Towards a Mitigated, Reasoned Release of Saddam-era Documents

By Hassan Mneimneh, MF Vice-President

The recent decision taken by the United States Government to release documents captured in the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan is a bold move to engage the public in the foundations of the foreign policy decision-making process. Accessible through the internet to anyone with interest, the documents that helped shape the US’s action in Iraq are laid bare to be read, interpreted, scrutinized, and speculated upon. However, some cautionary observations are due. While the documents are being released with care to avoid an inadvertent disclosure of intelligence procedures, further consideration should be made to insure that no harm is done to Iraqi society, polity, and culture.

Through a thorough analysis of documents seized during the 1991 Gulf War, the Iraq Memory Foundation was able to discern the overall patterns of oppression that the Saddam Hussein regime applied on the captive population of Iraq. The documents show the systematic implication of ordinary citizens in the crimes of the regime. A young woman seeking employment in a small factory had thus to commit herself to disclosing to regime operatives the actions and thoughts of her colleagues. In a regime where speaking ill of the President earned you the death penalty, her collaboration surely led to tragedies. A decade and a half later, this woman may be a wife, mother, and an active member of her community. The unmitigated disclosure of her cooperation with the regime may end up ruining her life. Is she guilty of collaboration? Isn’t the revelation of her involvement part of the justice that Iraq needs for closure in the post-Saddam era? Perhaps. But perhaps not. These questions must be resolved in an atmosphere of understanding, accountability, and responsibility by Iraqi society itself. No action taken by any outside party should prejudice or jeopardize this process.

The release of documents needs to be informed by an appreciation of the complexity of the truth and reconciliation task in the Iraq of tomorrow, when the dust settles and the guns are silent. Freedom of information has also to be balanced with the respect of the privacy of Saddam’s victims, lest they end up being victimized twice, once by Saddam and once by hurtful exposure. The United States Government is advised to seek the input of Iraqi civil society organizations in this intricate and important subject.

As to its impact on the current war effort and on the global confrontation between free societies and totalitarianism, attention should be paid not to provide indirect support to the enemy’s propaganda effort. Saddam appears on some released video rehearsing speeches. The human face of the dictator practicing utterances full of

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ORDINARY ATROCITIES: Oral History in Iraq

Since its first interview in 2003, the Oral History on Film Project has videotaped more than 60 testimonies by Iraqi men and women of different ethnicities, religions and classes, all of whom suffered under the regime. The Oral History team continues to film in Iraq, even as conditions in the country make it more and more difficult to travel safely. Fuel is scarce and filming sessions are often cut short by blackouts and gunfire.

In April, the Oral History team traveled to Southern Iraq to interview victims. One of these victims was Turkiya Hanoon Saiyah Al-Kinani. The Oral History team met Mrs. Al-Kinani at her home in Al-Shatra City. Born in 1939, she is a widow, and a mother of twelve children. Sadiq, her son, was arrested by the former regime and never released; later, he was executed. Mrs. Al-Kinani's other sons, Muslim, Jawad and Qasim, were prisoners of war during the Iraq-Kuwait war. Ali, her other son, was killed in March 1991 uprising.

Mrs. Al-Kinani escaped from Al-Shatra city to Baghdad. In Baghdad, the former regime imprisoned Qasim, Muslim and Jawad in Al Radwaniyah Prison because their brother Ali had participated in uprising. Muslim lost one of his eyes while he was in prison; Jawad still suffers from mental illness as a result of his torture. After the regime's fall, a document was found detailing the execution of Sadiq, though his body was never found.

During the same trip, the Oral History team interviewed Mohammed Abdul-Hussein Jaze' Abid Al-Hijami. Mohammed was born in 1966 and is married with four kids. Mohammed left school at a young age after his father and uncle were stricken ill and the family suffered economic hardship. In 1985, he was called for military duty but he fled from Iraq and never returned till the pardon of 1988. During the invasion of Kuwait, he was called again for duty but he escaped and participated in March 1991 uprising, during which his brother was killed. In 1997, Ba'athists imprisoned him and sent him to the Security Department where he was tortured. He was imprisoned in a cell large enough for one man only. He was released after the interrogations and torture due to the issuance of a general pardon for the entire prison by the former regime.

FACES AT THE foundation

In each issue of Memory, we will introduce you to members of the Iraq Memory Foundation’s staff. This month, we profile Mustafa Al-Kadhimiy, Director of the Oral History Project.

Based at the Baghdad MF headquarters in the heart of the “Green Zone”, Mustafa is a well-known and respected Iraqi activist in the fields of democracy and human rights. Working under extraordinarily tense and often dangerous circumstances, he travels around the country with the Oral History team filming testimonies of survivors of the regime. He has worked with Iraqi and international nongovernmental organizations to promote these values, and has acquired expertise in the area of human rights documentation and witness testimony. He has written three books in Arabic, including Human Concerns, published in London in 2000 and officially recognized by the European Union as among the best work by a refugee writer. In addition, he is an accomplished journalist who has produced documentaries on Iraq for the BBC and Channel 4, and written numerous articles for leading Arabic journals and newspapers, including Al-Hayat. His long experience in broadcasting includes time as a director of a radio station in Greece between 1995 and 1997, Director of Programming for Radio Free Europe between 1999 and 2003, and co-founder and Director of Planning and Programming for the Iraqi media network Al-Iraqiya, which he helped establish immediately following the fall of Saddam.

Listen to Mustafa on National Public Radio's All Things Considered, which aired March 31, 2006.
promises is thus brought to the forefront. Nowhere in the vicinity is the face of his victims or the record of his crimes. We at the Iraq Memory Foundation have endeavored to keep this record from being forgotten or dismissed. We will further strive to place the released documents in the context that explains them to the world.

But more discretion may be needed. In the case of documents generated by al-Qa’ida and captured in Afghanistan, we are presented with an odd situation. While American and other international authorities are engaged in an effort to shut down terrorist websites, the newly released documents amount to a well-stocked website for global Jihadism. Again, what is missing is context.

Many readers of these documents have readily engaged in attempts at translation and analysis. Some offer fresh insights, other promote unjustified theories. As an exercise in social participation and collaborative work, the release of documents may yield interesting and stimulating results. However, after the initial euphoria of the newly granted access, much of these documents will be orphaned. We need to insure that it is not the case. A sustained and reasoned approach to receiving, contextualizing, and deriving value from these documents needs to be established.

Deciding to release the documents was a powerful and controversial move. Now that the floodgates are open, we need to do it responsibly. All stakeholders, governments and societies, should be engaged. Most importantly, the right of the victims not to be victimized again needs to be guaranteed.