

Meeting Resistance

A Film by
Steve Connors and Molly Bingham

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The Washington Post

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Synopsis

What would you do if your country was invaded? MEETING RESISTANCE raises the veil of anonymity surrounding the Iraqi insurgency by meeting face to face with individuals who are passionately engaged in the struggle, and documenting for the very first time, the sentiments experienced and actions taken by a nation's citizens when their homeland is occupied. Voices that have previously not been heard, male and female, speak candidly about their motivations, hopes and goals, revealing a kaleidoscope of human perspectives. Featuring reflective, yet fervent conversations with active insurgents, MEETING RESISTANCE is the missing puzzle piece in understanding the Iraq war. Directed by Steve Connors and Molly Bingham, this daring, eye-opening film provides unique insight into the personal narratives of people involved in the resistance exploding myth after myth about the war in Iraq and the Iraqis who participate. Through its unprecedented access to these clandestine groups, MEETING RESISTANCE focuses the spotlight on the "other side" leaving the viewer with clarity as to why the violence in Iraq continues to this day.

Directors' Statement

by
Steve Connors & Molly Bingham

From the capture of Saddam Hussein in December 2003 to the historic elections held on January 30, 2005 and the elections that followed in 2006, the world has waited expectantly to see whether these events would herald the beginning of the end to the “insurgency”. Would the capture of the “leader” decapitate the organization and render it incapable of action? Would the final assault on Falluja, described as the heart of the insurgency, deliver it a crippling blow? What about the formal transfer of sovereignty or democratic elections? Would these events turn the tide? Before the trumpet calls fade into history hopes are dashed as the bloodshed continues, unabated and often with a renewed ferocity. The world asks why, and the answer seems as evasive as ever.

For the most part we place our dependence for understanding the situation in Iraq on the views of Western experts, analyzing from the sidelines and basing their assessments on government and military statements. Beyond the telling vox-pop quote in a news article, we only rarely get to hear the voices of ordinary Iraqis. Even less common is to hear first hand from the people who are behind the violence. *Meeting Resistance* is an effort to redress that imbalance and seeks to understand the factors underlying the carnage that has become characteristic of daily life in Iraq.

On May 1 2003, President Bush triumphantly stood on the deck of an American aircraft carrier and declared an end to major combat operations in Iraq. Behind him fluttered a banner proclaiming “mission accomplished”. Even as the President made his speech, men and women in Iraq were in the early stages of organizing themselves for a guerrilla war and some of that preparation was already being translated into action. Small incidents - described by one American general as “militarily insignificant” - were already taking place. Despite their amateurish and ad hoc nature these incidents were being written off by the US military as “mopping-up operations” against remnants of the Iraqi military. These attacks were harbingers for the future. Through the summer of 2003 the attacks against American troops increased in both frequency and ferocity and, when asked about them by reporters, President Bush replied with the words “Bring ‘em on”. There were people in Iraq who were listening to the President’s words and were prepared to rise to the challenge.

To make *Meeting Resistance* we traveled to the Al Adhamiya district of northern Baghdad to make the acquaintance of some of the people actively engaged in the fight. Adhamiya had its fifteen minutes of fame when, in April 2003, Saddam Hussein made his final public appearance there before being toppled from power. The district was also the scene of the last stand in Baghdad; local militia and foreign volunteers battled it out with American armor around the Abu Hanifeh mosque at least a day after the rest of the city had capitulated. Those who were involved in the fighting told us that Saddam fought alongside them, escaping only at the very end. Although a predominantly Sunni neighborhood, Adhamiyah was never favored by the Ba’athist regime and attitudes to both the President and the party were, at best, ambivalent. Years of infrastructural neglect have taken their toll on this traditional, middle class

area of the capital and its inhabitants have suffered just as much as anyone else from the privations wrought by the wars and sanctions the regime brought upon them.

In the teashops and alleyways of Adhamiya we found people who - within days of the fall of Baghdad - were organizing themselves into resistance cells, finding the money and weapons to continue the fight against the American military. We discovered that before retired general Jay Garner had even managed to board an aircraft in Kuwait, phase two of the Iraq war was being planned in places like Adhamiya.

By repeatedly interviewing a number of characters over a period of ten months we were able to learn about the people themselves, how they organize themselves, why they have decided to violently oppose the occupation of the country, what are the underlying ideological foundations to their fight and how and why those have changed over time. We discovered, from those involved, the real timeline of developments - both structural and tactical - that have led to the present methodology and targeting policies by the different groups who gather under the heading of the Iraqi resistance. We came to know who funds them [broadly speaking] and where they get their weapons, who and how they recruit and what effects US counter-insurgency operations have on their will and effectiveness to fight.

By spending so long in the making of this film we were able to note trends and track them by cross-referencing them between characters from different groups. Two good examples of this were – first - being told of the preparation to use IED's two months before they came into use and why and – second – about the use of dogs and electricity as torture techniques in Abu Ghraib prison, information that was related to us in December of 2003.

Of the utmost importance to us was learning how Iraq's social and religious characteristics made the violent resistance to occupation inevitable. We struggled to understand these forces and sought out Iraqi experts in those fields in an attempt to provide explanations to an audience which is - like us - largely of a secular Christian tradition that values social individualism.

We didn't set out to challenge the official narrative of the war in Iraq, but by going out and seeking the stories on the other side that has inevitably happened. As a result *Meeting Resistance* calls into question many of the myths that have established themselves as fact in both the journalistic and public consciousness. If we take the testimony of these individuals as being credible - and there is little reason not to do so - then we must re-examine such notions as the role of administrative incompetence on the part of the occupying civil authorities, in either inspiring or fuelling the violence. Other issues, such as the seeming predominance of foreign fighters or of a violent Ba'ath party revanchism, no longer seem so certain and the timeline as we have come to know it all but eliminates the current received wisdom that the insurgency existed and began as a pre-planned operation. Some of the people we interviewed were Shia - fighting alongside their Sunni colleagues - and the idea that has recently become common currency, that Iraq is a country riven by ancient sectarian hatreds, is a claim for which we found little evidence. In fact we found several of the individuals engaged in the resistance that we spoke to were in mixed marriages or were from mixed families. What was clear through these characters was the terrible price all Iraqi society would pay should sectarian conflict take center stage. Indeed, the

research we did for *Meeting Resistance* indicates that any existing fissures in Iraqi society at the time of the 2003 invasion were exploited and exacerbated by coalition forces and administrators in order to enable the success of the occupation.

We filmed *Meeting Resistance* around the streets and alleyways and ubiquitous teashops of Adhamiya. Much of the look and feel of the film derives from the necessity of working within the challenges and security issues inherent to the project itself. We used in-camera techniques to conceal the identities of the individuals we interviewed - more for our own protection than theirs - and attempted to do so in a way that didn't eliminate the body language and attitude of character that is so important to understanding the human condition. We are grateful to the people of Adhamiya who unfailingly received us with warmth and their own particular brand of generous hospitality.

Ultimately we feel *Meeting Resistance* raises as many questions as it answers but in doing so it makes a vital contribution and informs the debate on Iraq. We hope this film inspires others to ask those questions.

Steve Connors
Molly Bingham

The Characters

The Teacher: In his late forties is married with three children. This quiet, philosophical man is active in the resistance. Never a member of the Ba'ath party - which he loathed – he is a family man who has devoted his life to teaching. During the fighting around the Abu Hanifeh mosque in Adhamiya on April 9th and 10th 2003 *The Teacher* helped out by guiding foreign volunteer fighters through the backstreets of his neighborhood. He was shamed by their willingness to fight and die for Iraq while most Iraqi's - especially the Ba'ath party members - failed to stand in defense of the country. *The Teacher* described his pre 2003 war life as secular. However after a brief period of 'shock' after the war he joined an Islamic group and began working with them as a weapons procurer.

The Warrior: A former special-forces officer in his mid thirties, he was one of twenty-three survivors of a 1,000 man strong suicide unit sent to Kerbala and Najaf to put down the Shia insurrection in 1991. Having successfully completed their mission the twenty-three survivors returned to their Baghdad base only to be charged with dereliction of duty – for surviving - and sentenced to death. Their sentences were commuted to life in prison on appeal. *The Warrior* was released 3 1/2 years later during a general amnesty having suffered extreme torture. While his experience bred in him a great hatred of the Ba'ath party, Saddam Hussein's reputation as a leader remained untarnished. After his release he refused to return to the military though they sought him – but when Iraq was invaded in 2003 *The Warrior* re-joined his old army unit. When the initial fighting was over he slept for a couple of days then started his own resistance cell. In addition to organizing, training and leading his own group, he works with other groups as a roving consultant.

The Traveler: Left home when he was just a teenager to fight alongside the Palestinians, and did so for the next twenty years. Although a long-time member of the Ba'ath party, he quit in the mid 1990's because of political corruption at the district level. *The Traveler* is now too old to do much in the way of actual fighting in Iraq but his skill and experience - honed in the years of fighting a guerilla war against the Israeli's - are very much in demand. He works as an organizer, strategist and consultant to a number of resistance cells in Baghdad and the provinces.

The Traveler is Shi'a.

The Imam: A young, thoughtful family man who was jailed under Saddam on suspicion of being a Wahabi – a charge that he denies. *The Imam* worked as a shopkeeper before becoming a junior Imam at a mosque. He studied the Koran - passing the required tests - in order to take up a position as head in his own mosque. *The Imam* calls for Jihad against the occupation believing there is no choice but to do so, as it is prescribed in the Koran and the teachings of Mohamed. Although he denies any direct involvement in the movement, he provides spiritual guidance to his congregation on the subject of Jihad and its ‘correct implementation’. He understands and reflects on the inherent conundrum – the fact that he believes that he must preach Jihad in spite of the damage that the fighting inflicts on the country.

The Imam comes from a mixed Sunni-Shi’a family.

The Wife: With a husband and two sons involved in fighting the Americans *The Wife* lives in a permanent state of poverty and fear. She doesn’t know whether they’ll all come home and when they do she has little to put on the table. In addition to being a wife and mother she also works in the resistance as a courier carrying messages and sometimes weapons between groups.

The Wife is Shi’a.

The Syrian: A young man from small town Syria who answered the call to Jihad that came from his local mosque. Having persuaded his family to give their blessing he volunteered through the mosque. After testing *The Syrian’s* determination his Imam put him in touch with people who would facilitate his entry into Iraq. Once in Iraq he was taken under the wing of an Iraqi fighter who provided him with ‘on-the-job’ training and a place in a community of like-minded people.

The Syrian is Shi’a.

The Fugitive: A young man in his mid-twenties. Before the US led invasion he had deserted from the Iraqi army but later volunteered to fight in the resistance. After receiving training in Ramadi he became the commander of a small squad of fighters operating out of Adhamiya.

The Local: Having been imprisoned for forgery and desertion from the Iraqi army during the Iran/Iraq war of the 1980’s he later became a truck driver, traveling throughout Iraq. *The Local* loathed Saddam Hussein and the Ba’ath party for the damage they had done to Iraq and it’s people during their years in power. Although he welcomed the toppling of the regime he could not accept foreign occupation. Driven by what he regarded as the dictates of Islam, *The Local* decided to form his own resistance group made up of men from the neighborhood.

The Republican Guard: A career officer who served right up to the end of the US invasion in the elite Republican Guard formation of the Iraqi Army. As a mid-rank staff officer the *Republican Guard* witnessed the collapse of the army and the regime from the inside. As the fighting at Baghdad airport came to a close his commander ordered the officers to carry out suicide attacks. Instead they chose to go home in order to perhaps fight another day. The *Republican Guard* is in his early thirties, married with children. He is Sunni, married to a Shi'a woman.

The Lieutenant: A junior officer in the paramilitary Fedayeen Saddam, *The Lieutenant* fought with his unit at Baghdad airport and in the Adhamiya district in early April 2003. In his mid-twenties, he comes from a family with a long history of Iraqi military service. Parts of his unit reconstituted at the end of April 2003 after purportedly receiving orders in a letter from Saddam Hussein.

The Professor: A lecturer in political science at Baghdad University, *The Professor* is a native of the western Iraqi city of Falluja. In 2003 he undertook a research project in his hometown to identify and analyze the make-up and structure of the resistance movement in that area. By attending funerals and interviewing the families of men who were killed fighting against coalition forces, *The Professor* was able to learn about the backgrounds and motivation of those who chose to fight. Adhamiya has strong tribal, social and economic ties to Falluja and the results of *The Professor's* research were in line with the discoveries made in the course of the making of *Meeting Resistance*.

The Filmmakers

Steve Connors, Director

Steve Connors was born in Sheffield, England. He began taking photographs while serving as a British soldier in Northern Ireland in the early 1980s. After leaving the military in 1984 he worked for London newspapers and housing charities, but maintained a preference for photographing the quirkiness of British life.

At the end of 1989 Connors started traveling - first to Czechoslovakia as the communist government fell and then into Sri Lanka in 1990. Connors spent the early 1990s covering the wars following the break-up of Yugoslavia and later spending time in Russia and the former Soviet Union as the euphoria of a new age gave way to the miserable realities of economic meltdown. Connors has worked for most of the worlds' newspapers and magazines including *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times* in the United States; *The Guardian*, *The Observer* and *The Telegraph* in London and in Europe he has worked for *Der Spiegel*, *Stern* and *Paris Match* among others.

Connors spent fifteen months from November 2001 on in Afghanistan. Starting during the invasion, he went to Iraq, and spent fourteen months there total, working ten months solidly on *Meeting Resistance*.

MEETING RESISTANCE is Connors' directorial debut.

Molly Bingham, Director

Molly Bingham was born in Kentucky and graduated from Harvard College in 1990. She began working as a photojournalist in earnest in 1994, traveling to Rwanda in the wake of the genocide. She spent a good amount of her energies for the following three years focused on the regional fallout of that event. Aside from her photojournalistic work, Bingham has also completed two special projects for Human Rights Watch - one on Burundi and another on small arms trafficking in Central Africa. From 1998 through 2001 Bingham worked as Official Photographer to the Office of the Vice President of the United States.

In 2001 Bingham returned to work in Central Africa, producing a story for the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* (published in August 2001) on the mineral "coltan" that is mined in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In Washington on September 11 Bingham got some of the only close up pictures of the Pentagon, and followed the story of America's response to the 9/11 attacks to Afghanistan later in the fall. 2002 found Bingham in the Gaza Strip and Iran before heading to Iraq shortly before the US attack in March 2003. Bingham was detained for eight days by the Iraqi government security services and held in Abu Ghraib prison with four other westerners during the war, and released to Jordan in early April 2003. Bingham's first major written story - on the Iraqi resistance - was published in *Vanity Fair* in July 2004.

Bingham teamed up with Connors in August of 2003 to begin a film about who was behind the emerging post-war violence in Iraq.

Daniel J. Chalfen, Producer

Daniel J. Chalfen is a documentary producer specializing in non-fiction feature films, television series and specials, educational programs, news and current affairs programs and digital media content. Chalfen's latest documentaries include the feature-length films *Meeting Resistance*, *Encounter Point* (A Just Vision Production; distributed by Typecast Releasing), *39 Pounds of Love* (An HBO Cinemax/Hey Jude Production; distributed by Goldcrest International), and *Pulled from the Rubble*; and the television series *Ordinary People* (A Radical Media/Noga Communications Production; distributed by Solid Entertainment & Cinephil) and *Happy France* (An Arte/Camera Lucida Production). He has also produced and directed programming for NGOs, including Ability Awareness and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Chalfen's films have been shown in festivals around the globe, have been theatrically released and broadcast worldwide (including on HBO, CBC, Al Arabiyya, ARTE and ZDF), and have received a multitude of major awards and accolades. His films have also been screened at the United Nations in New York; the UNHCR Headquarters in Geneva; the Frontline Club in London; the United States Institute for Peace; the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague; and for Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

Chalfen is a graduate of UCLA's School of Cinema, Television, and Theater, Los Angeles, (Professional Certificate in Producing); the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel (MA Israeli Politics and Society); and the University of Leeds, England (BA (Honors) Politics and Religious Studies). He is a founder of Cine-Peace Film Festival, Los Angeles; an Advisory Board Member of the Other Israel Film Festival; and a member of the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA).

David Emanuele, Editor

David Emanuele is currently an editor at NBC Universal News, including the programs, *Dateline* and the *Today Show*. He previously worked on such films as *Three Sister's Searching for a Cure*, *Deadline*, and *Gay Sex in the 70's*. David has worked with numerous production companies, including, Lovett Productions, Big Mouth Films, and Catalyst films. He holds a BFA in Film from NYU's Tisch Film School.

How the Project Came About & FAQs

Q: How did 'Meeting Resistance' come about?

Before we worked on the film, Steve and I worked in Iraq as freelance photographers from just before the war in March 2003 through to the end of June 2003. As we worked on various projects we came across people and incidents that indicated there was opposition to the US military presence in the Iraq. We decided that it was an important story and that we wanted to work on it. In order to not compete with each other as journalists – since we were both still photographers – we decided to try out some new journalistic tools. I used our reporting as the foundation for the text and pictures of a magazine piece (*Vanity Fair*, July 2004 issue “Ordinary Warriors”) and Steve picked up a video camera to develop the project as a documentary film. During the summer of 2003 we took a six-week break and watched the increasing level of violence in Iraq every day in the news. Convinced that our instincts were right, that this was a fundamental story to the war that was not being significantly covered, we returned to work on the project together that August of 2003.

Q. How and when did you begin shooting the film?

We returned to Baghdad in early August of 2003 thinking that we would work on the project for six weeks. We got further than we thought we would more quickly than we thought. Because of that we decided to continue the reporting until we had a sense of how things were changing over time and some closing point for the story. That took ten months. As time went on and we were able to gather the dozen or so figures that we interviewed in depth – and do repeated interviews with some of them – we realized how critical what we knew about Iraq was to understanding the ever escalating violence in the country.

Q. How did we find, identify and interview the characters?

I had come across a man in the Adhamiya neighborhood of Baghdad in May of 2003 while working on another story and he had told me that he was ‘part of the resistance’. In August, when we started, we went back to try to find him. That man came to be called the Teacher in the film. Quickly after meeting him we met another man who was involved in the fighting and we managed to interview him as well. He was the Traveler. From that point on we decided to focus the film on this one small neighborhood of northern Baghdad because of the success we felt we were having in the community and because of its’ historic economic,

tribal and trade ties to the Sunni Triangle - of which Falluja, Ramadi and Anbar Province are parts.

From that point on we did what we called ‘fishing’ – looking for people to interview. We went almost every day to Adhamiya, sitting in the tea shops - sipping tea, smoking cigarettes, chatting about all manner of things with whoever spoke with us - and inevitably steering the conversation to politics and the budding resistance. After those conversations sometimes we were approached by an individual who would ask who we were and what we were interested in. We would tell them that we wanted to interview people who were directly engaged in the fighting against coalition troops. Sometimes they would say they were not involved, or simply beg off. Other times they would set an appointment for us to talk.

Finding, identifying and interviewing the characters took tremendous time, patience and persistence. When it was possible we did multiple interviews with the characters. During the first interview with each character we had a long list of questions that we asked each one about their background, political and religious attitudes. When we got to do repeated interviews - as we did with six of the characters - our questions focused on clarifying elements from the first interview, asking about events that had transpired since then, and asking questions that might help us corroborate or contradict what other subjects had been telling us in the intervening time.

Q. How did we journalistically support what is in the film?

Our first question to ourselves about the individuals we were interviewing was always ‘do we find them credible’? We spent a lot of time translating and transcribing the interviews we had conducted – some of which were four or five hours long – and discussing the content and meaning of them. Perhaps one of the most fundamental way we tested their revelations to us was whether what they told us came to pass. For example, the first time we heard that some groups were looking for special explosives to build small but powerful bombs was in mid August 2003 – when the Improvised Explosive Device (IED) had not yet become the main method used to attack coalition forces.

However, our ‘sources’ inside the resistance were not the only way we found out what was happening. We responded to and reported on attacks and bombings around Baghdad as every other journalist did – but looking for specific kinds of information and detail that might support or

contradict what we were being told. We read as much as possible to see what other journalists were writing and finding – both about attacks, and any interviews that were done with ‘resistance fighters’. When journalists were kidnapped and released we carefully looked over what they said about their captors. These elements combined to form our questions for follow up interviews.

Over the period of time that we worked on the project it became increasingly dangerous for those who were in any insurgent organization to identify themselves to anyone, even their families. US military raids and sweeps, cash rewards for insurgent members and militias were all geared towards ferreting out those active in fighting against the coalition forces. It became clear to us that saying you were part of a resistance cell just for the bragging rights was not only stupid, but quite possibly deadly. The Iraqis knew this much more intimately than we did. We also found, under questioning, their detailed descriptions of the activities in their work and their life made sense with the kinds of activities they were describing. Additionally, most of them had the cautious nature - the physical and emotional bearing - of people who knew what they were doing was dangerous to them and could get them killed.

Q. How did you stay safe?

To the dismay of our families, the short answer is that we didn’t really have any guarantee of safety while we worked on this story. Like all other journalists working in Baghdad at the time we were the possible victims of random violence, being in the wrong place at the wrong time when an ambush occurs, an IED or a car bomb are detonated, being killed by coalition forces either during combat or like many civilian Iraqis, during the response to an attack, or being kidnapped. But we were also exposed to the specific dangers of this story; that the fighters we were interviewing would turn on us, or that one of the many intelligence services, militaries or militias in the country would find out what we were doing and decide to rough us up or kill us to find out what we knew. We are very lucky that none of the possible things that could have gone wrong did. Not all journalists who have been working in the country have been lucky.

However, unlike many of our colleagues, we did not take the ever increasing security precautions of armored vehicles, private bunkered housing, security professionals to analyze our activities and provide logistical, communications and physical safety support or armed guards. Nor did either of us ever carry a weapon. We were vulnerable. Vulnerable in regular ‘soft’ cars, local taxis, clearly foreigners and – we hoped – clearly journalists. We think that that

vulnerability worked to our tremendous advantage on this story – and that in fact if we had been less vulnerable we would not have been able to accomplish what we did.

Q. Why did you stop when you did?

We stopped when it became no longer possible to work and we felt we had done everything we could to understand the movement that was happening before it went entirely underground. The characters we had repeatedly interviewed through the fall and winter had quickly dropped off – unable or unwilling to talk to us. The last interview we did was in May 2004 with the Warrior – and his commander had finally put his foot down and told him he was never to see us or talk to us again. The window that provided the glimpse into the resistance that had been quickly closing since we arrived had completely shut. Now it was dangerous for Iraqis even to be *seen* talking to a foreigner, who were all suspected of being foreign intelligence or military. Translators working for US military and even for journalists were being killed for their association with foreigners.

The country had also gone through a powerfully violent eruption in April 2004 - with Falluja under heavy US attack and the resistance's reply while at the same time Moqtada Sadr's followers were rising up against the American forces. It was the occupier's nightmare – Sunni and Shia fighting them at the same time from different corners and for different reasons and sometimes joining forces. Then the Abu Ghraib story broke and the Sunnis talked with a new sense of justification for their fight. We felt that those events capped the first year of the insurgency and revealed the powerful combustion that was possible, and we felt we understood why. It was time for us to put the story we had uncovered before the public. The increased violence acting as a cap to the story combined with the dwindling access our characters were allowing us and that kidnapping was on its way to becoming a regular and real threat to foreigners, meant that it was time to wrap up and go.

We drove out of Iraq, on the long road to Amman Jordan at the end of May 2004. Having crossed that border almost a dozen times it was the first time anyone had ever been rude to me because of my American passport. One of the boarder guards doing the final check to ensure we had the proper stamps and visas threw my passport back at me through the window practically spitting as he said, "Haramat" – it's a shame.

It was definitely time to go. And he was so right.