one of four million Iraqis in the diaspora, but she doesn't like rain and she is still afraid of thunder.

### III. Mass Graves

The joy of witnessing Saddam's demise was too brief to savor. It was a euphoria whose hangover will be measured in depleted uranium, cluster bombs and the heavy price Iraqis will have to pay to liberate their country from the "liberators," now that the occupation is official.

Let us never forget that when the regime carried out most of its crimes, when it turned the whole of Iraq into a giant mass grave, it was not yet on Washington's list of "rogue states." As for those mass graves which date back to the uprising of 1991, let us never forget that the

US stood by as Saddam's helicopter gunships slaughtered Iraqis and did not allow Iraqi rebels to reach warehouses containing the weapons and ammunition they needed to defend themselves.

L. Paul Bremer, Iraq's American governor, now visits the sites of these mass graves to express solidarity. It would be naïve to expect an apology or an admission of complicity. But, nevertheless, one must ask if the skeletons of Iraqi soldiers buried en masse by the US in 1991 will ever be unearthed to be identified and returned to their families. Will we hear mention of the resting places of the retreating soldiers left to burn alive on the highway of death?

In the cacophony about Iraq's future (or lack thereof) and the regime's numerous crimes, another enormous crime is slowly being consigned to oblivion. Whereas Saddam's mass graves can be located and investigated, that crime's vast cemetery is already ringed off, beyond the reach of memory. There have been many attempts, in the last 13 years, to breach the gates and exploit gaps in the fence, but the graveyard of victims of the sanctions once again seems impenetrable to inquiry. Iraqis' collective memory will forever be haunted by their ghosts. Perhaps the memory of those one million innocent civilians will one day help exhume a fellow victim, also buried for some time now: collective responsibility. ■

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The Journal of the Research Group  
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217 East 86 Street # 143

New York, NY 10028

(212) 427-5976

\$10 for this issue

Four-issue subscription \$32