

Horrors of the war

An eye-witness account of the agony of war in Iraq, Aida Schlaepfer's film *Gangs of Baghdad* focuses on the ordeals of ordinary Iraqis, writes [Nesmahar Sayed](#)

Gangs of Baghdad, a 52-minute documentary film directed by Aida Schlaepfer highlighting the trauma suffered by Iraqi adults and children since the US- led invasion and occupation of Iraq, was screened for the first time in Egypt at the Russian Cultural Centre on 20 March, the fifth anniversary of the invasion.

Dealing with stories from the victims of the war, including those who have been kidnapped, threatened or blackmailed by gangs operating in the country following the breakdown in law and order, the film succeeds in depicting the magnitude of Iraq's ordeal. It includes interviews with many of the kidnapped and their families in Iraq and Egypt, and it interviews an Egyptian psychotherapist who comments on the victims' ordeals and explains the likely psychological effects in each case.

Born in Baghdad to a Lebanese mother and an Iraqi father, and spending her life between her parents' two countries, Schlaepfer knows well what it means to live in a war-torn country and how this can affect an entire life. Including a psychologist in her film was very important to her, she says, since she wanted to examine the effects on individuals of the violent experiences dealt with in her documentary.

"His presence gives more credibility to what we are showing and acquaints the audience with what is needed to restore the victims to psychological balance," Schlaepfer says.

Alaa Mursy, the therapist in the documentary, agrees, adding that although he has never himself treated victims of kidnapping directly, he was enthusiastic about the idea of appearing in the film as it offered the opportunity to discuss post- traumatic symptoms, highlighting what these can mean. Many people can suffer such symptoms without recognising or understanding them, Mursy adds.

Schlaepfer's professional training in art and media in Zurich also played a role in her choice of subject matter. "This is a humanitarian issue," she explains. "Children who face death every day, people who are scared to go two streets away from their homes, all these people are affected by what is taking place around them, even though they might continue living from day to day unaware of the severe trauma such existence entails."

According to Schlaepfer, it was very hard to film in Iraq because of the dangerous situation and security risks. Many of the individuals and families she interviewed were also scared of appearing in a film and speaking about what had happened to them. However, "later they warmed to me and began to acknowledge the importance of explaining to the whole world what they had been through," she says.

The Iraqi members of the crew who worked with her while she was in Baghdad were remarkable, Schlaepfer adds. "Without them, the film would not have seen the light of day."

At the centre of *Gangs of Baghdad* is Halima El-Sa'dy, an Iraqi mother who has lost two sons,



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Stills from *Gangs of Baghdad*

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and Ali Al-Erieby, a lawyer who has fled Iraq and lives in Cairo after two of his brothers and two of his nephews were killed and his two sons were kidnapped. He had to pay a big ransom before they were united back with the family, at which point he decided it was time to leave Iraq.

Al-Erieby says that he was more fortunate than a friend who had to pay a 100,000 ransom to set his brother free, but then all what he got was his brother's corpse. " We used to long for freedom and democracy, but now what is happening makes us nostalgic for the days of Saddam. At least then there was law and order."

Commenting on Al-Erieby's story, Schlaepfer says that it provides evidence that life will go on, whatever terrible things happen. Mursy agrees, saying that life goes on and victims of such violence will be able to cope with such traumatic experiences because "if human beings can overcome the trauma of the death of loved ones, then they can also survive and overcome the trauma of kidnapping and blackmail with proper psychological help."

Regarding the violence and horror that has enveloped Iraq since the US-led invasion, Schlaepfer says that "kidnappers do not differentiate between Sunni or Shia. They are after money, and anyone with any assets is threatened." According to Mursy, the gangsters themselves are probably psychologically disturbed as a result of the environment they live in and of "living for many years under the pressure of threats and fear."

According to Al-Erieby, "the chief of the gang that kidnapped my son was a relative of a member of the police force in the area. So it is very hard to know whom to seek help from, and who are the bad guys who should not be trusted. It's a very confusing situation."

The film, made on a modest budget using Swiss funds, will be screened again at the French Culture Centre in Cairo on 11 April. It has also been entered in the Al-Jazeera International Documentary Film Festival, which takes place from 21 to 24 April in Doha, Qatar.

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