

THE ANATOMY OF CRIME: PHYSICIANS UNDER THE OPPRESSIVE REGIME OF SADDAM HUSSEIN

ANATOMIJA ZLOČINA: LIJEČNICI ZA VRIJEME REPRESIVNOGA REŽIMA SADDAMA HUSSEINA

Samir Johna*

ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, disturbing reports started to emerge about the participation of Iraqi physicians in human rights abuses in southern Iraq under Hussein's regime. While such heinous acts of ear amputations, falsification of medical-legal reports of torture, falsification of death certificates, removal of patient's organs without consent, and many other violations were true, there was no attempt to explain why it happened. There is no doubt that such behaviors reflected long years of threats, displacement and loss of jobs, confiscation, verbal and physical abuse, jail, and the ultimate punishment of torture to death that befell Iraqi physicians. With so many recipes on the menu, could any physician refuse to cooperate?

Based on the recounted injustice in this article, which is only the tip of the iceberg, it is only fair to say that, under the circumstances, Iraqi physicians had no choice but to become unwilling accomplices. They should indeed be viewed as survivors of an abusive regime rather than collaborators. In the midst of the struggle to rebuild Iraq, measures should be taken to prevent future breaches of the medical code of ethics. This can only be achieved with a new constitution that ensures the independence of professional medical associations from state authority, and with the support of the international community that can exert pressure on all oppressive regimes. The civilized world must not tolerate and should not turn a blind eye to any violation of the basic rights of every human, for which too much blood has already been shed.

Key Words: Physicians, Abuse, Medicine, politics, Iraq

* Clinical Professor of Surgery. Loma Linda University School of Medicine. Staff Surgeon. Southern California Permanente Medical Group.

Address for correspondence: Samir Johna, MD. Southern California Permanente Medical Group. 9985 Sierra Avenue. Fontana, CA 92335. USA. E-mail: Samir.johna@gmail.com

Ever since I read the report on “*Physician Participation in Human Rights Abuses in Southern Iraq*” [1], flashbacks from my past have kept hovering around my injured soul. I once thought that by leaving Iraq I would leave all my memories behind, but it was wishful thinking. Having lived as a physician under the oppressive regime of Saddam Hussein for over two decades, I could attest to the authenticity of the report. I have not only lived through it, but I consider myself a living witness to the heinous acts of ear amputations, falsification of medical-legal reports of torture, falsification of death certificates, removal of patient’s organs without consent, and the list continues.

While the report is an eye opener for the medical community worldwide, it lacks the perspective of an insider - a sincere cry of the soul for Iraqi physicians who are still living in dire situation today. But why would any physician participate in human rights abuse? The answer, at least in my opinion, may be more relevant than the act itself and may, in fact, reflect the pressures physicians had to face living under Hussein’s regime. It is an irony of fate to see the patrons of ethical ideals and the sole defenders of human welfare become *tools* for the torture of the very people they took the oath to protect.

To understand the psychology of the Iraqi community under Hussein, one must understand Hussein’s personality and the attributes of his regime - a personality that is dominated by fear, intimidation, anger, hatred, revenge, brutality, and sadism. In his book *Saddam Hussein: the Politics of Revenge* [2], Mr. Said Aburish navigates the life of a daydreamer who wanted to take Iraq into the 20th century even if that meant eliminating half of his nation. As such, he rose up to match notorious leaders like Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin. In fact, there is enough evidence to suggest that Hussein indeed modeled himself after Stalin more than any man in history. As a young man, he read almost every book about Stalin. Even before he attained any measure of power, he used to wander around the offices of the Ba’ath Party telling people “Wait until I take over this country. I will make a Stalinist state out of it yet” [2]. Without doubt Stalin was Hussein’s hero for he saw in him his own shadow - both came from a poor background; both were brought up by their mothers, both used thugs to terrorize compatriots; both used security services to purge their opponents; both hated their army, and the rest we all know.

Physicians make a small fraction of the Iraqi community, but have been equally terrorized by Hussein and his regime. Although no secret to Iraqi physicians, a few physicians abroad could even imagine the magnitude of

abuse that befell their Iraqi colleagues - threats, displacement, loss of jobs, confiscation, verbal and physical abuse, jail, and the ultimate punishment of torture to death. With so many recipes on the menu, could any physician refuse to cooperate? Realistically, I could have been an accomplice, albeit unwillingly, was it not for the fact that then I was only a general practitioner. I knew that saying "no" to Hussein was Russian roulette and I am not sure I had the guts to play it!

In medical school I was harassed by my Ba'athi colleagues for no reason other than being assigned to a group of students, some of whom were suspected communists. The standoff escalated after I refused to join the Ba'ath Party. Coming from a non-Arab, non-Moslem minority did not help either! Upon graduation, I was among the top five graduates for whom the rules and regulations ensured a position on the faculty with fully paid postgraduate scholarships abroad - let alone the exemption from military service during the Gulf War. While my colleagues enjoyed their privileges, I was destined to spend six years of my life as a *soldier* on the front lines! It became crystal clear that there was no light at the end of the tunnel - time to get out!

But my ordeal in Iraq is far less sinister compared to others. The plot against physicians started when tensions escalated between Iraq and Iran in the wake of the Islamic revolution in Tehran. Hussein felt intimidated and threatened by al- Khomeini and his mullahs. In a knee-jerk reflex, Hussein launched his campaign to eliminate Shiite opponents, many of whom were medical students and physicians - I knew a few on a personal level who disappeared in thin air never to be seen again.

Hussein's personal physicians were no exception! In his recent book "*I Was The Doctor to The President*" [3], Dr. Ala'a Bashir, Hussein's personal physician, recounts the horrifying and chilling details of the torture that befell his colleagues for no reason other than the grudge that Hussein had always held against physicians. When Hussein was shot in his calf during an attempt to assassinate president Qasim in 1959, he could not get physician's help because it was against the law to treat victims of violence without involving the police, something he could never forget. Ever since, he sought revenge on physicians! [3].

During the Gulf War, Iraq was interested in developing weapons of mass destruction. In preparation, Hussein offered one follower, a veterinarian, a fully paid scholarship in USA for the management of massive casualties. However, the position required the applicant to be a physician.

Hussein ordered his minister of health, Riyadh Ibrahim to provide falsified documents to that effect. When Dr. Ibrahim refused he was fired and forced into home confinement. Within weeks, he was framed in an alleged conspiracy against Iraqis - the usual accusation! [3] To make a long story short, Dr. Ibrahim was tortured to death. The bruises and fractures inflicted on his body were crying out for a mercy bullet, and a bullet it was to his head that put an end to his misery [3]. The fact that Ibrahim was fired from medical school and sent to jail in 1959 for helping Saddam Hussein was not good enough for a pardon from the man he so faithfully served!

In a separate incident, what starts as a pleasant social gathering ends up in tragedy. Ismael al-Tatar, a dermatology consultant, was cracking some jokes to his colleague, Hisham al-Salman, a pediatrician. One AIDS joke was politically incorrect for it involved Hussein as a central figure. No one expected an undercover agent to tape the whole encounter. Hussein was so furious that he ordered their immediate execution! [3] Both never made it home.

Another tragedy involved Saddam's home town physician, General Raji Abbas al-Tikriti, the Director General of Army Medical Services. In his book "*Saddam's Secrets*" [4] General Georges Sada recounts the horrifying murder of his physician General Abbas. One day Abbas was sitting with a group of doctors when he made some disparaging remarks about Hussein. He said, "Who is Hussein? He grew up in the streets of Tikrit. He's uneducated, and he only became president because he'll stop at nothing." [4] Apparently General Abbas forgot that walls have ears! A few weeks later, General Abbas was in Jordan on some sort of military business, and he happened to be sitting with the Iraqi ambassador to Jordan, Nouri Al-Weis when a phone call came from President Hussein who said, "I understand that General Raji al-Tikriti is in Jordan. Have you seen him?" The ambassador said, "Yes, sir. He's sitting here with me now." So Hussein said, "Nouri, whatever you do, don't let him leave. I want you to give him your car and send him to me as soon as possible. I need to see him urgently." [4] When general Abbas made it to the presidential palace, he was taken to the basement where he was surrounded by some fifty of Hussein elite guards. Off to one side, Hussein was sitting in a chair with his legs crossed. He lit a big Havana cigar and watched his guards knocking Abbas to the ground, stomping him with their hob-nail boots, pounding, jumping, kicking, and crushing him to his death right there on the floor. When the grisly beating was over, a pack of dogs that had been starved for days were unleashed [4] - the rest you can imagine.

Based on the recounted injustice, which is only the tip of the iceberg, it is only fair to say that, under the circumstances, Iraqi physicians had no choice but to become unwilling accomplices. They should indeed be viewed as survivors of an abusive regime rather than collaborators. In the midst of the struggle to rebuild Iraq, measures should be taken to prevent future breaches of the medical code of ethics. This can only be achieved with a new constitution that ensures the independence of professional medical associations from state authority, and with the support of the international community that can exert pressure on all oppressive regimes. The civilized world must not tolerate and should not turn a blind eye to any violation of the basic rights of every human, for which too much blood has already been shed.

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SAŽETAK

Nakon invazije Iraka 2003. pod vodstvom američkih snaga, isplivali su na površinu zabrinjavajući podaci o sudjelovanju iračkih liječnika u povredama ljudskih prava u južnome Iraku za vrijeme Saddamova režima. I premda su se priče o grozotama poput amputacija uha, lažiranjima liječničkih izvješća o mučenju i potvrda o smrti, odstranjenjima organa bez pacijentove privole i mnogim drugim povredama pokazale istinite, nitko nije ni pokušao objasniti kako je do toga došlo. Nema sumnje da je ovakvo ponašanje iračkih liječnika odraz dugih godina prijetnji, preseljavanja i gubitka posla, konfiskacija, verbalnoga i fizičkoga zlostavljanja, zatvaranja i konačno kažnjavanja mučenjem i smrću. S takvim izborom u ponudi, tko je mogao odoljeti pozivu na suradnju?

S obzirom na ovakva gaženja ljudskih prava, koja su tek vrh ledene sante, treba pošteno priznati da irački liječnici u danim okolnostima nisu imali drugoga izbora negoli da prisilno postanu suučesnici u zločinu. Stoga na njih treba gledati kao na ljude koji su preživjeli jedan zlostavljajući režim, a ne kao na suučesnike. U središtu napora da se obnovi Irak trebaju biti mjere kojima bi se spriječile daljnje povrede medicinskih etičkih načela. To se može postići jedino novim ustavom koji jamči neovisnost stručnih medicinskih udruga od državne vlasti te davanjem podrške međunarodne zajednice koja je u stanju napraviti pritisak na opresivne režime. Civilizirani svijet ne smije dopustiti i ne smije zatvarati oči pred povredama osnovnih ljudskih prava zbog čega je proliveno već previše krvi.

Ključne riječi: liječnici, zlostavljanje, medicina, politika, Irak

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