

KATE RAYNOR

ffccaustralia
The Frank's Corporation

STUDYGUIDE



IRAQ, MY COUNTRY

Synopsis

Hadi Mahood has been living in Melbourne, Australia, having fled Iraq in the first Iraq war, a refugee from Samawa in Iraq's Shiite South. Watching the news broadcasts in Australia about the war in his country, he has many unanswered questions about the war and decides to return to the city of his birth, filming his journey and the many encounters he has along the way. Flying into Baghdad is currently too dangerous, so Hadi lands in Kuwait and then makes a six hour road trip with a truck driver. He is greeted at the Kuwait/Iraq border by his brothers and by corrupt border guards jokingly asking for 'donations'.

We learn a little about Hadi's background as he travels around Samawa. Many years ago, he was an art teacher. (The Americans have bombed the school where he once worked because Saddam Hussein stored weapons there.) He was imprisoned during 1988 for refusing to attend Saddam Hussein's student training camps and fight in the Iraq/Iran War. After his release, he was then forced to join the army for a year.

From everything we see in *Iraq, My Country*, this is clearly a place of chaos. While Hadi interviews a man about his experience of torture under Saddam, bombs go off at the Police Department, where Hadi's brother works. Much of the film is relentlessly depressing, with seemingly endless images of a country mired in violence and misery. But for all that, the footage has a sense of raw and powerful immediacy, capturing aspects of the conflict we are unlikely to see here on the nightly news. This is a land of date palms, goats, skinny, yapping dogs, mounds of rubble and bomb-wrecked buildings, policemen hiding behind black balaclavas, and

guns, guns, guns. Through it all, the film is informed by Hadi's empathy for his countrymen and his desperate hope that somehow his homeland can steer its path to some sort of peace and prosperity.

Curriculum Links

Iraq, My Country would have relevance to VCE students studying SOSE and Middle East Politics. Due to scenes of violence, it would not be appropriate for middle or junior secondary students.

Activities And Discussion Points

(NB: Much of the factual and statistical information in this guide is derived from web sites referenced at the end of the guide and from the *World Book Encyclopedia* on CD-ROM.)

Iraq: Background and History

'We hope the [new] government will make our lives better because we've suf-





ferred a lot under the oppressive regime.'

- Iraq is an Arab country at the head of the Persian Gulf in south-western Asia. Situate the country on a map of the globe. Locate countries in the region that are currently sympathetic to the US-led coalition.
- Find Hadi Mahood's hometown, Samawa, on a map of Iraq.
- Iraq is bordered by Turkey, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria. Write an account of Iraq's relations with its neighbours over the last three decades.
- Create a timeline showing the major events in Iraq's history during the twentieth century and up to the present.
- Write an account of the Iran/Iraq War (1980–1988). Which side did the Iraqi Kurds support?
- In 1990, Iraq invaded and occupied neighbouring Kuwait. The United Nations condemned the invasion and imposed a trade embargo on Iraq. A coalition of thirty-nine nations, including the United States, opposed the invasion and sent forces to the region. In early 1991, they defeated Iraq in the Persian Gulf War of 1991. Write an account of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and subsequent events.
- The world's first known civilization developed along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what is now Iraq. The ancient Greeks called part of Iraq and the surrounding region *Mesopotamia* ('between rivers') because it lay between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. What can you find out about Iraq's ancient heritage and history?
- Find out information about the ancient city of Uruk. Until recently it has been protected from looters by Japanese troops, but since May 2005 this role has been taken over by Australian troops.
- Select an article on the current situation in Iraq from a daily newspaper. Summarize the article and make a presentation to the class.
- Collect articles about Iraq from the newspaper for a month. What themes dominate the coverage? Can you identify any important matters that are not regularly addressed by Western media?
- Describe the natural environment of the south of the country as you see it in this film.
- Iraq became part of the Arab Empire in the 600s A.D. and absorbed Arab Muslim culture. Today, about seventy five per cent of Iraq's people are Arabs. Iraq also has a large Kurdish population that has struggled on and off for self-government for many years. Iraq has eighteen provinces. Two Kurdish political organizations control parts of northern Iraq, with the Kurdish groups operating under United Nations protection. Other ethnic groups in Iraq include Armenians, Assyrians, Turkomans and Yazidis. Iraq's official language is Arabic, which is spoken throughout the





country. Kurdish is spoken in Kurdish areas. About ninety-five per cent of Iraq's people are Muslims. More than half of the country's Muslims are Shiites (members of the Shia branch of Islam). The other Muslims belong to the Sunni division. Most Arabs living southeast of Baghdad are Shiites. Central and south-western Iraq is a mixture of Sunni and Shiite Arab populations. The Kurds are Sunnites. Christians and other groups make up about 5 per cent of the Iraqi population. When the Ba'ath Party ruled Iraq from 1968 till 2003, most of its high-ranking members were Arab Sunni Muslims. Many Shiites resented the Sunni monopoly on governmental power. What can you find out about the Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds, their political, religious and historical divisions?

- The cultural heritage of South Iraq was suppressed under Saddam Hussein. How has it begun to re-emerge?
- Research the story of Gilgamesh and the history of the Uruk people.
- Iraq's Constitution of 1970 states that Iraq is a republic. However, from 1968 till 2003, the ruling Ba'ath Party controlled all branches of the government and eliminated or restricted all political opposition. Under the 1970 Constitution, a president headed Iraq and was commander of its armed forces. The president was elected to an indefinite term of office by the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), which was made up of top Ba'ath Party officials. The president chaired the RCC, and the RCC determined government policy. A Council of Ministers, appointed by the president, carried out government operations. Iraq's legislature, the National Assembly, had 250 members elected to four-year terms. The Ba'ath Party controlled elections through a government-appointed commission that determined who could run for the Assembly. US officials have claimed they hope democracy will spread throughout the Middle-East from their intervention in Iraq. In what ways did the Ba'ath Party era contravene the basic principles of democracy? Do you think the region will eventually become democratic in terms of its governance, judiciary and culture?
- Iraq's economy has depended heavily on the export of oil. Iraq's major oil fields are located in southern Iraq near the Kuwait border, and west of the city of Kirkuk in the north. From the 1950s through to the 1970s, income produced by the oil industry improved living conditions for Iraq's people, but war has had a devastating effect on the country. Trade routes have been disrupted, ports closed, and factories destroyed. In addition, the UN trade embargo imposed in August 1990 halted all oil exports from Iraq. The embargo was partially lifted





in 1996. Hadi notes ruefully that despite having some of the largest oil reserves in the world, queues for petrol stretch over two kilometers. What can you find out about the current state of the oil industry and the economy in general in Iraq?

- Iraq was importing about seventy per cent of its food before the 1990 UN trade embargo. What can you find out about the effects of the embargo on the civilian population of Iraq?
- Hadi shows images of the Red Crescent Society exhuming mass graves and trying to identify victims, 'the disappeared'. The remains of the father of one of Hadi's friends are discovered. What can you discover about the origins and workings of the Red Crescent Society?
- Divide the class into small groups to research and report on the following people: Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari, President Jalal Talabani, Abdel-Aziz al-Hakim, Massoud Barzani, Muqtada al-Sadr, Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani, and Iyad Allawi. Refer to the web sites at the end of this guide for possible starting points.
- Research the UN oil-for-food program.
- What is a no-fly zone?

The War and the Coalition Presence

'Where's the freedom Bush promised the Iraqi people? What about human rights? Where's the prosperity Bush promised? We were oppressed, Bush came to release us. Where's relief? Our rights? Are we rich?'

On March 20, 2003 (March 19 in the United States), US-led forces launched an air attack against Baghdad, the capital of Iraq and its largest city. US officials said the military campaign was intended to overthrow Saddam Hussein and eliminate Iraq's ability to produce weapons of mass destruction. British and Australian forces participated in the war effort. The United States began the war without UN support. Although a number of countries, including Spain and Portugal, expressed support for the war effort, many others notably

France, Germany, Russia, and China said the war was unjustified without clear UN backing.

After the initial strike on March 20, the US-led coalition continued its campaign of heavy bombardment of Baghdad. Tens of thousands of coalition ground troops advanced through southern Iraq toward the city, sometimes meeting stiff resistance from Iraqi forces. Coalition air and ground attacks also occurred elsewhere in Iraq. The coalition troops reached Baghdad in early April, and on April 9, they took control of central Baghdad. US officials declared that the Hussein government had been removed from power.

- An Iraqi man, when questioned about the presence of Coalition troops, says that he would like them to withdraw 'in a couple of days', but he acknowledges wryly that the decision is up to the coalition. How difficult will it be for the coalition to extricate itself from Iraq?
- Has life for the average Iraqi improved since the US invasion?
- What can you find out about Iraqi death and casualty statistics from the last two years?
- Iyad Allawi's interim government was appointed by the Coalition. What can you find out about its constitution?
- Debate topic: 'US intervention in Iraq against UN directives was wrong.'
- The conflict in Iraq is referred to as 'the war of liberation'. What other terms are popularly used in the press and by the Coalition?

Saddam

'As if he [Saddam Hussein] cared about the country. He cared about his dollars, jewellery and comfort ...'

- Hadi claims that Saddam 'sabotaged the Iraqi mentality'. What do you think this means?
- What is the current status of Saddam's trial? What are the exact charges against him? If he is found guilty, what sentence do you think he should receive?
- What can you find out about the

whereabouts of Saddam's family members and high ranking officials in his government?

- A young man interviewed by Hadi makes the bitter claim that Saddam stole five years of his youth, forcing him into prison and the army. He desperately gestures at his tattered shoes: 'How can I build my future? We want a solution, stability, jobs ... It's the same injustice. There's nothing new'. Imagine you are this man. Write a letter to Saddam Hussein, telling him of your suffering and your grievances.

Men With Guns

Early in the documentary, Hadi films his uncle's funeral, a ceremony marked by the ubiquitous presence of guns. He explains that guns are used to celebrate births, weddings and funerals and that to participate in these rites, it is necessary to have a gun.

Men justify their guns by talking in terms of protection and the lack of official security. The Samawa jail, for instance, is over-crowded, with 'non-existent or inadequate authority and structure, no Ministry of the Interior or General Directorate of Police'. The people exist in a state of lawlessness. We see a young boy arrested for possessing a gun. He asks, apparently genuinely perplexed, 'What's wrong? Are you the government?'

Hadi films in a hospital where gun-shot victims languish. A man who has lost his leg claims to have been shot in front of a policeman. From there, Hadi ventures to the morgue, where we are offered a brief glimpse of a blood-stained corpse on a slab, the result of a dispute between brothers.

Dutch troops have replaced US soldiers in Samawa (and now Australian troops have replaced the Dutch), but the city remains dangerous. The police, still in training, are afraid to patrol certain districts, and while the Dutch try to support the establishment of local law and order, the situation seems intractable. A Dutch soldier patiently explains to an aggrieved Iraqi, 'We cannot give everyone a gun'.

Comprehension Questions

1. Why is the date 17 July 1968 significant?
2. Why is the date 9 April 2003 significant?
3. Who was Enkidu?
4. Why is Samawa sometimes called the capital city of mass graves?
5. What is the name of the organization exhuming mass graves in Samawa?
6. What specifically does Hadi mean when he refers to 'the legacy of all our wars'?
7. What was the Iraqi Intifada?
8. What happens to Hadi and his sound recordist when they attempt to film the bombing at the Police Station?
9. Which tribe appears to be ascendant in Samawa?
10. What is the name of the Japanese Festival of Hope?

Answers

1. It is the date on which Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party took control of Iraq.
2. It is the date on which the coalition troops took control of central Baghdad. We see Iraqis toppling statues of Saddam Hussein.
3. Enkidu was a friend of Gilgamesh.
4. Saddam transported victims there.
5. The Red Crescent Society
6. He is referring to the disproportionately high incidence of cancer, a direct result of Saddam's use of chemical weapons (mustard gas, anthrax) and the US use of depleted uranium warheads during the first Gulf War.
7. The Iraqi Intifada was an uprising against Saddam during the first Gulf War.
8. Hadi and his crew are arrested for five hours and his sound recordist is hit on the head.
9. The Abu-Hassan tribe appears to have power, particularly in determining employment opportunities.
10. Tanabata

The dramatic mourning rituals of Samawa were suppressed by Saddam. Now, with his demise, the ceremonies take place on an almost nightly basis. We see young boys participating in the chest-beating self-flagellation. Hadi observes, 'The life of Iraqis is overwhelmed by sadness'.

- Essay topic: 'From an outsider's perspective, this appears to be a culture driven by a toxic mix of machismo, grief and guilt.' Discuss.

Characters

- Majid, known as "the Wise Fool of Samawa", conducts imaginary card games, talking in riddles and poetic analogies: 'people are tired, they want a chance to rest and rebuild'. His madness allows him to say what others are too afraid to speak of. What do you think he means by his repeated references to Marie Antoinette? Is there anything analogous about the French Revolution and the current situation in Iraq?
- Ahmed is a fifteen-year-old boy trained as a 'cement carpenter' and formerly working for his father. Now there is no cement, so he makes his living selling bullets. He buys a bullet for 200 dinars and then sells it for 250. Describe the scenes at the markets, where illegal trade in arms

is conducted quite brazenly.

- We see Japanese troops building a fence around Uruk to protect the remains of the ancient city. The Japanese soldier says he is privileged to protect Uruk. The celebration of Tanabata, the Japanese Festival of Hope, is an attempt to rebuild morale in the shattered community. When asked what he wishes for, an illiterate Iraqi boy, unable to write down his wish, says shyly but with conviction, 'security and stability for Iraqis'. The Japanese soldier smiles warmly and says, 'Me too'. How would you describe the Japanese soldier Hadi films? What is his attitude to the people and the situation?
- Homeless families live in the Security Building where Saddam tortured and executed people. As the children describe the cells and the types of torture that once occurred there, they say, without any sense of the irony of their statement, 'We live in Security'. Write an imaginary account of one of these children's daily routines.

Iraq's Women: 'Her face will light the way ...'

- Hadi is re-united with his mother, presumably after a separation of fourteen years. What do we see of

this moment?

- The film ends with Hadi's wedding, a ceremony typically suggestive of hope for the future. What do we learn of his bride?
- How do women figure in this film?

Samawa's Future

'The collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime is a very big chance for us to make a change, but from what I have seen, we have only just begun. It is a complex problem to introduce democracy here. But I hope we can do it. I am worried about the future, but I have decided to stay in Samawa. I now have the chance to say things about this government, help make the change and contribute to the rebuilding of Samawa from inside Iraq and not in exile'. Hadi Mahood

- What motivates Hadi to return to Iraq?
- How can you explain his intention to remain in Iraq?
- Essay topic: 'Hadi's return to Iraq is ultimately a mad expression of patriotism'. Discuss.
- Bribery and corruption are rife in Samawa, with a full-blown class system and widely entrenched nepotism: it is claimed the Abu-Hassan tribe only employ others from their tribe. What steps need to

be taken to address this situation?

- One man Hadi talks to discusses the urban–rural divide in Iraq, saying that in effect, Iraq is two countries. He suggests Samawa is a city of education, arts, poetry and heritage: ‘It could become an international tourism and cultural centre’. Do you think, from what you witness in the documentary, this is probable? What would need to happen before Samawa can reach such potential?
- What images of hope does the documentary attempt to offer towards the film’s end? (Consider, for example, shots of a girls’ school reopened, computer lessons, children re-learning the National Anthem, Ahmed – the boy selling bullets – resuming carpentry work)
- Essay topic: ‘Rights aren’t lost if people demand them’. Discuss.

The Film

- Write a brief account of the film for a TV guide.
- Design a poster to promote the film. Annotate your poster, explaining your choices and decisions.
- Describe the style of the film, and the relationship between the film’s style and its content.
- Does the film demonstrate an obvious bias?
- Choose six adjectives to describe the tone and mood of this documentary.
- Do you think the film-maker set out with a specific agenda?
- Suggest an alternative title for this documentary.
- How does the narration function? Why might the film-makers have chosen to use two narrators?
- Do you think the film would be well-received in Iraq?
- Make a graphic outline of the film’s structure.
- What do the images of young men leaping into the Euphrates River from the bridge at Samawa suggest? What mood is evoked by these images?
- Are there other aspects of the current situation in Iraq that you feel the film-makers needed to address?

References

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Web Sites

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Iraq, My Country (2005)

Director: Hadi Mahood

Writer: Hadi Mahood

Producer: Philippa Campey

Editor: Ken Sallows

Production Manager: Elise West

Cinematographer: Zaiad Turkey

Sound Recordist: Fadi Fadhle

Narrators: Dean Linguey, Eugene Matti

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