

# NEW YORK TIMES

## Contemplating Iraq's Pain With a Cinematic Collage



An 11-year-old named Mohammed with his boss in Baghdad, as seen in "Iraq in Fragments." Typecast Releasing

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An elderly Kurdish man, speaking in James Longley's documentary ["Iraq in Fragments,"](#) predicts that his country will inevitably be divided into three parts. A few moments later an unseen child's voice casts doubt on that prophecy and asks how you cut up a country. "With a saw?"

Mr. Longley, who captured the images in this haunting, oblique film during trips to Iraq between February 2003 and April of last year, offers no ready answer to that question or any other. His is not the kind of documentary that presents an analysis or argues, even implicitly, for a particular point of view.

The title seems to refer as much to the filmmaker's method as to the content of his film, which is lyrical and impressionistic. Rather than focus on the experiences of American soldiers, as did [Michael Tucker](#) and Petra Epperlein in "[Gunner Palace](#)," or follow the expanding shelf of books that discuss the background and consequences of American military policy, "Iraq in Fragments" dwells in the hectic immediacy of daily life. From 300 hours of material, Mr. Longley has created a collage of images, sounds and characters, an intimate, partial portrait of an unraveling nation — a portrait that gains power partly by virtue of its incompleteness.

Arriving in theaters today after being shown at several festivals, including Sundance, "Iraq in Fragments" feels both timely and prophetic, given the current levels of sectarian violence. But even as Mr. Longley glimpses the sources of that division, he does so in a way that is remarkably contemplative, at times even serene. That is partly because his narration is supplied by Iraqis who use their conversations with him to reflect and philosophize.

The first section of the film focuses on Mohammed, an 11-year-old boy who lives in a working-class Sunni neighborhood in Baghdad, where he is employed by a mechanic whose main activities seem to be smoking cigarettes, talking politics and humiliating his young helper. At first glance the relationship between Mohammed and his boss, a father figure whom the boy seems to love in spite of the mistreatment, has little evident connection to the larger situation in the country. But Mohammed's fearful, adoring attitude toward his employer comes to seem like a miniature parable of life under a dictatorship.

The question of legitimate authority — and the related question of what, in this fragmentary country, democracy might look like — hovers over the other two sections of “Iraq in Fragments,” which deal with militant Shiite followers of [Muktada al-Sadr](#) in Nasiriya and Najaf, and then with Kurds living in a village outside of Erbil.

The Shiite section, narrated mainly by a thoughtful young cleric, Sheik Aws al-Khafaji, is full of images of sectarian commitment that verge on the fanatical. Young men at a religious procession flog themselves with chains; others, their faces covered, converge on an outdoor market, where they beat and detain suspected vendors of alcohol, who accuse their attackers of being new Saddams.

After such chaos, the Kurdish region looks downright pastoral, though there is a scene of voting-day chaos in which police scuffle with some voters, while poll workers patiently tell others which party to vote for. Although everyone in the film expresses a desire for normalcy and peace, the Kurds seem closer to achieving it than their fellow citizens.

Since “Iraq in Fragments” was finished, the fragmenting of Iraq appears to have accelerated, but the film is not easily summarized as a text of hope or a brief for despair. It is instead an invitation to look again and afresh at a country many Americans may be tired of thinking about, and to be reminded of the complicated human reality underneath the politics.

## **IRAQ IN FRAGMENTS**

*Opens today in Manhattan.*

Directed by James Longley; in Arabic and Kurdish, with English subtitles; director of photography, Mr. Longley; edited by Billy McMillin, Fiona Otway and Mr. Longley; music by Mr. Longley; produced by John Sinno and Mr. Longley; released by Typecast Releasing and HBO Documentary Films. At [Film Forum](#), 209 West Houston Street, west of Avenue of the Americas, South Village. Running time: 94 minutes. This film is not rated.