

NEWSDAY --- MOVIE REVIEW: 'IRAQ IN FRAGMENTS'

How Iraq lost its dictator but gained '100 Saddams'

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"How can you cut a country in pieces? With a saw?" asks a Kurdish boy in "Iraq in Fragments," considering an elder's opinion that their nation will have to split in three in order to resolve the current unrest.

As if trying to acclimate us to the prospect of a trisected Iraq, James Longley divides his prescient and sobering portrait into three chapters depicting his journeys into Sunni, Shia and Kurdish enclaves. In the first and most emotionally compelling, an 11-year-old auto mechanic named Mohammed serves as our eyes and ears in a bombed-out Baghdad, where we hear men in cafes grouse about the American occupation and wax nostalgic for the days of Saddam: "Sure he was hard on us, but he would never have left us in this situation."

In part two, Longley travels between the Shia-dominated Nasiriyah and the holy city of Najaf to capture the roiling atmosphere of regional elections among the followers of Muqtada al-Sadr. Anxiety and despair inform the lives of indigent families under this severe authority, as witnessed by the brutal arrests of men suspected of selling wine. "Is this democracy?" asks one, adding, "They kick out Saddam and replace him with 100 Saddams."

The black smoke of brick kilns on a Kurdish farm hangs over the third part, in which an elderly farmer recalls Saddam's destructive legacy in the area's villages and the end of unity between religious sects.

Of all the documentaries to come out of the current war, "Iraq in Fragments" is the least violent and perhaps the most disquieting. Longley locates a visual lyricism in the tumult and rubble: The poetic images he collects from a traumatized land act upon us in a way not dissimilar to Francis Ford Coppola's gorgeous napalm clouds in "Apocalypse Now." A more hopeful version of "Iraq in Fragments" would have left us with the end of part one, as Mohammed liberates himself from his abusive boss to work for a relative. As he exclaims defiantly, "I will never go back!" he seems to speak for an entire war-wounded populace.