



From Persona to Homo: Tracing Iraqis' Depersonalization from Infrastructural Destruction to Militarized Borders

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The prevailing military responses by the United States (U.S.) and Europe to contemporary crises, both abroad and closer to home, have dehumanizing effects that fundamentally undermine professed humanitarian intentions. The U.S. occupation of Iraq and the European Union's (EU) external border militarization and securitizing policies as a primary answer to migration establish a triple depersonalization of people from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Through a critical examination of these phenomena, this essay underlines how military interventions, infrastructure destruction, and exclusionary migration regimes legitimize specific individuals while relegating others to a state of apolitical beings. Military interventions, even when overtly framed as "protective" or humanitarian operations, often end up catastrophically weakening and destabilizing the very populations they purport to liberate. The devastating infrastructural and socioeconomic damage inflicted on Iraqi society by the U.S. invasion obliterated the foundations for dignified human existence. Paradoxically, this created conditions that drove mass displacement, compelling millions to seek survival and basic human security elsewhere as refugees and migrants. However, these forcibly displaced Iraqis encountered further depersonalizing violence and rightlessness under the militarized border enforcement regimes of receiving states.

As is explored here, human rights rhetoric enabling military intervention perpetuates a depersonalizing exclusion, also exemplified by the overt destruction of infrastructure. The essay identifies three interlinked phases through which militarized interventions and exclusionary migration regimes enact processes of dehumanization and depersonalization. First, the mobilization of humanitarian rhetoric and human rights framings to legitimize military intervention "reifies and objectifies"¹ populations as passive victims requiring rescue, stripping them of political autonomy. Second, the physical destruction of civilian infrastructure critical to social reproduction and bare dignified existence renders human lives as mere corporeal objects, depoliticized and subjugated to sovereign disposability.² Finally, those displaced by such violence encounter further depersonalization through militarized border enforcement approaches that treat migrants as dehumanized security threats to be barred and deterred through coercive exclusion. Thus, Iraqi migrants become reduced to rightless "bare life,"³ their political and civil personhood excised and contained through sovereign regimes of violence. Detached from plural political subjectivities, they are subjugated to foreign sovereign decisions.

1 Esposito, R. (2012). *The Third Person: Politics of Life and Philosophy of the Impersonal*. Polity.

2 Benharrouse, R. (2024). *They Cannot Not Escape: Necropolitics, Pre-Migratory Expectations, and the Elsewhere* (unpublished) [Doctoral Dissertation, Mohammed V University in Rabat].

3 Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life* (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). Stanford University Press.



The Iraqi is a Person No Longer

We can analyze the premise of the “conflict” in and occupation of Iraq through the lens of Roberto Esposito.⁴ The stated rationale for U.S. intervention and occupation revolved around human rights, removing Saddam Hussein to liberate the Iraqi people and promote democracy. This was a textbook illustration of the mobilization of human rights discourse to legitimize militarization and the extension of sovereign power.⁵ The Iraqi people were cast in the role of the oppressed, whose “bare life”⁶ required rescue by an intervening force guaranteeing their “right to rights.”⁷ However, this human rights rhetoric, in fact, enacted and perpetuated the very reifying separation it claimed to overcome. The U.S. positioned itself as the sovereign bearer of rights, prepared to dispose of the Iraqi population reimagined as mere corporeal life denuded of political standing.⁸ The occupation authorities acted as transcendent subjects/persons, assuming the power to remake Iraqi civil existence through bureaucratic institutional reform.⁹ George Bush’s war ultimatum speech evidences this further,

“We will tear down the apparatus of terror and we will help you to build a new Iraq that is prosperous and free. In a free Iraq, there will be no more wars of aggression against your neighbors, no more poison factories, no more executions of dissidents, no more torture chambers and rape rooms. The tyrant will soon be gone. The day of your liberation is near.”¹⁰

Hence, the occupying forces treated the Iraqi population not as free persons with political autonomy but rather as an inert mass of impersonal, biological “life” in need of administration and governance by a sovereign intervening power.

The second phase of dehumanization/depersonalization manifested acutely through the infrastructural destruction inflicted during the U.S. invasion and occupation. The realities of aerial bombardment and urban combat starkly contrasted the humanitarian rhetoric, treating civilian spaces like hospitals as disposable collateral damage. Focusing solely on quantitative economic effects would overlook infrastructure’s crucial role in maintaining social reproduction and minimum standards of dignified living. This was evident in the destruction of essential infrastructure, such as hospitals, water treatment facilities, and

4 Esposito, R. *Third Person*. Esposito argues that the modern liberal human rights regime, despite its purported aim of protecting universal human dignity, reifies and objectifies human life through its grounding in the juridical category of personhood. The person is seen as the sovereign subject with rights over their own body/property, thus separating it from the mere “material support” of biological life.

5 Waleed Hazbun explains the historical trajectory of U.S. militarization since the Cold War in his SALAM essay; McCormack, K., & Gilbert, E. (2022). The geopolitics of militarism and humanitarianism. *Progress in Human Geography*, 46(1), 179–197. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325211032267>

6 Agamben, G. *Homo sacer*.

7 Arendt, H. (1973). *The origins of totalitarianism*. Mariner Books.

8 Benharrouse, R. *They Cannot Not Escape*.

9 The reduction and separation of personhood continue with the ongoing genocide of Palestinians at the time of writing this memo. Israel reduces Gaza as a space of living things, not of persons. At its core, the blockade weaponizes scarcity, stripping Palestinians’ plural narratives down to abjected refugeehood. This process reduces dynamic transnational identities, societal traditions, and political demands for justice into an impersonal humanitarian monolith of bare ethnic embodiment. The author is currently writing an article exploring this in further detail.

10 Guardian staff reporter. (2003, March 18). Full text: Bush’s speech. *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/mar/18/usa.iraq>



electrical grids, during the invasion and subsequent urban battles.¹¹ Rather than being treated as inviolable spaces sheltering the embodied personhood of Iraqi civilians, this infrastructure was rendered mere disposable material, external to the sphere of rights. Its decimation exemplified the occupiers' sovereign disposability¹² over Iraqi lives, reified as pure corporeal materiality.¹³ As the physical networks enabling the transportation of necessities degrade due to armed conflict, obtaining adequate food, water, shelter, and community services became increasingly difficult, if not impossible. The availability of infrastructural access forms the very bedrock upon which Iraqi citizens' ability to meet essential human needs rests. A comprehensive approach that considers material welfare and lived experience remains necessary to facilitate recovery, opportunity, and dignity for all affected communities following cataclysmic events.

The displacement of millions of Iraqis as refugees represented the ultimate third phase in this continuum of dehumanization and depersonalization unleashed by the militarized intervention. Stripped of political belonging and the civic rights of personhood, Iraqi refugees found themselves reduced to the status of bare life, living dead,¹⁴ and living things. The human rights discourse that legitimized the war also produced this situation of rightless precarity, casting Iraqi refugees as anonymous living things entirely subject to sovereign decisions over their fate. The exposure of Iraqi refugees to heightened mortality risks from lack of healthcare, food insecurity, and violence in camps was not an accidental lapse but followed necessarily from the occupiers' impersonal, militarized framing of Iraqi existence. While the initial rhetorical framing of the intervention depersonalized Iraqis through the narrative of helpless victims requiring military intervention, this dehumanizing paradigm rapidly materialized in the destruction wrought by the invasion and occupation itself. This represented an assault on the very foundations of social reproduction and democratic political existence. Rather than liberating the Iraqi population, the destruction of hospitals, water treatment facilities, power grids, and economic institutions actively dispossessed them of the material and socioeconomic bases for self-determination. The following section expounds on how this infrastructural

11 Dina Mansour-Ille critically examined the failure of interventionism in Libya, specifically critiquing the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine in the same SALAM publication. During the SALAM workshop, we discussed the destruction of Libya's infrastructure, which has reduced the country to a zone of chaos. Additionally, Jaida Aboufotouh and Yara Ahmed's essay on Palestine traces the total destruction of Gaza's infrastructure and explores Egypt's foreign policy in response to the crisis.

12 Razack, S. H. (2012). Memorializing colonial power: The death of Frank Paul: Memorializing colonial power. *Law & Social Inquiry: Journal of the American Bar Foundation*, 37(04), 908–932. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-4469.2012.01291.x>

13 This caesura between Persona and Homo is a central theme in Western popular culture, particularly evident in movies and video games. In films like Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008), American soldiers are often depicted as heroic figures preserving world peace, rather than as invaders responsible for the deaths of civilians in the name of freedom. This narrative aligns with the prevalent portrayal of the Middle East as a space of terrorism, exoticism, and evil, as explored in Sut Jhally's *Reel Bad Arabs* (2006). In video games, players often assume the role of a soldier whose mission is to kill disposable Iraqis, which further perpetuates the heroic persona and legitimizes military interventions for the wider public. Games like Victura's infamous *Six Days in Fallujah* (2023) and Pivotal Games' *Conflict: Desert Storm 2* (2003) depict the US military's fight against terrorism, framing destruction as necessary to eradicate the threat. These and other representations dehumanize Iraqis, and the people of the broader MENA region, portraying them as disposable and impersonal living things whose lives hold less value than the pursuit of "peace, freedom, and democracy" in the region. The author is currently working on a project that questions video games through affirmative biopolitics.

14 Mbembe, A. (2019). *Necropolitics*. Duke University Press.



decimation epitomized the depersonalizing violence at the core of the occupation's militarized logic.

Infrastructural Destruction and Socioeconomic Decline

The 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq was overtly framed as a protective intervention, ousting Saddam Hussein's regime to eliminate the threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), end human rights abuses, and enable Iraqi society to be "rebuilt" along liberal democratic lines.¹⁵ The initial "Shock and Awe" bombardment campaign, coupled with the protracted ground operations and ensuing sectarian violence, inflicted extensive and severe harm to Iraq's infrastructure.¹⁶ As a result, the provision of electricity faced significant challenges, with households experiencing access to electricity for only nine hours per day despite a growing demand that more than doubled from pre-conflict consumption levels.¹⁷ Water treatment facilities and sewage systems were also heavily compromised, resulting in acute public health crises, water-borne diseases, and child malnutrition.¹⁸ Over 1,500 medical facilities across Iraq were damaged or destroyed between 2003-2005.¹⁹ The ramifications of this infrastructural devastation reverberated throughout Iraq's socioeconomic landscape, triggering a cascade of destabilizing consequences. The erosion of critical infrastructure networks directly contributed to a contraction of economic activity, evidenced by a 41 percent decline in GDP in 2003. Even after five years, growth only reached 4 percent in 2008, far below the 14.4 and 12.9 percent predicted by the IMF and World Bank.²⁰ Unemployment rates soared, reaching an estimated 40 percent in 2007; "that is, as many as two out of five Iraqis may be unemployed—even though more than 2 million have already left the country."²¹

The aerial bombardment campaign epitomized the profound disconnect between the humanitarian rhetoric used to justify the intervention and the brutal realities of the invasion and combat that treated civilian spaces, like hospitals, as disposable collateral targets. The economic toll of this infrastructural wreckage proved immense. Entire sectors like manufacturing, transportation, telecommunications, and agriculture were devastated

15 Hinnebusch, R. (2007). The US invasion of Iraq: Explanations and implications. *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 16(3), 209–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10669920701616443>; Butt, A. I. (2019). Why did the United States invade Iraq in 2003? *Security Studies*, 28(2), 250–285. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1551567>

16 Al-Rawi, S. (2020). Shock and Awe, sectarianism, and violence in Iraq post-2003 [MA Thesis]. City University of New York (CUNY).

17 Ozlu, O. (2006). Iraqi economic reconstruction and development. Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1-92.

18 Vick, K. (2004, November 20). Children Pay Cost of Iraq's Chaos. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2004/11/21/children-pay-cost-of-iraqs-chaos/od7bo668-02f8-4dc0-95c9-1bba3c6562fa/>

19 Hilfi, T. K. A., Lafta, R., & Burnham, G. (2013). Health services in Iraq. *The Lancet*, 381(9870), 939–948. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(13\)60320-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(13)60320-7); Bilmes, L. J., & Stiglitz, J. E. (2011). The Long-term Costs of Conflict: The Case of the Iraq War. In *Handbook on the Economics of Conflict*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

20 O'Hanlon, M. E., & Campbell, J. H. (2007). Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/index20071221.pdf>

21 Bilmes, L. J., & Stiglitz, J. E. (2008). The three trillion dollar war: The true cost of the Iraq conflict. WW Norton.



by the physical destruction of plants, warehouses, roadways, refineries, and supply chains.²² The Iraqi economy went from struggling under Saddam Hussein's regime to being flatlined and dependent on foreign humanitarian aid under U.S. occupation.²³ Iraq became a landscape of displacement and pure subsistence-level survival amidst ruination. While occupying authorities allocated funds for infrastructural rebuilding contracts, mainly the Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund (2003-2007)²⁴ and the Iraq Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Fund (I3RF; 2018-2022)²⁵, many of these efforts were plagued by corruption, inefficiency, and security disruptions that severely limited their effectiveness. Beyond statistics that highlight the total destruction of Iraq on all fronts, the daily realities of alienation, frustration, and despair became the norm for Iraqis.²⁶ Hence, the sheer scale of infrastructural destruction and economic ruination exposed the fundamentally depersonalizing and dehumanizing effects of pursuing humanitarian intervention through overwhelming military force. Despite the rhetoric of liberating the Iraqi population, the realities on the ground rendered that population an anonymous mass of bodies subjugated to sweeping infrastructural ruination that treated civilian hospitals, water systems, and economic foundations as disposable material objects, exterior to human rights concerns. The displacement of millions of Iraqis produced rightless refugee populations subjected to coercive deterrence and criminalization under militarized border regimes, experienced as rightless biomatter.²⁷ Just as the invasion treated Iraqi civilian infrastructure as disposable material, the exclusionary migration policies of the U.S. and EU ultimately treated displaced Iraqi refugees as anonymous living matter, bodies without political standing. The externalized border securitization adopted by receiving states further calcified this militarized framing of human mobility as a security threat to be barred through coercive force rather than a humanitarian imperative, perpetuating the dynamics of dehumanization.

The Borders Do Not Welcome You

In recent years, the European Union's evolving border control regime has revealed an increasingly militarized orientation that prioritizes security imperatives over enduring humanitarian obligations. The ascendance of Frontex as the bloc's primary mechanism for coordinating external border governance has been of particular concern.²⁸ Beyond the agency's expanding operational mandate and multi-billion budget, its acquisition of

22 Looney, R. (2006). Economic consequences of conflict: The rise of Iraq's informal economy. *Journal of Economic Issues*, 40(4), 991–1007. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00213624.2006.11506971>

23 Although Iraq garnered important funds between 1970-80 because of the oil prices' boom, the war with Iran soon drained the economy. This is to say that Iraq's economy was not a success prior to 2003 precisely because of overt central planning and monopoly of Baath Party under Saddam Hussein; Sanford, J. E. (2003). *Iraq's Economy: Past, Present, Future*. Dtic.Mil. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/tr/ADA476247>

24 *Rebuilding Iraq: U.S. Achievements Through the Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund*. (n.d.). State.Gov. Retrieved May 5, 2024, from <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rpt/60857.htm>

25 This fund did not have the support of the U.S. World Bank Group. (2022). *Iraq Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Fund (I3RF): Trust Fund Annual Progress Report to Development Partners 2021*. World Bank Group.

26 Al-Mohammad, H. (2015). Poverty beyond disaster in postinvasion Iraq: Ethics and the "rough ground" of the everyday. *Current Anthropology*, 56(S11), S108–S115. <https://doi.org/10.1086/681800>

27 Benharrouse, R. They Cannot Not Escape.

28 Neal, A. W. (2009). Securitization and risk at the EU border: The origins of FRONTEX. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 47(2), 333–356. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2009.00807.x>



advanced naval and aerial surveillance technologies and staging of land interception squads signal a conceptual reframing of irregular migration as a quasi-military threat vector rather than a complex phenomenon raising profound moral issues under international law.²⁹ While ostensibly aiming to curb deadly Mediterranean crossings, such militarization policies have critically undermined asylum seekers' access to dignified screening and humanitarian care as afforded under the United Nations Refugee Convention.³⁰ While border governance necessitates balance, the present momentum ignores emigration's root political and economic drivers and glosses over receiving states' contributions to global inequities.

At the height of the displacement crisis in 2007, over 4 million Iraqis had been forced to flee their homes, with 2.5 million becoming refugees in the MENA region. Yet the U.S. accepted only around 19,800 Iraqi refugees that year, while the entirety of the Western nations absorbed just 3.67 percent, undermining the purported human rights justification for military occupation.³¹ Despite international law's binding obligations of non-refoulement for legitimate refugees, arrivals along this perilous avenue continue to face heavily militarized responses rather than the compassion their plight warrants. The failures of global governance highlighted by such widespread forcing into unsafe irregular migration require holistic remediation well beyond mere border enforcement. The deportation regimes and stringent visa policies enforced by the U.S. and EU made clear that for Iraqi civilians, there were no "rights to rights" to be upheld by external intervention. Just as their infrastructure and economic life were rendered disposable amidst the occupation's violence, the political existence of displaced Iraqis was reduced to the humanitarian category of depersonalized refugeehood. Refugee camps like Al-Hol in Syria displayed the full impersonal segregation and deprivation enforced on Iraqi and Palestinian bodies.³²

Yet when Russia's invasion of Ukraine triggered a new refugee crisis in early 2022, the response from the U.S. and European nations stood in stark contrast. Over 3 million Ukrainians were warmly welcomed across the EU in three weeks, rapidly granted legal residency rights and employment access, and provided substantial public housing and social services aimed at integration rather than mere warehousing.³³ This marked a dramatic reversal from the exclusionary policies towards displaced Iraqis and other Middle Eastern refugee populations who were systematically barred from receiving asylum in years prior.³⁴ This divergence reflects how some human lives become recognized as political and granted the rights of personhood, while others are reified as depersonalized living things. Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov said, "These are not the refugees we are used to; these people are Europeans. These people are intelligent. They are educated

29 Eman Ragab's SALAM essay speaks on irregular migration throughout the MENA region.

30 Benharrousse, R. Shoring borders, dismantling humanity: Greece's detention of asylum seekers and the immunization paradigm. (2024, February 16). Oxford Law Blogs. <https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/border-criminologies-blog/blog-post/2024/02/shoring-borders-dismantling-humanity-greeces-detention>

31 Statistics on Displaced Iraqis Around the World. Geneva, Switzerland: UNHCR; September 2007.

32 OCHA. (2020, October 11). Syrian Arab Republic: North East Syria: Al Hol camp As of 11 October 2020. ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-north-east-syria-al-hol-camp-11-october-2020>

33 THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. (2022). Temporary Protection Directive. Europa.Eu. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022D0382&from=EN>

34 Zhou, Y., Narea, N., & Animashaun, C. (2022, March 19). How to understand the Ukrainian refugee crisis, in charts and a map. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/22983230/europe-ukraine-refugees-charts-map>



people.”³⁵ Hence, the suffering of non-European refugee groups became again rendered as impersonal humanitarian afterthoughts devoid of political demands or rights-bearing status.

Conclusion

The continuum of dehumanization catalyzed by militarized interventions follows a stark trajectory. First, the mobilization of humanitarian rhetoric itself depersonalizes and dehumanizes the Iraqi population, recasting them as passive victims devoid of political personhood. This discursive depersonalization enables the second phase: the physical destruction of civilian infrastructure critical for social reproduction and basic dignity, rendering human lives as mere corporeal materiality subjugated to sovereign disposability. Finally, the displacement prompted by such infrastructural ruination produces populations of rightless refugees reduced entirely to impersonal “bare life.” Expelled from legal protections and the political sphere, they are subordinated to sovereign decisions over their existence as anonymous living matter. This ultimate depersonalization is then brutally reasserted through militarized deterrence and criminalization at borders.

The realities analyzed here lay bare the fundamentally depersonalizing and dehumanizing effects intrinsic to the militarized paradigms governing contemporary forcible displacement and migration. Whether through the physical infrastructural ruination and socioeconomic immiseration imposed on Iraqi society during the U.S. occupation or the coercive deterrence regimes enacted by the EU’s externalized border militarization, human lives become abstracted from political personhood and reduced to mere biological existences. Undergirding these dynamics is a necropolitical caesura between the politicized spheres of rights-bearing citizenship and zones of abjected “living things” expelled from legal and moral standing. This critique reveals how ostensibly humanitarian interventions reify rather than overcome this exclusion of personhood.

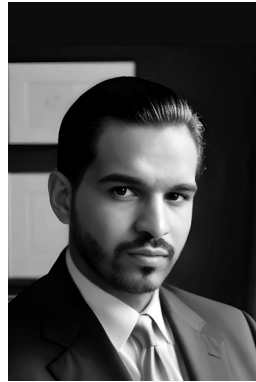
Therefore, it is an ethical imperative to uplift radical re-conceptualizations that can supplant the current depersonalizing discourses. Pragmatically, this necessitates diverting resources away from militarized border enforcement toward creating expansive infrastructures for dignified refugee reception, rapid legal incorporation, and empowered socioeconomic integration. It also involves dismantling ideological constructs framing certain populations as security threats and stripping them of their right to rights while countering xenophobic mythologies portraying migrants as alien others.

35 Europe’s different approach to Ukrainian and Syrian refugees draws accusations of racism. (2022, March 1). CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/europe-racism-ukraine-refugees-1.6367932>



PRISME

Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive
Security in the Middle East



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PRISME

Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive
Security in the Middle East

PRISME Initiative

PRISME aims to redefine the conception of “security” in the Middle East and North Africa, as the starting point for strategic relations between MENA countries and their European and North American partners. It does so in pursuit of effective, collaborative approaches to ensuring a more peaceful and stable future. To this end, PRISME sponsors dialogue and debate between foreign policy professionals across diverse backgrounds and perspectives. These include individuals in governments, thinktanks and academic institutions located in the MENA region, Europe and North America, with a specific focus on engaging young and emerging thinkers and practitioners. Its goal is to re-define security in the Middle East, broadening the definitions of what it looks like, for whom, how it can be achieved, and how outside actors can contribute to it.

SALAM Project

SALAM (Sustaining Alternative Links beyond Arms and the Military) proposes to rethink the centrality of the arms trade in international relations with and among Middle East & North Africa (MENA) countries.

It fosters and amplifies ideas from a network of scholars and practitioners working in and with the Middle East. Issues they will address include the arms trade’s advertised role in cementing bilateral and multilateral ties between North America, Europe and the MENA region; the opportunity costs of over- or sole reliance on weaponry as security; and alternative modes of engagement that might redefine a shared strategic agenda.