

IRAQ IN FRAGMENTS



by Phil Hall

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2006, Un-rated, 94 minutes, Typecast Pictures

CREDITS

James Longley, who offered a harsh view of life under Israeli occupation in the excellent 2002 documentary "Gaza Strip," now offers an equally grim vision of life under American occupation in "Iraq in Fragments." Shot between 2003 and 2005, "Iraq in Fragments" presents a tragic view of the ruined nation as seen through the lives of the Iraqi people.

The film's title is double-edged – Iraq is obviously fragmented due to the endless violence that disfigures the country, and the production offers three different stories of Iraqi lives that have been caught up in the tumult. The first focuses on the 11-year-old Mohammed Haithem, who lives in Baghdad with his mother and grandmother. His father, a policeman under Saddam Hussein, had disappeared and it is not clear what became of him. Mohammed supports his family by working in an auto repair shop. He is not one for school (he's had to repeat first grade four times and cannot write his surname), and he is more than able to tolerate the harsh shop owner who employs him. Around him, helicopters and tanks are in constant motion and fires burn out of control. Mohammed openly dreams of going somewhere overseas where life is placid.

The second segment takes place in Najaf, the epicenter of Moqtada Sadr's political power base. Sadr himself is not present in the film, but his lieutenant Shiek Aws as Kafaji is available to whip up the masses with Islamic theocratic speeches. Speaking of whipping, the Sadr militia runs its own police force and arrests any Iraqi who sell alcohol (that was tolerated in Saddam's secular regime, but not among the Muslim fundamentalists). Longley was present during the August 2004 uprising and offers a harrowing picture of life in that warzone.

The third segment takes place in Kurdistan, in northern Iraq. Although part of the country, it seems like another world – complete with its own flag and language. Many of the Kurdish people are fiercely anti-Arab and there is great talk of splitting away from the Shia-Sunni provinces, thus ensuring a permanent fragmentation of Iraq.

The American military occupiers are not front-and-center here – we see them in quick glimpses driving their tanks through the streets or standing on the street corners with weapons ready for gunfire. Longley has a strange habit of capturing the least attractive soldiers on camera (usually some dumb-looking guy in an ill-fitting uniform who is absent-mindedly chewing gum).

What is front-and-center, however, is a population who are both weary of war and seething at the state of their nation. Much of the sentiment here belies any notion of progress in Iraq: the people say rueful things like “And I used to complain about Saddam!” and “Today is better than tomorrow!” while looking mournfully at the wreckage that encroaches into their world.

Many documentaries about the conflict in Iraq focus on the American military personnel, to the point of completely ignoring or dehumanizing the Iraqi civilian population. “Iraq in Fragments” offers the Iraqis a rare chance to share their anger and their lives with the outside world. The resulting production is a raw and powerful film that demands to be seen.