



# Humiliation and Masculine Crisis in Iraq

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## Introduction

The truth is that there are hundreds of thousands of angry, humiliated, frustrated, powerless young men in the Islamic world. And what we have done in Iraq is make ourselves accessible to them. – General Wesley Clark, November 2003<sup>1</sup>

It is impossible to watch, as Iraq spirals out of U.S. control (I write at the end of April 2004), without noting the depth and combustibility of the masculine crisis that has taken hold in and around Iraq. The crisis is double-edged and dialectical; it has both Iraqi and American dimensions. The purpose of this brief article is to examine the parameters and politico-military implications of this masculine crisis, which can be defined as the traumatic psychological and material consequences of the inability, or threatened inability, to conform to masculine role expectations.

I focus in particular on the element of humiliation in masculine crisis. I also examine the crisis in terms of gender and human rights, something that is virtually never done in the case of male subjects. Building on many years of research into contemporary state repression, warfare, and genocide, I argue that it is typically

the case that militarized conflicts and uprisings lead to disproportionate violence against younger adult males – those of imputed “battle age” (military capability)<sup>2</sup>. Iraq is no exception. There, younger adult males constitute *the most vulnerable population group in the present occupation and military struggle*, if by “most vulnerable” we mean the group most liable to be targeted for killing, torture (including sexual torture and humiliation), and other acts of repression.

## Gender and Economic Crisis in Iraq

In the year that has passed since the U.S. “coalition” invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, basic infrastructure has remained in shambles, and the crisis of subsistence remains generalized. Crucially, unemployment appears to have increased from the Saddam Hussein era (to between 60 and 90 percent of the workforce), at the same time as the infrastructure of subsistence food distribution has faltered, and the prices of many basic goods (such as cooking gas) has skyrocketed.

Though female unemployment typically increases, relative to males, in times of transition, the picture in Iraq seems somewhat different. With the dismissal of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi soldiers, it may be that male



Saddam Saleh, a former prisoner in Abu Ghraib prison, shows a picture of the torture, humiliation and abuse they endured, May 17, 2004.

Picture Credit: Reuters/Oleg Popov

unemployment has increased more dramatically than in the case of women. These mass layoffs also likely exacerbated the humiliation that many Iraqi men, including these soldiers, felt after Iraq's rapid defeat on the battlefield. Furthermore, because of their suspicions about the political loyalties of Iraqi men, the occupation authorities have flown in contract workers from as far afield as Bangladesh and Nepal, rather than hiring locally. Economically desperate Iraqi men see this, too, as a humiliating slap.<sup>3</sup>

For women, as well, growing unemployment and confinement in the home (exacerbated by the widespread insecurity in Iraq) represents an enormous and humiliating setback. Nonetheless, it can be contended that given patriarchal role expectations, a failure to find formal or adequate informal employment impacts *existentially* upon men-as-men to a greater extent than upon women-as-women. In any case, given men's domination of the public sphere, this masculine crisis has direct and profound political consequences. The ranks of demobilized soldiers were probably the key ingredient in the early months of the Iraqi insurgency, while the more recent Shi'ite uprising has mobilized predominantly poor and unemployed men and male adolescents. As the BBC put it: "High unemployment is not just a waste of Iraq's enormous human resources, it also leads to trouble, with hundreds of thousands of young discontented Iraqi men finding they have not much to do – except perhaps confront coalition forces."<sup>4</sup>

The element of gendered humiliation that runs through this account seems vital to understanding the atmosphere of masculine crisis. American commentator Thomas Friedman defines humiliation as "the single most underestimated force in international relations."<sup>5</sup> The

Norwegian social scientist, Evelin Lindner, has explored the effects of humiliation and its companion, shame, in what she calls "honour societies" – including those of the Arab Middle East.<sup>6</sup> The most lurid face of shame and humiliation are perhaps the institutions of "honour" killing and blood feud that are common in the Arab World (along with regions such as the Caucasus and South Asia).<sup>7</sup> But their impact is more complex, subtle, and quotidian. Media reports have documented the central role of these quantities in fuelling rejection of, and

violent resistance to, the occupation. This is apparent also in the case of gender-selective victimization of Iraqi men by occupation forces.

#### **Gender-Specific and Gender-Selective Targeting of Iraqi Men**

Objective factors – particularly the socioeconomic ones just described – are vital in setting the contours of masculine crisis in Iraq. Also key, however, is the strategy of gender-selective victimization of Iraqi males that lies at the heart of U.S. occupation policies. The measures directed overwhelmingly at males include harassment, humiliation before family members, mass roundups, incarceration, torture, selective killing,<sup>8</sup> and denial of the right to humanitarian evacuation from besieged cities.<sup>9</sup>

Gender-selective repression is particularly evident in the forcible depopulation of males in conflict areas – including boy children and very old men. According to the *New York Times*: "American forces are still conducting daily raids, bursting into homes and sweeping up families. More than 10,000 men and boys are in custody ... [T]he military acknowledges that most people it captures are probably not dangerous." As a result, "entire swaths of farmland have been cleared of males – fathers, sons, brothers, cousins. There are no men to do men's work. Women till the fields, [and] guard the houses ... Iraq has a new generation of missing men. But instead of ending up in mass graves or at the bottom of the Tigris River, as they often did during the rule of Saddam Hussein, they are detained somewhere in American jails."<sup>10</sup>

This evisceration of the male population is often accompanied by the humiliating treatment of detainees in front of their families – forcing men to the floor and then placing soldier's boots on their heads is a prime example.

More masculine humiliation follows in detention facilities themselves. On the very day that I write, shocking photographs have been published worldwide and broadcast across the Arab world, showing baroque acts of degradation inflicted on Iraqi men imprisoned at the Abu Ghraib prison west of Baghdad. In the description of investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, one photograph depicts a female soldier,

a cigarette dangling from her mouth, [...] giving a jaunty thumbs-up sign and pointing at the genitals of a young Iraqi, who is naked except for a sandbag over his head, as he masturbates. Three other hooded and naked Iraqi prisoners are shown, hands reflexively crossed over their genitals. A fifth prisoner has his hands at his sides. In another, England stands arm in arm with Specialist Graner; both are grinning and giving the thumbs-up behind a cluster of perhaps seven naked Iraqis, knees bent, piled clumsily on top of each other in a pyramid. There is another photograph of a cluster of naked prisoners, again piled in a pyramid. ... Then, there is another cluster of hooded bodies, with a female soldier standing in front, taking photographs. Yet another photograph shows a kneeling, naked, unhooded male prisoner, head momentarily turned away from the camera, posed to make it appear that he is performing oral sex on another male prisoner, who is naked and hooded.<sup>11</sup>

It is hard to think of imagery more likely to fuel the rage of Iraqis, and particularly younger Iraqi men.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, we may look back on the release and widespread diffusion of these photographs as one of the most significant moments in the history of post-invasion Iraq. U.S. Senator Joseph Biden (D-Del.) went so far as to contend that “this is the single most significant undermining act that’s occurred in a decade in that region of the world in terms of our standing.”<sup>13</sup>

### Masculine Crisis and the U.S.

Feelings of humiliation figure strongly in the other side of masculine crisis in Iraq: that of the invaders, led by a president apparently seeking to avenge his father’s humiliation at the failure of the 1991 Gulf War to win him reelection, while Saddam Hussein remained in power throughout the 1990s. Jonathan Freedland captured this with some suggestive comments about humiliation and politico-military aggression:

A veteran New York political operative once told me: “Never underestimate the subtext of male violence that runs through American politics.” ... Bush feeds that glad-



Former Iraqi prisoners wave from a bus after they were released from Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad, May 14, 2004.

Picture Credit: Reuters/ALI Jasim

iatorial appetite skilfully. “Slowly but surely we’re going to hunt them down,” he warns the “bunch of cold-blooded killers” of al-Qaida. There will be no limp-wristed attempt to understand terrorism’s root causes. “See, therapy isn’t going to work,” he says to laughter. And, in a moment of pure Mafia-speak, he mentions an al-Qaida suspect caught by the US: “This guy is no longer a problem for America,” he says, with an implicit wink. You could be watching *The Sopranos*.<sup>14</sup>

There was humiliation, too, in the sophisticated and widespread insurgency against the US occupiers that left the US occupation reeling in April 2004. “In the space of two weeks,” notes the *Washington Post*, the insurgency “isolated the U.S.-appointed civilian government and stopped the American-financed reconstruction effort ... pressured U.S. forces to vastly expand their area of operations within Iraq, while triggering a partial collapse of the new Iraqi security services ... [and] stirred support for the insurgents across both Sunni and Shiite communities.”<sup>15</sup> This massive blow paralyzed the US authorities on the ground and shocked their masters in Washington, along with those trying to ensure George W. Bush’s reelection. The contrast between the macho “mission accomplished” rhetoric of the immediate post-conquest period, and the collapsing occupation structure at present, could hardly be more stark. Such contradictions injure a specifically masculine pride; they are the politico-military equivalent of a kick to the *cojones*.

As for the pathological machismo displayed by some of the occupying troops, it is to be expected – though never condoned – and it is secondary, both chronologically and logically, to its political counterpart. That the military lives and breathes this gender ideology hardly needs emphasizing, after two generations of diligent feminist criticism

on this count.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, under conditions of protracted occupation of an alien population whose public face ranges from the sullen to the murderously hostile, the stress and isolation have increased, while discipline and self-esteem have declined; and so it is that once- or sometimes-stable masculinities have tilted towards abuse and atrocity.

### Conclusion

This short article has contended that a multifaceted masculine crisis is central to understanding patterns of opposition and insurgency during the first year of the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq. Enormous material damage and psychological trauma has been inflicted on the children and

women of Iraq. However, the specifically male/masculine crisis of post-conquest Iraq has direct and decisive politico-military implications. Economic hardship and unemployment have played a key role in fuelling anti-occupation sentiment among men, often leading them into the swelling ranks of the violent opposition. Likewise, the gender-selective repressive measures deployed by the occupation forces has spawned a gendered backlash. A skein of masculine humiliation pervades all these phenomena, and is also highly relevant to the masculine crisis. A more generalized comparative understanding of these phenomena provides powerful insights into dynamics of repression and resistance worldwide.

### END NOTES

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1. Clark quoted in *Business Week*, 24 November 2003, p. 43.
2. The selective targeting of "battle-age" men, both combatant and non-combatant, has roots deep in human civilization and human conflict. The organization that I direct, Gendercide Watch ([www.gendercide.org](http://www.gendercide.org)), confronts gender-selective killing of both women and men. Among our central contentions is that "state-directed gender-selective mass killings have overwhelmingly targeted men through history, and that this phenomenon is pervasive in the modern world as well." One of the grimmest examples of recent decades is the Anfal Campaign of 1987-88 against Iraqi Kurds, when up to 180,000 people – overwhelmingly male civilians – were consumed in the Ba'athist holocaust. For scholarly treatment of the theme, see Adam Jones, ed., *Gendercide and Genocide* (Memphis, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004); on Anfal, see the Gendercide Watch case study at [http://www.gendercide.org/case\\_anfal.html](http://www.gendercide.org/case_anfal.html).
3. See "Jobs for the Boys – and for Foreigners," *The Economist*, 11 October 2003, p. 48.
4. "Iraq Unemployment," BBC Online, 6 January 2004. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/newsnight/3372029.stm>
5. Thomas Friedman, "Thomas L. Friedman Reporting: Searching for the Roots of 9/11," CNN International, October 26, 2003.
6. Evelin Lindner defines "humiliation as the enforced lowering of a person or group, a process of subjugation that damages or strips away their pride, honor or dignity." She cites Suzanne Retzinger and Thomas Scheff's finding that "humiliated fury" plays a major role "in escalating conflict between individuals and nations." Lindner, "Gendercide and Humiliation in Honor and Human-Rights Societies," in Jones, ed., *Gendercide and Genocide*, pp. 40, 45.
7. For an overview, see Gendercide Watch, "Case Study: 'Honour' Killings & Blood Feuds," [http://www.gendercide.org/case\\_honour.html](http://www.gendercide.org/case_honour.html).
8. Selective, at least to the extent that men of "fighting age" are

viewed en bloc as a threatening force, with fire directed accordingly. This should not efface the apparently indiscriminate, but withering, "counterfire" frequently directed by U.S. forces against predominantly civilian quarters and populations.

9. In April 2004, Iraqi males of "fighting age" were routinely prevented from leaving besieged Fallujah. On other occasions, only males accompanied by children were allowed to leave, leading to desperate scenes of men accosting children near the checkpoints and seeking to pass them off as their own in order to escape. The South African Sun Times reported an encounter with a "young Marine [who] tells us that men of fighting age can't leave. 'What's fighting age?' I want to know. He contemplates. 'Anything under 45. No lower limit.'" See Jo Wilding, "U.S. Snipers Shoot Anything That Moves," *Sun Times*, 18 April 2004.
10. Jeffrey Gettleman, "As U.S. Detains Iraqis, Families Plead for News," *New York Times*, 7 March 2004.
11. Seymour M. Hersh, "Torture at Abu Ghraib," *The New Yorker*, 10 May 2004. [http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?040510fa\\_fact](http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?040510fa_fact)
12. One survivor of alleged torture at Abu Ghraib, Dhia al-Shweiri, gave voice to the intimate link between masculine humiliation and misogyny. "They [American forces] were trying to humiliate us, break our pride. We are men. It's OK if they beat me. Beatings don't hurt us, it's just a blow. But no one would want their manhood to be shattered. They wanted us to feel as though we were women, the way women feel and this is the worst insult, to feel like a woman." Quoted in Scheherezade Faramarzi, "Iraqi Prisoner Details Abuse by Americans," *Associated Press dispatch*, 2 May 2004.
13. "U.S.: No Widespread Abuse in Iraqi Prisons," *Associated Press dispatch*, 2 May 2004.
14. Jonathan Freedland, "The Natural," *The Guardian*, November 5, 2002. The Sopranos is an HBO television program built around the lives and crimes of mafia gangsters.
15. Rajiv Chandrasekaran and Karl Vick, "Revolts in Iraq Deepen Crisis in Occupation," *Washington Post*, 18 April 2004.
16. See, recently and representatively, Cynthia Weber, *Faking It: U.S. Hegemony in a "Post-Phallic" Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).