

Andreas Hejj

Liberation – American Style

Report of a journey through Iraq

Mustafa's silhouette stands out against the first rays of daybreak through the bullet-holed windscreen of the ancient Chevrolet. Our Iraqi driver is praying to Allah, to safely guide us through those thousand kilometres that separate us here in the luxury of Amman, the Jordanian capital, from the bombing sites of war-torn Baghdad. It is the 14th of July 2003 and although the latest war the Americans and the British had waged upon Iraq has been declared over by president Bush for 3 months, there is no Iraqi administration and no authorities to issue a visa.

Only a few months back things were very different. The Iraqi authorities would only grant permission to enter the country after making sure that the applicant was in possession of a recent negative aids-test and that he had committed no criminal offence, in order to protect Iraq from dangerous infections, drugs and criminals. Apparently the occupying forces have no interest in carrying on with these security measures.

An Iraqi physician is standing next to me in the queue at the Jordanian border. He glances at the PhD in my passport and asks, if I am a surgeon on my way to Iraq to help the civilian victims of the bombings, amounting – to his best knowledge - to a hundred thousand.

The question is really a good one: Why on earth do we, my wife Eva and myself, want to come of all places to Iraq, where the daily temperatures do not sink below 45 degrees centigrade and nobody can guarantee for our personal safety? Because we, as social scientists, intellectuals, indeed as citizens of a democracy cannot grasp how fast public opinion – after 10 million anti-war-demonstrators around the globe – is now ready to put up with the infinite suffering people in Iraq are exposed to today. We will not join in turning our eyes away, but have come to see for ourselves.

Turning our eyes away would hardly be possible here. On our way behind the border we are confronted with burnt-out tanks of the Iraqi defence all over the place (those of the Americans on the other hand are wrapped up as huge blue parcels and transported away immediately). Bridges bombed down force us to take roads difficult to drive. There are no two minutes of our travelling without passing heavily armoured American vehicles of war demonstrating their presence everywhere in the country at any time of day. There are extra wide jeeps in front of and behind the convoys, the soldiers are holding their machineguns at those who pass by them, ready to shoot.

In the psychological briefings for deployment in Iraq the instructors prepared the soldiers for their mission in an empire of „evil“. And indeed, they are not saluted as liberators and there are no flowers. Time and again they see their fellow soldiers shot by the Iraqi résistance. Day by day the GI are more aware that their frightening war machinery will not protect them as individuals. Day by day they are more frustrated and nervous. When in doubt they attempt to save themselves and pull the trigger. They are in an environment extremely strenuous for them both physically and socially: The eternal heat by itself aggravated by the bullet-proof uniforms and the desert dust will go on anyone's nerves, especially if he has no idea, how many months or even years he has to be on duty in the burning sun. But real stress results from never knowing who their enemy is, since they do not understand language and culturally based expressive behaviour of the locals. In order to camouflage their disappointment and their fear in this hostile environment, they behave in an exaggeratedly assertive manner bordering on arrogance, at times even brutality.

The expectation – resulting from their pre-combat training – soldiers were coming to the empire of evil, now determines interaction between the groups. The phenomenon leading to such a culmination of conflict is known to social psychologists as a self fulfilling prophecy.

But Iraqis face a very similar challenge too. Their disliked dictator told them all the time, it was the Americans, who were evil. The encounter with the Americans through their bombings in and ever since the first Iraq war was good evidence for this. Nevertheless, some Iraqis did trust the liberating troops. But the arrogance and brutality they have to endure from these very troops is of little help to get to like the occupying aliens. The Allies have delivered the indirect proof, that Saddam was not too far beside the point. Besides disillusioning in many cases exaggerated expectations in the liberators, patterns of behaviour are activated, that anchor deeply in the genetic program of all social animals: To defend one's territory against alien intruders even if this means having to sacrifice the life of the individual defender.

Thus it was both the American *and* the Iraqi president, whose prophesy led to both occupants and locals see the cause of their conflict resulting in mutual daily murder in the *other*. Are Bush and Saddam both *false* prophets?

Our driver stops at one of the innumerable checkpoints: 4 US-tanks with heavy machineguns block our way. The member of the occupying army checks our documents in an overconfident manner and asks, what the camera in my lap is for. It is beyond the reach of his world of thought that we are in the 8000 year old cradle of human civilisation, some of whose pearls the traveller might like to capture.

He graciously allows us to proceed.

In Babylon we are not quite as lucky. When we arrive there at 9 o'clock in the morning the entire historical city is blocked off by barbed wire. Even though we travel in a car of the Iraqi Board of Tourism and our documents are complete, the GI will not even let us in sight of the site. Responding to my polite request to see the officer in command, Corporal Birelle assures us to be granted permission to enter at „twelve hundred“ (midday). After three hours of waiting in the burning heat I ask again. The new officer of the guard knows nothing of our appointment, he is reluctant in requesting information from his seniors concerning us, but then tells us, we would have to wait longer. After 1 p.m. I gather my courage and walk to the barbed wire again. I am told the US-Army is on Kuwaiti time and we will soon be met. Had the corporal informed us, that „twelve hundred“ was in reality 1 p.m., we could have gone back to Baghdad in the meantime. But even the excuse with Kuwaiti time turns out not to be true. After 5 hours of waiting in front of the fence, I ask to speak to Corporal Birelle in person one more time. After some time he appears. Now he does not “remember” having assured us to be admitted to see the destination of our journey, Babylon. He explains, under Saddam the Iraqi were never able to visit the archaeological sites, anyway.

Next to me I have my Iraqi translator, Dr. Namat, a company manager, whose company was destroyed by the latest allied bombs. Since then he is unemployed. Namat informs us, he visited these sites in Saddam's days both with his family and foreign visitors whenever he liked, without any appointments or limitations.

As the corporal notices he has been proved untrue, he lifts his rifle.

I ask him whether his weapon is his only reason why we should not see Babylon.

Now he is at the verge of losing control. He yells at me, claiming I have insulted him and all marines in general and lets me know, the he will now indeed take me to Babylon, however as his prisoner, handcuffed. I bow to his forceful logic, it is the first time I'm glad about the barbed wire between us and the Americans and together with Namat we run for it.

After this shock we stop at a restaurant for a delicious *tschai*, as the strong local tea is called.

Suddenly we hear loud commands of the occupying forces. This time, they are not after us. They are conducting a vehicle control in front of the restaurant. The driver, a young and thin Iraqi, has to lay down with his face flat in the dirt while four US-soldiers, who probably think he is the personification of evil, press a machinegun each at the back of his head. He is unarmed. Our driver,

Abu Chamar, tells us, the Americans have taken away all his money, 500 USD at a similar vehicle control. I ask him why he and all the others who suffered this fate in post-war Iraq would not complain to the American authorities. His answer is, he has to feed his family and could not afford to be imprisoned.

How should the Iraqi trust the Americans, if they do not even dare speak with them? A new staging of the confusion of communication of Babel?

A Baghdad Businesswoman, Miss Huda explains to me, after one of these vehicle controls she could not find her vehicle altogether. She was so horrified by this abusive "loss" of her BMW, she indeed complained to the US High Command. She was told to report the loss to her insurance company. Unfortunately *Desert Storm* 1991 blew away all insurance companies in Iraq. And here I quote Miss Huda literally: „Under Saddam we were a hundred times more free“.

But it is not just entire cars that pose considerable danger. A Baghdad car mechanic was carrying a spare part, a dynamo over his shoulder across the courtyard of his workshop. He died of the bullets of the US-Patrol driving past, who took the dynamo for a bomb and opened fire. Although deadly good shots of this camp have no legal prosecution to fear, their license to kill does not protect them from payback of the families concerned.

Aki, a Japanese businessman I met in the hotel, was a bit more lucky than the car mechanic. All the US-soldiers took away from him was his video equipment. The reason they gave, was, that he was filming a Baghdad street with American soldiers. Would the Americans really stand up to their mission, they would have no problem letting the entire world see.

I have long been looking forward to visiting the Iraqi Museum. Nobody knows in Baghdad, whether my visit will be possible.

The premises are closed to public. As the guards here are Iraqi police officers, it is not difficult to convince them to let a Munich professor see the director. Indeed the director is glad to see me, hoping for my help in getting his staff post graduate scholarships at our university. He tells me that the robbers of the ten thousand objects had extremely professional counsellors both in the selection and the packaging of the cargo. (Three thousand of these objects of lesser value have emerged since). The „pay“ for those, who captured this immense treasure of cultural history was, that they could keep all the computers, cameras and the entire furnishings for themselves. It is reported, some "robbers" had to be "motivated" to their deeds by machineguns pointed at them. How fortunate for Aki, that he was not around to film these scenes!

The following afternoon we stop at a luxury juice-bar in downtown Baghdad. Luxury means they have their own generator and can thus cool their fresh to be squeezed apples not just during the official power supply of two hours a day. Prices are accordingly expensive, some 2 Dollars for 0,3 litre juice, in a country, where a lecturer earns 150 Dollars. Two friendly well dressed gents say hello to us. It turns out, the older one is professor at Baghdad University, the younger one his assistant. They are both architects. This colleague tells us, some 2000 university employees in Iraq have been sacked by the occupants, who have found them not to be politically "responsible". So far his institute has not been effected but it is striking, how lady students are now missing in his lectures. Due to frequent rapes since the occupation, lady students dare only come to lectures if two of their male relatives have enough time to give them escort to campus.

Well indeed, soldiers are healthy young men in full possession of their manhood. It is unnatural for them to be far away from their lady friends; in this Muslim society, from ladies in general. If their leadership expects them to lead a life of self-restraint, that is tough. But the damage they cause by violently breaking this abstinence is immeasurable and not just for the individual Iraqi ladies abused. All Iraqi men consider themselves challenged to defend the honour of their ladies, – from

the perspective of behavioural science, the most highly valued resource of their reproduction – no matter what it takes. They even feel it is their duty to defend their ladies' chastity *beforehand*, a fact that will do little to raise the feeling of security of the occupying soldiers.

I ask the professor for a comparison of times during and since Saddam. Similar to the dozens of interview partners from simple nut-vendors, steam bath and hotel staff, students and business people, this learned man, whom the American examiners have given clearance of having collaborated with Sadam's Socialist Bath Party, gives me the same description: All Iraqi had free education (including at universities). Free medical and dental care was a basic citizens' right. Anyone could possess as many houses, cars, companies and hotels, as they wished. Anyone could have telephones, radios and TV. However there was no mobile phone or satellite television. One was fully free to travel around within Iraq and was – even in the remotest areas – completely secure. Anyone could travel abroad, however an exit tax had to be paid to the government. Yet critique against the president was not tolerable. And many Iraqi were upset about the cult practiced around the president. Still the Iraqi are surprised, how fast US-troops destroyed all statues and pictures of Saddam, since he was part of Iraq's history. This professor reminded of the fact, that statues of Stalin are found everywhere in Georgia, although that dictator has been dead for more than half a century.

He sadly compared conditions three months after the first US led war against Iraq with the present ones: Just like today, at that time the allied bombings destroyed all "objects of strategic importance", all centres of telecommunication, administration, ministries, railway stations and the entire power supply. Saddam, who had been beaten and whose hands were further tied by the embargo and the uprising of the Kurds, was able to re-establish public security, power and water supply, telecommunication and transport within three months. In the same amount of time the victorious US-Troops have accomplished non of that, despite of the fact that they have all resources of the world's richest state at their disposal.

At 4 o'clock the following morning horrible hammering awakes us in our hotel room. Since all good hotels are occupied by the US-army, we were quite lucky to find a room in a private hotel. This is hotel Petra, where UN-diplomats also live. Angrily I go downstairs to stop the disturbing noise. The manager apologises but he says there is nothing he can do, he himself is horrified, but the UN people ordered him to wall the beautiful glass doors of his terrace and all windows on the ground floor. I ask him, whether the UN-Diplomats, who obviously prefer to operate in the dark, are paying for his construction expenses, but his answer is a sad no.

Of course there is an another side to this coin as well. Regardless of how well UN-diplomats are paid, they would not like to end with a bullet of the Iraqi resistance. Unfortunately their distrust is not quite unjustified. But both behavioural research and history teach us that distrust and armour is not the way to long-lasting stability. The diplomats know this, of course. Yet their archaic pattern of behaviour concerning their personal safety is stronger than what they might have learnt in their training.

Getting up at this premature hour lets us take an early start for Mossul. On our way we stop at the grave of St. Behnam, where we have the opportunity for a lengthy discussion with the Prior, Monsignore Franzis Djahola. After what we know from other socialist single party dictatorships, the Monsignore surprises us with his evidence that neither he nor the Christian minority in Iraq have ever experienced any limitations or problems during the era Saddam. This is exactly what we learn from the Greek-catholic side from P. Behnam in the Monastery of St. Matthew and from the catholic padre Aiman in Barrila. This last one fears that the Americans will try and pass themselves off to the Muslim majority as allies of the Christians thus discrediting them in their own country. I ask the padre for his evaluation of Iraqi resistance. He explains, individual resistance fighters, who want to protect their country with the most primitive weapons against the American Goliath are only wasting their lives. He cannot approve of their actions. Resistance must be organised right

through the entire society of Iraq. Then they can prove the contradiction immanent to politically correct language to the whole world: If Goliath attacks David with the most modern weapons, that is *koscher*, if, however, David is ready to defend himself, we have a case of „terrorism“.

I am impressed at the impact the behavioural program of territorial protection is coming through, even in this man of the robe with deep philosophical roots.

We would like to have lunch in a Mossul restaurant. There are three heavily armed American tanks on guard in front of it. The reason: Some of their fellow soldiers felt like kebab and stopped by, not without leaning their machineguns on the tables.

One of the waiters notices we are not delighted by the sight of these tools of murder at the lunch table and tells us that in the first weeks of occupation the Iraqi made the US soldiers believe that in Iraq cigarettes would cost a hundred USD for a crate.

In the afternoon we visit the tomb of prophet Jonas. Mohammed, a student of medicine in his third year, opts to be our guide. He is the only interview partner who actually refers to the Americans as *liberators*. I ask him, what liberty means to him. He brings me to the old part of Mossul to a cinema where they are now free to show pornography.

On our last morning in Mossul a set of nearby explosions awake us. Later we find out, it was the so called „liquidation“ of the sons of the Iraqi president, also killing his 14j year old grandson. Intoxicated with victory, senior administrator Mr. Bremer proclaims, they would soon “hunt down“ Saddam too. Many Iraqi ask themselves like Dr. Namat, if this is the program and the language of the heralds of human rights.

On our way back to Baghdad we stop in the well preserved capital of the Parther, Hatra. Luckily, the captain of the US-troops there has pleasant memories of our city, especially of *Hofbräuhaus* and Munich beer. His cheerfully flowing fantasies in the dry desert grant the Munich couple the privilege to move around freely. A great Bavarian politician once said, beer belonged to the politics of understanding.

In Hatra we are eye and ear witnesses of a loud reprimand of an Iraqi police officer by a young US-soldier. He doesn't give a damn to our presence. The Iraqi police officer would like to guard the ruins from the shade, where the American himself is sitting. The GI orders him to stand in the sun. His actual words are: „We are here to fucking supervise you fucking bastards. Move your fucking ass!“ This translates to – we are here to rule and you to obey. Dr. Namat says, if an Iraqi talked to his brother with such contempt, this brother would have to kill him. What a field of action for trainers of communication!

Before we part, I would like to visit the grave of the unknown soldier in Baghdad. Dr. Namat is quite scared, saying this is utterly impossible, the memorial is in the off-limits security zone US military area. Not quite inexperienced with this institution, I walk up to the guard and request in a stern voice to be escorted to the most senior officer immediately. I explain to sergeant Moss, that I am here to pay my respect to those who lost their lives in combat on both sides. My direct style must be to his liking because he says to the guard: „He is good!“ This means that I am admitted to the security zone together with my wife and my Iraqi translator, indeed they let us drive to the memorial. The security zone is right in the middle of Baghdad and it measures a circle of more than one kilometre around the former presidial palace, where Mr. Bremer now resides. Dr. Namat can hardly believe his eyes: After a very reasonable security check we are actually allowed to drive up to the monument and may move around free in the security zone with no escort. For all we know, there was no Non-American here since the fall of Baghdad.

Originally Saddam built this modern megaloman monument for those who left their lives in the Iran-Iraq war.

The graffiti we found on this grave describes best how a member of the US-Army sees his mission and it is typical of the mood among the Americans.

We came to kill;
time to go NOW.
Somebody needs to clean up the bodies
before they cook out here!

Maybe somebody, in the shape of professional communicators and mediators should help clean up not just the *bodies*, but also the psychological and spiritual identities of those concerned, before further masses of bodies of both parties will cook out here.

