

# Iraq Diary ( Nov.-Dec. 2003 )

by Kouross Esmaeli

## 1. Second Day in Baghdad

We pulled in the airport yesterday right after the Red Cross Building was hit and by the time we drove into our hotel, 4 more police stations.

We got to the CBS bureau where we are staying and were greeted by armed guards, road blocks and folks checking the trunk and the bags and mirrors on the ground to check to see what's underneath.

The CBS folk were walking on egg shells and looking at us like "you've come here with MTV? how cute..." We started thinking that it's not our place and we might just do the shorter news show and leave. It was tense. The worst day in Baghdad since the end of the war.

Today we got up and went to the home of a couple who are here as a part of American Friends' Services Committee (the Quakers) who had set up some interviews for us. Two very nice American couple living in a typical Iraqi middle class house. They took us to the Baghdad College of Arts, a very impressive art gallery and then to the Baghdad Independent Media Center where we interviewed 11 people over all.

The friendliness, the welcoming (especially to me as an Iranian) were incredible, but even more so was the normalcy and the basic belief in living that everybody carries around with them.

In one way, life is hard. Traffic is crazy, there's joblessness, lawlessness and put those together and you get crime. Lots of it.. burglaries, rapes, murders, and add suicide killings and it seems like doom. Iraq has never had it like this, especially suicide bombings which are as alien to them as they are (or were) in New York. There are constant blackouts and for long stretches on time. Apparently the last day that the electricity did NOT go out was a month ago: the day that Bremer (the American viceroy) announced that the electricity was at pre-war conditions. Ever since that day it's getting worse! And Iraqis look at the trucks and planes and helicopters and the satellites and the TV and say... All THAT and America can't fix THIS?

The apartment buildings and the modernist architecture remind me of Tehran, with a little bit more of a Babylonian/Ancient Iraqi touches. More angular and thin long pillars. There is beautiful sculptures and art work throughout the city, all covered with dust and smoke and rubble. People are in a bit of a rush, but other than that, it doesn't seem crazy. And the traffic lights don't work, so the driving is hectic.

SO I think we are staying till we finish both projects and are probably moving out of the

CBS bureau into a normal house where we will blend in. The media at the moment is barricading itself in and wondering why it's so dangerous for them!

The CBS bureau is really wanting us to use their security force ("Pilgrims" is the name of the company, hence their names. As in "Excuse me sir, are you a Pilgrim?" or "Hey Pilgrim") and they are all ex-British military folk: big burly Anglo-Saxons with quiet British smiles and an honestly-good sense of "we know how to handle these situations better than the confused Americans." They're great to flirt with, but I wouldn't want to walk down the street with them. And I will not have them protecting me, it's like walking down the street and putting a target on your back and a gun in your hand, while you could just walk down the street and be safer.

The producer guy is dark and chubby and he fits right in too. People presume he is Iraqi and don't quite know what I am until I start talking to them. So we'll do without the Pilgrims... and just go at it normally. We have a driver and translator and that's enough. I am not sure if any of this makes sense, but then, the mood here is nothing like what you see on TV. The two Americans who we met today were very comfortable and the Iraqis were nothing but reassuring and accommodating. People ARE scared: there's many more ways of dying here than anywhere else, but most people want to live and want to let you live and that's the sentiment that you have to go with.

## 2. Karbala

The Shrines of Imams Hussein and his brother Abul Fazl in Karbala are sights to see -- Gulf Arabs driving Mercedes mixed in with middle class Iranian kids with clean clothes and well-defined faded beards and coifs intermingling with the poorest section of Iraqi society. It is in these times of lawlessness that the poor become players in any political sense. And the Shiite holy sites are becoming the arena where that is clearly happening. There is something about the area that transcends sectarianism, the same way that shrines in Cairo and Tehran always seemed something other than "Shiite" "or Sunni" or even "Muslim." It is not only true to say that the Shiites of Iraq have historically been oppressed, it is that the most disenfranchised Iraqis have turned to the Shrines of the martyrs and in the process have become 'Shiite' probably without really making a conscious sectarian choice. Ideology is not what most of these people are here for. But, for the time being, the economic misery and the political vacuum in the country has allowed them to rush into the streets and they are here for the taking.

The actual tombs of both martyrs is filled waist high with money: Iraqi Dinar and Iranian Rial notes is what I could make out. Pictures of Saddam and Khomeini filling the coffers side to side. and I was told that the sanctuary is emptied out and re-filled daily. The humongous domes and their minarets, are lined with bright shining gold. The doors opening to the sanctuary are large portals covered with intricate gold as well. It is magnificent in its gaudiness. A magnificence that interferes with my middle class sense

of decorum and the sublime (E., is that the correct use of the word?). Inside is not a quiet sanctuary for personal prayer, nor is there any ritualized procession that smacks of an institution with deep historical roots. It is merely filled with the noise of women and men crying, wailing, asking for intercession from the Saints, asking to be forgiven for a mistake or to be given a chance at a better life. At one side of the tomb, people pray towards the qibla with the tomb physically in between them and the holy site of Mecca. On the other sides, people mill about, sit, talk, rest, pray and wonder. The only people looking up at the intricate mirrors on the ceiling and the chandeliers hanging between them are tourists and out of place journalists. But there really isn't a sense of insider or outsider, people are there for their own reasons and no one bothers to question anybody else's. If you squint, you feel like you are in a room covered with aluminum foil.

If there is any single human element peculiar to the tombs it is the rhythm of the sounds. There are professional wailers who recount the story of the martyrdoms in incomprehensible Persian and Arabic. It is not the words that matter at this point, everyone knows the story, it is the rhythm. A rhythm, kept by the wailers' words and the smacking of hands landing on chests in self-flagellation. This rhythm has a sense of history. It has been developed to make you cry. If there is any single human activity that Shii Islam has excelled at regulating, it is the flow of tears. The rhythm that I always thought was clearly Iranian made just as much sense with Arabic words. Eyes swell when you hear it, or you are left with the uncomfortable struggle to hold them back.

Outside the sanctuary, within the big walls of the compound, a melee. Loud voices in Persian and Arabic. And a quick swarm of people. Two Iranian boys are sprawled out from exhaustion on the cool marble grounds of the courtyard. They have been slapping their faces so hard that they had drawn blood. The Iraqis see this as a provocation and want them to leave. Blood had fallen on the grounds of the sanctuary and that was enough reason to force them out. "Maa meekhaheehm enqadr bezaneem ta khoon biyad (But we want to flagellate until we bleed)." They are uptown Tehrani kids: nice haircuts, Turkish jeans and t-shirts, beautiful well-fed faces that show sign of great care -- bleeding at the temples. Their friends are standing around them fighting for their right to continue. "Well, go outside and do it" was the response. They were taken to wash their faces and finally dispersed promising to stop and we didn't hear anymore of them.

In my eyes they were desperate kids having come to this place to exorcise a crisis between them or amongst them. In the eyes of the Iraqis, they were provocateurs sent by the Iranian government. Iran is a major player here and the paranoia about the Iranians runs almost as high as the one towards the Americans.

Muqtada al-Sadr is thought to be an Iranian agent. At the same time he is thought to be an American agent. In any case, he is currently the biggest trouble-maker in Iraq and arguments and conspiracies are plentiful about him. It is the poor Iraqis and their appearance in the Iraqi politics that he represents. His father who was one of the highest authorities in Shiite Islam, a Marja, was killed in 1999, probably by Saddam. In his will, he chose Ayatollah Haeri, an Iranian, as his successor. Haeri is also a Marja, one of a half-dozen or so Marjas who are the highest living authorities in Shiite Islam at any

single moment. The position is so shaky and undefined that no lay person who I asked could tell me exactly how many Marjas are currently in existence; there are four in Iraq and a number in other Shiite centers. There is no one above them religiously and Shiites make a personal choice who to follow. That's how Marja's gain and keep their position: by winning adherents to their teachings. Their authority and teachings die with them, and Muqtada showed his lack of respect for orthodoxy when he declared that his father's teachings are still in effect even after his death. Individually they speak to millions of people, and they control the holy sites of Iraq, the golden domes, the piles of money, and the cities of Karbala and Najaf. Najaf is an hour drive away, it houses the tomb of Imam Ali, and is where the highest educational centers of Shia Islam are located. They are called Hawzas and they are fully controlled by the Marjas.

Another half hour drive from Najaf, in Kufa, is where Muqtada is nudging his way to political power amongst the Shiite establishment. He made an attempt to make trouble in Najaf, but that city is pretty much in the hands of the Marja and Hawza authorities. At the end of the day, it is back in Karbala that this battle is being fought, and it is the poor of the city who are gaining importance in that fight.

Karbala is also where the Americans have revealed their competence in nation-building. Last week, the Iraq Governing Council, the highest representative body of the Iraqi people handpicked by the Bush administration, made an important decision about Karbala. The Municipal Council of Karbala which was traditionally made up of 17 members will now be raised to 40 allowing for a wider representation of Karbala's fractious body politic. It could be seen as a nod to Moqtada and others like him who are trying to make some room for themselves. The four Iraqi Marja's, in response, refused to accept the legitimacy of the Municipal Council and have refused to send representatives to it, placing themselves, in effect against the wishes of the new Iraqi government. They are independent enough to do so, and they add to the uncontrollable fractures that is America's Iraq.

The most noticeable thing about the Shia centers is the lack of Western armies. I saw a tank with two American soldiers in front of the Karbala Police station and a handful of Polish troops inside, and they were busy in one of the bureaucracies of the station looking out of place and neurotically busy. When we went in to interview the Chief of Police, he was finishing his meeting with the head of the Polish troops stationed outside the city. Otherwise, it was the local police that was in charge, as much as any single legal institution could be in charge. I am not clear whether we hit the station at the right time or if the presence of the journalist and the camera produced an event that might not have been otherwise: after the interviews inside the station, we sat in the smacking new police pickups -- the kind with four-passenger seating and enough room in the back to pile a good number of nervous police officers. The police Captain wanted to show us their activities in Karbala. We drove to the area called Bayn al-Haramain -- this is the plaza between the two sanctuaries of Hussain and Abulfazl and it is also where the informal economy has taken a turn for the absurd (poor people selling plastic-ware to other poor people). We pulled in right when a fresh fight was starting. The police were trying to clean up the area, clear it of some of the congestion, grime and crime; and they were

outnumbered. Arguments broke out and it got heated with the arrival of the police officer -- and the camera. The Captain rushed us back in his car and told his officers to carry on while he drove us around and gave us a tour of the mess that he had to deal with. Less than ten minutes later his officers surrounded the car and told him that they are unable to do anything: "they accuse us of being Baathist." That was the end of that, the junior officers basically refused to carry on. The chaos continued, and the police had to learn to live with it. Back at the station, we took some group pictures with the Captain and his men, and went our way.

The peddlers we interviewed just wanted a place to do their business. A couple of them mentioned the name of Muqtada al-Sadr, but I am not clear if any of them said that they had actually been helped by him, had been promised help by him, or had just heard his name more than anybody else's. Zaid Fahmy, the journalist from the newspaper "Iraq Today" who I went there with, put it best when he said "Muqtada is pushing around the small people like chess pieces and the small pieces in turn push him forward."

On the way back to Baghdad was less than eventful. Except for the Iraqi Police road blocks. On our way to the Holy Cities on Monday, their blue and white barrels used to stop traffic had only "IP" written on them. By Thursday morning, there was "al-Shurtah al-Iraqiyyah" in Arabic quickly and sloppily stenciled underneath.

Americans are slowly learning how to run another people's country.

### 3. The Tyrant is Captured

"My first reaction, when I first heard the news of Saddam's capture, was an overwhelming joy.... But when I saw Saddam on television and the condition he was in, his beard and the crazy look on his face, I felt pain and sadness. And not for Saddam, but for myself; for this people who suffered and endured, for those who lived the pain of fear moments before being executed, for the women who suffered the loneliness of a bed emptied of the men who had been forced into the military, and for the children who went hungry and who never felt the joy of seeing their father walk in with a toy in his hand. All these scenes passed in my mind like a film ... as if all these years have passed in vain, all in the hands of a mere cockroach or a rat whose only success was to instill this fear in people for such a long time."

*Letter to a friend*

*Khaled Ali*

*Iraqi Actors Union*

*Current employee: CBS News, Baghdad Bureau*

Iraq is not a happy place right now. The gunfire celebrations have died down completely. And it's only 10:00 pm. What has sunk in for people, and even those who went into the

streets and celebrated for the cameras, is a feeling of shame. “Ihtiqaar” is what one person called it. Shame of humiliation. He didn’t even try to defend himself, he didn’t even have the courage to not be captured.

Alongside discussions about how he should be tried, punished and/or killed, there is a realization that this man who so controlled people’s lives for so many years, was nothing but a scared, crazed individual who, once left on his own, couldn’t even turn a gun on himself.

Tonight I found myself asking people why they feel responsible for a man that the world produced. But only half-believing the question myself. And then falling silent at their answer for I have nothing else to say.

The hardest thing to hear in Iraq, up to today, was that only Saddam could run this country. This was usually said in moments of great frustration during a traffic jam, gas line, a heated argument.... But everybody seems to have felt this at some point, and expressed it when pushed to it. And I would just cringe and see it as a product of a disturbed moment.

The hardest thing to hear now is that nothing has changed. That whatever caused a Saddam Hossein is still there and it’s a matter of time before it resurfaces. This feeling is here and it will not go away that easily. And I am sorry to be reporting it.

There is a catharsis in his capture. A purification and an ending of sorts. Even I, who have at best a largely obscure connection to this place, felt it. In short, anger turned into great sadness today. To those people who I’ve talked to in the past few days, you have heard me sound a bit crazed. I have been feeling the great social divisions in this country and it has been a descent into mental hell. It’s easy to say that Saddam is responsible for it, he is. But what’s harder to see is that people have internalized it.

Memory is an incredible thing. Especially those memories that take a hold of you and remind you that you are nothing but a mass of bones, flesh, nerves and electronic mental processes cruising through time. You can go through your days feeling like you don’t have to be the same person from one moment to the next. Some version of “living in the moment.” It’s a euphoric way of being and I realize why so many people talk about it and make it their goal. Until you hit against those memories that make you realize that it’s actually a choice to forget. The kind of memory that makes you understand that your current condition is nothing but a re-experience of events that boil up and tumble down in random, for no other reason than the fact that they are in you and in no one else, that you experience them unlike anyone else, and that no one else is going through this moment twice the way you are.

To those of you who grew up in Iran, do you remember when you first heard that there are these people who are Sunni? Say it to yourself the way you first heard it. Sonnee. As in: “Mes-e Sonnee-a meemooneh” (“he’s like a Sunni”): he is cruel, unjust and irrational. Here in Iraq, I physically remembered the revulsion this word produced in me

the first time I understood it as a young boy in Iran. You need not be from a religious family to feel it: anyone can see that whoever supports spilling the blood of innocent Hossein must suffer from a great moral depravity. I remember not understanding how anyone could be a Sonnee when the Sonnees stand for injustice. The place associated with this understanding is my third grade class room. That's where I probably first read about them in religion class. But the person I associate with it is my Grandmother who rarely, but definitely, went through the motions of commemorating and weeping for the Saints. Between these two, I must have heard about the Sonnee-s and was petrified at the world that harbors them.

The world that harbors them is Iraq. This is where that innocent blood was spilled many years ago and it's where the sects that support both sides of that tragedy continue to live side-by-side. The rest of the Muslim world is Sunni. But the Sunnis in Iraq are the real deal. Whereas other Sunnis are just plain Muslims and have little understanding of the Shiis and the history that produced them, the Sunnis in Iraq have to constantly identify themselves against the Shrines, the pictures, the flags, the slogans and the Shiis whose existence is the living remembrance of the tragedy. Much like the way the Christians live the memory of Jesus's martyrdom.

I cannot explain why I have been feeling this insignificant and childish memory, but I have been angry at the Sunnis and the way they treat the Shiis and feeling like the cruel irrational injustice that persists is more than just a product of Saddam's maniacal regime. I have been cursing Sonnee-s for a while now. Been living what my body remembered for only the second time in my life. A descent into a mind frame that is alien to me, but one that I could not shake off.

It was all or none of the guy who had told me that Saddam killed three times as many Shiis because there are three times as many Shiis to kill. Or the guy that had told me that the Wahhabbis (extremist Sunnis) kill Shiis because the Shii veneration of the saints IS heresy. Or the guy who had told me that the Shiis could never be left to run a country because they are perpetual victims that need to be lead and who could never be trusted with too much responsibility. One of whom is the man who I have translated and quoted above.

And it took Saddam's capture to snap me out of it. I am now just sad. Hopeless at the situation here and fearful of what it means to people whose reasoning, conditions, and history I can only skim in my experiences and fleeting memories. He was just one person. He was created by a world that needed him for its own benefit. And he was for 35 years the leader of 30 million people who tonight, for the first time, saw this symbol of absolute strength be checked for lice and mouth sores by a bald American doctor with plastic gloves and a wooden ice cream stick. And who asked themselves: How?

I wonder what the capture of Saddam will do to the Iraqis. It is not a happy moment. That's for sure.

#### 4. Never sent letter

I look out my small window every morning -- the first thing after I take a shower. Every morning as if something would have changed from the day before. Scenes out of windows don't change, usually do they? Leaves turn, cars get parked in different spots, buildings get built slowly and over a long period of time, but on a day to day basis, things don't change. But my Baghdad window drew me to itself every morning with a new excitement and interest as if it were changing on a daily basis. I became conscious of this a while back. Why was I rushing to the window everyday expecting something spectacularly new behind it? The only reason that came to my mind was a guilty sense that perhaps I, alongside every other person who has chosen to be here, am looking for a visible form of war. Here for the entertainment that destruction provides, looking at the window as a movie screen offering a new scene of destruction that I escaped but can be a witness to.

The visual engagement, it turns out, is more mundane, and more subtle than that. The panorama of Baghdad IS changing. Changes not due to any act of violence, but because of the ever decreasing visibility due to the creeping cloud of dust, smog and smoke that is taking over the city. The scene behind the window changes everyday but if only because the smog makes less and less visible. My eyes saw it before I understood it.

The city is descending into chaos. Chaos has become normalcy. Gasoline lines are literally the length of Manhattan at 14<sup>th</sup> street . Believe me, it is unfathomable how long people wait in line. The number of cars in Baghdad have doubled in the past 8 months. DOUBLED. Black market gasoline abounds, people sell it on every street corner, mixed with water, diesel, and who knows what else. The air has become thicker in the last month. That is definitely true. And the visibility from my window is down to a few hundred meters.

That's what I have to report to you guys after a month or more of using this city as a backdrop for an American reality TV show.

As hard as the life is, the Iraqis make it harder for themselves. I guess there is no other way to be here. You live your life, internalize your problems and treat people around you accordingly. The hardest thing to hear from the Iraqis is that only Saddam knew his people well enough to rule them. It's usually said at moments of great frustration, in the middle of traffic, at long lines, in the middle of arguments.... In any case, one can't help but cringe at the sentiment. It's the kind of thing that probably everyone in this country has said to himself at some point.

More likely, though, as a strong autocrat, he was good at training his people to accede to his values. That's what autocrats do, they carrot and stick people into submission. The stick, his gruesome violence, is well known and will continue to be talked about especially while the US needs to justify itself here. But deep down, it's the carrot that people remember and it's also what Americans haven't gotten right.

You see ... it turns out that Saddam and his ilk built enough chicken factories to provide a leg, thigh and breast alongside two sunny-side ups for everyone in this country for everyday of their lives. To give you a sense of priorities, though, he did not build one—read: not a single-- car factory. You'd think if an autocratic megalomaniac is hell bent on building a strong country and not just feeding it to finger-licking nirvana, he'd build some sort of a infrastructure that can sustain it beyond lunch. But petro-dollars are a strange phenomenon of our times and we are seeing it at work here in Iraq. I am no economist but I understand what a car factory does and all the infrastructure and secondary development it represents and provides for a society. And it hasn't left me the fact that there is not one car factory in this country. Who ever said oil was a blessing for the rulers and a curse for the ruled? If no one ever said it, I am saying it now. So between Saudi where there isn't enough of a population to make it a nation, or Iran where there is too much population to allow it to depend on oil money alone, is Iraq. Iraq right now, seems to me to have been a nation where a vast population is trained to keep happy with what oil-money can put on their plate. But now that they are getting less than they used to, they are grumbling, but unclear for what. It's a recipe for disaster.

Seeing Americans fighting to create good old American liberal economy through their own version of cronyism is amusing. They are trying to train Iraqis in the wonders of 'free enterprise.' There's a new layer of gofers who are servicing the residents in the Republican Palace. If there is a difference between these and those who gofered to the previous occupants, it remains to be seen. But alongside this new layer of Iraqis is a whole number of Americans (and others whose numbers probably doesn't count). Lots and lotsa corn fed Americans in the middle of Baghdad. Making a buck while helping Iraq. The situation doesn't really deserve a better rhyme.

The Palace has been turned to many things, the central ball room, if it was ever that, WAS turned into a chapel but now it's filled with bunk beds for the guys who were evacuated out of the al-Rashid hotel. Inside the central dome of the ceiling is a painting of horses galloping against the blue sky flanked by clouds and cruise missiles. You have to look down at the walls to understand the significance. One of the walls has a painting of a bunch of cruise missiles painted with Iraqi flags in a perpetual juisseance towards the sky and the painting facing it is of the Dome of the Rock, where they are, supposedly aimed at. The Medici palace, it aint'.

The main American compound (the "Green Zone") is basically the former gated community of the Hussein family.

The Pool is functioning, the attendants were there in full force and the water was clean.

Over all, it was probably no worse (or better) than a Beverly Hills mansion.

In the office of the Chaplain where we held the interviews with Bremmer and Sanchez, there are great books from all major religions, alongside loads and loads of CD's made specifically for the American soldiers by this guys who looks like a leper. I asked if I

could take one and I did. On the glass-topped table were (purportedly) Saddam's sword and helmet (the same one that his four statues wear on the four corners of the roof of the Palace). Why they were there, I don't know. It was the TV producer in the midst who thought it would be funny enough to put on the helmet and hold the sword for a picture, in which no one chose to join him.

Outside of another palace was one of Uday's vintage Cadillacs which one of the soldiers proudly told us is "currently being driven by the General." This is what booty means, I guess. When I asked him if the General plans to take it home with him: "I don't really see who can stop him, if he so chooses."

The true nature of Iraqi reconstruction remains to be seen.

Sitting in Amman, Qatar, Cairo or a host of other American satellite countries and advocating the violence that is making Iraq a hell hole. I don't want to do that. Life is too precious to waste on constant immediate gratification of a deep-seated (and oft-misplaced) anger. The arm-chair ones call it being principled, the honest ones are the actually wrapping themselves in explosives and carrying out their frustrations. The screeching of commentators on Arab satellite stations is a testament to this process.

#### 5. Interview in Al-Ahram Newspaper about the MTV experience

I decided to become a filmmaker on 12 September 2001. I had made one short film before this, but had not taken work in the medium seriously until I saw the level of control and distortion in the American media in covering events of the previous day. I joined Paper Tiger Television, an independent video collective based in New York, and worked as assistant producer on a video titled Turning Tragedy into War. The alternative media community is a face of American culture few people get to see. It is the antidote to CNN et al, trying to build structures and networks outside the corporate media. It is part and parcel of the American left, very dedicated, very critical of US foreign and domestic policy -- but with very little access and visibility.

It was partly frustration at this fact that led me to accept an offer from MTV. Last October I got an e-mail from an independent producer looking for a co-producer to go to Iraq for an episode for MTV's weekly show True Life. This is one of the better shows on MTV -- reality television that aspires to cover the lives of young people in some depth. The producer had already made an earlier episode in which he tracked four Palestinians and four Israelis. It was probably the first time many young Americans had seen the Middle East situation from a personal angle, or had seen a Palestinian at all.

So when I heard of a similar project in Iraq I figured that showing the daily lives of Iraqis and humanising them might be a corrective to the way the war has been shown in the US: like a video game, as if the death and destruction are totally anonymous and separate from people's lives. MTV is not a news programme and there aren't layers of producers and editors to make your material politically acceptable. Their one big concern was that we bring back something entertaining, something that wouldn't hurt their ratings. We

were also strongly advised to avoid subtitles, meaning that we had to interview Iraqis who spoke English. I grumbled about this but finally acquiesced. We made contacts with organisations in Iraq and went there at the end of October 2003.

Going to Iraq was like stepping out of the screen and into the street. Baghdad is devastated. It is a large city with beautiful public spaces, artworks and buildings that are covered in dust, bombed out or just abandoned. I arrived there on the day the Red Cross and several other international agencies were bombed. And the mood never really changed after that: fear mingled with a strong desire for normalcy.

Baghdad is a far cry from Cairo or Amman, where American franchises litter every corner. It has yet to be globalised, but the process has begun. Satellite dishes of every size poke out of windows, balconies and rooftops like metal sunflowers twisting to find their satellite beams. Iraqi television sets are now flooded with the same programming that people watch in the rest of the Arab world. It is a whole new world for Iraqis, since satellite dishes were banned under the previous regime, and its effects remain to be seen.

I stayed at a hotel that was also the Baghdad bureau for a major American network belonging to the MTV conglomerate, and so I got to see how the news bureau operated up close. The newest development in the US corporate media operation in Iraq is the use of private security. Imagine, for every American journalist there has to be one guard. How close can you get to ordinary people if you have an armed guard following you around and directing your movements according to his estimate of risk? I simply refused one, and the bureau agreed to make an exception in my case since being Iranian and speaking Arabic made me local enough.

The producer and I had two digital cameras and that was it. All we had to do was to find the right characters and follow them around until a good story emerged out of their lives. For the Americans we contacted the military and asked to meet soldiers and be embedded with them. The Iraqis were contacted through a variety of sources, including universities, NGOs and personal contacts. We would make an appointment, go to someone's house or office, and interview young people one-on-one. Out of about 50 interviews we picked eight.

We split into two crews. The four young Iraqis I ended up following were a journalist, a musician, a filmmaker and a graduate student. Three were from Baghdad and one from Al-Kut in the Shia heartland south of Baghdad. They had all heard of MTV but since it was not yet available on the satellites they had not seen it.

These were all young people with knowledge of English. None of them wholeheartedly supported the occupation but the fear of continued violence or civil war kept them hoping that the American presence would bring some stability. They were interested in learning about the world outside Iraq, and especially about America. And they faced a contradictory America that is both a fantasy piped in through their television sets and at the same time the occupying power in their country.

It was hard to gain access to every part of their lives, particularly to their homes, which was a necessity for the format of the show. Part of this stemmed from their fear of being identified as close to the Americans, but it was also because people were not used to the camera and how to be natural in front of it. America is saturated with cameras -- culturally and visually -- and Iraq is the opposite. This fact, I think, contributed greatly to the final outcome of the show.

The American soldiers we interviewed hardly co-existed with the Iraqis. Most were resentful and tired of being at the front-line of the continuing war. One soldier described their first assignment in Baghdad, informally called Operation Get Shot. They had to go down to the street and draw fire so they could then identify and arrest the shooters. The outcome of this situation is a basic mistrust and resentment between Iraqis and the military. I believe this is a reflection of the leadership's ignorance, its obliviousness to the lives of Iraqis and its own soldiers. The young Iraqi filmmaker wanted to make a documentary about American soldiers during Christmas and the New Year. But the military refused to give him access. It would have been a great public relations exercise for the Americans but their fear of Iraqis prevented them from seeing it that way.

On my return to the US I was told that contrary to the original understanding, I was not going to be a part of the editing. There wasn't enough money in the budget and there were professional editors more experienced at making an MTV cut out of the footage. The producer wanted my input every once in a while but I basically had no say over which characters were included in the final show and how they were portrayed. So they took the footage and made it MTV-friendly. In the name of dynamic characters, strong stories and good television the show became mostly about the hard lives of the American soldiers. Of the Iraqis only two men were included. And of the two the filmmaker was featured more prominently, and was edited to speak at length about his desire to make a film about the American soldiers and their difficult situation. There was no mention of the fact that the US military had refused him access to the soldiers. The Iraqis, as a friend of mine put it, were afterthoughts or little breaks between the stories of the Americans.

American television is a business: there's a lot of money at stake and there is no sense of right and wrong beyond the bottom line. It is not only a question of censorship and editorial control over the content; it is the general cultural and political values that individual directors and producers don't question, and also the values of the television industry itself. I think the producers of True Life really do believe that their priority is to show the strongest characters -- judged by American television standards -- rather than make the extra effort necessary to show Iraqis who don't exactly fit with MTV character-types. In that way, I believe, they lost an opportunity to show a true and varied picture of the situation in Iraq.