

EXPERIENCE

Raja Ahmed is an Iraqi living in Britain

Broken Bridges

went to Baghdad last December to spend Christmas with my family. I have been living in Britain since 1970, almost half of my life has been spent here. We did not know what the future might hold and had to face the possibility that we may not see each other again.

My relatives and friends lived in fear of nuclear attack or bombardment by chemical weapons. Every discussion of the crisis facing Iraq ended with a sense of doom. In public, people tried to carry on with their lives, while at home they were starting to prepare for what was to come.

As I prepared to return to Britain, several of my relatives gave me copies of their identity cards, the deeds for their houses and even the ownership documents for their property. I was to keep them safe and eventually give them to anyone who survived. My sister buried all her valuables, showing me the spot so that I could tell her children where they were in case she was killed. Since then her husband has died of a heart attack, no doubt a result of the stress caused by the endless bombing of Baghdad.

Even officials showed the same kind of fatalism. As I checked in at Baghdad airport, I found that I had 100kg of excess luggage. It was mainly books that I was trying to preserve. After haggling with the airline official and trying to make sure that I didn't have to pay the charges with foreign currency, the woman in charge suddenly said: 'All right, pay in Iraqi dinars!' She took only 16, about two pounds at the black market rate. When I expressed surprise, she replied: 'Well, what would we do with the money? We only have two more days.'

There was a feeling of exhaustion from eight years of wars, which the allies thought would turn the people against Saddam and lead the way to surrender. But a friend, who arrived from Baghdad in the middle of February, informed me that morale is now high. Even those who opposed the rule of Saddam and who would have wel-

comed anyone to topple him are now defiant.

Iraq is Mesopotamia: the land between two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. It is the oldest country in the world, where writing and the wheel were invented. It is the land of Babylonians and Assyrians. But as far as the government, politicians and media in Britain are concerned the war is only taking place in the desert. We know about the Desert Shield with the Desert Rats and now it is the Desert Storm. Iraq is only shown to be Saddam and the desert; the people of Iraq are without faces and voices.

The public ignorance of the history and geography, the current problems and grievances of the Arab world helps to explain the 75% support for the war. It may also explain the anti-Arab sentiment. My experience here has been positive. My professional friends, British, Europeans and Americans, who know the Middle East, have been most supportive, many are even apologetic. But I heard only this morning the story of an Arab girl whose parents have had to remove her from school because she was receiving threatening messages.

The media do not help with their obsessive references to Iraqi censorship. I wonder if the journalists in Riyadh are allowed to report freely? Have the allies shown any of their casualties or dead? I have yet to see an Iraqi journalist reporting from Saudi Arabia. I am astonished there has been silence about the anti-war demonstrations that took place in most Arab cities from Morocco to Syria. This dismissal of the importance of Arab opinion is perplexing. The double standard is so obvious.

Some days ago I saw pictures of the Baghdad suspension bridge being destroyed. I had seen many pictures of attacks on the city but somehow seeing that bridge destroyed, it suddenly hit me what is happening to Baghdad. It was such a beautiful bridge, surrounded by date palm orchards, I used to cross it almost every day on my way to work. The bridge

was like a symbol which suddenly made me realise what is happening to that country.

There are times when I think that this cannot be real. I am afraid that I may be watching my own family and friends being killed. Tonight for the first time I was deeply worried after seeing the pictures of the attack on a civilian shelter. I feel sure that someone I know must have been in there. Until now I have always thought that it is such a big city with so many people that my family may be safe but tonight I am afraid because this shelter was in an area where they are living. When I saw those images and heard the Arabic voices in the back-ground I cried. I had to stop watching because there was too much emotion.

I am still learning the power of national identity. When

Iraq first invaded Iran I was against the war. I knew it was wrong but as time went on I found that despite myself I was hoping that Iraq would win. I suddenly discovered what patriotism is and how powerful it can be, even when it is buried very deep inside. Even though I was against the war, those 'patriotic' feelings were there. So I do not blame those people here in Britain who support the war and who hope that the allies win. I understand where such feelings come from and the strength they can have.

But this war is not simply the result of Saddam's invasion of Kuwait. I am sure that there has been much more scheming involved and the invasion, which I have always opposed, was the opportunity for this action to be unleashed.

