

Iraq 20 Years on: Dispossession and Sectarian Grievances

BIC STORIES FROM THE FIELD, SERIES – COMMENTARY

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Twenty years after the beginning of the US invasion on March 20, 2003, the village where former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was born has been completely emptied of its population. The armed group that now controls the area claims the reasons are security-related, while the residents believe that their forced exile is an act of revenge because of their affiliation to the deposed dictator. At the core of this dispute is a story about sectarian grievances, land grabbing, nostalgia for a bygone regime, and paramilitary groups that have gained unchecked power in recent years.

The sand-coloured houses are located right there, so close one could almost touch them, yet out of reach, locked behind checkpoints guarded by armed men. Since the beginning of the war against the Islamic State group (ISIS) in 2014, the residents of Al-Awja, the birthplace of Saddam Hussein, have not been able to return home. "No matter how much time passes, I miss Al-Awja. I just want to go back to where I was born," Hassan Nada Al-Hussein told the Brussels International Center (BIC) during a recent trip to Iraq.

The 78-year-old Sheikh is the head of the Albu Nasir tribe, to which Saddam Hussein also belonged. "We have lost everything. We lost our sources of income, and we lost our homes. We were forced to leave everything behind," this Al-Awja native added.

Twenty years ago, on March 20, 2003, US President George W. Bush ordered the invasion of Iraq in pursuit of ousting Saddam Hussein, who had held power for nearly

25 years. Born in Al-Awja in 1937, the despot was eventually buried there in 2006 after his execution by hanging, having been judged guilty of crimes against humanity. His mausoleum, which had become a place of pilgrimage for people nostalgic of the Baathist regime, was destroyed in 2015 during an offensive against ISIS led by the Iraqi army and Shia militias.

Since then, the thousands of residents of Al-Awja who had initially fled the fighting have been prevented from returning to their homes by those same militias, also known as the "Popular Mobilisation Forces," or PMF, a paramilitary coalition formed in the summer of 2014 to fight back against ISIS.

Forming the core of the PMF are older militias¹ which received the support of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to fight against Saddam Hussein's regime in the 80s and 90s.

This historical opposition to the former president seems to explain at least in part the fate of the villagers.

"Residents of Al-Awja joined the Islamic State and committed massacres in the area. They are loyalists of Saddam who joined the terrorists to avenge his death, so their return is not possible," claimed Sadoun Shaker, deputy head of intelligence of Kataib al-Imam Ali, a pro-Iran armed group belonging to the PMF.

His armed group now controls part of the region while a second group (which did not respond to the BIC's request for an interview) occupies Al-Awja. These Shia fighters, often hailing from the south of the country, are now deployed in a predominantly Sunni area, in a country where sectarian violence has left deep scars.

The young 30-year-old officer met with the BIC in a building located in Tikrit on the banks of the Tigris River, which was part of a palace complex belonging to Saddam Hussein. He did not choose the place at random: it was here that the Islamic State executed some of the 1,700 young military cadets, mostly young Shia men, that the Sunni hardline group had taken prisoner in June 2014 at the nearby Speicher airbase.

¹ "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups," August 2019. Combating Terrorism Center.

It is said that the river, now turquoise and peaceful, had been filled with so much blood that the waters had turned red. It was this massacre that prompted Sadoun Shaker and thousands more to join the PMF.

"Among the people who participated in the massacre were former soldiers, generals and supporters of Saddam's regime, and of course civilians linked to certain tribes that had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State," the officer said.

"The Speicher massacre will never leave our minds; we will continue to pursue and fight all members of the Islamic State who participated in this massacre and our will for revenge will remain alive forever. This massacre will remain as a pain in the chest of every Iraqi in general and Shias in particular," he added.

In his eyes, supporters of Saddam or of the Islamic State are essentially "the same thing", and the residents of Al-Awja, guilty of being born in the same place as the deposed dictator, are seen as both.

However, residents of Al-Awja say that accusations of supporting ISIS have been weaponised against them to justify the spoliation of their land by the PMF, which developed into significant security, political, and economic forces in Iraq following the territorial defeat of ISIS.²

"After the end of the war, many areas under the control of the PMF were initially off-limits to residents, before a gradual return was eventually allowed. Cases like Al-Awja, where access is completely blocked and there is no prospect of return, are very rare," Mélisande Genat, a doctoral student at Stanford University and an expert on Iraq, told the BIC.

"In nearby Albu Ajil, for example, villagers were allowed to return home as early as 2015 even though some members of that tribe participated in the Speicher massacre. The 'special treatment' meted out to Al-Awja suggests that there are other reasons why the PMF are blocking access to this particular place," she added.

For the residents and their representatives, there are two obvious reasons: vengeance and profit.

² "Networks of power, the Popular Mobilization Forces and the state in Iraq," February 2021. Chatham House.

"For the PMF, it is a form of revenge against Saddam and the village is of course highly symbolic," Marwan Al-Jabbari, spokesman for the Salah ad-Din Tribal Council, told the BIC.

"There are also economic stakes: the village is located along the Tigris River, which is fertile land that they can cultivate and use to set up fish farms. It is also a strategic area, located in the heart of the province of Salah ad-Din, at the intersection of important roads that lead to the north of the country," he said. "I had a meeting with Mustafa Al-Kadhimi when he was still Prime Minister and he assured me that he would take care of this issue, but even he could not find a solution."

Al-Awja residents have experienced the last twenty years as a demotion that is all the more staggering given that Saddam, during his time in power, used to surround himself with people close to him, notably drawing from among the members of his tribe to populate the ranks of his security services.

Hassan Nada Al-Hussein was himself a Lieutenant-General. The leader of the Albu Nasir admits that several members of his tribe (which numbers of tens of thousands) had joined the Islamic State. But holding the whole community responsible for the misdeeds of some individuals is akin to collective punishment and political vengeance, he told the BIC from the house he now rents in the suburbs of Erbil, in the Kurdish region of Iraq. In his living room, a dozen men from the village sat on sofas sipping tea.

Some of them showed the BIC satellite images that they say is proof that their land had been confiscated for profit. Indeed, a visual analysis of satellite imagery freely available online shows a radical transformation of the topography of Al-Awja and its surroundings over the years.

From 2016 – when the village had already been completely emptied of its population – one can clearly see the first artificial pools appear, steadily multiplying until the most recent imagery from 2020, which shows a patchwork of several dozen pools that residents say are being used by the PMF for aquaculture.

"These lands had been passed from father to son for the past 300 years," the tribal leader said. "This is our heritage, our history. What an unbearable loss."

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