

This Is Iraq

Photographs & Text by
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This was my first time in Iraq – I was in high school when American forces invaded the country in 2003. Growing up, I've always thought about the country as a place of war. Almost a decade on, I had the opportunity to visit the country that was still searching for its place. Hired by the ICRC, I obviously had a very different experience than other photojournalists who worked independently, or embedded with coalition forces. As a journalist, I'm always careful of working for organisations with motives other than independent, unbiased reporting. What I would find is that the ICRC's principles of neutrality and conduct in conflict situations paralleled the way that I would generally work as a journalist. I felt comfortable knowing that I could photograph the work of the ICRC, and still paint an honest picture of Iraq.



Children play in a makeshift playground in the neighborhood of Zafraniya on May 2, 2011 in Baghdad, Iraq. Zafraniya has become a refuge for internally displaced Iraqis fleeing violence in other parts of the country.



An ICRC plane takes off from an airport on April 12, 2011 in Amman, Jordan.

Through the projects that the ICRC undertook, I found myself with unique access and trust of normal Iraqis affected by conflict. I was welcomed into the homes of female widows who had lost their husbands due to the war. As a male, I would have never imagined being able to visit – let alone photograph, women going about their daily lives in their homes, and I felt quite humbled to have rare glimpse into private spaces that strangers rarely get to see. The one constant I noticed every city I went was the way protracted conflict has affected every single Iraqi, but within that, I was able to consistently find a sense of family, community, support, and ways that life goes on, regardless of conflict.

a sense of family, community, support, and ways that life goes on, regardless of conflict. Borne out of tragedies of losing their husband and only means of support, it was a privilege to see women taking initiative of their own lives – finding work that they care about to support themselves and their children.

Tracing projects that the ICRC were facilitating made tangible to me, the sheer scope of the human toll and lasting effects of conflict. At the Al Zubair Martyrs Center in Basra, I got lost in countless documents, personal belongings, bones, corpses, and clothes of soldiers killed in the wars Iraq has seen. Rows and rows of unidentified bodies rest in largely unmarked graves.



A UXO decontamination team inspects a piece of unexploded ordnance near a military checkpoint on April 18, 2011 in Amarah, Iraq. Landmines, unexploded ordnance and other lethal debris of war are still a serious threat in Iraq.

Stacks of clothes, jewellery, ID cards lie in container boxes, too many to sort through. It was an eerie museum, a living reminder of the nameless soldiers who were sent off to war, only to disappear into a graveyard of statistics. I photographed an Iraqi man reunite with the body of his brother, killed in the Iran-Iraq war, almost three decades ago. Even though he always knew in his heart that his brother was likely killed, his grief was compounded with almost thirty years of uncertainty, wishful thinking, and lost hope. Now, he had comfort in closure, but it struck me that with the violence that is still happening to this day, grief will be the undertone of this country for many decades to come.

The last day I was there, Osama Bin Laden was killed by American Special Forces in Pakistan. As politicians and commentators began to debate the implications of his death, I found it to be a bitter reminder for the Iraqi people, who took it as a time to reflect on their unwilling place in the 'War on Terror', and the events that became the pretext to the invasion of their country. On my way to Baghdad Airport, a roadside bomb exploded less than a hundred meters ahead of us. Before I could even register what had happened, our driver instinctively swerved into a side street away from the smoke and potential secondary explosions. They were absolutely unfazed at something that still happens with haunting regularity. "You see, nothing changes. This is our Iraq."



Suhad Abbas Mohamed, 27, styles the hair of her niece at her salon on April 29, 2011 in Baghdad. Suhad's husband was killed in the sectarian violence in 2006, which left her unable to support herself. She was given assistance from the ICRC to start her own salon in her house. She says that running a salon helps her support herself and also puts her in touch with her community.

Residents of Sadr City illegally tap into a municipal power line to provide electricity to their makeshift shelters on April 30, 2011 in Baghdad, Iraq.





Forensic anthropologists reconstruct the remains of a body found in a mass grave currently being exhumed in Saklawyia, Anbar Province in morgue of the Medical Legal Institute on May 2, 2011 in Baghdad, Iraq. The ICRC has been supporting the centre, which uses forensic analysis to trace victims of war found in mass graves, unidentified soldiers, and the missing. Over 900 bodies have been recovered at the site, and exhumations are still continuing.

TOP LEFT: Iraqi army veteran 54-year-old Raad Mostafa Abd, who lost both his left arm and leg in 1982 during the Iran-Iraq war, receives treatment at an orthopedic center on April 17, 2011 in Basra, Iraq.



TOP RIGHT: Amputees practice walking with new prosthesis in an orthopedic center on April 20, 2011 in Basra, Iraq.



BOTTOM LEFT: Amputees practice walking with prosthetics at an ICRC orthopedic center on April 24, 2011 in Erbil, Iraq.



BOTTOM RIGHT: Ayat Ali Shaker, 5, who was born without a right arm, waits to be fitted with a prosthesis at an orthopedic center on April 20, 2011 in Basra, Iraq.





Kafya Sabah, 25, (blue shawl) with her family in their yard on April 23, 2011 in Kirkuk, Iraq. During a picnic near the Iranian border in 2001, Kafya stepped on a landmine and lost a leg. She went to an ICRC orthopedic centre in Erbil, where she was rehabilitated and also given MEI assistance.

Men guard an empty lot, slated to become a shopping center on April 24, 2011 in Erbil, Iraq.





Iraqi Kurds work on an ICRC funded land reclamation project on April 26, 2011 in Deralok, Iraq. They are employed to clear stones and debris from mountainsides so the land can be used for agriculture.

TOP LEFT: Women tend to their newborns at an ICRC supported primary health care center on April 27, 2011 in Makhmour, Iraq.



TOP RIGHT: Walid Khalid, 6, has is fractured arm tended to at an ICRC supported primary health care center on April 27, 2011 in Makhmour, Iraq.



BOTTOM LEFT: ICRC staff looks over the facilities as Samira Suleiman, 29, tends to her 7-month-old son, Adam, who has fallen sick in the ICRC supported primary health care center on April 27, 2011 in Makhmour, Iraq.



BOTTOM RIGHT: Women queue for consultations at an ICRC supported primary health care center on April 27, 2011 in Makhmour, Iraq.





Kowthar Ahmed, 40, Photoshops images on her computer as her niece looks on in their house on April 23, 2011 in Kirkuk, Iraq. When Kowthar lost her leg in a bombing by the American Air Force during the first Gulf War, her husband left her because he felt she couldn't perform her duties as a wife. The ICRC helped her rehabilitate in an orthopedic centre. They eventually helped her start her own business, by giving her a camera, computer, and a printer to photograph events and portraits around her community.

Iraqis take a boat down the Shat al-Arab on April 16, 2011 in Basra, Iraq.





Patients of Al Rashad psychiatric ward take part in daily activities on April 30, 2011 in Baghdad, Iraq. Al Rashad is the largest hospital in Iraq for the mentally ill.

TOP LEFT: Kazeem Sachet Zahi, 46, a worker at the Zubair Martyrs Center, stands in front of newly installed filing cabinets which keeps records of identified and unidentified casualties of war on April 17, 2011 in Basra, Iraq.



TOP RIGHT: Ahmed Abdul Redha, 33, a worker at the Zubair Martyrs Center, tends to graves of identified but unclaimed casualties of war on April 17, 2011 in Basra, Iraq.



BOTTOM LEFT: Corpses at a facility which houses the recovered bodies of soldiers who fought in the Iran-Iraq and Iraq-Kuwait war on April 17, 2011 in Basra, Iraq. Many bodies have yet to be identified, and many identified bodies have yet to be returned to their families.



BOTTOM RIGHT: A worker at the Zubair Martyrs Center, removes a coffin from storage in a facility which houses the recovered bodies of soldiers who fought in the Iran-Iraq and Iraq-Kuwait war on April 17, 2011 in Basra, Iraq. Many bodies have yet to be identified, and many identified bodies have yet to be returned to their families.





A view from the mountains on April 26, 2011 in Az Zibar, Iraq.

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