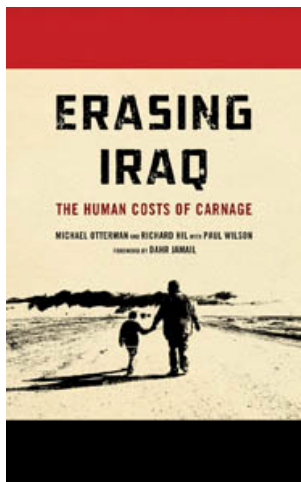


Erasing Iraq – the human costs of carnage, Michael Otterman and Richard Hil with Paul Wilson,  
Foreword by Dahr Jamail, Pluto Press, London-New York 2010, 248 p., 20 \$.



Nobody seems to talk anymore about the human sufferings and the costs of the US-led invasion of Iraq. Under President Barack Obama the US is still unwilling to end the illegal occupation of this country and take the partners of the “coalition of the willing” and live the country. All the talk about a prospective “withdrawal” from Iraq seems mere rhetoric. Large military facilities are popping up like mushrooms all over the place, and in Baghdad they are building an embassy of the size of Vatican City. Modern history tells us that when the US takes over a country it will stay until it is thrown out like was the case in Vietnam or Iran. The long-term prospects of remaining an occupier in Iraq or Afghanistan are rather dim, taking the history of resistance against foreign occupation in both countries into account.

It takes three Australians, a freelance journalist and two scholars, to ask questions about the costs of carnage not only of the US attack on Iraq in 2003 but also of the deadly sanctions period that started days after Saddam Hussein’s invasion into Kuwait in 1990 and remained in place for more than 11 years after the restoration of Kuwait’s sovereignty in February 1991. The authors present a terrifying picture of this devastated country, whose population has paid a heavy price in blood and impoverishment. The authors visited Syria, Jordan, and Sweden, where the largest community of Iraqis live in exile, and talked to the refugees. They also analyze the writings on Iraqi blogs.

For almost two decades the US and its “willing executioners”, especially the United Kingdom, have persecuted war and aggression in Iraq. They turned a county that was once the most secular of Arab countries, in which nation resources were used to increase literacy, industrialization and women emancipation, that it was a major center of Arab learning – students from all over the Arab world went to study in Baghdad, into a living hell. In earlier times, the colonialist carried with them missionaries who converted the pagans into Christians. Today, the neo-colonialists not only invade a country with their superior military forces, but bring along tens of thousands of mercenaries, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), colonial feminists, and US-evangelical fundamentalists. They intent to take care of those human beings who survived the military assault. What Frantz Fanon writes in “The Wretched of the Earth” that “colonialism shamelessly pulls every string ” paradigmatically holds true for Iraq and Afghanistan.

The authors point out that Saddam Hussein was a creation of the US - “a regional strongman charged with checking Soviet and Iranian influence in the Middle East”. The earliest contacts between the US and Saddam

stretch back to the Cold War era. In 1959, Saddam was part of a six-men team recruited by the CIA to assassinate Prime minister Abd al Karim Qasim. Since then, the US administration maintained close relations with Saddam, especially after he became Iraq's president in 1979. During the war between Iraq and Iran, the US government supplied Saddam not only with conventional, but also with chemical and biological, weapons. Ronald Reagan's special envoy Donald Rumsfeld paid a visit to the autocrat and "conveyed (to him) the President's greetings and expressed his pleasure at being in Baghdad". Saddam returned these niceties by using US helicopters to gas the Kurds in Halabsha and to fight the Iranians with these poisonous weapons. Admittedly, the US condemned Iraq's use of weapons of mass destruction (MWD), but conditioned it by saying that there were "indications" that Iran had used chemical weapons too, which could never be proven.

Saddam fell into US disgrace when he attacked Kuwait in August 1990. Two weeks before this happened, he summoned US ambassador April Glaspie to his palace where she commented on the build-up of Iraqi troops at the Kuwaiti border as follows: "We have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait." US administration officials later disputed this statement. In contrast to Bush junior, his father obtained the approval of the UN-Security Council to restore Kuwait's sovereignty by force. The US used massive firepower, including depleted uranium (DU) ammunition. The radioactive fallout caused not only a high death-rate of cancer and fatal deformities, but affected also thousands of US soldiers. "Even cockroaches were seemingly affected by DU", write the authors.

Special attention by the authors are paid to the sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council in August 1990, which lasted until the attack in March 2003. During this period it is estimated that more than one million Iraqis died, half of them children. Asked on national TV what she thought about the death of half a million children in Iraq due to sanctions, Madeleine Albright, then US Secretary of State, answered: "we think the price is worth it". During the sanctions period Iraq was reduced to the status of a poor third world country. The US and the United Kingdom established, without UN mandate, two no-fly zones, one in the north, in the Kurdish areas, and one in the predominantly Shiite south, where only they could fly. From these areas, US and UK aircraft regularly bombed Iraq. As the humanitarian situation in Iraq deteriorated further and further, the UN established in 1996 a program called "Oil for Food", under which Iraq was permitted to sell oil and import humanitarian goods for the proceeds. The first humanitarian coordinator, Denis J. Halliday, resigned in 1998 because his conscience did not allow him to participate in this humanitarian charade. After leaving for ethical reasons his career as a high UN official, he began a tournée of lectures in which he described the sanctions as a form of genocide. His successor, Hans van Sponeck, also quit in protest because the program could not satisfy basic human needs. This did not prevent President Bill Clinton from declaring in 1997: "Sanctions will be there until the end of time or as long as he (Saddam) lasts." Since 1998, through the "Iraq Liberation Act" the removal of Saddam from power became official US policy.

Although some of the interviewed by the authors state that life under Saddam was bad and his regime was brutal and people had to suffer out of political opposition to the regime, they describe the period from 1991 to 2003 and beyond as horrific. In the aftermath of the attack in 2003, Iraq descended in every respect into chaos. Michael Otterman, freelance journalist, maintains that comparing the Saddam regime with the current situation is akin to comparing apples with oranges. He met numerous Iraqis who supported the ousting of Saddam, but he did not meet any Iraqi who supported this prolonged occupation. Until the mid 1990s, Iraq was a very secular society. Religious persecution was unknown. Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz was a Christian. The government included Kurds. But after 2003 the society split along ethnic and religious lines, a divide to which many of the killings are attributed. The human costs of this carnage were "tremendous", so were the cultural ones. The US occupation forces guarded the Interior and the Oil ministries, but did not care about the massive lootings of all museums and the tens of thousands cultural sites. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's only remarks were: "stuff happens".

The US assault caused the death of more than one million Iraqis; 2,2 million refugees, mainly in Syria and Jordan, 4 million internally displaced people, and the social infrastructure totally destroyed. The authors call this "sociocide", using the term coined by Keith Doubt in his book "Understanding Evil: Lessons from Bosnia". It means that the basic elements of Iraqi society were destroyed, including "solidarity, identity, family, social institutions, self-consciousness". Instead "distrust and bad faith become the dominant orientations of human beings living together". But amidst this societal and moral devastations the authors found a positive outlook, especially on the blogger-scene: "Iraqis now endure precarious peace punctuated by assassinations and suicide attacks and a fragile democracy still split along ethnic and sectarian lines. But sociocide did not run its course. Despite a coordinated attack on Iraqi people and institutions, vibrant social strands remain intact. Iraqis like Youkhanna, Eskander, Riverband and Sunshine – plus the countless others that have worked to restore Iraq and document its destruction – reveal an ethos of resilience amid carnage. Against all odds, Iraqi identity has not been destroyed."

For the main perpetrator, the US government and its "willing executioners", the authors see only one passive role involving "payment of reconstruction, resettlement and reparations" to the Iraqi people, that could well into run into trillions of dollars. One aspect is highlighted by the authors: They mention repeatedly that the US does not engage into body count of the enemy. This held true for the first US war against Iraq (1991), as well as for the latest attack. This was also true in Vietnam, where the US military accounted for every bomb they dropped and every screw they have used, but did not care how many Vietnamese died. Only after Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts intervened massively, the US government started counting civilian casualties in Vietnam. The occupation forces of Afghanistan do not hold either a body-count of dead Afghans. The late

Harold Pinter said in his Nobel speech in 2005: "Their (Iraqi) deaths don't exist. They are blank. They are not even recorded as being dead."

This reviewed book is the first that gives the victims of occupation a voice and documents the war crimes, the crimes against humanity and other atrocities, which have been perpetrated upon the Iraqi people by the Western quest for hegemony and domination. In the presence of this disaster the book leave the reader with two justified conclusions: Immediate withdrawal and massive financial compensations. For these war crimes, the perpetrators have to be brought to the International Court of Justice.

Ludwig Watzal