

## Life in Baghdad Since the Fall of Saddam

By SPIEGEL Staff

**Five years after the US invasion, no one misses Saddam, but some Baghdadis are nostalgic for the relative freedom and stability they had before the Americans came.**



REUTERS

Saddam's 24-year reign of terror ended in spring 2003. What followed, say Iraqis, was a brief period of freedom and prosperity before their nation fell apart.

The situation in Iraq on the eve of the anniversary of "Operation Iraqi Freedom" has both opponents and supporters of the American military campaign puzzled. The body of a Catholic archbishop is found near the northern city of Mosul, and yet the US embassy in Baghdad is holding a flea market as if it were peacetime. There has been a slight rise in the number of attacks again, and Douglas Feith, one of the Pentagon's principal architects of the war, has just published a book in which he seeks to justify his decisions. The United States has been in Iraq longer than it fought in World War II. The conflict is getting long in the tooth.

In America's public consciousness, the number of American soldiers killed in Iraq stagnated in the summer of 2007. At the time, more than half of respondents to opinion polls knew that 3,500 GIs had been killed, but today only a quarter of Americans know that the number has increased to 4,000. According to Joseph Stiglitz, winner of the 2001 Nobel Prize in economics, the war has already cost the country at least \$3 trillion.

Washington has burned through two American civilian administrators, three ambassadors and three commanding generals. The last of the diplomats -- and, relatively speaking, the most successful -- has just announced his departure. Ambassador Ryan Crocker plans to leave in January. Commenting on his retirement, Crocker said: "That will make two years in Iraq and 37 years in the Foreign Service -- it's enough!"

Before they leave, Crocker and Commanding General David Petraeus, who also remains in office until January 2009, will have to deliver another report to Congress in April and explain to lawmakers what the US troop surge has achieved. After the summer of 2007, the number of attacks declined by half, but then it remained stable. There were just under 2,000 attacks every month from November to January, or about as many as in the spring of 2005.

The prognoses are relatively worthless as long as it is unclear what exactly the results of the turnaround have been. Optimists point to successes among Sunnis. Close to 80,000 former Sunni insurgents have changed sides and now work for the Americans, each of them earning \$300 a month. Al-Qaida terrorism has been dealt a serious blow.

But skeptics warn against being too optimistic too soon when it comes to the Shiites. Shiite leader Moqtada al-Sadr has extended his Mahdi militia's cease-fire, which is indisputably the main reason for the drop in sectarian murders. But no one knows whether the cease-fire is merely a strategic move, or whether it will last.

The progress of the war has long depended on both people and developments no one would have imagined five years ago. General Tommy Franks, who directed the US invasion of Iraq, merely rolled his eyes when he was asked at the time what would happen after the war, former US Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith writes in his new autobiography "War and Decision." Franks' response to the question was that he didn't have time for that kind of bullshit. Indeed, there are failures everywhere Feith casts his eyes. But, as the reader soon learns, Feith is convinced that the triumvirate of planners -- then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, President George W. Bush and Feith himself -- was infallible.

None of these retrospective quibbles appear to worry the president. "The decision to remove Saddam Hussein was the right decision early in my presidency," he said last week in Nashville. "It is the right

decision at this point in my presidency, and it will forever be the right decision."

How the country proceeds in Iraq will be decided, at least in part, by American voters this November. If they elect Republican John McCain as president, they may have to get used to a US presence in Iraq for another 100 years, as McCain has suggested. Meanwhile, the Democratic presidential candidates are urging a pullout of US troops. But neither side has thought of a peaceful way to resolve the political problems among Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds.

On the following pages, five Iraqis describe how their lives have changed since the invasion.

*Bernhard Zand*

### Mobile Phone Merchant

#### MUHANNAD AL-GARAWI, 41, Mobile Phone Merchant

We were doing very well immediately after the war. Many people quickly became rich because they were able to work for the Americans. Suddenly I was making more money than I'd ever made before: \$300 (€192) per week! No wonder, because everyone wanted to buy a mobile phone from me -- the old, the young, women, men, the rich, even the poor, who were still dreaming they could make something of themselves.



Ali Hussam

Muhannad Abdul Razzaq Al-Garawi.

The mobile phone was the symbol of a new era, and many people came to my shop in Karrada, one of the city's most popular shopping districts. Unfortunately, the boom didn't last very long. Violence broke out in 2005, the terrorists took control over entire city neighborhoods, and everything went downhill. My best customers, the rich, have all fled abroad.

I can only say one thing about Saddam Hussein: He was a tyrant, and he got what he deserved. Because I am a Shiite, I had no chance of getting a job in the oil fields, even though I had studied drilling engineering. I come from a very poor family and have had to work hard throughout my life to feed my family. I made ends meet as an electrician, and after the war I sold dinnerware for a while, until I hit upon the idea of selling mobile phones.

Business has improved again in recent months. It has become safer on the streets, and people are returning to Karrada to go shopping. Especially young women, who couldn't leave their houses during the worst of it, now want new mobile phones. But we are still afraid. There were four attacks in

Karrada in the last two months. We are a pawn of major powers. But I have hope, and I trust in God that the Iraqi people will win in the end. I got married six months ago. Life must go on.

### Journalist

#### NADA MAHDI SHUKUR, 47, Journalist

In Saddam's day I worked for Baghdad's only English-language newspaper, the *Baghdad Observer*. We were controlled by the Interior Ministry, and security people observed us constantly. But I was able to use my English. I spoke very well and interviewed many foreigners. That would be inconceivable today. It's dangerous to speak English on the street. It isn't because the Iraqis hate the language, although I do believe that the behavior of



some Americans has created a rift between their army and our country. The political situation is atrocious. The religious leaders are mixing politics with religion. I believe that it's a sin to establish a party on the basis of religion. But this new religious fervor has taken hold of the entire country. We have too little education and too little freedom. It's especially difficult for women. I consider myself a broad-minded person. I am unmarried and have no children, and I am an intellectual. I studied art and design in Leeds, England. I had great talent. But what good does that do you when you're stuck in Iraq? For me, the happiest moment was when Baghdad was liberated from this dictator. The city began to flourish after that, and it was peaceful. But the occupation resulted in Sunnis and Shiites attacking each

US soldiers search a house outside Baghdad in early 2007.

AP other, and in al-Qaida and former Saddam supporters joining forces. I live in Mansur, a mixed neighborhood. But even as a Sunni, I never feel safe there. Most residents are pro-Saddam. American and Iraqi troops often search the area. They also come to my house. I think this is good, in a certain way. It provides security. But there is often something missing after the searches: a camera, a watch, a mobile phone. It's very frustrating. I have wanted to sell my house and move to a different area for a long time.

## Surgeon

### DR. RAFID HAMUD EFAIT, 30, Surgeon

My friends tell me that they have been able to move more freely in the streets for months now. Many say that life out there is now better. Nevertheless, I don't have the feeling that we are really doing any better. I work at Medical City, the city's largest hospital, and every day I see the most serious of injuries. I see people dying because they happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time when a bomb exploded. I see bleeding, screaming people and despairing relatives. That's why I cannot truly say that things are better for us now.



Ali Hussam

Dr. Rafid Hamud Efait

Saddam was evil. He killed hundreds of thousands of people. He is responsible for three wars, and he brought ruin to my country. But when I think back to life before 2003, I still have to say that it was better. Everyone had his dreams and wanted to make them reality. I had friends who were Sunnis, and it didn't matter that I was a Shiite. I lived in Jarmuk, a predominately Sunni neighborhood, and there was no reason to be afraid. We went out at night and celebrated. The Baghdad where I live today is not the Baghdad that I once knew. Radical Sunnis attacked me on the street last year. They wanted to kill me. It was a stroke of luck that I survived. Now I live in the doctors' building in Medical City. I would like to get married. My fiancé is also a doctor, but it's impossible. I have no money, no house and no opportunity to get us out of the country. This makes me sad. Many of my friends no longer want to have anything to do with religion, because they see what horrible acts are committed in the name of religion. Religion is important, but the religious leaders interpret it only to their own advantage. I am terrified of the day when the Americans withdraw from the country.

There is not a single politician who can bring peace. When the Americans leave, Iraq will plunge into chaos once and for all.

## Taxi Driver

### AMJAD SAKI NASSER, 45, Taxi Driver

I owned a drugstore before the war, where I sold creams, perfumes and shampoos. But then no one needed those sorts of things anymore, so I bought a small Toyota with my savings and began driving a taxi. At first I was making more money than before the war, but now gasoline has become so expensive that



my profits are getting smaller and smaller. A liter used to cost 20 dinars. Now it's 500 dinars, (about €0.27 or 42 American cents). Of course, security is also a problem. As a Sunni I can only take Sunni passengers. I can't drive into Shiite neighborhoods. The soldiers wouldn't even let me in. If someone who left Baghdad before the war were to come back today, he would not recognize this city anymore. It's unnatural, how many lines divide it today. This makes me depressed. So do the curfews. I lost the Toyota a year ago in a bombing attack on Palestine Street, and I had to buy a new car. Now I have a "Brasili." Those are the old white and orange taxis from before the war. It was a step down, of course. I also make less money now, since a trip in a Brasili is cheaper than in a Toyota. I miss my freedom. My freedom to visit friends who live only five minutes from my house, but are unreachable for me now because, for example, they live in the Shiite Kadhamiya neighborhood across the Tigris bridge, while I have to stay in the Sunni Adhamiya neighborhood. Many Shiites lived in Adhamiya in the past, but there are none there today. Members of the al-Sawha militia patrol the

Baghdad's Al-Joumhouriya Street in March 2003, days before the US invasion.

DPA streets. It's better than al-Qaida, which was still in control here half a year ago, and yet it's still unbearable. Basically, I mistrust every religious leader. Their militias are interchangeable. The truth is that it makes no difference whether they are Shiites or Sunnis. I am very pessimistic about the future. The invasion has destroyed Iraq.

## Government Official

### SANA AL-MASCHHADANI, 39, Government Official

It is not easy to be a woman in this new Iraq. The leaders of our country do not respect women, and they do not give us the roles we deserve. It was different in the past, when many women were in important positions. Now most politicians and religious leaders have very conservative views. I feel limited in this new, narrow-minded society. I work as a translator for *Al-Mamoun*, a respected magazine published by the Ministry of Culture. I translate articles from English into Arabic. I worked for the



DPA

Iraqi women walk past an Iraqi soldier at a checkpoint in Baghdad in 2007.

Ministry of Information under Saddam. But when the Americans took over the country, Paul Bremer dissolved the ministry and we were all sent home. I work in the same building today, but for a different agency. I am one of the few Sunnis in my office. It is not easy for me to express my opinion openly here. Our supervisors pressure all of us to get along with each other. I don't miss Saddam, but I would like to have a government that supports equal rights and self-determination for all. But at least I earn significantly more than I did before the war. I'm pleased about that. I was divorced from my husband a year ago, and now I am raising my 13-year-old son on my own. His name is Hassan. My relatives are in Syria, and all of my friends are gone. I often wonder whether I too should leave. The occupation is unfair and brutal. The Americans are the main reason for the violence, and they should leave the country. Admittedly, things have improved, but I have this sense of fear every day when I go to work. I am an optimistic person, and I believe in the future. I hope that my people will learn to value freedom and democracy one day.

*Interviews recorded by Hussam Ali, Ala Chalil Nassir, and Mathieu von Rohr.*

*Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan.*

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