

# Surviving Saddam

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**Zainab Salbi, the founder of an international women's charity, knows all too well what it's like to live in the shadow of a monster. For 21 years she grew up calling the former Iraqi dictator uncle - and fearing his advances. She tells Helena de Bertodano her remarkable story**  
**Photograph by Joseph Maida**

When Zainab Salbi was 15 she realised what she wanted to do with her life. 'I remember the day clearly. I even remember the road I was driving down with my mother. I said, "When I grow up I want to help all women, I want to protect them from violence." My mother said to me, "You can do it."'



**Zainab Salbi: 'I grew up in a culture of silence'**

Today, more than two decades later, Salbi - a Shia who grew up in Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq war - feels she is finally achieving her goal. As the founder and president of Women for Women International, she is helping women in war-ravaged countries, including Iraq, to rebuild their lives.

Some 70,000 women worldwide have been helped by the organisation, which has disbursed £14 million in cash to those most in need. Last year it won the £750,000 Conrad N Hilton Humanitarian Prize. 'For a non-profit organisation it's the equivalent of the Nobel Prize,' says Salbi proudly, when I meet her in her office in Washington DC.

Iraq, however, is perhaps her biggest challenge today. There the situation for women has steadily worsened since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. 'It is nearly impossible for women in Baghdad,' sighs

Salbi. 'Every day they are risking their lives. I know personally more than 20 women who have been assassinated there by extremists. They all have the same profile: educated, outspoken women who have just been killed for who they are.'

I ask Salbi if she thinks she would be a likely target if she still lived there. 'Absolutely, 100 per cent,' she says.

advertisement Because of the security risks in Baghdad, the organisation's efforts are currently focused in the marginally less dangerous south of Iraq. 'We're helping about 1,000 women, teaching them on two levels - one is creating awareness of women's role in the economy, society, politics and health, and the other is teaching them vocational and business skills to help them get jobs.'

Salbi has an unusual perspective on recent events in Iraq. She grew up literally in the shadow of Saddam Hussein. Her father was his personal pilot, and she knew the dictator as 'Amo', which means uncle. Saddam would often spend weekends with her family, who had to pretend to be fond of him, knowing that he could have them all killed on a whim (he had the father of one of Salbi's best friends executed). 'Everyone lived in fear because he was so unpredictable,' she has said. 'One day your view would be welcomed, the next it could get you killed. There were no rules to his rules. He was like a poisonous gas leaking into our home, and, slowly, we died.' The anxiety drove her mother to attempt suicide, while Saddam's attentions towards Zainab so alarmed her parents, who feared he was lining her up as a prospective mistress, that they sent her to the United States in 1991, aged 21. It was there that she decided to found Women for Women.

'I grew up in a culture of silence,' Salbi says. 'My mother and my aunt broke that silence in whispers. I remember my aunt taking me into the middle of the pool and whispering to me about Saddam's violence against women. She talked about the People's Day rapes. People's Day was a day when you could make an appointment with Saddam and ask him to help you solve a problem. When he encountered someone he liked he'd take her to the second room and rape her.'

I ask if she ever felt threatened by him. 'No. But my parents feared it. Once when he gave me a ride in the car, I never thought anything of it, but I know my parents were horrified. I think the swimsuit incident was my first awareness of it.' When she was a teenager Saddam tried to persuade her to swim in a lake with him. As she writes in her memoir, *Between Two Worlds*, she told him she had forgotten her swimsuit. 'Doesn't matter Zanooba,' said Saddam. 'Just go up to my room and put on one of mine with a T-shirt.' Despite his attempts to persuade her, she refused. 'You missed a very nice experience tonight, Zainab,' he told her later. 'The water was beautiful.'

For a long time she hesitated about breaking her silence. 'I was convinced that if I told anybody about my story they would see Saddam in my face. I thought everything about me would disintegrate. I would shiver and cry when I talked about it. But now I've told it and I realise people still see me, not him. They wanted to call the book *The Pilot's Daughter*. I hated that. I'm defined by my own accomplishments, dreams and beliefs.'

Now 37 and happily married (her first marriage, to an abusive husband, ended years ago), Salbi lives in Washington but often returns to Iraq. She says that she did not rejoice in Saddam's death. 'I think it is the most unfortunate thing that he was executed; I have mentally shifted in my hopes and expectations for the country. His trial was an opportunity for us to learn from the past, to tell our truth. Instead we just repeated what Saddam would have done: a rushed trial, the justness of which was questionable. It led me to believe that we have just moved the country from the hands of one thug to the hands of other thugs.'

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