



## "Life in Iraq is worse now than under Saddam"

Iraqi journalist speaks at MCC

By Karen Jeffery

Eman Ahmad Khamas is a member of a delegation of Iraqi women brought to the U.S. for Women's Month by the Global Exchange and Code Pink. While here the delegation met with US officials to call for an end to the US military presence in their country. As part of a cross-country trip, Eman spoke at Maui Community College on

April 5th, telling students and guests that conditions in Iraq are far worse now than when Saddam Hussein ruled.

"At least it was safe then," said Khamas. "There's a complete absence of security now. Between the US troops, insurgents and increased street crime, Iraq is far more dangerous now, and women and children continue to be especially vulnerable to the chaos brought by the American occupation. "It's definitely worse than before. Of course it's good that Saddam is gone, but our life was better under a dictator than under the US."

Khamas says that in America there's only military and political news, not what life is like for Iraqis. "Americans do not understand what's really going on in Iraq, and journalists are far too quick to believe what the politicians and military brass say instead of investigating for themselves." This is of course extremely difficult now, she explained, due to the total lack of security. Just as it is difficult for Iraqis to go out without fear of being shot, journalists face the same danger. But even at the beginning, most American journalists were embedded with US forces so they only saw the war from that perspective.

"We're here in America to tell the truth about life in Iraq under American occupation, because Americans do not hear it. While the public is fed rosy propaganda, and Bush is saying things are getting better, the reality is far more gruesome."

Eman talked firsthand and answered questions from students about the effects of war on her life, the lives of ordinary Iraqis, and the most vulnerable in her society – women and children. How they were all so much freer under Saddam. Now everything is destroyed, and everything is chaos. There is unreliable water, only three to four hours of electricity per day, fewer schools and hospitals, a fraction of the goods and services previously available. And every family has known death.

Before US occupation Khamas felt that Iraq had one of the best societies in the Middle East. Even after the sanctions, things were so much better than now. Though Islamic, they had women's rights. In Baghdad women rarely wore hijab or burkas and went out daily – to the marketplace, to visit friends, to work, to school. Things were safe and stable. She belonged to a vibrant community where large landscaped boulevards housed a civil society and where everyone got free education (kindergarten through University) and free healthcare. They had power 16-24 hours a day, clean water, and food. Life was good.

Families were together as Iraqis, not Sunnis or Kurds. Sunni married Shi'a, people were more or less together, inter-mixing and mostly happy. "Until Bremmer made them," she said, "these arbitrary distinctions were not made. The reality is that it never happened in the history of Iraq for six thousands of years. It never happened – a civil war or these kind of distinctions. It is true that there are Kurds in Iraq; there are Arabs and Sunnis and Shi'a and Christians and many other minor religions and groups. But it never happened that we fought each other. Not at all."

Women's rights have corroded under the US led occupation. The war has rolled back decades of Iraqi womens' struggles for equal rights, and Eman is now afraid to go out. When she does, she covers in hijab...and dodges bullets. Her city is a rubble of concrete and rubbish and rot. "Violence is everywhere, and poverty is a real problem. Iraq is now one of the most poor nations in the world."

Eman estimates that more than 200,000 Iraqis have died in Iraq, and more have gone missing. Half of those killed have been women. The needless violence brought about by this war has wreaked havoc on the lives of Iraqis. Children and women go missing, many being jailed, disappeared, tortured and raped to lure their husbands or fathers in. "You are not liberating women with bombs," she said. "You are making widows and orphans and chaos."

Khamas runs Operation Watch, a human rights organization that documents abuses of the US military from rape to murder. She thinks the US doesn't want the truth. The US Ministry of Justice in Iraq refused to see eyewitness reports and video documentation, and here in New York at the UN and in Washington at the White House they refused to receive a petition of Iraqis asking the US to leave. Instead people were jailed. When asked if she thought the abuses in US-run Iraqi prisons were isolated cases, she replied, "they were not, and they are ongoing. I think it's policy. Torturing prisoners to get information is US policy. It's happening in many prisons, and now Iraqis are torturing too."

"Unfortunately, we have many more examples of US forces killing innocent civilians. The US public might not see or hear about them, but we do... and these actions fuel the insurgency. A portion of the US public might still think the US is bringing democracy to Iraq. If they only saw the bodies of dead children, if they only heard the wailing of mothers, if they only saw the anger in the eyes of the survivors, they would call and end to this horror."

Following the initial invasion and 'Mission Accomplished' Iraqis thought the Americans would leave and go home. When they did not, things continued to deteriorate. Bush's policy of 'staying the course' is not a policy based on the realities of the continued occupation. Eman says that Instead of announcing a timetable for leaving Iraq, the US continues to blame the Iraqis for the mess the US government made of their country. Now Bush says the troops must stay to hold off a civil war. According to Eman this is just propaganda and allows people to continue to support a government whose aim is to build and keep permanent bases and presence in Iraq. Bases, green zones, and the largest US Embassy in the world are being built – by and for Americans. "This signals to Iraqis that the US has no to leave, but rather to permanently occupy our country. Of the 260,000 reconstruction contracts awarded, less than 1,000 have gone to women. Corruption is rampant, and billions have been stolen."

"Bush needs to specify an exit time, an end to the occupation. This is what the Iraqis have been asking for the past three years – a schedule, a timetable." Eman wants democracy for Iraq but emphasizes, "Iraqis are capable of ruling our own country."

According to Khamas there was a time when Iraqis separated Americans from the American government, but once US voters re-elected President Bush in 2004, all hope was lost – and Americans as well as the American government became the enemy of many Iraqis. There is much the UN and others can do to help with security and reconstruction and peace, but America cannot stay. Its presence is breeding hatred for America, and that is not good for Iraqis or Americans. "Get the United States out," was Eman's plea. "Do whatever you can to get your troops out of our country. It will still be a dark future for us, but at least we can begin. Until then, things can only get worse. It is very important for Americans to end this occupation immediately."

It's rare that we get to hear directly from Iraqis themselves, especially women. Eman and the other women in the Iraqi delegation risked their lives getting to Jordan to request visas, and they take great risks coming to the U.S. to speak out against the occupation. As they said when they decided to come, "It is worth the risks because the only people who can stop this war are the American people."

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Eman is a journalist, translator and human rights advocate who lives in Baghdad, Iraq. She is a member of the Women's Will organization, which focuses on defining and defending women's

rights outside political party interests and opposing incarceration of women as hostages. Eman regularly publishes articles on women's conditions in Iraq under the occupation in a monthly newspaper called Oqol (Minds). As former Director of International Occupation Watch Center Baghdad for the past three years, she has been documenting abuses committed by the U.S. military in Iraq. Eman is also involved in mobilizing emergency relief (medicine, food and clothing) for victims living under the occupation, especially women and children living in refugee camps. She is married with two daughters.

**Resources:**

Background paper – Iraqi Women Under Siege:

<http://www.codepinkalert.org/downloads/IraqiWomenReport.pdf>

You may read the transcript or listen to an interview with Eman Ahmad Khamas at:

<http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=06/03/06/1424239>

The Global Exchange: <http://www.globalexchange.org>

Code Pink: <http://www.codepink4peace.org/>

Common Dreams: <http://www.commondreams.org/views06/0324-20.htm>

Video/Losing Hearts & Minds: <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article7531.htm>

Act Together: <http://www.acttogether.org/>

Occupation Watch:

[http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=International\\_Occupation\\_Watch\\_Center](http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=International_Occupation_Watch_Center)

Riverbend – popular Iraq blog: <http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/>