

Exploring the Iraqi Perspective

A Ground Truth Interview with Ms. Laura Poitras

EPIC visited Oscar-nominated filmmaker **Laura Poitras** in her New York studio to discuss her experience working alone in Iraq for eight months and living with an Iraqi family in Adhamiyah, a suburb of Baghdad. Laura set out to document the human toll of the war and to present the world with the Iraqi point of view. The result is the award-winning documentary *My Country, My Country*. The film details the months leading up to the January 2005 elections by focusing on one political candidate, Dr. Riyadh, and his family.

epic: Tell us a little bit about yourself and why you decided to become a documentary filmmaker.

Laura: I was actually a chef for many years, so I worked in French restaurants through most of my 20s. Then, when I started taking film and digital tech classes, I soon fell in love with documentary filmmaking. I was most interested in a documentary style known as *cinéma vérité*, where the filmmaker does not narrate the story but rather finds people who will take him or her on a journey to experience events as they unfold.

I practiced this style in my last film, *Flag Wars*, and I learned that real drama comes from examining the everyday realities that real people are forced to deal with. I've found that drama happens not when experts discuss and debate, but when you find people who actually have something at stake. I really wanted to continue this kind of filmmaking to address the political and social issues we are confronting as a nation, and that's why I made *My Country, My Country*.

epic: How did you get the idea to make a film about Iraq?

Laura: I got the idea from an article by George Packer called "War after the War" in a November 2003 issue of *The New Yorker*. The article looked at the Iraq issue from many different perspectives, but what was really unique about it was that it tried to understand the human aspects of the war. Most importantly, it looked to the people whose lives were on the line, rather than touting an American ideological viewpoint, which was how Iraq had been talked about up to that point. The article helped me understand the importance of ensuring

that Iraqis are part of the conversation and the solution.

epic: Could you explain how this initial idea was shaped into *My Country, My Country*?

Laura: The initial idea was to understand the human toll of the war, the tragedy of the contradictions, and how the U.S. military preemptively invaded Iraq yet at the same time talked about democracy and freedom. I anticipated that the film would focus on the U.S. presence in Iraq, particularly those who were conducting the elections and nation-building. But I quickly realized I couldn't tell a meaningful story from that perspective only. I needed to have an Iraqi perspective, otherwise I would replicate the ideological ping-pong game I had already witnessed, and I knew that wouldn't be helpful.

Two months after I arrived in Iraq, the pictures of the Abu Ghraib prison were made public and I was able to gain access to the prison. While at the prison I met Dr. Riyadh, who was leading an inspection. I introduced myself and told him that I was an American filmmaker completing a documentary about the war. He agreed to let me follow him because he wanted people outside of Iraq to know what was happening there. So I filmed that day for about two hours while he talked with detainees about their health and recorded their information. Dr. Riyadh was working as an advocate on their behalf to try to get them released. We met people in the prison who had been there for almost a year without being officially charged. While he was going through the prison, he also found out that there was a nine-year-old and other juveniles being detained. While



Laura Poitras studied filmmaking at the San Francisco Art Institute and the New School. Her newest documentary, *My Country, My Country*, has won a number of prestigious awards, including the "Inspiration Award" at the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival. Most recently, *My Country* received an Academy Award nomination for "Best Documentary," and an Independent Spirit Award nomination in the same category.

I filmed the scenes at Abu Ghraib, I had a feeling that Dr. Riyadh would become my main subject for the film. His ability to talk across the fence to agitated detainees, then turn around and communicate to the military and express why it was wrong, showed me how compelling he is as a person. When he invited me to his clinic in Adhamiyah, I knew he would be an amazing person to follow.

epic: What was it like being a white, American woman making a film in the Middle East, in the middle of a war zone?

Laura: I think the fact that I was a woman actually made my job easier, both in terms of Dr. Riyadh and in terms of capturing the big picture of Iraq and the U.S. occupation. Being a woman allowed me to capture Dr. Riyadh's family life and the domestic sphere, which is the heart of the film. Because I was a western woman, I also captured the public sphere, like the political debates, where traditionally only Iraqi men participate. Overall, I found that being an American woman allowed me to move easily between the public and private spheres so that I could capture two very different aspects of life in Iraq.

As a woman working alone in Iraq, the U.S. military tended to give me assistance at my request because they had a tremendous amount of respect for the risk I was taking, for the way I was trying to document this war, and the care I was taking. The military went out of its way to give me tips about what might be interesting to film or to get me on a helicopter, etc.

I think that being a woman also made it a little bit safer for me. I understood that a handful of women had been abducted, but many had been released. I felt that since I was a woman and I knew Dr. Riyadh, if I were abducted I thought I might have a chance of being released. As a safety net, I always carried with me the footage that I got at Abu Ghraib. I figured I could always show it and say, "This is what I'm doing here."

epic: As you've noted, the film gives a rare glimpse of the domestic sphere in Iraq. Based on your experience at the film's screenings, what feedback have you received from audiences regarding Iraq's family life?

Laura: It really depends on the audience. When I show the film to people from Iraq or the Middle East they completely

get it -- they are the ones who laugh the most and cry the most. Some American audiences ask me if Dr. Riyadh and his family are the exception, rather than the rule, because the film portrays so much open debate within the family and the women come off as being empowered. My answer is always no -- that women in Iraq are educated and have a strong voice. For example, all of Dr. Riyadh's daughters have gone to college. From a western perspective, there is a stereotype that Iraqi women are oppressed, silenced, and under the veil. When westerners see this film, it totally turns those stereotypes upside down, and I think that this is one of the film's strengths.

The film also undermines the image of what it means to be an Islamist. Dr. Riyadh is an Islamist who wants a democracy that is governed by the principles of Islam. Our secular western stereotype of Islamists is the radical terrorists, instead of the profoundly spiritual, self-sacrificing, noble servants of God who Dr. Riyadh represents. The film really undermines our typical understanding of the Iraqi people, and if nothing else I hope Americans who watch *My Country, My Country* will see the people of Iraq with new eyes.

epic: What surprised you most about the domestic environment?

Laura: Dr. Riyadh's wife is very outspoken, and she surprised and even intimidated me a little bit. I was also surprised by the fluidity and communal nature of the house. I lived with Dr. Riyadh's family and every now and then I would have to go upstairs to get some private space. I lived there and would spend four or five days filming with them. Then I would do this bizarre reality shift and go to the Green Zone. It was a very complicated transition from living with an Iraqi family to being in this sequestered military environment where you would be hard pressed to know that you were even in Iraq, except for the falling mortars.

epic: Do you speak Arabic?

Laura: No, but I picked up the words I needed to know, for example, about the election. Plus, Dr. Riyadh speaks English, so if there was an event, he would tell me what it was about and I would go there to film it. Most of all, I was just trying to be at the right place at the right time, and there was a lot of going by my gut in terms of the filming.

For me, the clinic was really symbolic, and I could have just filmed it for months. People would bring their physical

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problems to Dr. Riyadh, but they would also turn to him for political help and these discussions always captured the bigger story of the occupation and the situation for the Iraqis.

epic: You spent a lot of time filming in the Adhamiyah section of Baghdad. We really only hear stories of violence from that area. What was your impression of Adhamiyah?

Laura: Adhamiyah is a dangerous place. The first night I was there, I went to a party with Dr. Riyadh's family. We were walking in the dark because there was no electricity, and somebody said out of the pitch darkness, "We know one of you is an American." Dr. Riyadh's niece grabbed my hand, and we kept on walking. People knew I was there, but I think because Dr. Riyadh was highly respected, there was a certain level of respect that was given to me.

In terms of the violence, we talk about "insurgency" in the U.S., but I don't think that's the best term. There are different people perpetrating violence in Iraq, and each has his own goals. In Adhamiyah, there is anti-American sentiment but it is expressed as a nationalist resistance against the U.S. military presence and occupation.

epic: In your documentary, you visited the Abu Hanifa Mosque, home to the shrine of Imam Abu Hanifah, the 8th Century Islamic scholar who founded one of the most important schools of Islamic jurisprudence for Sunni Muslims. How does the mosque play an important role in your film and for the Sunni community in Adhamiyah?

Laura: The Abu Hanifa Mosque is revered by the Sunni community worldwide, and it is one of the most prominent Sunni mosques in all of Baghdad. The film captured a raid of the mosque by U.S. and Iraqi forces that occurred during Friday prayer. Troops not only burst into the men's prayer area but also the women's area, a clear example of how Americans are making a lot of enemies. Because a number of people were shot, the raid crossed a line in the eyes of many Sunnis, and it created animosity that erupted into fighting the following day. To make things worse, U.S. military jets flew overhead, further angering people over what happened at the mosque. When I visited the mosque, somebody came over and threatened me. Fortunately, Dr. Riyadh was there with some of his friends and the people were told to just move on.

epic: Were there any parts of Dr. Riyadh's life story that did not make it into the film that you wish could have been included?

Laura: I make certain decisions, in terms of the type of filmmaking I do, that make it hard to include back-story. Rather than conducting interviews, which often provide a framework for the substance of a documentary, I make docu-

mentaries about unfolding situations that are forward, not backward, looking.

The most important thing to me was to capture what it's like to live in Iraq and move beyond what we read in the newspapers. In my mind, anyone can talk about the danger, but when you're in the kitchen when a bomb goes off you feel it in a different way. The news reports how many people have died, but there are scenes in the film that really capture the violence -- for example, bombs going off as you're making breakfast, a young boy being kidnapped and the hostage negotiations that happen on the telephone.

epic: What are your favorite two or three scenes in the movie that you think get your point or your vision across?

Laura: I think that the dynamic between Dr. Riyadh and his family, especially his daughters, are my favorite scenes because they spell out a picture of Iraq that not many people know exists. I also think the Election Day scenes are really powerful, because the suspense, fear and contradictions of that day are made real in the film. For one thing, there were death threats in Adhamiyah against anyone who went to vote. Then there is a scene where a U.S. military contractor, who was training Iraqi police, talked about how the election was going to be a great show. Keep in mind that he was speaking to the very people who were going to be on the frontlines of these elections. An Iraqi policeman asks him, "What do you mean a show?" The contractor says that there is a difference between a show and history, and I think he captures the contradictions that I was trying to convey in the film. What does it mean to talk about democracy and occupation, and can you have legitimate elections during an occupation? Who is this war for? Is it a show for Americans or is it life or death for Iraqis? That scene clearly captured those tensions.

epic: What did you learn about Iraq's Islamic Party from Dr. Riyadh?

Laura: The story that the film shows is Dr. Riyadh's membership in the Iraqi Islamic Party, Iraq's largest Sunni Islamic party. He's definitely against the U.S. current operations in Iraq, but he participates in the political realm because he believes in democracy and representation. So, Dr. Riyadh embodies one of the ultimate contradictions of this war.

Dr. Riyadh's party was prepared to participate in the election process until the U.S. started bombing Fallujah, an important city to the Sunni community. The U.S. justification was that Fallujah was harboring terrorists, but the bombing occurred at the same time that voter registration was happening in November 2004. The effect was that it created

mass amounts of civilian refugees and ultimately the Sunni parties pulled out of the elections, resulting in a government that drafted a constitution without Sunni participation. There was a strong framework creating the division in the South, North, and Center in this constitution created in the absence of the Sunnis.

epic: Is Dr. Riyadh still active in politics today?

Laura: Yes, he's still active in politics. He's a member of his local district council and he's still trying to work in his neighborhood to help the people of Adhamiyah. He's also working for the Ministry of Health to help with developing hospitals and healthcare. Although a new set of elections has been held in Iraq since I filmed *My Country, My Country*, they were for the national government. Dr. Riyadh has not run for office again, but the Iraqi Islamic Party joined the Iraq Accord Front for the December 2005 elections and won 44 out of 275 seats in Parliament, the most of any Sunni political coalition.

epic: Newspapers in the U.S. have reported soldiers saying that Iraqis only understand force. Do you agree or disagree with that way of thinking?

Laura: I think that Iraqis understand respect, honor, and loyalty more than they respect force. In a way, I think it is probably what kept me alive because I went there with a sense of respect for their culture, and I didn't enter a neighborhood with five people bearing AK-47s.

In the film I think we can learn a lot about democracy, and we should take some lessons about it to the U.S. For instance, you have Dr. Riyadh who's participating in political life for no personal gain. His motive is a completely self-sacrificing commitment to something he believes in. Here, you get the feeling that political life is not about what you believe in but how to win political elections. It's a secondary priority to speak what you think is morally right.

The other thing is that the Iraqi turnout was much higher than ours, even in the midst of death threats. So I don't think they only understand force, but I do think that we need to understand their culture and how it works, like tribal relations and the ethnic and sectarian differences. We need to understand all these things in order to solve this issue, but unfortunately so many mistakes have been made to the point that I don't know how the U.S. can stabilize Iraq right now.

epic: Did you have a chance to interact with the soldiers? If

so, what surprised you the most about their views?

Laura: Yes, I definitely interacted with the soldiers. The soldiers I was following were part of what the military calls "Civil Affairs." Their job is to win the "hearts and minds" of the population. They were in charge of things like getting the electricity to work, building the government and local councils, and jump-starting schools. I met some amazing soldiers who were being put in tough situations because they were asked to facilitate local political life and be peacemakers in the community, while at the same time being shot at and threatened.

epic: What do you believe is the greatest source of conflict between the people of Adhamiyah and the occupying forces?

Laura: I think the conflict comes from aggressively patrolling the streets, raiding houses and making unfounded arrests. There were people I filmed at Abu Ghraib from Dr. Riyadh's neighborhood that had been held there for a year without being formally charged. In America, we hear the word "detainee" and we think of prisoners, but what we are really talking about are people who are being held without knowing what they're accused of and who cannot defend themselves. I think in the first year of U.S. presence in Iraq, a lot of people were just rounded up and carted off. We didn't have a process to try them or release them.

Another problem in Adhamiyah is the fact that the security forces are largely Shia, and the Sunni population of Adhamiyah has issues with that. To make matters worse, there have been allegations that Shia death squads and militias have been infiltrating the security forces.

epic: Was that a real arms deal that you documented in your film?

Laura: It was a black market arms deal and it really did happen. Although Dr. Riyadh is the main character of the film, I also wanted to look at the bigger story of Iraq and the occupation, so I followed the U.S. military and the U.N. and their planning around the elections. The U.N. subcontracted the security of the elections, the ballots, and the registration materials to Australian private security contractors (a.k.a. "mercenaries" or "guns-for-hire"), which transported election materials throughout the country. It was somewhat by accident, but they invited me to go north to meet some Peshmurga in Kurdistan that they were giving money to. I stayed at a hotel in Erbil, and we filmed all day. That night they pulled me aside and said they needed to meet with an arms dealer and asked me if they could do it in my hotel room. I was thinking, "Are you really asking a filmmaker if you can have a

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black market arms deal in her hotel room?” It’s something you can’t imagine or write. It turned out to be such a great scene because when you think about it, it’s crazy that a black market deal transpired to get hundreds of Russian AK-47s to protect ballot materials, as if you need that many guns to protect ballots. The first time I asked if I could film they said no, but after consistently asking them they ultimately said yes. The condition was that I couldn’t film the Kurdish arms dealer so you just see the back of his head, but I think it makes the scene even more powerful.

Ultimately, the Australians were a detour from the main story, but I feel that since so much of this occupation is being subcontracted out, showing the deal was a necessity. A lot of the contracts go to Halliburton, which provides the logistical support for the military, but you also have 30,000 to 40,000 guns-for-hire who operate in Iraq to provide security. I wanted to represent the presence of private security contractors.

epic: What surprised you the most about the security situation, particularly surrounding the elections?

Laura: I was there on Election Day when 44 people were killed. In any western country, such incidents would have been perceived as a massacre, but in Iraq the elections were still seen as a good day. From the outside you really have to respect the risk that Iraqis continue to take to participate in political life.

At the same time, simply holding elections does not guarantee security or create a functioning government. Unfortunately, the elected government has not been able to provide the basic things people need to survive—security, jobs, water, electricity. Although I really admire the risk Iraqis took, the tragedy is that there still is not a functioning government.

epic: In the film’s credits, you include a dedication to a Mustafa Riyadh. Can you tell us what happened?

Laura: Dr. Riyadh’s nephew, Mustafa, was assassinated after I left. Mustafa was 19 years old and studying to be a doctor. He was incredibly bright and smart, and he had so much promise. He was coming home for the holidays and was waiting in his car outside Yasir’s house, the boy who was kidnapped in the film. He was shot dead, his body riddled with bullets, in front of his whole family. I heard that people suspected he was working as a translator, which he wasn’t. But nobody has really found out why, and it been so tragic for the family. When we read the papers and hear how many are dead on a daily basis, it is hard to imagine how one of their deaths ripples through an entire family, let alone the hundreds of thousands who have died.

epic: In your film you are very careful to let you characters speak for themselves. Based on what you witnessed, what should America’s current role be in Iraq?

Laura: First, I think we should start by addressing what we, America, can do that will stop Iraqis from getting killed. We also need to convey a sense of responsibility for some of the mistakes we have made, including, for example, the problems we created by disabling the Iraqi army. We need to leverage strategies that demonstrate greater understanding of the Iraqi people in order to even begin to hope to stabilize the country. I personally feel that while the U.S. military presence continues, stabilization can’t be achieved. We need to debate the best way to support Iraq, be it financially or identifying third party peacekeepers. In order to create stability, any outside force needs to be perceived as neutral peacekeepers, not occupiers.

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