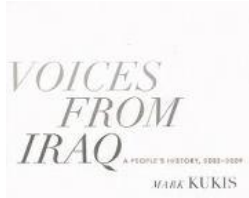




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## Book Review: Voices From Iraq: A People's History, 2003-2009

by Mark Kukis

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Reviewed by Michael Few



Ultimately, the American intervention in Iraq is one small trajectory along the arc of nation and state development in the land that claims the birthplace of civilization. As with every human endeavor, this arc is fraught with tragedy, triumph, violence, resistance, and hope. The current history of the intervention remains American-centric examining what United States forces and their allies did and failed to do following the regime change of Saddam Hussein. In *Voices From Iraq: A People's History, 2003-2009*, Mark Kukis presents the Iraqi voice drawing from over seventy interviews conducted in 2009. This book is a must read as it adds to the comprehensive historiography of the past decade; moreover, through the personal narratives, the reader is given a glimpse into the emotional and physical costs of small wars.

Full disclosure, Mark and I are friends. We met years ago in Diyala Province when the violence peaked. He was there to observe and report. I was there to observe and intervene. While this book is neither about him or I, the story speaks to an endeavor that swallowed a portion of our youth.

For an American reading this book, the stories provide what we need to hear not necessarily what we want to hear. Behind the optimistic reports streaming daily from the Multi-National Force Iraq (MNF-I) Public Affairs Office (PAO), a savage small war raged that pitted brother against brother, tribe against tribe, and village against village. For every report of a successful well dug, clinic established, or school opening, there lies another story of a young teenage girl blowing herself up at a police checkpoint or village elder beheaded for the crime of pairing the male cucumbers alongside it's female companion of tomatoes.

In trying to understand the darker side of the intervention, Kukis excels taking the academic explanations for why men rebel and placing them into vivid, real narratives. The sadness of this generation lost brings to question the role of American judgment in promoting democracy and capitalism abroad primarily through military might. These voices demand the reader to question the utility and efficacy of our foreign policy.

And this takes us to Ahmed Abu Ali. Kukis describes Ahmed as "a devout Shi'ite in his early thirties, poorly dressed and a little on the heavy side. His bare feet are covered with dust inside battered plastic slippers. He appears for the interview on a chilly evening in Baghdad,

where he was a shopkeeper living a quiet life with a wife and two young daughters before the U.S. invasion.” Ahmed describes that life under Saddam Hussein was “hard for me because I had avoided my military service. But I was honestly afraid that Americans would do again what they did in 1991, when Shi’ites rose up against that butcher Saddam with U.S. encouragement only to be abandoned.” As the invasion force neared Karbala in March 2003, Ahmed recalls feeling hopeful,

As we moved back into the city you could see that Saddam’s government was crumbling. There were no Ba’ath party cars or army vehicles roaming the streets, for example. More importantly, you could sense it. Look, I am a Shi’ite. I know Saddam and his butchers. I had felt that tyranny and oppression touching me every day of my life, and at that moment I could feel it all just melting away.

This hopeful feeling quickly dissolved as Ahmed and his neighbors gathered around the Imam Hussein Shrine to protect it from both vandalism and raiding by American forces. Ahmed describes a confrontation with American soldiers and questioning,

How could they have broken their promise by moving toward the shrine after they vowed they wouldn’t? What kind of people would force a standoff with unarmed civilians? How could they insult our dignity by threatening such a holy place right in front of us? We are human beings, after all. Aren’t we?

From one encounter, Ahmed shifts his anger from Saddam Hussein to the United States military. Kukis writes that “Ahmed Abu Ali later joined the Mahdi Army militia and came to consider himself a resistance fighter dedicated to ridding Iraq of the American occupation.” Ahmed still reels with anger and a sense of victimization. Is this the United States fault? Are we culpable for his feelings? Or, does Ahmed need to take ownership of his own emotions, actions, and future? Moving forward, what role if any does the United States share in helping other Ahmed’s?

Ahmed is just one story in [Voices From Iraq: A People’s History, 2003-2009](#). There are many others that should be considered. This book is necessary reading for any serious practitioner or student of small wars.

*Major James Michael Few is an active duty armor officer with multiple tours in various command and staff positions in Iraq. Currently, he serves as the editor of Small Wars Journal.*

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