

= The Boys from Baghdad High =

The Boys from Baghdad High , also known as Baghdad High , is a British @-@ American @-@ French television documentary film . It was first shown in the United Kingdom at the 2007 Sheffield Doc / Fest , before airing on BBC Two on 8 January 2008 . It also aired in many other countries including France , Australia , the United States , Canada , Germany and the Netherlands . It documents the lives of four Iraqi schoolboys of different religious or ethnic backgrounds over the course of one year in the form of a video diary . The documentary was filmed by the boys themselves , who were given video cameras for the project .

Directed and produced by Ivan O 'Mahoney and Laura Winter of Renegade Pictures and StoryLabTV , for the United Kingdom 's BBC , HBO in the United States , and the Franco @-@ German network Arte , The Boys from Baghdad High was produced by Alan Hayling and Karen O 'Connor for the BBC , Hans Robert Eisenhauer for Arte , and Sheila Nevins for HBO .

The Boys from Baghdad High received high viewership when it initially aired in the UK , and was reviewed favourably in the media . It was named the Best News and Current Affairs Film at the European Independent Film Festival , won the Premier Prize at the Sandford St. Martin Trust Awards , and was nominated for awards at two film festivals . The documentary also received the Radio Times Readers Award , and a nomination for the Amnesty International 2008 Television Documentary and Docudrama UK Media Award .

= = Synopsis = =

The film brings together the video diaries recorded by four friends and students at the Tariq bin Ziad High School for Boys in Zayouna , a mixed @-@ race , middle @-@ class area in the Karrada suburb of Baghdad , Iraq . Entering their final year in 2006 , each has high expectations for the year ahead and hope to graduate so they can have a chance to attend university . At the same time , the boys must also deal with the increasing sectarian violence that is starting to extend into Karrada . They face the threats of roadside bombings , the hassles of security checkpoints on their way to school , frequent curfews , the constant presence of American Apache helicopters overhead , and the deterioration of their neighbourhood which becomes rife with assassinations , muggings and kidnappings . Many of their fellow students , unmotivated and academically underperforming , are absent from school .

Ali Shadman is one of the few Kurdish people remaining in Baghdad . His family are struggling financially and resort to siphoning petrol from their car to run their back @-@ up generator when the power grid fails . When the generator breaks down one night , Ali begins to wonder why he is fixing it against a backdrop of gunfire , instead of studying in peace . Another night , he reports the neighbourhood 's news but explains there is nothing to speak of other than the usual explosions , violence , and death . Anmar Refat , a Syriac Christian , tries to remain philosophical and hopes that armed gangs will not attack the school . His family , however , are more nervous about any nearby gunfire , as their Christian beliefs increase the threat to their lives if anyone were to find out about them . Anmar has a girlfriend , whom he can contact only via his mobile phone , but he has not heard from her in several days , leaving him worried about whether she has found another boyfriend , or has been hurt in the violence . Hayder Khalid , a Shia Muslim , hopes to become a famous singer @-@ songwriter . He frequently downloads music videos of English @-@ language pop music so he can learn popular English songs and dance moves . Mohammad Raed , a Sunni Muslim , is the class clown at school , who prefers playing sports and fooling around with his friends to studying . Unaware of his behaviour at school , his mother believes he is hard @-@ working , self @-@ sufficient and mature , and believes he will graduate and go to university .

Halfway through the school year , Ali 's family moves to the more peaceful Kurdish region in Northern Iraq but after living there for several months , Ali says that he is homesick and misses the action and noise of Baghdad . Mohammad , feeling lonely , " adopts " a bird with a broken wing and a mouse he finds in the house . This brings him some comfort , but his mother later demands that he get rid of the mouse as she does not want " vermin " in the house . Mohammad 's family rejoice

when Saddam Hussein is sentenced , and feel that his later execution was justified , as to do otherwise would have made the Iraqi people look weak . Conversely , Anmar 's family is upset at his execution , as they feel that the people who came into power were no better than Hussein was . Hyder 's mother says that many Iraqi people were hopeful about the arrival of American forces , and that it is wrong to blame America for all of the problems in Iraq . She notes that the bloodshed has yet to stop as the Sunni continues to kill the Shiite , and vice versa . As the film continues , Hyder 's family loses its income and they start to sell their furniture to earn extra money .

At the end of the year , the boys must pass seven final exams to graduate . Anmar , Hyder and Ali each fail two subjects , and are given the option to retake the exams . Anmar passes the retakes and aspires to study English literature in college , and his family decide to move to the safer region of Arbul now that he has graduated . Hyder also retakes his exams and passes , but his family can no longer afford to pay for the university fees . Ali chooses not to retake the exams , and his family leave Iraq . Mohammad fails four subjects and must repeat his senior year . He chooses to do so at a different school while working at his uncle 's scooter repair shop . As the documentary closes , it notes that during the year of filming , two of the boys ' classmates were killed , six were kidnapped , and seventy @-@ five left Iraq .

= = Production = =

= = = Concept = = =

The Boys from Baghdad High was co @-@ produced and co @-@ directed by Ivan O 'Mahoney and Laura Winter . Before working on the film , O 'Mahoney had been a United Nations peacekeeper in Bosnia and an attorney in the Netherlands , and had directed the 2006 documentary How to Plan a Revolution , which profiled two young activists who attempted to remove the Azerbaijani government from power by staging an " Orange " revolution . He had also worked for the BBC , Channel 4 , CNN , and PBS in Ethiopia , Iraq , Sudan and Colombia . Winter had previously worked for CNN , 60 Minutes , CBS Evening News , CBS Radio , The Christian Science Monitor and the New York Daily News in Afghanistan , Pakistan , Jordan and Iraq . The Boys from Baghdad High was the first time she was credited as a director .

O 'Mahoney and Winter began working on the film in 2006 . Winter had watched a film called The Women 's Story , about two Iraqi women who had journeyed around the country and filmed what they saw . They wanted to make a documentary about " the people never seen on the evening news , [ instead of ] presidents , prime ministers , generals and militants ... claiming to know something of Iraq 's future " . Winter explained that " all these documentaries coming out of Iraq were done for or by adults . Iraqi children had not been more than a UN statistic about the dead , kidnapped or injured " , so they decided to concentrate on what they viewed as the " real source of Iraq 's future " ? teenagers . " I wanted to tell the story of Iraq in a different way . As journalists , we do stories about kids and teenagers , but we don 't hear from them . If you go to the UN reports , they are just a number and that 's it . " O 'Mahoney was a little more reticent ; he had recently worked in Iraq but did not wish to return due to the civil war and the deteriorating condition of the country . When it was decided to use a school as a backdrop to the story , which could also be used to provide a chronological narrative , O 'Mahoney and Winter realised it would be too dangerous for the students to be seen with either a Western or Iraqi camera crew because it would draw too much attention to them , and so they decided that the students would film the documentary themselves .

= = = Casting = = =

Producers chose boys who were students of Tariq bin Ziad High School . The school was holding on to the notion of a united Iraq , even as the country was becoming increasingly racially and religiously segregated . Having worked in Iraq in 2003 , Winter knew that the Baghdad district Karrada was mixed and integrated with high numbers of Shiites and Christians . She asked her

former driver and translator , who had attended the school , if he would contact the principal . Initially the school was suspicious of their intentions , but decided to trust the judgement of Winter 's translator . Principal Ra 'ad Jawad selected eight boys to take part in the documentary because he knew they could be discreet about making the documentary , would not get bored , and would remain committed to filming their lives for a year . The producers wanted their cast to include girls , and had found a school and families willing to take part in the documentary , but the then @-@ Minister of Education refused to let them take part . Jawad travelled to London to meet the producers and he was trained to operate the video cameras that the boys were to use . The cameras and tapes were sent into Iraq via the BBC News department , which were then passed onto the school . Jawad and two Iraqi associate producers trained the boys how to use the cameras . Two months into filming , four of the boys dropped out of the project , leaving Hayder Khalid , Anmar Refat , Ali Shadman , and Mohammad Raed . O 'Mahoney and Winter never met the boys while the documentary was being produced because it was such a high @-@ risk assignment .

= = = Filming = = =

The producers were diligent in ensuring the boys ' security . O 'Mahoney explained : " They were under very strict security rules when they were filming . They were told not to act as news cameramen . They were not allowed to film in the street . They could only film at school or at home , in secure environments . " Winter added , " they are not paid news cameramen , and that was not the point of the film . Would they normally be running down the street toward a fire to film it ? No . Would they run toward a bombing , knowing that there could be a secondary explosion or a group of soldiers , who could start , at any second , firing wildly into the crowd , to film a piece of video ? No . That 's not real life for any Iraqi civilian . " Nevertheless , Hayder sometimes filmed outside at night , and explained to the camera that he had to be careful because people are robbed if they are seen carrying even a mobile phone . On New Year 's Eve , he and his friend celebrate with a bonfire in his friend 's back yard , but after debating whether a noise they hear is fireworks or gunfire , Hayder rushes home . Another boy is driven to school one morning , and reach a special forces roadside checkpoint along the way . He explains , " if they see me with a camera they will take me to prison ; they 'll think I 'm a terrorist who wants to bomb them . "

= = = Editing = = =

More than 300 hours of footage was recorded by the students and the two Iraqi associate producers . It was transcribed , translated and edited into a 90 @-@ minute film . Getting the tapes out of Iraq proved difficult for Winter and O 'Mahoney , who remained in the UK . They had to rely on journalists from many news agencies , especially those in the BBC News 's Baghdad Bureau high @-@ risk team , to smuggle the tapes out of Iraq . When curfews were enforced , weeks passed before the producers received new footage because it was impossible for anybody to leave their homes or the country .

The execution of Saddam Hussein , which Anwar had filmed from the internet from start to finish , was excluded from the documentary . " We had a big debate about whether or not that should go into the film " , O 'Connor explained . Water continued , " it was one of those things where to see it , it just gets you . But we had to ask ourselves , does it help our story ? No . " Footage that was nearly edited out included a scene where Anwar had to siphon petrol out of the family car for the house 's generator . Anwar explained to the camera that he needed to do it because their family was so poor . " That 's tough " , commented Water , " because that 's a dishonour to his family . "

= = Distribution = =

The Boys from Baghdad High received its world première at the 2007 Sheffield Doc / Fest , an annual film festival for documentary productions held in Sheffield , South Yorkshire . In the US it was screened on 29 April 2008 at the Tribeca Film Festival , and 1 August 2008 at the Traverse City Film

Festival . The first time Winter and O 'Mahoney met one of the film 's subjects was at the 2008 Tribeca Film Festival , nearly a year after the filming had completed . Ali and his family had relocated to the US since completing the documentary , and so he was able to attend the screening . Winter and Ali met a second time at the Traverse City Film Festival . The producers had tried to get the boys visas to enter the UK for a screening in London , but they were denied entry by the British Government .

It premièred on television in the UK on BBC Two , a national terrestrial television network , on 8 January 2008 at 9 : 00 p.m. as part of the This World documentary series . Overnight viewing figures indicated that 600 @, @ 000 households had watched the film , which was three percent of the total television audience for that time slot . It was broadcast in France and Germany on the joint @-@ venture network Arte on 18 March 2008 at 9 : 00 p.m. , with the French title Bagdad , le Bac Sous les Bombes , and Die Jungs von der Bagdad @-@ High in Germany . It aired on the American cable network HBO as Baghdad High on 4 August 2008 at 9 : 00 p.m. , and was available on HBO 's video on demand service until 21 September 2008 . The documentary also aired in Australia on the Special Broadcasting Service , Canada on CBC Newsworld , and in the Netherlands on VPRO .

The documentary was streamed online by the BBC using its BBC iPlayer service to UK residents for seven days after the initial broadcast . A Region 2 DVD of the documentary can be obtained , although it can only be purchased directly from the BBC and is not available in stores .

= = Critical reception = =

Reviews for The Boys from Baghdad High were generally favourable . The Huffington Post said that giving the video cameras to the students was an excellent idea because the depiction of their school @-@ life versus the increasing danger was captured " with neutral equality [ so ] that the film is able to capture the interiority of its subjects more acutely than a straight @-@ forward examination of violence would " . Thomas Sutcliffe of The Independent said , " its storyline was governed not by a tick @-@ list of stock narrative dilemmas and secrets but the cruel uncertainties that occupation and insurgency have brought to Baghdad . " Time Out New York gave the film five out of five stars , and PopMatters rated it 8 out of 10 . The Washington Post 's Paul Farhi said , " HBO has carved a niche as the TV home of some of the most compelling programs about the Iraq war ... Baghdad High does no harm to HBO 's burgeoning war cred [ ibility ] . " Variety , The Christian Science Monitor , LA Weekly , and the Los Angeles Times also praised the film . At the Question @-@ and @-@ Answer session following a screening at the Tribeca Film Festival , one audience member , a new recruit to the United States Marine Corps , told Ali , who had also attended , " I finally know what life is like behind those walls and what you guys are like , and it 's been really , really fantastic . "

There were complaints , however , that the documentary did not depict enough of the political aspects of the Iraqi War . Farhi said , " The 90 @-@ minute documentary doesn 't say much about the larger issues facing Iraq , but it does capture some small and captivating human stories .... They happen to live in what one boy describes as ' the most dangerous city on Earth . ' You don 't see much of Iraq 's violence in Baghdad High , but you surely feel its gravity and their dread . " The Boston Herald 's Mark Perigard said that he felt the documentary was " a personal story , not a political one " . In The New York Times , Mike Hale commented , " While the boys talk frequently about violence and despair , they rarely discuss politics or ethnic differences ( with the exception of Anmar , the Christian ) and they almost never directly address the American presence . We do hear some parental opinions , which are surprisingly neutral . One mother says : ' We shouldn 't blame the Americans for everything . There is something wrong with us too ' . " Jennifer Marin , a culture columnist from the Los Angeles Times , wrote at About.com , that while it was innovative , informative and a noble experiment , the footage is " undistinguished and rough because the hands holding the cameras weren 't skilled and the eyes framing the shots were not those of artists or keen observers . " She thought that , with the exception of Mohammad , the boys lacked charisma , and that the film failed to capture the drama of living in a war @-@ zone , due to the lack of a director calling the shots . Perigard said , " After the time you 've invested [ as a viewer ] , it 's not nearly satisfying enough . For all the questions this fascinating film raises , it might as well be written in

sand . "

Many reviewers noted the similarities between the Iraqi boys and those from Western cultures . Peter Scarlet , the artistic director at the Tribeca Film Festival , said , " What 's fascinating about the film that resulted is how very familiar and ordinary these kids are ? they 're not really all that different from your own teenagers or the kids you went to school with . The kids of Baghdad High also open us up to a very different sense of life in Iraq than what we 've been seeing on the nightly news for five years . " The Huffington Post said , " previously it had been unfathomable that students in Baghdad might be experiencing the same ephemeral and narcissistic heartbreak as we are in the United States . " Farhi and Nicholls noticed that the Iraqi students do the same things as American high school students , such as listening to rap music , trying to study without distractions , playing sports , becoming stressed over their final exams and acting silly with their friends . Perigard commented , " despite the cultural differences , Ali , Anmar , Hayder and Mohammad will seem instantly familiar to anyone who has spent time around a teenage boy . They like to wrestle each other , love Western music , dream big and have trouble buckling down in school . "

The New York magazine said that the film 's premise of four high @-@ school friends videotaping their senior year " sounds like a fluffy reality show " ; Bill Weber of Slant Magazine said , " putting the trials of MTV reality @-@ show prima donnas in perspective , the middle @-@ class quartet will be relatable to this BBC / HBO production 's audience in their easy embrace of Western kid stuff ... Directors Ivan O 'Mahoney and Laura Winter balance [ portray ] an everyday sense of the adolescents ' wartime anxiety with the more commonplace juvenile relief . " Similarly , The Huffington Post raised comparisons with MTV reality shows , but was pleased to see that the Iraqi boys did not play to the cameras because they had not been exposed to programmes such as Laguna Beach : The Real Orange County or The Paper . That juvenile relief was commented on by many ; The Washington Post highlighted Mohammad 's adoption of an unwelcome mouse in the house . Hale described a scene where Mohammad and Ali act like hostage and captor . " Suddenly Ali is holding a large knife . ' He 's being naughty ! ' Mohammad says . Ali holds the knife near Mohammad and says , a little too unemotionally : ' Allah ! This is the first hostage . I 'm going to slaughter him this way . ' Mohammad tells him to stop fooling around . Ali relents . ' O.K. He just got a presidential pardon . He can live ' . " Reuters also commented on this , and more banter between Ali and Mohammad . " Ali is shown making a pretend hostage video with Mohammad , and then teasing his friend for his smelly feet . ' If Chemical Ali really wanted to destroy the north he should have fired a rocket with Mohammad 's socks in it ' . "

The depiction of the stark differences between Iraq and the Western world also received comments . Farhi described the school as having " all the charm of an abandoned prison " , and continued with , " visiting a friend who lives a few hundred yards away involves running a potential gauntlet of kidnappers and snipers ; getting to school on time means navigating military checkpoints . Before a big exam , teachers frisk their students for explosives , " while Perigard said , " at night , their neighbourhoods are riddled with gunfire and explosions " . In the New York Daily News , Patrick Huguenin wrote , " American teens wouldn 't recognize other scenes showing how life slips into a heavily regulated series of checkpoints and curfews . " Hale said , " The way the boys can tell without looking whether it 's an Apache or a Chinook helicopter overhead , the way the curtains are always drawn , the level of physical contact and affection among the men ... would be alien to American sensibilities . "

= = Accolades = =

The Boys from Baghdad High was well @-@ received from its initial screening . It was nominated for a Youth Jury Award at the 2007 Sheffield Doc / Fest , shortlisted for an Amnesty International 2008 UK Media Award in the category for Television Documentary and Docudramas , and the European Independent Film Festival named it the Best News and Current Affairs film . It was nominated for the Readers ' Award in the Radio Times , and in May 2008 it won the Premiere Prize at the Sandford St. Martin Trust Awards , which acknowledges excellence in religious broadcasting . The Trust 's chairman and former BBC Head of Religious Broadcasting Colin Morris said of the

documentary , " We saw the way faith breaks into secular life in the chaos of present @-@ day Iraq . Coming from different ethnic and religious backgrounds the boys showed that despite the war their daily preoccupations were much the same as those of teenage boys the world over ? girlfriends , parents , sport , fashion , exams , music . Would their friendship survive ? Ultimately the programme confronted British viewers with the question : ' What in God 's name are we doing there ? ' " The film received a standing ovation from the audience at the Traverse City Film Festival , and at the Tribeca Film Festival it was short @-@ listed for the 2008 World Documentary Feature Competition , competing against eleven other non @-@ fiction films for Best Documentary Film and Best New Documentary Filmmaker .