Resistance and remembrance: History-telling of the Iraqi Shi'ite Arab refugees women and their families in the Netherlands

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Chapter three
Unveiling the Untold Tales of the Gulf Wars
And the Crushing of March 1991 Shi'ite Uprising:
History-telling of the Iraqi Shi’ite Arab Women in The Netherlands

Captive captive
when are you coming home
Why the Dove of love is captive
Dove of love
Your place is empty
In your nest three little birds and a mother
They afraid of the alien buzzard who is flying around
Captive captive
Captive Captive.
(Safaa one of the young informants)

The Cause of the Flight:
The Failed March 1991 Shi’ite Uprising and Subsequent Refugee Exile

In the last chapter, we talked about the effect of the Ba’ath policies on Shi’ite women.(al-Khali l Samir, 1990; Omer, 1994; Makkiah, 1994) In this chapter, I will discuss the effect of the Ba’ath foreign policies on the Shi’ite community. The external wars against Iran during the 1980s and then against Kuwaiti in the form of an invasion, and then with the United States in the early 1990s, all translated into respective internal wars against the Shi’ite community itself. The Iraqi government enforced totalitarian policies and practices against the Shi’ites in accordance to each outside conflict. This accumulated internal brutality led to anger and unrest among the Shi’ites and other oppressed communities in Iraq, which in turn, led to the Uprising of March 1991.

It is important to preface this chapter by explaining that many of the analytical points herein were made by the women I interviewed. Fully aware of the politics and policies that affected their lives, it was the women themselves who called my attention to the fact that every external Iraqi foreign policy of war was paralleled by an internal act of warfare against the Iraqi Shi’ite community. When the Iranian Revolution took place in 1979, a mass deportation of Shi’ites to Iran happened, in a government attempt to rid the country of Shi’ism. (Stapleton, 1993)

To understand what brought some 35,000 Iraqi Arab Shi’ites to Rafha Camp, one must first look at the cause of this Iraqi exile, the failed Uprising. The Iraqi Shi’ites were the main component of the southern Iraq popular uprising against the Saddam dictatorship and his Ba’ath regime. The March 1991 Shi’ite Uprising, in contrast to the Kurdish Uprising, was by and large cut off from coverage by the Western press, due to the inaccessibility of Iraq during the actual revolt. The Western journalists had had access to Kurdistan through Turkey, whereas to get to the Shi’ite Uprising28, they faced the nearly impossible task of passing the frontline of either the Republican Guard, Saddam’s armed forces surrounding the insurgents, or the Iranian army along the Iranian border. These two obstacles proved insurmountable by

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28 According to Faleh ‘Abd al-Jabbar in his analysis “Why the Intifada Failed”, “In March 1991, following Iraq’s defeat in the Gulf War, the Kurds of northern Iraq and Arabs of the south rose up against the Ba’ath regime. For two brief weeks, the uprisings were phenomenally successful. Government administration in the towns was overthrown and local army garrisons were left in disarray. Yet by the end of the month the rebellions had been crushed and the rebels scattered, fleeing across the nearest borders into Turkey or into Iraq’s southern marshes. Many of those who could not flee were killed in summary mass executions”. (Hazelton, 1994: 97)
any potential journalists. The result of this omission from international news has unjustly negated much of the Uprising itself, much to the frustration of those who fought in it and survived its defeat.

That Uprising, which is now all but forgotten by both Arab and Western public opinion, has been veiled in misinterpretation. This chapter will explore the levels of betrayal that Iraqi Shi‘ites endured before, during, and after the failed Uprising. At the same time, this chapter will also explore the meaning and the effect of the two Gulf wars (Iraq-Iran war 1980-1988 and the Invasion of Kuwait in 1990-1991) on the personal level. This chapter will investigate the implications of these ordeals. More specifically, how were these events perceived as traumatic on the personal level? How have the women interviewed in this study perceived the two Gulf wars in their collective memory and personal memory within the context of the Uprising in particular?

The Iraqi Shi‘ite Community and the Ba‘ath Regime ideology:

In an attempt to understand the clash between the Iraqi Shi‘ite community and the Ba‘ath regime ideology, we must first address the issues of Iraqi nationalism and Arab identity, which are paradoxically at the center of both sides. The Shi‘ite of Iraq have a deep connection to both their country and to their Arab-ness. The Ba‘ath regime, however, contests both of these connections in their attack on the Shi‘ites, claiming that the Shi‘ite are not fully Arab, but rather Persian, and thus not truly Iraqi. This argument is a politically crafted strategy to rouse Pan-Arab sentiment in their favor against Shi‘ites everywhere—including in their own country. As Samir al-Khalil summarizes the term in his book *Republic of Fear,* “Pan-Arabism takes itself very seriously.” Later in his study, he describes the Arab as one whose faith lies in his identity as a member of the Arab nation. (al-Khalil: 1989, 155, 196). It is a measure of identity that reaches such an extreme as to define the world simplistically into a racialized us, the Arabs, and them, the anti-Arabs. This extreme, though not prevalent everywhere in the Middle East is seen most clearly and most extremely within the Ba‘ath party of Iraq. In their rise to power, the Ba‘ath utilized the notion of ‘pure Arab-ness’ to rally a patriotism around a ‘purely Arab’ nation—Iraq.

Rend Rahim Francke, in an article “The Opposition”, defines Pan-Arabism as “a cultural concept but also a political imperative”. He states that Pan-Arabism has existed since nationhood began in the Middle East, in the 1920s, and that its goal is the unity of all Arab states into one eventual nation. (Francke, 1994: 161) Isam al-Khafaji also discusses the issue of Pan-Arabism in describing the Ba‘ath ideology, particularly in regards to the Shi‘ites. The party, in economic and political straits with the rest of the world, needed the support of the Middle East. Under the rallying cry of Pan-Arabist nationalism, Saddam could gain needed backing by other Arab countries. (al-Khafaji, 1994: 37) Kamil Abdullah, another political writer, describes how a dictatorship arises with a national consensus. He argues that if the government is ruled by a dictator such as Saddam, national unity comes only through totalitarian oppression. (Abdullah, 1994: 58) These articulations of Pan-Arabism help explain how the Shi‘ite, though patriotic toward Iraq, are nevertheless punished by their government for their un-Arabness and national disloyalty. The patriotism of the Pan-Arab rhetoric is a state enforced, politically motivated nationalism that does not represent the real feeling of connection people have for their country, but rather seeks to force the Iraqi citizens into a loyalty towards the Ba‘ath themselves.

To ensure nationalist conformity within the country, the Ba‘ath party staged a coercive campaign to eradicate distinction between the Ba‘ath follower and the normal citizen. Such slogans as “The good citizen is a good Ba‘athist!” and “Every citizen is a Ba‘athist even if he is not affiliated!” served these purposes. Zuhair al-Jaza‘iri, in an article of the Ba‘ath practices describes these tactics. The party’s primary goal was conformity of every individual within the country to a pro-nationalist follower of the Ba‘ath Party. (Jaza‘iri, 1994: 44) Affiliation to the Ba‘ath Party was the only method to being a good citizen. One’s patriotic duty was to support Saddam. The alternative was to be an enemy of the state, the country, and Arabism.

The Ba‘ath Policies against the Shi‘ite: Singled by their names:

The Shi‘ite, however, found that they did not fit this image. Their version of Iraqi culture and history involved their own religion, Shi‘ism. Since the Ba‘ath party did not recognize this religion as Arab or
Iraqi, the Shi’ites did not support them. As such, they were persecuted as enemies of the state, thus re-enforcing their own misgiving toward the state. The cycle of distrust grew into one of outright antagonism. Fardous, one of the middle-aged informants, who comes from an educated Shi’ite family, and is now in her mid-fifties, recalls the discrimination her son and others from the south encountered when they went for job interviews or sought placement in the military academy:

Like many other candidates from the south, their accent disqualified them. Also many of the Shi’ite men and women were disqualified because they were called Jafar, Abdel Hussein, Ali, Alawi or any other Shi’ite name. They would find it very difficult to gain admission in the military college. If he did get into the military, it would be in the lower cadres where he would always be on the front-line. This feeling of being discriminated against has created a great rift between the Shi’ite and the Sunni government. Sometimes we were refused those basic rights because of our names: Abdel Husayn, Ja’fer, Hayder, Ali etc. To them this implied that we were Shi’ites, and thus suspicious! Our rights to education and employment were also difficult to obtain since Shi’ites have been deprived of their rights ever since the Ba’ath took over the state.

In her story Jamila, one of the educated informants, now in her sixties, explained the relationship between the Shi’ite community and the Ba’ath.

In the early seventies the Ba’ath party plan was to win over the youth after securing control of the armed forces and the media. Saddam’s slogan was “If we win over the youth, we win the future.” That’s why the Ba’ath targeted the youth organizations and student institutions and prevented any other political activists from approaching them. At the time the only real challenge came from the forces of the religious Shi’ite youth. I remember that my brother J’afar used to go to the mosques every day to hear a discourse different from the Ba’ath discourse. It was a nationalist discourse. We were nationalists. But by then, according to the Ba’athists, to be a nationalist meant to be a Ba’athist. The Ba’ath discourse did not and still does not represent us, the Shi’ites of Iraq. Saddam said at a large meeting of the official Union of Iraqi Youth, that to win over/secure the youth it was necessary to achieve other objectives, namely to eradicate the roots of other political movements. That is why the Ba’ath party dissolved the Communist youth and the Shi’ite religious/political organizations. My brother Ali was a Shi’ite Communist. He was executed. During 1980, Saddam developed the expression of “faith in the line of the Ba’ath and the revolution”. So we the Shi’ite, felt that from then on we were being deprived of our status as citizens. We were not Iraqi citizens because we were and are not Ba’athist. Also in 1980 enormous pictures of the leader were distributed for display in public places and private homes. We had to look at our killer with respect and we had to show our love as well. The first thing the Shi’ites did during the Uprising was to tear down those pictures.

Another form of discrimination that was used against the Shi’ites was the prevalence of intolerable living conditions. Maha, one of the elderly informants, described the humiliation and hardship of growing up in state-induced slums due to their religion.

We had grown up in that environment and since our early childhood we were told of the suffering of al Husayn and that has affected our personalities. Whenever we moved towards the North we observed the differences in the conditions of living. There in the South we had no potable water or electricity, and the public utilities were all leftover from the mediaeval ages. The laws enforced migration into the cities. Within Baghdad, "Thawra" city was later named “Saddam City" and there were more than 2 million Shi’ites brought in to live there. Now in Baghdad the Shi’ites are more than 80% of the population. My father had two wives and was fond of the study of history. My mother was also fond of the study
The Shi'ite experienced countless forms of prejudice and repression by the state during the Ba'ath regime. The women’s narratives are filled with instances of discrimination, yet simultaneously, there are numerous stories of a strong sense of solidarity and survival among the Shi'ites.

**Threatened in their religion:**

*Prevention of the Shi'ite religious rituals: Tales of the women's bravery*

The Ba'ath party was targeting the Shi'ite community specifically due to their Shi'ite religion, which they viewed as a threat to the strength of their own power. Meanwhile, the Shi'ite intensified their own identity in the face of oppression, through their religion. As their religious rituals were targeted by the state, the Shi'ite found other means to establish their identity and maintain their religion.

More specifically, the government worked to prevent the Shi'ite religious rituals of commemration and rememberance of the members of the Holy Family of the Prophet Mohammed, which is the most central aspect of the Shi'ite religion. The practice of the prevention started after the first massacre of the Shi'ites by the Ba'ath regime in 1963-64, where the Shi'ite were considered the "enemies of the Revolution" and all of their political activities were banned. Their religious rites were limited only to those held in private homes and with permission from mudiriyat al-amn al-amma (General Security Directorate.)

While discrimination against the Shi'ites became apparent shortly after the Ba'athists regained power in 1968, the repression of the Shi'ites as such, can be said to have begun with the emergence of organized Shi'ite opposition to the regime in the late 1960s. In the late 1970s, the severity of the repression intensified as the growing Shi'ite opposition movement was increasingly targeted as an "enemy" of the regime. This was especially the case after the advent to power of the revolutionary Islamic government in Iran and the use of sporadic and ineffectual violence by the Islamist party al-da'wa.

Anyone with actual or alleged Iranian descent, even if they were, as was the case for most, Iraqi citizens who had lived in Iraq for several generations, were deported to Iran. In addition, any Shi'ite Muslim fundamentalist or Islamist was arrested, tortured, or executed. Clearly, the result of such drastic measures alienated the Shi'ite. Thus, the Shi'ite community has experienced citizenship much differently than the Ba'ath Iraqis, because they have maintained a markedly different political ideology not because they are a member of a different ethnic or religious group.

The first deportation was followed by propaganda to discredit the image of the specifically Shi'ite religious rites such as the majlis al-Husayniya as "backward culture." As a result these rites were completely banned in 1977. The general feelings of the Sunni regime in Baghdad, which equated the Iraqi Shi'ites with Iranians, coupled with the regime's suspicion that the Iraqi Shi'ites massively resented the war against Iran further intensified repression. This, in turn, made the practice of the Shi'ite religious rites grounds for execution or long term imprisonment.

The abandonment of the Shi'ite religious rites and the destruction of the Shi'ite religious culture had a deeper meaning and effect on the consciousness of the Shi'ite refugee women. In their accounts, these women profoundly resent the denial by the Sunni Ba'athist government of the Shi'ite right to practice their religious rites. For them these rites are an essential aspect of Shi'ite women's culture, providing an

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29 For more information on how the Ba'ath Party was targeting the Shi'ite community see Stapleton, 1993; al-Bayati, 1994; al-Shahristani, 1994

30 In 1988, the ministry of culture and mass communication produced series of publication called "fi al-Thaqafa wa al-hareb" "culture of war" which targeted the image of the Shi'ite community in south of Iraq. These publications aimed at showing the Shi'ite as loyal to Iran. Therefore, they were the enemy of the Saddam's regime and enemy of the state.
occasion for women's solidarity in the most organic rather than abstract or ideological sense of "solidarity". Shi'ite public funeral services were also restricted and even prohibited at times, particularly in the cases of soldiers dying in combat or in state executions.

“Azizah” one of the elderly informants and a mullaya, a religious authority who conducts majlis al-Husaynia, risked persecution if not arrest for her activities. This is her story:

On the 5th of Moharram in 1977 the police came to my house. They searched the house and found my collection of poems and stories about Al-Hussein. They also found other Shi'ite women's collections of poems and stories that were kept by me from generations and generations of my grandmothers and other women's mullaya in the family. I lost all of them and with them I lost my identity, my culture, my work and a complete collection of the history of Shi'ite women.

Kawther, one the middle-aged informants and was a mullaya, an attractive woman with a strong personality. She suffered an even more violent reaction from the authorities because of conducting of the sacred rites.

I was taken by the security because I had organized and led recitations in my house in celebration of the birthday of Sayedna El Husein. It was officially prohibited. We were preparing food for the festival when one of our neighbors, a woman, visited us. She asked whether we would be celebrating the event and we invited her to join us. She did not return, but later on during the recitations, we were taken unaware by the police who entered our house. They took me to their station and I told them that it was an ordinary reading attended by a few women only and that the regime had not been mentioned. I was told even that was strictly prohibited. I maybe couldn't tolerate that and began to shout at them, insulting them, and accusing them of being unjust and violating the peace of the people. Three gigantic men started beating me to the point of unconsciousness! They hit me on every part of my body, later dragging me to a very small cell where I was to be detained. When I came to I felt a cold liquid around my genitalia, to my astonishment it was blood. I looked in between my thighs to see what had happened and the pain there was unbearable. I was left sitting there and could not even extend my legs due to pain and to the tiny area of the cell. They began to give me coffee and tea every half an hour and they commanded me to drink. I could not sleep or eat and was terrified because in spite of the agony eventually I would have to urinate. After three days they let me go unaccompanied on my feet to my house. I was in dirty clothes and they intended that all the people would take notice of me and hence receive the message and would know as well what happened to me. I was a mullaya, [a religious scholar and leader] and that scene would degrade my image. I stayed at home for three consecutive years not participating in any recitations, even the remembrance of al-Husayn. In 1981 myself, my husband, my two sons and my daughter moved from Basra to the El Amara area where we stayed until the time of the Uprising when we went into exile in Saudi Arabia and then onto Holland.

In the face of such horrors, the Iraqi Shi’ite women have prevailed by continuing their religious traditions in spite of the brutal persecution they have faced by the Iraqi government. Resistance is a key element of all of the life-stories I have collected in this study. Fatima, one of the key informants, tells a moving narrative of resisting the Ba’ath control.

We had a butcher who was accustomed to slaughtering an ox in Muharram [Muslim holy month] each year. The police took him in detention for ten days without the knowledge of his family. This was done to him because they forbade him from slaughtering in Muharram! Next year he slaughtered two oxen! It was
ordinary to do something special in Muharram even for a young, recently married woman. I remember when I got married I prepared much food and distributed it to the poor without getting fearful of the government orders. I did it without thinking of any bad consequences! We do it in worship for the month. The religious ceremonies of commemoration of the Prophet’s Family are a holy duty that we fulfill in their honor during Muharram, as well as other occasions like the memories of their birthdays & deaths. We learned this naturally from our observation in our families! Wearing black dress had its own meaning for Shi’ites, but this was forbidden. And a man would be permitted to wear black only if he had his brother assigned as a martyr! Inspired by this prohibition, people insist on wearing black especially during the month of Muharram! The security considered every man dressed in black as either a member of Dawaa Party or as a fanatic Shi’ite. People now almost all dress in black, neglecting the orders to do otherwise.

The Shi’ite community resistance to the Ba’ath policies was consistent and brave. Many of the narratives, including Fatima’s above, describe how the community courageously overrode state prohibitions to continue their religion and their identity in opposition to the state. Undaunted by the thoroughness of the totalitarian control, they maintained their rituals and their community.

The State’s War against the Shi’ites:

Many women in their narratives expressed frustration at the fact that every external conflict of the Iraqi government was paralleled by an internal attack against the Iraqi Shi’ite. Most notably, the aggressive foreign relations with Iran leading up to and during the (1980-1988) Iran-Iraq War were waged internally as well, with the Shi’ite as the victims. Before looking into the women’s own comments and stories regarding this trend, it is important to review the political history between Iran and Iraq.

In the long history of relations31 between Iran and Iraq, social, political, and religious tensions have frequently manifested themselves in territorial disagreements. During the eras of Islamic empires, Western imperialism, and modern nationalism numerous territorial treaties have been concluded. Persons alleged to be of Iranian descent, even if they were Iraqi citizens who had lived in Iraq for several generations, as was the case for most were deported in mass, and Shi’ite Muslim fundamentalists or Islamists were arrested, tortured, and executed. (Stapleton, 1993: 25) The Shi’ite community has experienced a different type of citizenship than the Ba’ath Iraqi because they have a different political ideology, not because they are a member of a specific ethnic or religious group.

Women’s Tales of Deportation: Physical and Symbolic Displacement

Deportation was a primary form of the Ba’ath oppression against the Shi’ite. Although this matter is an internal issue between the Shi’ite community in the south of Iraq and their government, it can be understood within the framework of the relationship between Iran and Iraq, as discussed above.

31 When Iraq became nominally independent under Britain in 1921, relations with Iran deteriorated. Iran wanted a new border drawn along the thalweg (line following the midpoint of the main navigational channel of a river) of the Shatt al-Arab; Iraq refused. After the Iraqi government fell in 1936, the new government of Hekmat Suleiman agreed to the adjustment along the thalweg in the Shatt al-Arab in the Frontier Treaty of July 4, 1937 between the kingdom of Iraq and the empire of Iran. Following the 1958 nationalist revolution in Iraq, the issue of the frontier re-emerged and remained a sore point in Iraqi and Iranian relations. Iran abrogated the 1937 treaty in 1969. Both Iran and Iraq encouraged their respective Kurdish populations into Separatist activity against each other. Iran occupied the Persian Gulf islands of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb. Iraq severed diplomatic relations with Iran. From 1971 to 1974 there were border confrontations between the two countries. Iraq took the dispute to the United Nations. A border settlement was reached with the signing of the Algiers Agreement of March 6, 1975. Within four years the border settlement was again disturbed in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution of 1979. (Gardiner 1988: vii-viii)
In the late 1970's, Iraq had an opportunity to become a leading Arab power, especially after Sadat's visit to Jerusalem and Egypt's decline as a nation with major power in the Arab world. After the outbreak of the Islamic revolution in Iran, there were fears in the Gulf of the spread of radical Islam, combined by a fear of possible Iranian aspirations of dominating the Gulf region. (Ibrahim, 1992: 9)

Also in the late 1970s, the Ba'athist regime started to blunt any Shi'ite opposition to its usurpation of power. Therefore the regime initiated the policy of periodically deporting Iraqi Shi'ites to Iran on the grounds of "Iranian origins". This meant that if a Shi'ite or his/her spouse had any Iranian ancestry, the entire family was deported directly to Iran. Despite Iraqi birth, Iraqi citizenship, Arabic language, and a deep collective sense of Iraqi-Arab identity, the Shi'ites were considered foreign by the Iraqi government.

These deportations were in direct opposition to an abiding sense of Arab identity within the Shi'ite community. Karima, one of the key informants, spoke strongly of this issue.

I grew up in the area of “Suwk ash-Shiukh” near Nasiriyah City. It was a rich area culturally. It was inhabited by urban dwellers mixed with Bedouins who had settled in the area at the beginning of the 20th century. Every group had its own habits and cultural heritage and of those mixed and intermingled, some of the rites were highly Islamic while others were not! A Bedouin could steal to get something home to show hospitality to his guest. Another could murder his female relative if she committed adultery while he himself could fornicate! These contradictory ideas showed the prevailing double standards. I was born in 1959 into the Hamdani tribe and was reared in these circumstances. Our tribe had its imprints in history and the Hamadani State which was ruled by Safe al-dawla al-Hamdani and Abu Faras al Hamdani the poet was also from our area. When their Hamadani state collapsed the rest dispersed all through Iraq and my descendants settled in the “Ahwar” area. My father used to recall this emigration and was proud of the presence in that area. The people in Ahwar were known to be from the Maaden tribe and they were highly informed about their historical heritage. Mi'dan was the name for both the tribe and the area. They live on fishing and bird hunting. They cultivate rice, but never other crops. Those who grow vegetables were referred to as “Hasawiya” meaning being less than a peasant! They all follow the dominating secular state saying that according to the Sunni an Oath would be given to the ruler for loyalty. We expressed our grievances in poetry. Our poetry was disseminated by oral telling especially the native type in which our accent was clear. We tended to choose the words that expressed our pains like “Ah” etc. Even the vanguards of our society were fond of that poetry. We repeated the verb “Jaa” to express our sadness.

Her story reflects the consciousness and subjectivity of the Shi'ite community and their use of their Arabic language to confirm their Arab identity. This is the only choice they have. The Shi'ites are highly aware of their history, of their ancestry, of their cultural legacy and of their own subjugation in the present state of affairs.

The first wave of deportation to Iran:

In the early 1970s the Ba'athist regime, claiming the excuse of Iran's overtaking of the Arab islands of Abu Musa and the two Tunbs in the Straits of Hormuz, attempted to blunt any early Shi'ite opposition to its power. One hundred thousand Shi'ite were deprived of their possessions and forcefully expelled from Iraq to Iran. The wave of mass deportations began when Imam Sadar, one of the Shi'ite opposition and religious leader, was executed. Opposition sources say that up to three hundred fifty thousand Shi'ites, with only the clothes they were wearing, were dumped onto the Iranian border on the pretext of having "Iranian origins." The deportations were justified by the state on the grounds that those deported were a “fifth Column”. The bulk of the second wave of deportations occurred before war began with Iran, but they raised little opposition among
writers, who did not even question the Iraqi regime's claim that those expelled were "Iranian", and, moreover, they gave the lowest estimate (thirty thousand) as the number deported. (Helms, 1984; Stapleton, 1993)

Tension remained between Iran and Iraq throughout the 1970's. This corresponded to tension within Iraq against the Shi'ites. For the Shi'ite any tension on the border represented tension in the Shi'ite community and thus in the women's own homes.

Soheir, one of the elderly informants, came from a prominent and once influential family. The deportations severed her family, took their land, and destroyed her father.

When the government declared in 1970 that people of Iranian origin should go back to Iran, my father's name was on the list of deportees. And that was despite the fact that my great grandfather was born in Al-Basra. My father, my mother, my two sisters and my youngest brother were all deported even though their birth certificates, their passports and all their other legal papers stated they were Iraqi. I wasn't deported with them; probably because I was not with them in the same house. I was living with my husband in a small village far away from them, near Shatt al-Arab. My father was a banker. He had land and he was rich. When the government deported my family they took the house and the farm. On their way to Iran my father died of a heart attack. He had been angry. He felt he had lost everything: his country, his health, his home and his wealth and on top of that his identity and his nationality.

Her father and his grandfather and his great grandfather had all been born in Iraq, but his great-great grandfather was Iranian: he had moved in the eighteen century to al-Najaf, one of the great centers of Shi'ite learning and he taught at al-Najaf University for years. He (the great-great grandfather) was married to an Iraqi woman and lived with her all his life in al-Najaf and never went back to Iran and so did their children. Clearly such injustice wreaked havoc upon the Shi'ite community.

This tension between the Shi'ite of Iraq and their Ba'ath regime mounted in 1974 during the Year of the Poisoned Crop, Sanat al-Hinta. Habiba, one of the elderly and key informants recalled this year in her story:

In Sanat al-Hinta [year of the poisoned crop] thousands and thousands of Shi'ite lost their lives from eating the poisoned crop. The Ba'athist did it. They did not want us in Iraq. They want all the Shi'ite of Iraq dead. Why? [long silence] Sanat al-Hinta We starved. We did not have enough food to eat. All of the farmers' savings of food had gone. If you ate one meal a day you were a king. None of the neighbor countries helped us. [sarcastic laugh] None of them were Arab or Ijam32. The Ba'athist wanted to kill us and the world was watching.

In the same year 1974, the year of poisoned crop, the Shi'ites turn their religious parade from Najaf to Karbala to a political demonstration expressing their anger and opinion of the Ba'ath regime's act which they viewed as a deliberate attempt to poison them. That demonstration took place on Ashura day, which is the tenth and the last day of celebrating the rituals of remembering al-Husayn, and it is the same day al-Husayn was martyred. During this demonstration, the police ravaged anyone remotely involved. Thousands of Shi'ite are believed to be killed and thousands were imprisoned and injured in the crushing of the demonstration. The government retaliated with such harshness to strike at the particular Shi'ite-ness of the protest. Its strong religious character and cultural solidarity were a powerful message, to the country and to potentially to the world, of Shi'ite identity in the face of Ba'ath power. Thus the Ba'ath were adamant about stopping this protest as quickly, as publicly, and as harshly as possible.

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32Non-Arabic speaker and this term is used especially for the Iranians.
The Second Wave of Deportation:

In 1979, Sadar, the leader of al-da’wa al-Islamyia was publicly infusing political appeal with Shi’ite references. He worked, for the first time ever in Iraq, in calling for religious leadership to guide the political destiny of the country. The government responded to this political move by deporting thousands of wealthy Shi’ites to Iran because they were in a position to fund the opposition to the regime. In addition, the Iraqi government forced many Iraqis of Iranian origin to go to Iran after 1979. In 1979, Iran, of course, was in the midst of a major revolution, bringing Khumaini to power with a new government of Islamic rule. Meanwhile, the Iraqi representatives stated that even the Shi’ite Iraqis of Iranian origin who were living in Iraq and had escaped deportation, were ill treated and denied government positions. Under increasing restrictions and oppression, on the right of Iraqis of Iranian origin, who were expelled to Iran after 1979, to return to Iraq. The second wave deportations in 1979 were carried out in an even more brutal manner than the first. According to Soaad one of the mid-aged informants:

We were forbidden to take anything but the clothes we were wearing. We were forced to walk long distances in mountainous terrain with no water or food. We were literally dumped on the Iranian border The Iranians were not very welcoming either. [Long silence] We suffered a lot.

The relatives of those deported as the women mentioned in their account were frequently arrested and held for investigation, which meant torture. The deportations helped induce a state of fear throughout the entire Shi’ite community, except for those few who were members of the Ba’ath party and serving in the party’s security forces.

This second wave of deportation was a big operation that targeted many people who were labeled tabi’ya (followers) by the regime, due to their alleged following of Iran. The regime persecuted them and confiscated their often-extensive properties. They were deported to Iran; stripped of their citizenship and their assets were sold off in auctions. Soaad’s narrative expresses the anger many Shi’ites felt at this cruel injustice. During the deportation to Iran many Iraqis did not survive. Soaad said that she thought the deportation was a political act against the Kurd and the Shi’ite. In Iran the status was no better, she recalls:

The Iranians they hate the Iraqi. We are Iraqis...[silence] ...Iraqis in Iran but not in our own country. For the Iraqi Shi’ite the situation in Iran was no better. We have no legal status, no papers, no citizenship and no trust.

1980: The beginning of Iran-Iraq War:

In May 1980, Iraq invaded Iran, thus beginning the Iran-Iraq War. That month, both Sadar al Hakim and his sister Bint al-Huda were executed. Karima, one of the elderly and key informants described below the isolated, trapped position of the Shi’ite community in the aftermath of these two horrific events.

Betrayed by both sides, the Shi’ite deportees did not feel a sense of belonging to either the Iranian or to the Iraqi governments. This schism even began to divide their marriages. The women mentioned in their narratives that in 1981 the Iraqi government issued a degree that men of Iranian origin should divorce their Iraqi wives. Using financial grants as motivation, the government rewarded the separation of what they viewed as “mixed” marriages. Many women confessed that the incentives were tempting: 4,000 dinars for a soldier and 2,500 for a civilian. Often, this was more than the husband’s annual salary.

33 al- Da’wa al-estamiya is the first Shi’ite of Iraq political movement. It was born form a background of Shi’ite disaffection from their religious institutions. Saddam Hussein choose a stick-and-carrot policy. He had five members of the al-da’wa executed in 1974, and another eight in 1977. He ruthlessly put down demonstrations in the wretched Shi’ite quarter of Baghdad, al-Thowra, and had no hesitation in sending in tanks to attack the procession celebrating the 40th day after Ashura at Najaf in 1977. al-Da’wa al-Islamiya (Islamic Call) was founded and reputed to have the blessing of Ayatollah Muhain Al-Hakim, who was regarded by Iraqis as the senior marja’ al- taqlid of the Shi’ite world. The Daw’ah’s initial support came mainly from younger and lower-ranking ulama. It was also reputed to have been financially backed by the Shah of Iran according to Batatu and others.
Although the majority of the men and women, despite their financial need, did not divorce, some marriages did end at this time.

For these women deportation and encouraged divorces meant forcible family separation. The Saddam regime was targeting the Shi'ite community and the Shi'ite tribal and familial unity. The brunt of the Iran-Iraq war and its aftermath fell upon the Shi'ite of southern Iraq, whose lives, families, and identities had been torn. In the years 1980-1982, following the execution of "bint al-Huda" and her brother "Al-Sadr", the state of aggression was raised against the Shi'ites. Shi'ites were arrested for trivial reasons and were executed simply for their being Shi'ites. Many were lost this way.

I was dismissed from the boarding house when I was only 15 years old because I poured water on a colleague girl of mine. I was returned to the hostels only after much mediation. That was meant to make us feel that we were under continuous surveillance. The state suspended those who regularly carried out their religious duties. University students had been executed simply because they had said their prayers in the nature in the mosque! Others were detained in places not known to their families for lengthy periods. These intimidator measures were practiced exclusively on the Shi'ites whilst the Sunnis were free to do whatever they wished in terms of prayers and self-expression. Often the Shi'ites that were released from detention were disabled.

These prejudices paved the way for even more deportations in a wide-scale attempt by the Ba'ath to rid the country of Shi'ism and Shi'ites. Iran, however, soon returned two hundred thousand of the deported Iraqis back to Iraq. According to these figures, the numbers of relatives of those deported that were imprisoned by the regime was most likely huge. The regime also began attacking Shi'ite religious sites. In March 1980, laws were passed that ceased the traditional independence of the Shi'ite corporate revenues, which controlled the collection, allocation and distribution of income and supervised the upkeep of all Shi'ite holy shrines. In January 1980, an order was issued exempting members of the religious classes from military service. The goal of this was to prevent them from having any power in the army, so that they would only constitute the lower ranks, which were already dominated by the Shi'ite. By the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war, the seeds of the internal Shi'ite opposition had been planted. (Batatu, 1989: 589)

**Shi'ite Women's Tales of Iran-Iraq War:**

Beside the direct effect of the relations between Iran and Iraq on the deportation of the Shi'ite Iraq to Iran, other forms of the Ba'athist policies were inflicted upon the Shi'ites. Such policies included forced conscription into the army, placement at the frontline, and punishment against the army deserters and their families. Often, the families of the soldiers were punished more harshly than were the soldiers themselves. Nevertheless, the sense of familial solidarity ran high among the Shi'ites during the Iran-Iraq War.

Since a man's time in the army could last anywhere between five to eight years, the general feeling among the southern Iraqi Shi'ites was to get the man married at an early age for three reasons. First, he would have had the chance to have a wife and family, in case he did not survive the war. Second, if he died, his children would make sure that the family lived on. Third, if he survived, he would have a reason to return home and not to flee. Consequently, the women also married very young and then spent most of their lives waiting for their husbands to return, while raising the children and frequently becoming the breadwinners.

Conscription and subsequent desertion made many Iraqi women, and particularly mothers, intensely protective of what remained of their families. During the Iran-Iraq war, widespread desertions occurred only at times when the government lost control. During these short and rare periods, many of these deserters fled to the Shi'ite marshlands in the southeast of Iraq. (Stapleton, 1994: 22) Increasingly, unrest began to develop in the army. Even among those who did not desert, troops were hungry, angry, and restless to escape the confines of a war they did not want to fight.
“Hosniah” one of the mid-aged informants was devastated when her son deserted the army in 1989 and simply disappeared. Some were caught at checkpoints, shot on the spot and buried on the spot. Other deserters reached the marshes where they joined resistance groups and subsequently many died unrecorded deaths.

Not knowing what has happened to one’s own son is a terribly difficult situation. I have become a mental wreck. I don’t know whether he is alive or dead, in the army or in prison, in Iraq, Iran or a third country. My mind doesn’t dwell on my present surroundings [in the Netherlands.] I am lost in my thoughts, my fears and worries about my son. If only I knew what happened to him. The disappearance of my elder son made me extremely protective towards my second son. I was determined not to lose him too. One night, before the Uprising, I decided to take him to the Marshes, Al-Ahwar, where some of my relatives lived. We traveled on foot for two days and three days through farmland. It was enough for me to know that my youngest son was alive and safe. I used to visit him from time to time. These were difficult journeys both physically and mentally but the journey was worth the effort.

“Fatima”, in her early forties now, was also a war widow but she coped with her circumstances with what she acknowledged as a “hardness of heart.” With the approach of the allied armies she abandoned not only her homeland but also her responsibilities and without (she claims) any remorse.

There was no room for feelings and emotions. I had to leave behind all sentimentiality. I no longer had a heart; there was a piece of stone in its place.

That was the only path to survival, to face and overcome the dangers surrounding me. I left my two sons with their grandmother and fled for Saudi Arabia.

For some of the southern Iraqi Shi’ite women, the war was more than conscription of husband and/or brother and/or son sent off to fight in a distant war. Al-Basra and its suburbs and neighboring towns were under Iranian siege for much of the war. “Saleha”, one of the middle-aged informants, who lived in al-Basra at the time, realized the gravity of the situation and was careful and alert. She accepted the grimness of her reality, but refused to dwell on the dark side. She became tougher, but she also struggled to bring a ray of sunshine and happiness into her life and those around her:

I found myself facing the war and all its horrible ramifications. Dead bodies coming from the front and women mourning no longer had the same effect as before. The sound of gunfire didn’t frighten me any more. I had changed. I was no longer that woman who was affected by these scenes. I no longer dwelt on sad thoughts. I had additional responsibilities raising my children by myself. The war had qualified me for my new role: I could now create a meal in the most difficult circumstances. With the war we lost everything beautiful in our lives. Smiles vanished from people’s faces. If the war was going to continue I couldn’t stop it but I could do one thing, protect, and serve my family.

Saleha’s attitude of perseverance is nothing short of heroic when one considers the obstacles she, her family, and her community were facing. Such heroism took place in the home and in honor of the community, according to the women’s narratives. The battlegrounds, on the other hand, had nothing to do with heroism, since the war itself was not their war, thus they felt no connection to its fight.

Desertion intensified the hardship of conscription upon wives, sisters or daughters. If any of her male-relative deserted she was automatically brought in for interrogation and easily became the target for official revenge. If one of her male relatives was executed because of desertion (or for a political offense), or in certain cases even if he had died in combat, she was forbidden to mourn for him. And in the community in which she lived she became an outcast. This alienation was used as a means of subjugating the Shi’ite through fear. The concept of fear is central to all of the narratives regarding this period.

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The women's role in the Iraq-Iran War:

As the Iran-Iraq War continued, the role of political propaganda on the part of the Iraqi government increased dramatically. As Iran became more deeply entrenched as the nation's enemy, so too did the Shi’ite community become more deeply entrenched in the propaganda as the nation's potential enemy. Nevertheless, the Shi’ite of Iraq played a huge role in the war, particularly the Iraqi Shi’ite women.

During the Iraq-Iran war 1980-88, the Shi’ite women were the only household heads, market traders, teachers, and role models for the children. With no men in sight, the mothers took the burden of both male and female responsibilities. In addition to the already heavy workload of these responsibilities, these women devoted themselves to easing the pain of their ravaged families. They reassured their children and relatives and supported them in these difficult times. They provided their husbands and their male relatives with a sense of home and peace when they came back from war. Especially during the seven-day-a-month leaves each soldier was granted during the war, these women would be busy ensuring their comfort and rest.

Most of the men spent their vacations resting at the house, visiting the relatives of their soldier colleagues to tell them their news, or sitting with friends in the café telling stories about what was happening at the Front. Meanwhile, the women continued to be responsible for practically every aspect of domestic and community life when their male relatives were home. The women willingly and happily took on these responsibilities as their duties during war. This deep sense of care and self-sacrifice was a common and collective attitude reflected in their stories. Above all, the women derived joy from bringing comfort and happiness, whenever possible, to their families. These women also were happy that their male relatives returned alive from the war. Their return was a source of joy that encouraged them to celebrate their return to the utmost.

The women’s burden, however, increased when her husband did not come home. For “Ihsan”, one of the mid-aged informants, the news of death at the front, after years of waiting, can came almost as a relief, and faith can provide consolation. Her husband served at the front for five years during the Iraq-Iran War.

During those years, I was thinking all the time about him. But when my husband’s body was brought home, it was like a release to know that he was dead. Death is inevitable and I can deal with it. Because he died fighting he is a martyr and is alive in Heaven.

For some women like “Salwa” one of the middle age informants the eventual return of a conscripted husband meant new problems for the family:

When my husband left the for the Iran-Iraq war, he left me with my nine year old son. My husband stayed in Iran from 1980-1990 for ten years. The war ended in 1988 but he had been taken prisoner and the Iranians kept him for two more years. During these ten years, I lived with my son, who was nineteen when his father returned. I worked with my son to support us. I used to cook and my son use to sell the food at night after school. By doing that my son acted like the man of the family. When my husband came back, he found us changed. We were not the same people we had been when he left ten years ago. Many problems occurred between father and son. My son did not accept any orders from his father. He felt he was a man and not a child any more. Both of us felt that we had changed but my husband was the only one who had not. There was no peace in the family and even now, after we fled and have come to Holland, there is no peace in the family.

Safaa, one of the young informants, was a child of eight years old during the period of the Iraq-Iran War (1980-1988) She remembered who her mother used to play and sing for her and sisters and brothers. As

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34 For more information about the position of Iraqi women during Iraq-Iran War see Omar, 1994
Safaa remembered that her elder women relatives created during the war a distinctly melancholy genre of songs. Safaa still remembers the song her mother used to sing for her every night when her father was a captive in Iran.

My mother used to hug the three of us in her double bed and sing this song:

Captive captive
when are you coming home
Why the Dove of love is captive
Dove of love
Your place is empty
In your nest three little birds and a mother
They afraid of the alien buzzard who is flying around
Captive captive when are you coming home.
Captive Captive.

Despite the thrill and scare invoked by the war these women found a chance to reassure and amuse their children. The children themselves developed a means of survival that was highly precocious. They ingeniously transformed devastation into moments of connection. This transformation is a psychological method of perseverance and survival. Safaa described how, in the absence of good, she and other youth would seek joy in the worst of situations. Safaa also mentioned in her account how sad she was when she witnessed the adult responsibilities the youth had assumed since their childhood.

I was eight years old when my friend Najat, who was two years older than me, started to work. Najat had many brothers and younger sisters. Her mother was very poor and her father was fighting in the Front. After school hours Najat used to collect trash and garbage from houses so as to gain some extra money to help her family. Ultimately her father was shot. She had to quit school forever to work as a garbage collector to support her family.

Women played a large role in the Iran-Iraq War even though they were not on the frontline. Maintaining the home, the businesses, the family, and the community, the women shouldered male and female responsibilities as well as substantial grief and hardship. Nevertheless, they continued to encourage their husbands, children and each other throughout the War in the face of sorrow and persecution.

After the Iran-Iraq war ended in 1988, the naïve nationalism from Saddam’s wartime propaganda was less effective. Social and economic problems had grown severe by this time. Rather than alleviate the hardship of the Iraqi citizens, Saddam invaded Kuwait and conceded the Shatt al-‘Arab waterway to Iran in a political maneuvering. (Jabbar, 1994: 100) The people of Iraq felt betrayed and angry. Most of the women I interviewed mentioned in their narratives that eight years of their lives had been devastated for nothing. There became a marked split in nationalism during this time: the forced patriotism of Saddam’s regime and the genuine patriotic concern of the people that their nation was in danger.

As Maha, one of the middle-age informants, explained sorrowfully:

We suffered a lot during the years of the Iran-Iraq war. Our male relatives lost their lives, thousands of women became widows and thousands of children became orphans for nothing. Now the two governments are on good terms and we suffered for nothing.

This was the predominant feeling of those people who, from the beginning, had not wanted war, but had been forced by their government to enter the war. During the Iran-Iraq war, Iraqis enlisted in the Iraqi military service, the reluctant soldiers feared accusations of desertion or disloyalty to their country. They fought unwillingly in a war against their neighbors to escape the punishment of their own government, whose brutality was explained in Chapter Two, Life in Iraq.
The women spent these years suffering the brutal consequences of the war: dealing with death, war handicaps and the burden of supporting the family in difficult economic and social conditions. In addition, women, for the rest of their lives, had to confront the trauma, depression, and aggression of their husbands, the veterans, who suffered emotionally and psychologically from the effects of the war. In addition, some of these women mentioned that they still have husbands and sons imprisoned in Iran. For everyone involved, the trauma of Iraq-Iran War was still an open wound when the second Gulf War arrived. The Shi’ite community had experienced this trauma not just as individuals but as a community. In a direct attack on their identity as Shi’ite, persecution and humiliation characterized this period as much as the usual hardships of warfare. The Iraqi government had waged two wars, a declared war against Iran, and undeclared one against the Iraqi Shi’ite.

**Shi’ite Women’s Attitude towards the Two Gulf Wars:**

In the case of the second Gulf war, as Saddam planned the invasion of Kuwait, there arose a new patriotism, a popular nationalism that ran counter to the Ba’ath regime’s forced nationalism. When Saddam invaded Kuwait, many Iraqis were horrified, dreading yet another war. This was particularly true of the Shi’ites in the south of Iraq, who would constitute the core of the ground soldiers in the offensive. Many women in their accounts mentioned that their male relatives had just come home after a family separation of eight long war years, during which both men and women had suffered. The men wasted their youth at the front lines carrying their guns in one hand and their souls in another.

When the second Gulf War did come in 1990, the majority of the people accepted it only on the grounds that it might overturn the Ba’ath regime and topple Saddam Hussain. Nevertheless, they freely admitted to any international journalist their aversion to another war. Despite rampant promises made by the state that such a war would spur the economy, the Iraqi people were disgruntled with the prospect of more destruction and more of the Ba’ath regime.

Saddam labored to appeal to the Shi’ite population for support of the second Gulf War. Using Arab tribal symbols and Shi’ite references, he attempted to instill patriotism. Throughout southern Iraq posters were hung of Saddam as a traditional Shaykh. The Iraqi scud missiles launched at Saudi Arabia and Israel were given the names ‘Abbas and Husayn, two of the most beloved religious symbols in Shi’ism who were buried in Karbala in south of Iraq.

The Iraqi women suffered even more during the Invasion of Kuwait in 1990 than they had during the Iran-Iraq War. Financially, agriculturally, psychologically, the country was severely drained by nearly a decade of warfare. Before 1990 the national average salary was small but sufficient. Women told me that no one was starving in Iraq and everyone could still afford to feed and dress their children. The electricity and water were affordable. After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, however, the prices rose drastically. Tomato paste at 1/4 Dinar was suddenly sold for 3 Dinars. (The Dinar was then equal to 3 dollars.) At the start of the war, rice was sold for 60 fils, but during the war, it increased to 150 fils. Flour was hard to find, and even harder to afford. Many women lived in extremely difficult conditions, yet, still had to manage to feed their families. I heard many successful stories of how the women were able to manage the sparse official rations of ten kilos of flour and ten kilos of rice a month in order to feed their families.

Saddam’s regime considered the first and second Gulf wars national wars, fought in the name of Iraqi nationalism, with any victory being a victory for the Iraqi citizens. Yet, the women’s narratives tell a much different story. The women I interviewed have a great deal of disgust for both the first Gulf War of Iran-Iraqi War and the second Gulf War resulting from the invasion of Kuwait. The former, they consider a war waged completely for naught. Eight long years of futile violence over a tiny island, that, in 1991,

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35 For more information on war trauma see Bracken and Petry, 1998; Leydesdorff, 1999

36 Saddam would appear in traditional cloth with a (cofiya) turban on his head. For more information on how Saddam Husayn tried to win the Shi’ite support see the book of Bengio, 1992 on Saddam Speaks on the Gulf Crisis: A Collection of Documentation.

37 For more information about the economic hardship during the war see Alnasrawi, 1994
was handed back over to Iran. Samira, one of the elderly informants, summed up many of the women’s frustration.

We look at the Iraq-Iran war with bitterness. Now the governments are on good terms but we really suffered. The Shi’ites in the south were the ones who really paid for that war since most of them were infantry soldiers. All houses in Iraq suffered, all the families. There wasn’t a single house that did not face a catastrophe. Imagine that while a man was sitting amongst his family in his house, drinking tea, and suddenly, out of the blue, he could be shattered and killed by an artillery shelling. And when one is in need of medicines, it is impossible to find anything! The real pain was caused by the fact that the country, or rather Saddam, had initiated two major wars in less than ten years with neighboring countries in which many Iraqis had close blood relations. When the soldiers came back from the war, those who were lucky to return, many were disabled. Everyone suffered: the sons, daughters, all were at a loss. The only winner from the war was Saddam himself. What is the value of one’s life if you are deprived of everything? Diseases were attacking people and the hospitals are empty, without medicines or medical care. So many areas were left without water or electricity. People were left to emptiness!

Understandably, when the government began the campaign for yet another war, the people of Iraq were staunchly opposed. Many of the Shi’ites in particular, whose community had just been ravaged during the Iran-Iraq War, could not even conceive of another armed conflict. Nevertheless, Saddam did not relent. Less than two years after the end of the Iran-Iraqi War, the second Gulf War had begun: Iraqi forces moved into Kuwait. Habiba’s, one of the elderly and key informants, narrative reveals a series of vivid, arduous memories as Iraq entered yet another war. She describes in detail how the hardships led to resentment and finally to insurgence.

The Kuwaiti War started on Jan. 17, 1991 and was ended on Feb. 28 when President Bush declared the cease-fire. The American soldiers were in the suburbs of Nasiria in the South. We were under extreme constraints: prices went up, commodities were in nadir, mortars were shelling and our houses were shaking! Our hearts reached our throats! Cars were expensive and hiring a taxi was an impossible task since the taxi drivers would inflate their fees when somebody was planning to get away! The air was polluted with the smokes from the burning wells and fuel. During this time the Iraqi army withdrew from Kuwait and it was the ignition point for the Uprising. Our youth were killed by the war. I did not feel that they had been devoted to their country, thus their death as martyrs was actually a fallacy. We felt that the intention of the regime was to eliminate us! We were left with no choice but death, either in the fields of battle or in the hands of the security. So half of the people were dead and the other half was in exile!

As Habiba eloquently explained, the Shi’ite felt used by their nation. The Shi’ites had wanted neither war, yet were forced to die in both. Since most of the armed forces were comprised of southern Iraqi Shi’ites, they were the first to die at the front line. Their lives were expendable for some political agenda that would never benefit them anyway.

When the second Gulf War started, we in the south were not ready for it because the period of peace was so short between the two wars. We did not have the chance to breathe the fragrance of freedom after the first war. We were not able to enjoy a respite, or even sleep enough. How were we supposed to deal with the pain and anxiety of the first war while preparing for yet another? We did not have enough time to walk in the streets of our villages and towns or to visit relatives and friends. We did not find time to laugh and play. We did not enjoy listening to the stories of our sons who came back from Iran few months ago. We had forgotten how to enjoy a normal life. There was no time to recover from carrying guns, hugging death and watching our friends die in front of our eyes. Shi’ite sons were and still are wood for the war of fire. During the war we were
afraid. We used to move from house to house. Our children forgot that they were children. They forgot how to play, laugh and even smile.

The impact of two consecutive wars had an accumulated effect upon the soldiers, but also upon the civilians. The double trauma of these two conflicts irrevocably changed the Shi’ite community, scarring them, and eventually scattering them in exile across the world. From the ground troops under fire, to the children’s young nightmares, to the women in fear back home, the wars deeply impacted every sector of society.

The Kuwaiti War: Defeat and Revolt

On all accounts, the invasion of Kuwait was a massive military mistake on the part of Iraq. Saddam erroneously overestimated his own forces’ capability to withstand a month long air-strike by the Americans. Also, he envisioned an oil blockade and subsequent schism in European allies. Instead, the world’s powers remained behind the Bush administration. Instead of a ground conflict in the familiar desert, the Iraqis were defeated in a rout of air missiles. And as the Iraqi army began its hasty retreat, civil commotion and anti-state sentiments began to develop.

In the bloody aftermath of the Gulf disaster, the Iraqi Shi’ites, who had suffered particularly from the onslaughts, became fed up. Finally, the popular uprising opposition leaders had been demanding for years, was underway. In the havoc of national defeat, citizens rose up against the tyrant at the helm. The retreating soldiers and officers served as the catalyst for the pent-up anger that had been building since the late 80’s. The popular revolt, amidst the turmoil of war and defeat, had begun.

This Uprising was against an oppressive regime that, until then, had frustrated any possibility of revolt with its extensive use of state terror. It was only possible, in part, because of opportunity: the regime in Baghdad was reeling from its defeat by American and Allied Arab forces in Kuwait. Many embittered Iraqi Arab Shiite conscripts, who made up the bulk of the enlisted men in the ordinary Iraqi Army units, had retreated to Basra and other southern Iraqi cities adjacent to Kuwait. They were, a long with civilians, to be the cadre of a spontaneous and almost leaderless revolt.

The other major factor that stimulated the Uprising was American encouragement and the implied promise of American support. To go back in time a bit, it was on February 15th that US President George Bush made his first explicit call for the Iraqis to overthrow Saddam Hussein. At this point the war was still only an air war but it was already turning Kuwait into a death house for the largely Iraqi Shi’ite conscripts manning Iraqi Army positions in Kuwait. Bush suggested that if the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people wanted to stop the war, they should take matters into their own hands and overthrow their leaders. Until then, Bush told reporters, “there will be no cessation of hostilities, there will be no pause, there will be no cease-fire.” (Nakash, 1994: 274)

Suddenly the power of the overwhelmingly totalitarian Ba’athist state appeared to be decreasing. President Bush had told the Iraqi people there would be no end to the war unless they overthrew Saddam Hussein and promised there would be no cease-fire until such an insurgency happened. The implications seemed clear. Early in March, unrest and uprisings spread from Basra to many other predominantly Shi’ite towns in the south, reaching al-Najaf and Karbala by March 7, 1991. Civilians and Shi’ite Iraqi Army deserters had taken over much of southern Iraq. But on March 4, 1991, a week after President Bush declared his readiness to enter into a cease-fire agreement with Saddam Hussein’s government (contradicting his promises in February 1991 never to do so), the cease-fire went into effect. Soon after, the Ba’athist government moved all of the loyal, predominantly Sunni elite units into southern Iraq to crush the Uprising. (Nakash, 1994)

His remarks were broadcast extensively throughout the region via the VOA, the BBC, Saudi Arabia Radio and a special American armed forces propaganda radio unit beamed at the Iraqi conscripts in Kuwait. Many women mentioned that this theme was to be repeated continually in the days before and during the Intifada.
The 1991 uprising in southern Shiite regions led to a new wave of suppression. Thousands of people suspected of taking part were arrested, some of whom were subsequently executed. (Amnesty International, 1994) Members of the Shi’ite clergy have also been targeted for arrest and several have “disappeared” since 1991. (Amnesty International, 1994)

The alienated southern Iraqi Shi’ite masses were opposed to the Iraqi invasion of Iran, which they perceived as an anti Shi’ite war against an Islamic Revolutionary leadership with which they sympathized to a great extent. But due to the coercive power of the Ba’athist, their sons could either accept conscription into the Iraqi Army or desert and flee, as many did, into the southern Iraqi marshes which were then still beyond the police surveillance of Baghdad. In addition, the Shi’ite were also opposed to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Surprising to many, there are tribal ties between the Kuwaitis and the southern Iraqi Shi’ite even though the Kuwaitis are Sunni. Still, however, no protest could convene against the government’s actions, due to the brutal totalitarian resources of the Ba’ath.

The situation changed when US-led Allied forces massed in Saudi Arabia in the late summer and fall of 1990 in order to prepare for the counter-attack to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. Less than a month after the beginning of the US-Iraq War over Kuwait, crowds in the predominantly Shi’ite town of ad-Diwaniya, 110 miles south of Baghdad, attacked Ba’athist headquarters and killed ten party officials. Five days later, U.S. President George Bush made his first explicit call for the Iraqi people to overthrow Saddam Hussein. On February 24th Allied troops moved across Iraqi Army lines along the Saudi-Kuwaiti border driving the Iraqi Army out of Kuwait and occupying a large but unpopulated area of southern Iraq. (Nakash, 1994: 276)

**Governmental Fight Against Shi’ites Heritage:**

The traditional Shi’ite religious or clerical leadership, in contrast to the largely lay Islamists, was quietist and were left alone by the regime. On the contrary Saddam Hussein spent millions of dollars restoring Shi’ite monuments, visited the Shi’ite pilgrimage sites, and praised Imam Ali and his descendants the Imams who are at the center of Shi’ite religious sensibility. But when the barely organized Army deserters and civilians who staged the Uprising in 1991 turned to the traditional Shi’ite clerics for leadership, they too would experience the wrath of the regime. With massive arrests, torture and executions in the wave of terror, tens of thousands of Iraqi Shi’ites would be sent across the American lines seeking refuge.

The Shi’ite most affected by the wars were those of the south of Iraq because of their location next to the Kuwaiti and Iranian borders. In addition, water and electricity were disconnected for years during the first war and for months during the second Gulf War. Cities such as Basra were destroyed. For the women I interviewed, this situation necessitated an even stronger Shi’ite unity in an opposition to a regime that was threatening to destroy them.

**Taking the Situation into Their Own Hands:**

*The Shi’ite Women’s Tales of the March 1991 Uprising*

For many of the Shi’ite women resettled later in The Netherlands the Uprising was a moment of great promise but, finally, of failure. The chaos that allowed the insurrection to take root, also doomed it to defeat. The army had lost a third of its men, and the country’s security forces disintegrated. In city after city across the nation, simultaneous, spontaneous demonstrations began. As each township declared surrender to the Americans, the masses would gather in the streets and march toward the Ba’ath headquarters, meanwhile chanting and desecrating posters of Saddam. Although there was no definitive journalism covering the events, informal reports recount that for a short, dramatic period, the insurgents actually gained control of many of the townships.

On the 24th of February, after Saddam Hussein ignored the American deadline to withdraw from Kuwait, Allied troops launched a ground offensive. Within days, they had not only driven the Iraqi Army out of Kuwait, but had occupied a large but unpopulated area of southern Iraq. When the Uprising began in Basra on March 1st, it rapidly spread to a string of other predominantly Shi’ite towns in the south including Al-Najaf and Karbala.
By the beginning of March, unrest was spreading quickly, and the Iraqi government acknowledged it was facing a domestic revolt. The opposition remained intact for only a short period, fueled by the deep and unifying sentiment of the people themselves. Students, women, and children took to the streets. According to their stories, it seems that the Intifada had a certain pattern. Many of these women mentioned that the demonstrations began in their own hometowns of al-Najaf, al-Basra, al-Nasiria, Karbala, al-Amara, al-Hilla, as well as other cities, villages, and towns in the south of Iraq. They arose as spontaneous acts of thousands of unarmed civilians, youth, children, and old men and women started to shout anti-government slogans. Then people descended on government buildings, police stations, and security offices. The government forces fought back, and there was killing on both sides. Then the demonstrators took control. Many women mentioned that the demonstrators opened prisons and freed many people. Overcoming curfews, army patrol, and tanks, masses demonstrated vigilantly against Saddam. Eventually, the demonstrations became armed takeovers. In each township, insurgents began executing Ba’ath officials and suspected state sympathizers.

At that time the women mentioned that the Shi’ite insurgents were certain they would receive material support if not open intervention on their behalf by what appeared to be approaching Allied Forces. Instead of being helped by the Americans and Allied Forces, however, Saddam threw his surviving elite (which meant professional, rather than conscript and Sunni, rather than Shi’ite) Army units into the counter-attack in a bitter fight to recover the southern cities. They were backed by heavy artillery, which included the devastating rocket and machine gun fire of helicopter missiles.

According to those who fled, the Army unit forces descended upon the towns and destroyed homes and buildings. They and their families ran to take refuge at the Husayn and Abbas mosques, assuming that the government would never strike these holy shrines. To their astonishment, the government troops began heavy attacks on these tombs, considered sacred by Shi’ites pilgrims all over the world. Then people ran outside the holy shrines and the government troops opened fire on the people.

By now the Allied Forces were in complete control of Iraqi airspace. Yet, while Iraqi jet fighter planes would have been shot down on sight, the helicopters were curiously allowed to fly, on the basis that they were not part of an Iraqi war mission, but concerned domestic law and order. Nevertheless, the Iraqi forces had been swiftly vanquished, and the seeds of dissent had been sown.

These small successes, however, were short lived. In a matter of a few weeks, the opposition was divided and crushed by the state. There are three main factors that led to the downfall of the Uprising. Foremost, the headquarters position of the opposition was located in the south of Iraq, dangerously close to the stations of the Republican Guard. Then, the separate factions of the rebellion did not have the communication or the wherewithal to effectively coordinate forces and develop their political objectives. And lastly, the Islamist insurgents rallied around a slogan that would eventually destroy them. Fighting in the name of "Ja’feri (Shi’ite) Rule!" they alienated crucial potential Iraqi Sunni allies. Furthermore, the Islamist rebels focused their efforts and agendas on the two holy Shi’ite cities of Najaf and Karbala, thus cementing the Uprising as a specific to Islamist Shi’ites from Southern Iraq. This decision alienated the Uprising from the critical support of others in the opposition, including the Kurds, Arab nationalists, Communists, any foreign Arab nation, or any foreign nation in general.

In Baghdad, however, the insurgence never took root and thus never took place. Without organizational infrastructure or communication, those in the capital remained unconnected with the Uprisings around the country. Still under the control of the Ba’ath regime, what information they did receive presented the insurgence as merely a Shi’ite flare-up. The Western forces did not show sustained interest in the Uprising due to this misconception, as well. The Shi’ites were seen as a problematic splinter of Iraqi opposition politics. And the Arab nations, along with their antagonism toward Shi’ism, feared insurgence in general, seeing it as the precursor to an anarchic revolution like that of Iran in 1979. Thus, the intifada, despite its initial collective success, was doomed an all fronts.

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Although the Shi’ite March 1991 Intifada failed it continues to have a deep meaning in the Shi’ite consciousness. It represents a turning point in the lives of the women who were interviewed in this study as well as to many other subjugated Iraqi communities. For Maha, one of the elderly informants, the Uprising represented a critical opportunity for women to be seen as individuals and not as men’s kin. Like the 1920 revolt in Iraq, the 1991 Uprising represented an important historical vie for democracy.

When the March Uprising began, I participated in it, not for my brother or for my father, who had died of his grief, but for myself. I demonstrated against everything unjust that had been done to me. I thought that the Uprising would end all our pain and problems. It would be the end of injustice and tyranny. But the Uprising failed.

The Uprising brought to a climax the relationship between the Shi’ites of Iraq and the Iraqi government. It awakened people’s awareness of their oppression and their unity as they sought justice against tyranny. The crushing of the Uprising also served as a pivotal moment, forcing many women into a new identity. It was a baptism through fire. The government was targeting their men, their homes, their holy Shrines and their religion itself. In the face of such extreme repression, their defiance had to be swift and bold. The situation had grown so bleak so fast, that only a total upheaval could save them, and their country, from tyranny.

The defeat of the Uprising was a huge blow for the women involved. Many lost their husbands, sons, and fathers. Without any international or national support, subjugated by the state, wanted by the government, trapped and alone, the situation had worsened from bleak to deadly. And yet, the women found the means to survive the dangers and endure the overwhelming destruction. The mother of a “shahid” (“the martyr”, who died fighting during the Uprising) would talk of her son’s valor in protecting his comrades and his courage in the face of death. In this image of heroism she would find the strength to bear her loss. Nawal, one of the elderly informants, lost many members of her family during the Uprising. Nevertheless, in honor of her slain relatives, she remains positive.

There is nothing more terrible than losing your loved ones, but we feel happy when we know they died for us and for the defense of their home and their beliefs. Those who died sacrificed themselves for their families, their friends, and their beliefs. They accepted death so that we may live. Their death is a symbol of victory for us.

In contrast with the women’s attitudes towards the two Gulf wars, the women made peace with the loss of their loved ones in the Uprising. Though they had technically lost the battle for revolution, their valiant fight against the government was considered a victory against tyranny. For many other women the Intifada served literally as a moment of personal and social liberation.

Bothina, one of the mid-aged informants, also talked about the state’s ruthless punishment of the Uprising:

When the government started its raid against the uprisers its armies conquered through “Romaytha”. They detained many people and families and started shooting people at random and pursuing them in the streets. I used to go out to collect information. My brother participated in the uprising. My father took the decision that we could no longer stay there hence we fled. For the members of the party every one was expected to work with them and especially on information collection and reporting about the people. This is why we used to have very limited social relations with others.

Many of the interviewed Shi’ite women narrated that during the Uprising, they joined the Uprising because they felt a deep, urgent connection to the cause. The majority had never participated in political activities. But, this movement was different in that it was not born of ulterior, calculated agendas. It was instead a genuine, organic rallying of oppressed people. The Shi’ite were not fighting against their nation, but, rather, for their nation against Saddam. The women all tell of their experiences shouting deep from their hearts against the regime, demanding a government that would recognize them as citizens deserving
equal rights. The Uprising was not planned, but the genuineness of the insurgency unified the people into a state of revolt. According to these narratives, the demand was not for some Party’s power, but in the name of basic human and civil rights.

Sometimes fearful things made us break into laughter. Once my mother went to bring water. While she was carrying the water pot on her head a bullet went through the pot and the water poured to her body and clothes. When she arrived home we were laughing at her, but our elders were weeping and it was not as amusing for them as it was for us. We used to be puzzled by the reaction of our elders in such events!

But their story is not just a story of loss. It would be a misrepresentation to omit the distinct note of brightness within many of these narratives. Although these children had experienced many harrowing events, they managed to find some moments of laughter within these tragic times. As Nidhal, one of the young informants, said:

We used to laugh with our peers in serious moments! I remember a joyful time during the Uprising when we used to transfer the weapons and ammunition with joy from house to house we carried the guns as if we were carrying toys! We would hide the guns under our clothes with no fear, just as mothers were carrying their children. We used to laugh at men, using the tanks they had taken from the Ba’athist during the Uprising, to transport commodities, such as vegetables, meat and fruits to their homes. It was funny.

Badria, one of the young informants, was nine years old when she left Iraq. She too recounts terrifying stories of growing up in a war zone.

When we were children in Iraq we saw many dead bodies. We saw many corpses scattered in the streets of our village during the Uprising. Once I was playing with my sister, building small houses of sands when I picked up a stone and to our agony and horror found it to be a human finger. It was too scary for us to play with sands again.

Salma one of the young informants, she was eight years old in Iraq when she experienced a particularly horrific event.

During the Uprising we found the head of our neighbor next to the river shore so we ran to his relatives to tell them the discovery! We wanted to let them know he was dead so they could stop searching for him. We were aware that death is more calming than having missing relatives! We used to feel that too. As children we did not fear death.

It is impossible to imagine the sustained effect such violence has upon children. As these narratives reveal, at a certain point, the human spirit begins to seek peace even within chaos. In deadly situations, the children of Iraq adopted the objects of war as substitute toys. Salma remembered the role she and her young friends played for the soldiers.

During the time of Uprising the men used to ask me to take the weapons and hide them in our house. We used to carry messages from my uncle to the fighters across the road, and when the army came we sent signals to the patrols to hide. The soldiers did not take any notice of us because we were children and they thought that we were playing. We used to carry and hide heavy arms under our clothes (abaya); sometimes two or three of us would carry one piece because it was so heavy. There was a girl of fifteen years old who carried the heavy arms all alone. We used to consider all that as kind of play, but we developed a real hatred for Saddam and his soldiers.
These women show extraordinary calm as they describe horrors they endured as children that would make most adults shudder. This is a critical instance of their admirable strength and perseverance. It is also an important illustration of the power of the act of narrating. As will be discussed in Chapter 7, the telling of these stories helps the process of coming to terms with their abhorrence. By joining together to create a space in which to share their stories, these women begin the process of healing. When I asked Fatima, one of the key informants, about her role in the Uprising, she responded with a poem filled with powerful religious references:

You were lonely, Muhsin
But Tawaa supported you
You were betrayed by
Men of al-Kufa which is
Scented and putrid by your blood.

As we shall discuss later, the act of reciting poetry and referencing Shi’ite religion are both potent indicators of Shi’ite identity. Fatima, like the other women I interviewed, was quite aware of this phenomenon. Symbolizing and maintaining their strong resistance to the attempted eradication of their religion, these Shi’ite-inspired poems are a message of insurgence in and of themselves.

The Image of the Shi’ite after the Uprising: Silencing as Totalitarian Terror:

Al-thawra published three editorials in April 1991 to “explain” the Intifada as an episode known officially as “the page of treachery and betrayal”. In a state-sponsored attempt to obliterate any historical record of the Uprising, the Ba’ath party’s main newspaper, Al-thawra, reported that the Uprising was Iranian aggression, and a leftover chapter of the Iran-Iraq War. Referring to the Shi’ite as the “enemy”, it spoke of their “conspiracies” having failed. Why was conspiracy rooted in the south? In the words of Al-Thawra editorialist turned sociologist, probably Tariq Aziz, the “sect” of Shi’ism is based in Persian culture and thus is anti-Arab. Returning to the deeply-rooted Pan-Arab rhetoric of the Ba’ath Party, the media coverage after the Uprising focused on the Shi’ites as conspiratorial and dangerous to the country of Iraq and of Arabism itself. The article continues by comparing such ‘marsh people’ to breeding buffalo who migrate to big cities like Baghdad make their living through begging, prostitution and robbery. The racialized prejudice of the Ba’ath regime was the only media coverage of the Uprising. (Hazelton, 1994: 29)

In Ahmed Chalabi’s article on totalitarianism and terror, he discusses the situation in Iraq by stating that anyone with any sense of decency or justice was omitted from the government and strongly deterred from public life. This totalitarian control is aided by media portrayals. The Iraqi government depended on this description of the Uprising as a failure and a danger. With no legal restraint or alternative journalism, Saddam had free reign in crushing the Uprising and maintaining his reign of continued terror upon the Shi’ites. (Chalabi, 1994: 226)

The routine use of collective and retroactive punishment was and is a core strategy in the regime’s politics of terror. Massive conscription in the south with tours of duty of up to eight years during the Iraq-Iran War were coupled with deportation of fathers, brothers, and husbands, and the disappearance of deserters. The wide-scale arrests and executions of the Shi’ite Islamist opposition left a high percentage

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40 Muhsin was al-Husayn cousin who was sent by al-Husayn in 661 to make sure that the Iraqi people would support al-Husayn if he reached Iraq. Muhsin reached Iraq but betrayed by the Iraqi men and the only person who offered him help was a woman named Tawaa.

41 Tawaa the woman who saved Muhsin in 661.

42 A city in Iraq where Imam Ali the father of al-Husayn and the fourth Caliph of the Muslims had ruled was killed.

43 A government daily newspaper.

44 For more information and statistic on disappearance see the Middle East Watch for the year 1990 on Human Rights in Iraq.
of women alone to support their families and raise their children. But these women also had to take on the role of protector--to save their families from arrest or secure release from prison of their men folk.

And finally endure their own victimization by a party that considered “bad intentions” towards it and its revolution as a crime that was conceivably punishable, in the case of women by rape, as well as by death. The Uprising was a moment of great hope. This hope was a partial retribution against the official torturers, murderers and rapists of the regime, and literal liberation for those women in prison and awaiting execution.

Unveiling the Uprising:

At this point the veils of misconception, both intentional and mistaken, began to be discarded. The first major misconception was decidedly calculated: the Uprising threatened the unity of Iraq. This could be argued in the case of the Kurds, who longed for independence. It was not the case of the Iraqi Arab Shi’ites who have never asked for more than their proportional share of political power in any independent Iraq. Why would a people who were the majority, secede from a state in which they were the majority? On the contrary, while the Kurds are very conscious of their not being an Arab people, the Iraqi Arab Shites are profoundly Arab in language, culture and custom. As I have mentioned earlier, they were aware and proud of the Shi’ite history as tribal Arab, not Persian.

Over and over again, leaders of the Uprising broadcast that the revolt was not directed against the Iraqi State but against Saddam and his personal regime. The conscripts who rose up against the regime in Basra had loyally served Iraq in the war against Iran, a war theoretically against their own co-religionists, without any incidents of national rebellion.

The second misunderstanding was that the militant Iraqi Shi’ite religious leadership instigated the Uprising. Along these lines, radical Shi’ism was behind the rebellion with the goal of Iranian alliance. This misunderstanding was based in part on an active Iranian propaganda campaign against Saddam Hussein that played up news of the Uprising. It was reinforced by reports that thousands of Iraqi Shi’ites who had been deported to Iran, armed, trained and enrolled in the militant, Iranian-allied Badr Brigade were sent across the border to join the Uprising. In fact only a few thousand crossed over and their operations were to be largely confined by geography to the Iraqi marshes adjacent to Iranian territory. This force had little or no impact on the Uprising.

On the contrary there was no organized leadership when the Uprising broke out, nor was there any sign of a prepared blueprint for the Uprising. Only after rebels in Najaf appeared to be consolidating their control of the city did Abu al-Qasim Khwi, the grand mujtahid of Iraq at that time, declare his support for an establishment of a Supreme Committee to preserve Iraq’s security and to stabilize public, religious and social affairs. Nothing in either the communiqué or in al-Khwi’s career as the grand mujtahid would indicate any intention to establish a radical or militant Shi’ite Islamic state. (Stapleton, 1993; Nakash, 1994)

By late March, Iraqi armed forces loyal to Saddam had recaptured many of the cities and towns in the south. Much of Karbala and Najaf, including the shrines, were devastated by tank and artillery fire. Hundreds, possibly thousands of rebels or their nearest relatives were taken prisoner, tortured, and executed. Meanwhile US officials were publicly ruling out action to aid the Iraqi rebels, citing President Bush’s fear that Iraq might disintegrate. The U.S. adopted a “hands-off” policy and reverted to its original professed objective of only seeking the liberation of Kuwait.

The unveiling of the Uprising and the series of betrayals do reflect an American and allied preference, indicated in off-record briefings alluded to by Nakash and others and only openly acknowledged over the past year in the recollections of Bush and his top military. Whether due to official American misreading of the region or the misinformation supplied by allied Arab countries, Bush and the Pentagon were convinced that if the selective bombing of Baghdad did not topple Saddam, then the humiliation of defeat in Kuwait would prompt the Sunni generals to overthrow him. When Bush called on the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi people to rise up against Saddam Hussein the first part of that message was heartfelt
encouragement to the Iraqi people, while the second part was most likely sound-bite slogans of "democracy" in an attempt to instigate a palace coup. Such a coup was ludicrous to consider, however, given the way the Ba'ath Party which functions as a security apparatus animated by the Cult of Saddam, rather than as a party has absorbed the state and its army.

According to many of the 35,000 Iraqi Shiite refugees who fled as the Uprising was being crushed, American broadcasts (it is not clear whether VOA or the Special US Armed Force Radio) promised refuge for the rebels if they fled to the American lines in the southern Iraqi desert. According to these accounts, these broadcasts promised that whoever fled would be given refuge in the United States within three months. Saudi Radio reportedly backed these American promises up. The rebels who crossed over to the allied forces would be treated as guests in Saudi Arabia for no more than three months, after which they would be taken as refugees to America.

The refugees were received at the American Army checkpoints of Samawa and at the outskirts of Nasiriyya and Al Basra, all cities that had risen up against the regime and could have easily been relieved by nearby American forces. But the civilians were quickly separated from Iraqi Army soldiers. The former were classified by the Americans as "refugees", while the soldiers, many of whom had fought against the regime in the Uprising, were classified rather amazingly as "prisoners of war", as if they were enemies and not allies of the American forces. (Nakash, 1994: 273-281)

The veiling of the Uprising was a tactical manoeuvering on the part of the Ba'ath regime. Through manipulated media coverage, the government was able to erase the effort of the Shi'ite people from national and thus international awareness. Meanwhile, the state continued and even heightened its violent terrorizing methods of eradicating the Shi'ite communities. The Uprising served only to fuel the government's aggression towards the Shi'ite. Their identity had been threatened and now their very lives were endangered. Yet, it is also important to note, that despite the increased persecution that followed the Uprising, the Shi'ite did not succumb to the Ba'ath regime's ideologies. Instead, they kept their religion as intact as possible, and thus their identity, and many decided to flee for refuge.

Flight to the Americans Camps:

After the Uprising failed, the Shi'ite Iraqis were forced to seek refuge in the American refugee camps near the Iraqi border with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. They heard, via radio, that those who fled to these camps would be granted refuge in Saudi Arabia as guests of the King. Soon after, the radio broadcasts promised, the refugees would be resettled in another country, safe from the harm of war and poverty. Some of the women I interviewed also recounted this invitation in written format, dropped from airplanes in the weeks after the Uprising.

According to Solima, one of the key informants, the women felt overjoyed with the possibility of security and refuge. The men, however, wept with the shame of having to surrender to the American forces. Solima also described the masses of Iraqis who made their way across desert and marsh to the American camps, streaming in from all directions from Samowa, al-Nasaria, al-Khut al-Sariah, and Jabal al-Salam in Basra, making their way steadily to safety. At each town, the refugees had to pass through numerous American controlled checkpoints. Sumaia and her family arrived at the camp the night of March 17, 1991. In the early morning, the camp officials divided the arriving refugees. Each man was asked if they were military or civilian. The few men who had civilian status were allowed to stay with their family, but any man who had ever fought in the Iraqi army, and this was by far the majority, was immediately separated from the families. This constituted the first major betrayal by the American forces.

The second betrayal occurred as the men were taken to the POW camp at Arttawiyah. Sumaia's narrative tells the story of her brother, Saleh, who arrived at the refugee camp expecting protection, but instead, was treated like a prisoner of war. Forced onto army buses, removed indefinitely from their families, and strip-searched collectively and publicly in front of female guards, Saleh and the other men received no explanation for their maltreatment. The American forces were highly insensitive and disrespectful to the cultural and religious concerns of the Iraqi men.
The women, on the other hand, were spared the abuse their male counterparts endured during the six weeks-two months that they stayed in the American camps of Selman and Sawan. When the U.S. decided to evacuate from Iraqi soil, they moved the refugees to the Saudi Arabian camp, Rafha.

Reflection on their Stories:

The analysis of these life stories suggests that there is direct relationship between the personal memory and the collective memory of the Gulf wars. These wars must be understood within the more inclusive context of the meaning of war in general in a given society. Moreover, this study suggests that the stories these women tell may differ from historical accounts of the exact same events. But, the personal memory, although it may differ from the collective memory in content, is crucial to the construction of the actual events of an historical occurrence. War in general and the Gulf Wars in particular, due to lack of journalistic accounts, are difficult to historically piece together. The numerous layers of pain and trauma along with the numerous layers of political deception and propaganda along with the countless betrayals make it extremely difficult to construct a history that actually does justice to the histories of those involved.

The women feel that their experiences of war have infiltrated into their lives to the extent of becoming normal. During these long years leading up to and after the Uprising, the women did not question the centrality of the war in their lives nor the fact that war was simply a part of daily life. Their narratives are an essential element to any account of the Uprising and the social upheavals that led up to it. Within each narrative one finds the voice of the individual and also the embedded “other voice” of personal, critical analysis. This second voice may reside in the content or in how the content is presented. It tells the concurring stories of social definitions and personal meanings given to the atrocities. In contrast to the collective, public memory of the Iraq-Iran war as a meaningful war, the dominant voices in the life stories of the Shi‘ite women present the war as traumatic and purposeless.

Conclusion:

The effect of the Ba‘ath policies against the Shi‘ite is two-fold. First, it was a destructive means of attacking their religion, their communities, their identities, and their persons. On the other hand, it also resulted in a sense of solidarity on these exact levels. The women were quite aware that every foreign policy implemented by the state had a corresponding policy against the Shi‘ite people. The Iran-Iraq War led to two mass deportations that forced thousands of Shi‘ite across the border into an inhospitable Iran. This was under the rhetoric that the Shi‘ite were of Iranian origin due to their religion. Using Pan-Arab language and ideology, Saddam attempted to gain support from other Arab countries by targeting the Shi‘ite.

Meanwhile, the Shi‘ite felt a strong sense of Arab-ness and patriotism toward their country that had nothing to do with Saddam. This mutual dislike increased into an internal war against the Shi‘ite with persecution, torture, oppression, deportation, execution, and propaganda prejudice. The Kuwaiti invasion and war against the U.S. further compounded this tension. The Shi‘ites were conscripted to the frontline to die quickly. The Shi‘ite realized this and it fueled their anger towards the state. Dissent was growing.

During the Iran-Iraq war Sunni suspicion of possible Shi‘ite sympathy and support for Iran led to the arrest, expulsion and suppression of thousands of Shi‘ite. Furthermore, the decade leading up to the March 1991 Shi‘ite Uprising was a period fraught with warfare and government coercion. The economic fallout after the Iran-Iraq War led to the ill-fated Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, which brought about the Gulf War. The double impact of the Iran-Iraq War and the Kuwaiti Gulf War tore the Shi‘ite community on many levels. It not only took many lives (due to the fact that the Shi‘ite conscripts constituted most of the army frontline), but it also dismantled the very fabric of the Shi‘ite community, alienating their religious identity as Shi‘ites from their identity as Arab-Iraqi.

This political, social, economic, and psychological crises paved the way for the intifada, which rose up against the state for two dashing weeks before being systematically crushed by the government. In March 1991, the Shi‘ite in the south of Iraq rose up against the government. Taking over buildings and killing
officers, they retaliated against the accumulated subjugation. Within weeks, however, the Uprising was crushed brutally by Saddam’s forces. The pro-Shi’ite slogans of the Uprising only fortified the regime’s crackdown, thus dooming the insurgence to a bloody defeat. The Shi’ites found themselves, at this point, alone and trapped. The Gulf War had brought international support to Saddam as he fought Western forces. The Shi’ites felt deeply betrayed by the neglect they felt from their fellow Muslims as well as the international humanitarian groups in the face of such oppression. No community has pledged support of the Iraqi Shi’ite—from western leftists to Palestinians.

In the face of such overwhelming odds, a new patriotism arose. As described throughout this chapter, the Iraqi Shi’ites were forced to develop their own identity, independent of Saddam, yet deeply Iraqi, and independent of Iran, yet deeply Shi’ite. This nationalism, of course, ran counter to the prevailing, forced nationalism of the state-sponsored propaganda. Saddam’s ideological agenda included a re-painting of the Iran-Iraq War into a battle of good vs. evil. Using Islamic jargon, he claimed to the ‘Deputy of God’ who had vanquished al-Khumaini. The Shi’ites were not the only Iraqis fed up with such deception. But their story, unlike the Kurds in the north, has gone undocumented by internal and external journalism. The Iraqi Shi’ite Uprising against Saddam’s dictatorship is a crucial story of a real fight for democracy and identity. It grew from the hearts of the people and, even amidst its crushing, retained hope and unity. It is a story that is crucial to those in the Shi’ite community itself, but it also important on an international level. The women interviewed in this study perceived the war as a break in their collective and respective biographies. Each of their stories delves into the interrelation between collective memory and personal Memory within the context of the Uprising in particular, and the Iraqi wars in general.