

Apocalypse now: Dispatch from Iraq

by [Peter Dula](#) in the [December 28, 2004](#) issue

Let me tell you about Nadia, a friend and colleague in Iraq. From May 2003 until last April she worked for a newspaper in Baghdad. Then two of its reporters were killed and its editor, after receiving repeated threats, fled the country. So Nadia was out of a job. She tried to keep busy doing translation work for various foreigners, but one was assassinated and two were kidnapped. Almost all the others left the country or were afraid to leave their homes.

Nadia's family is Christian—members of the Chaldean Catholic Church, one of the oldest churches in the world. In that they are a bit atypical, since most Iraqis are Muslims. But in many ways their story is representative of families in Iraq's middle class. They knew better than anyone the evils of Saddam Hussein. They thought that things could only get better after he was removed from power—that the greatest superpower in the history of the world would leave behind a new Iraq.

But then they saw American soldiers stand by as Iraq was looted. They watched as Iraq become infested with criminal gangs, made up of prisoners released by Saddam and newly unemployed soldiers. Garbage collectors began looking through the trash to see who was rich enough to rob. Baghdad, like all great Middle Eastern cities, had been a night city. People ate lunch at 4 p.m., supper at midnight, and shopped and visited friends and family till early morning. Now they stay home and watch TV or play dominoes and backgammon.

"When is the future?" Nadia asked me. "Thirty-five years of Saddam waiting for the future. And they say the Iraqis must be patient. We were patient as our husbands and brothers and sons went to three wars. Our patience has expired."

We were sitting in her home in the dark because Baghdad electricity was on for three hours, then off for three. Sewage lay in the street. "Why did they come here?" she asked. "To bring in companies to take our oil? In America they make you pay taxes on everything. Now our oil is the tax they are making us pay for removing Saddam."

When I last visited the house, no one was home when I arrived. They had gone to the neighbor's house after learning that the neighbor's son had just been killed. He had been kidnapped while walking down the street to visit a friend, and the family was unable to come up with the \$300,000 that the ransom note demanded.

I suddenly realized why Nadia had never let me walk the half-mile home from her house. She always had her husband or son drive me. That was back in the spring. Now they have fled to Jordan because of a series of phone calls from someone asking for her son but refusing to leave a name. Nadia now lives in Amman, with her son, who was a university student, and her young daughter. Because they have very little money, her husband went back to Baghdad, where he has been an accountant for a firm in the city for many years. But a couple of weeks ago his company was threatened by a simple note that read, "Give us \$1 million or there will be a car bomb at your door."

In Jordan Nadia runs into families from the Baghdad neighborhood who have come to Amman for the same reason—fear of kidnapping. They tell her that since the school year began, 22 children have been kidnapped in their neighborhood alone. Another friend told me that he agreed to let his sister remain at the university but bought her a cell phone and makes her call five times a day. A few schools have shut down, a few never opened, none are full. All are on streets blocked off by concrete bunkers and razor wire, like the government ministries, the big hotels, the churches. It looks like an apocalyptic Western film: *Mad Max goes to Iraq*.

Another neighbor has three sons, ages 17 to 22. One night a convoy of Humvees came up their street at 2 a.m. with heavy metal music blasting from their stereos. Some of the men from the vehicles blew up the front door of the house while others entered from the roof. Once inside they shattered doors with their boots, dragged the brothers from their beds and locked their mothers and sisters in the kitchen. The family told Nadia that the soldiers stole all the money and jewelry, then took the young men off to prison. You might have seen these brothers in pictures from Abu Ghraib or other prisons across Iraq and Afghanistan.

Nadia's home wasn't raided. But for weeks her nine-year-old spent much of the night crouched by her window waiting for the soldiers to come. Then she would crawl into bed with her mother and father and ask, "Is Iraq going to be like Palestine?" She had no idea what she meant, but she'd heard this on TV and it sounded bad. Iraq isn't Palestine. If one had to pick a historical analogy it might be Lebanon in the '80s, with

its many internal divisions, its fighters drawn from all over the Middle East, and its invention, or at least perfection, of car bombing and kidnapping as political tactics.

One reaches desperately for analogies. Iraq is like a backlashed fishing reel, so tangled it cannot be undone. The only choice is to cut it. Cutting it might mean the immediate withdrawal of the American troops. It might mean flattening another dozen towns like Fallujah. Or Iraq is a forest fire burning out of control, a fire that will end only when there is nothing left to burn. Or Iraq is a *Buffy* episode gone bad, with the gate dividing hell and earth flung open and the creatures of the netherworld swarming out to devour all.

The U.S. started this lawless, anarchic, slow-burn civil war. It didn't have to invade. When it did, the soldiers didn't have to stand around watching as Iraq was looted in May and June. They did, and the looting caused the initial hopes to be replaced by fear. Insurgents soon capitalized on and extended the fear, looting public buildings, libraries, universities, schools, hospitals, museums, and taking everything, right down to the copper pipes and the electric wire.

The U.S. didn't have to disband the Iraqi army, leaving 350,000 well-trained, well-armed young men unemployed, but when it did, it created an instant enemy class and security threat. The U.S. had no plan for repairing the electrical, water and sanitation systems. (Actually, the State Department had a plan. In one Senate office, an aide showed me 15 fat volumes called the "Future of Iraq" project, representing months of work done by a State Department team led by Thomas Warrick. Two months before the war, however, responsibility was transferred from the Department of State to the Pentagon. Warrick was fired by Donald Rumsfeld on orders from Dick Cheney.)

Iraqis don't know if the disaster is due to American malice or American incompetence. An official at the State Department said, in all earnestness, "What do we have to do to convince Iraqis that we aren't malicious? We're just stupid." I am not sure if that is true. The people behind this war are not stupid. In a similar situation during the Vietnam war, David Halberstam said of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and his colleagues: "They were brilliant, but they were fools."